

Migration, labor and business in the worlding cities of the Arabian Peninsula

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Abstract

This short essay, built on a foundation of more than a decade of fieldwork in the hydrocarbon-rich societies of the Arabian peninsula, distills a set of overarching threads woven through much of that time and work. Those threads include a discussion of the social heterogeneity of the Gulf State citizenries, the central role of development and urban development in these emergent economies, the multifaceted impact of migrants and migration upon these host societies, and the role of foreign ‘imagineers’ in the portrayal of Gulf societies, Gulf values, and Gulf social norms.

Keywords: Arabian Gulf States, Anthropology, demography, development, migration

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Migration, Labor and Business in the Worlding Cities of the Arabian Peninsula

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Abstract:

This short essay, built on a foundation of more than a decade of fieldwork in the hydrocarbon-rich societies of the Arabian peninsula, distills a set of overarching threads woven through much of that time and work. Those threads include a discussion of the social heterogeneity of the Gulf State citizenries, the central role of development and urban development in these emergent economies, the multifaceted impact of migrants and migration upon these host societies, and the role of foreign 'imagineers' in the portrayal of Gulf societies, Gulf values, and Gulf social norms.

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I. Introduction

In this paper, I present several summary points intended to illuminate some of the practices, norms and relations that characterize the contemporary Arab Gulf states. These points are not intended as a comprehensive portrait of Gulf societies, but rather a series of highlights and noteworthy aspects distilled from more than a decade of ethnographic research on the Arabian peninsula. While the central focus of my own research has long been the transnational flow of labor migrants to the Arabian Peninsula, it has also periodically included projects focused on the states and societies that host these migrant populations. What I present here incorporates those broader interests.

II. History and Demography of the Gulf States

In scholarly conversations focused on the peoples and societies of the Arabian peninsula, substantial effort is devoted to understanding the unique historical experiences of the

respective Gulf Cooperation Council states. These discussions have been rich and informative, but this scholarly conversation often obscures the parallel paths these states have followed to the contemporary era. Despite historical particularities and differences, these states' histories are woven together by geography, environment, culture, ethnicity, by the presence of lucrative natural resources, by a similar historical positionality relative to Ottoman and British colonial empires, and by much more. Even today, many families, clans, and tribes continue to maintain relations across national borders, and several of the ruling families are genealogically connected. Another facet of this shared historical experience is the region's long history of interconnectivity with regional and global systems of contact and exchange, a history which stands in contrast to the insularity by which the peoples of the Arabian peninsula are often characterized. That interconnectivity is tied to the historical mobilities of the peoples of the peninsula — mobilities inherent in the livelihoods of the pastoral nomadic *bedu* peoples of the vast inland deserts, and also in the livelihoods of the urban dwelling *hadhar* peoples whose livelihoods were long tied to seafaring, pearl production, and trade in the Indian Ocean world. These preexisting mobilities and interconnections were only enhanced in the colonial era, and they reinforce the basic fact that for millennia the Arabian Peninsula has been a cosmopolitan crossroads.

Today, the GCC states are most known for their hydrocarbon wealth and for the global prominence that wealth allowed them to forge. Qatar, the focus of my research for the past five years, is an excellent example, for it has an extraordinarily high per capita GDP and the densest accumulation of millionaires in the contemporary world.¹ The situation is not dissimilar in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. A hundred years ago, however, the foundation of the regional economy was undermined when Mikimoto Kokichi pioneered the commercial production of cultured pearls. After the difficult and penurious decades in the British colonial ambit that followed, the Arab Gulf states became independent over the second half of the 20th century, and their hydrocarbon reserves, envisioned as a gift from Allah, carried these desert peoples and states to unforeseen heights. This combination of factors — new nationalisms, small indigenous populations, hydrocarbon wealth, a tribally conceptualized authoritarian leadership, and rapid infrastructural and social development over the past four decades — characterize

¹ This calculation is, of course, measured in American dollars. Nearly 18% of households in Doha have at least \$1 million in private wealth (Boston Consulting Group, 2013).

the shared experience of the GCC states.

From an outsider's perspective, the citizenries of the Gulf states appear homogenous and uniform, a perception only enhanced by the steady convergence of Gulf Arab fashion and style around a singular mode. In reality, however, these populations are somewhat heterogeneous. The peoples of the Arab peninsula include the bifurcation, previously noted, between *bedu*, or those who trace their lineage to the pastoral nomads of the subcontinental interior, and the *hadhar*, or those who trace their lineage to the merchant and seafaring peoples of the towns and cities of the peninsula.² But these are only two of many socio-historical fissures. There are both Shi'a and Sunni components of the indigenous population. There are Persian immigrants, both old and new, some of whom claim an Arab ethnicity, and others who don't. There is the *abd* component of the population who trace their ancestry to the population of slaves brought to the Arabian peninsula from Africa. All of these vectors of difference, and more, interlace with the revitalized conception of tribe and tribal belonging, a form of social differentiation more specific than ethnicity but more encompassing than the extended family.³ And all of this identity construction occurs against the backdrop of a proportionally vast population of foreign workers, professionals, and visitors.⁴

Amidst this diversity, one of the central features of society and state in Arabia is the ongoing construction and maintenance of nationalisms and, simultaneously, the legitimacy of the ruling families and tribes. Much of these states' contemporary activity can be tied to this truism. Hosting global mega-events invigorates this nationalism. Constructing spectacular cities asserts singular nationalisms to a global audience. The energized heritage industry in the region — in the form of museums, in particular — distills and codifies a singular national narrative. These activities, and more, symbolically project a refined, cosmopolitan, and thoroughly modern image to a global audience, an ongoing act that simultaneously asserts the benevolent leadership of the ruling families, whose role in these relations is to guide this progress, to choose tastefully, and to choose well.

² See Longva 2006, Nagy 2006, Al-Nakib 2014

³ See Alshawi and Gardner 2013.. Also see Cooke 2014.

⁴ Longva 2005, Matsuo 2014

III. Development and Urban Development

Development is the keystone that holds this system together. In this sense, development — as infrastructural development, as social development, as urban development — is the principal activity of these states. I would like to briefly consider three facets of this assertion. First, there is the fact that in all of the GCC states great proportions of the citizenry work in the public sector: they are directly employed by the state⁵. In a material sense, public sector employment can be understood as a transfer of wealth from state to citizen through salaries, benefits, loans, and retirement packages. Unexamined, however, is the sociocultural impact of this this employment. How might citizens' quotidian participation in the manifold activities of the state build and affirm these nationalisms?

Second, state-led development produced numerous developments laden with a particular sort of modern and cosmopolitan cultural capital. Megadevelopments on the Gulf littoral call forth luminary starchitects (e.g. I. M. Pei, Arata Isozaki, Jean Nouvel, Santiago Calatrava), index cosmopolitan brands (e.g. Ferrari, Guggenheim, the Louvre, Cornell), and seek public spectacle (e.g. the World Cup, the Asian Games, Formula One, the Olympic Games). The resulting constructions assert these states' positionality at the vanguard of a cosmopolitan global modernity. The cities themselves represent a veritable trophy case for the respective citizenries, and affirm the capable stewardship of benevolent authoritarian leaderships. En suite, then, these urban trophy cases serve as the focal point for new nationalisms, and weave together a globally-indexed symbolic capital with the culturally moored tradition of hosting and hospitality.⁶ As the identification and enhancement of the "MICE sector" of Qatar's economy implies, development is also frequently framed in terms of tourism, sustainability, and economic diversification from the singular reliance on hydrocarbons.⁷

Third and last, however, expenditures on infrastructural development can be understood as the principal nexus for the transfer of wealth from state to citizen. Legal systems

⁵ See Baldwin-Edwards 2011

⁶ For a more in-depth explanation of hospitality and nationalism, see Gardner 2010a

⁷ MICE stands for Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions. Qatar promotes and enhances this portion of its economy as one component of the "knowledge-based" society that it is striving to develop.

maintain that, with notable exceptions, only citizens can own land and property. Combined with the fact that, via the *kafala*, citizen-sponsors remain interwoven in all business concerns, this system ensures that portions of the capital involved in state-led development percolate to the respective citizenries. Urban development is the driving force behind this political economy of the rentier states of the region. Singular megaprojects — museums, residential developments, grand mosques, satellite university campuses — call forth this development industry. For example, the nine stadia planned for the World Cup in Qatar require a labor force, the labor camps to accommodate them, architects, planners, engineers, and the compounds to accommodate them, and in the latter case, schools for their children, automobiles, and some modicum of recreational infrastructure. This is only the beginning of a comprehensive list, but at each juncture beyond this capital's journey from state to the stadia projects of this example, state-controlled hydrocarbon wealth calls forth a broader array of enterprises that, directly or indirectly, are in the business of developing Qatar. Each of these business concerns includes Qatari sponsors, and the substantial profits those individuals aggrandize can be understood as the transfer of wealth from state to citizen. In this sense, urban development is the keystone that holds this sociopolitical system together, and is essential to the political legitimacy of the state and its authoritarian leadership.⁸

IV. Migrants and Migration to Arabia

This system, configured around state-led development, has long required a substantial labor force. The scope of this requirement long exceeded the domestic capacities of the respective states. In the closing decades of the 20th century, the Gulf States drew heavily on South Asia and Southeast Asia for this labor supply.

The taxonomy of this migration system has been ethnographically explored in a variety of different projects.⁹ In the sending state, an underpaid, underemployed, or unemployed potential migrant seeks remunerative work abroad. Through a labor broker

⁸ This political economy of urban development is explored at more length in Gardner 2014. For a much more in depth consideration of the relationship between the Gulf states and their economies, see Hertog 2013.

⁹ Longva 1997, 1999; Gardner 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012b; Gardner et al. 2013; Pessoa et al. 2014

or that broker's network of contacts, the potential migrant is connected to an employment opportunity in one of the Gulf states. Over the past decades, the right to work in the Gulf States has been commodified, so potential migrants typically pay labor brokers between \$1000 and \$2000 for a two-year work contract. These monies commonly involve the resources of entire households, as well as mortgages, loans, and debts held in the sending country. The migrant then departs for the Gulf States. There, he or she might be employed by a manpower agency that seeks contracts for its workforce, or the migrant might be directly employed by a particular company or concern. He or she is typically housed in a labor camp, although accommodation can vary significantly in form.¹⁰ The migrant is associated with a sponsor, who is almost ubiquitously a Gulf citizen, although the migrant may have little or no contact with that individual. Instead, contact is typically consigned to the constellation of supervisors and managers who oversee the workforce — individuals who are almost always migrants themselves. If all goes well, the migrant often chooses to renew her or his contract for an additional two-year period. Many migrants string together sequences of these two-year contracts, and spend significant portions of their working life abroad in the Gulf States.

Problems are seemingly endemic to this migration system. Recent research has helped illuminate these problems and the frequency with which they occur.¹¹ Transnational labor migrants' passports are almost always confiscated by employers, a practice that is both illegal and commonplace. Salaries promised by labor brokers in the sending states often don't match actual salaries delivered in the receiving states. The straightforward nonpayment of promised wages is also common. Migrants frequently report challenges with their living arrangements and their working conditions. Notably, these exploitations are often at the hand of other migrants — supervisors, managers, and bosses also employed by the sponsor. But because both the *kafala* and the labor contracts underpinning it lock transnational labor migrants to a single employer, migrants have very little recourse in these scenarios. They and their families back home remain indebted to the labor broker in the sending state, and migrants are often forced to simply endure this exploitation for the duration of their contract.

¹⁰ Gardner 2010c

¹¹ See Gardner et al. 2013

In brief, this migration system is both a lightning rod for international critique and, simultaneously, the locus of opportunity for millions of potential migrants in underdeveloped portions of Asia, Africa and beyond. Explaining this seeming dichotomy has been another prominent theme in ethnographic research concerned with Gulf migration.¹² Essentially, the *kafala* distributes significant portions of the responsibility for governing migrants to citizen-sponsors and their proxies. From a migrant's perspective, her or his migration experience is highly dependent on the sponsor with which he or she is associated. It is the abstracted structure of the *kafala* and the distribution of the responsibility for governing the foreign presence that explains the high degree of variability we see in migrant experiences in the Gulf States.

V. Imagineers and the Relations of Business

I'd like to articulate one final point specifically configured for this audience. In a forthcoming publication, I briefly describe one of the scenarios that Divendra¹³ faced while a labor migrant in Qatar.¹⁴ Briefly, Divendra and the other South Asian laborers at his company faced all sorts of serious problems at the hands of their Palestinian employers. Those problems included the non-payment of wages, poor conditions in their labor camp, the extraction of various "fees" from what salary they did receive, and several lawsuits filed by their employers to discipline and punish the exploited South Asian workforce. Early amidst these difficulties, Divendra and several fellow workers were able to meet face-to-face with their Qatari sponsor to plead with him. After that meeting, their sponsor communicated with the men's employers (who he also sponsored), and most of the problems were quickly resolved. Within months, however, the same problems returned. In this second manifestation of problems, their Palestinian employers ensured the South Asian workers had no access to their mutual sponsor, and the situation endured for the remainder of Divendra's time in Qatar. This brief ethnographic snippet speaks, of course, to multiple issues described earlier in this paper – the structure of relations codified by the *kafala*, relations between different migrant ethnicities, and the fact that many of the problems migrants encounter in the Gulf States are at the hands of other migrants. But the point of focus at this juncture is the strategic move by Divendra's employers to prevent contact between the labor force they

¹² Longva 1997, 1999; Gardner 2010a, 2010b

¹³ A pseudonym for a labor migrant I tracked between 2008 and 2010.

¹⁴ Gardner 2015

controlled and their mutual Qatari sponsor, for it echoes several of my own experiences as a researcher in the Gulf States.

Over the last decade, I have often been asked how I've been able to pursue a research agenda focused on the transnational proletariat at work in the Gulf. This research agenda is perceived as politically volatile, and I am often asked how I secured permission to conduct this research. In my decade of experience, I have sometimes encountered significant resistance to my interest in better understanding the lived experiences of labor migrants to Arabia. But almost ubiquitously, the resistance I've met with has come from other foreigners — from other foreigners who work, sometimes in a self appointed fashion, as gatekeepers to Bahrainis, Qataris, or other citizens who make decisions. Like Divendra, in those handful of situations in which I've encountered significant resistance to my research agenda, I've found ways to circumvent those gatekeepers and to talk with the citizen in charge. In my experience, the Gulf Arabs behind these gatekeepers are open, amenable, and interested in my research agenda, and with their approvals I have been able to proceed without further difficulty.

While my experience as a foreign professor at Qatar University and Divendra's experience as a labor migrant in the Doha's Industrial Area were extraordinarily different, both of the experiences I've described concern the hierarchy of power and governance established by the *kafala*, and both describe the role of gatekeepers who strategically manage contact and communication in that hierarchy. In the demographic context now established in the Gulf — armies of foreign workers, businesses and institutions overseen by Arab locals but staffed by foreigners, powerful absentee sponsors associated with contingents of foreign workers — control and management of the percolation of information up this hierarchy is frequently leveraged for power and gain. The presence of this class of gatekeepers is a social fact of doing business in the region, whether that business is development, education, construction, or even academic research. Considering the prominent role that ethnic factions of foreign nationals played in my own experiences with Gulf institutions, perhaps this class of gatekeeping power brokers is an outcome inherent to the diverse demographic concoction we see in contemporary Arabia.

My own experiences point not simply to this class of foreigners' roles as gatekeepers,

but also to their function as *imagineers*.¹⁵ At this juncture of communication and information, these gatekeepers not only manage the communication of information for their own personal gain (as in Divendra's case), but are also continually engaged in estimating, guessing, evaluating, and portraying what might be culturally or socially appropriate to their Arab local superiors. Noteworthy, while these gatekeepers may share ethnicity, and/or class with their superiors, they often have little substantial insight or contact with the inner workings of Gulf society and culture, largely due to the insularity of the tribal and authoritarian pluralism that predominates in the contemporary context. In my experience, it is often an imagined set of interests, aspirations, and concerns that characterize these gatekeepers' image of local society. In both of the examples above, those imagined interests of Qataris and their society were disabused by Qataris themselves. In summary, however, this points to the significant difference often found between the norms and interests of local Arab culture portrayed by these imagineers and the actual social interests and norms encountered beyond those gatekeepers.

VI. Brief Conclusion

In conclusion, I have focused on four interrelated themes today: the unique demography of the contemporary Gulf, the role of development and urban development in the GCC states, migrants and migration, and imagineers in the relations of business. As noted at the outset of this paper, these are not intended as a comprehensive portrait of contemporary Gulf societies, but rather as fragments that, in my ethnographic experience, characterize the social, cultural, political, and economic relations that predominate in the contemporary era.

¹⁵ This term, originally coined by the American aluminum manufacturer Alcoa in the 1940s and popularized by Walt Disney, is also the name of a Japanese entertainment company.

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