

Keynote Address:

Family and Migration to the GCC Status: An Ethnographically-Informed Overview

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Abstract:

For many decades the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have served as primary migratory destinations for tens of millions of individuals from South Asia, West Asia, and other points in what is now frequently called the Indian Ocean world. While both historic and substantial in scale, these migration flows remain some of the most understudied movements in the contemporary world. In exploring these migration flows, this paper seeks to accomplish two basic tasks. First, it provides a fundamental overview of the current state of scholarship concerned with Gulf migration. That overview includes an historical description of the changing parameters of Gulf migration and the delineation of those particular aspects that mark the GCC states as unique migratory waypoints in the larger global context. Those unique aspects of Gulf migration include the extraordinary proportion of migrants to citizens; the kafala, or sponsorship system, that governs and organizes these migration flows; and the role of the state in managing and organizing employment for both citizens and foreign labor. This overview draws upon scholarship—and particularly ethnographic scholarship—produced in both sending and receiving states, and also makes heavy use of original ethnographic data gathered by the author between 199 and 2009 in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar.

The second portion of this paper seeks to frame Gulf migration through the lens of family. The paper first considers the impact of Gulf migration upon the families and households that remain in sending countries, with particular attention devoted to the role of Gulf-derived remittances in households' livelihood strategies, as well as the household-level vulnerabilities engendered by Gulf migration. Next, the paper explores the particular dilemmas faced by those migrants whose families accompany them to the Gulf States. These dilemmas typically involve managing children's education through periodic movements between home countries and the Gulf States, as well as the struggle to convey some modicum of cultural belonging to children in diaspora. Finally, this section concludes with an analysis of the impact of these migration flows upon local families in the Gulf States, with particular attention to the attitudes citizens display concerning the cultural frictions produced by the diverse domestic sector workforce.

Overall, this paper is intended to inform migration specialists with little or no knowledge of Gulf migration patterns of the unique and substantial Gulf migration flows, to simultaneously provide a foundation for fundamental comparisons between Gulf migration flows and those south-to-north flows that continue to predominate in the contemporary literature, and to establish a set of basic conclusions concerning the impact of Gulf migration upon families in both sending and receiving states.

I. Introduction

For tens of millions of families in South Asia, the Middle East, and portions of East and North Africa, the petroleum-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula present the most significant migratory waypoint in the spectrum of possibilities they face. While the migratory conduits with one endpoint in the Gulf States share many characteristics with those in other parts of the world, they also differ from other migration flows in noteworthy ways. One particularly notable difference concerns academic scholarship: analyses focused upon these particular migration flows are strikingly impoverished. Compared to those migratory conduits with one endpoint in North America or Europe, for example, very little is known about these migrants, their experiences in the Gulf States, the processes that lie behind their decisions to

migrate, or the way this migration reshapes family and community life in the places from which they come². More specifically, quantitative data has been a particular blind spot in the analysis of these migration flows: while ethnographers and other qualitatively-focused social scientists can tell us about the types of problems and challenges migrants encounter in the Gulf, scholars and policy makers continue to lack the ability to discuss the scope and frequency with which those problems and challenges occur. This dearth of scholarly attention is due to a confluence of factors, including the fact that only recently have the Gulf States developed the capacity to gather these sorts of data; the fact that through the dominant Orientalist discourse the Gulf State were, for many years, portrayed as a strange and anomalous component in the Middle East; and the fact that many of the Gulf States are perceived, perhaps correctly at times, as reticent to encourage research that might tarnish their emergent global reputations. ³ Despite these hurdles, a slow but steady trickle of research has accumulated over the last fifteen years.

Furthermore, with Qatar and several other Gulf States now actively encouraging migration research, it seems a particularly appropriate moment to cull a set of basic themes and findings from the existing literature.

To that the end, this paper seeks to accomplish two basic tasks. First, the paper provides a general overview of migration in the Gulf States. This overview includes a brief history of migration to the Arabian Peninsula and a more in-depth discussion of the commonalities the various migratory destinations of that peninsula share. Overall, this section comprises a broad introduction to migration to the Gulf, and is intended to provide a basic framework for comparison to migration flows in other parts of the world. In the second half of the paper, I focus specifically upon the relationship between family and migration. This discussion will highlight three distinct

² The Study of remittances and remittance flows World be the sole exception to this. Indeed, there is an abundance of work on remittance flows to those countries that send migrants to the Gulf States (e.g. Azee and Begum 2009; Zachariah and Rajan 2007; Prakash 1998; Mallick 2008; Labaki 2006; and almost all of the references listed in ECSWA 2007).

³See ECSWA 2007: 43-44; Labaki 2006:16; Willoughby 2008: 193; Kapiszewski 2001: 26-27; Fair 1999; Demery 1986: 19; Winckler 2000; Leonard 2002; 15. As Nasra Shah notes, even basic demographic data are often difficult to locate: "[T]here is no regular publication that provides comparative data for the six countries. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) used to publish data sheets summarizing the vital events information for the ESCWA region, including migration, annually or biannually. Hence relatively updated information was available for the major characteristics of national and non-national population. However, ESCWA discontinued this publication since the last few years. The Gulf region governments do not have any routine publication where comparative data for the region may be available, especially with regard to migration statistics" (Shah 2006:3).

venues of interest: the impact of migration upon the families left behind in the sending countries, the experiences of families that migrate as a unit to the Gulf States, and the impact upon the families that are members of the host societies. This second section relies upon ethnographic data gathered by the author in a series of projects conducted over the last ten years in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Qatar, but remains primarily a distillation of key themes in the existing literature⁴ Overall, while all classes of migrants are described in this paper, the central concern is with the experiences of the majority of migrants to the Gulf – that is, with semi-skilled and unskilled labor. Moreover, the analysis seeks to move beyond a discussion of the economic impact of migration to the Gulf States. In considering the impact of Gulf migration upon families both in the Gulf and in the sending states, the analysis developed here is broad, multifaceted, and essentially sociological in nature.

II. Migration in the Gulf States

Migration and trans-regional movement on the Arabian Peninsula have a history that precedes written records by a millennium or more. As a matter of convenience, however, we might speak of migration to the Arabian Peninsula in terms of three distinct chapters. First, for much of the region's historical and prehistorical period, the cities of the Arabian coastline were major and minor ports in the Indian Ocean world. Certainly the production of pearls in the shallow waters of the western Gulf anchored the existence of these port cities, but these coastal cities also served as entrepôts for trade with the nomadic pastoral peoples of the Peninsula's interior. Records from this historical period describe a cosmopolitan constellation of merchants in the larger port cities (such as Muscat and Manama); in those port cities, Banyan traders from the Indian subcontinent typically predominated.⁵ The traders' position was built by shipping pearls eastward to the subcontinent and returning cloth, foodstuffs, and assorted sundry items back along the same maritime

⁴ These projects were funded by a variety of institutions and sources, including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Meteorological and Environmental Protection Agency (199), the Foreign Language Area Studies Program (2002), the Fulbright Program (2002-2003), the Wenner-Gren Institute (2002-2003), Qatar University's Faculty Stara-Up Grant (2008), the QNRF Undergraduate Research Experience Program (2008-2009/2009-2010), and Georgetown University's Center for International and Regional Studies' Migrant Labor in The Persian Gulf Research Grant (2009-2010)

⁵ Palgrave 1865; Lorimer 1908

routes. These South Asia merchant families prospered in the region: they often served as bankers and advisors to local leaders, and many of these families still maintain a presence in the region today.

The second distinct chapter in the history of migration to the region roughly coincides with the British colonial period in India. In the 19th and 20th Century, Britain became increasingly and intricately involved in governance in the Gulf. While the details of its quasi-colonial relations with the Gulf states is beyond the scope of this paper, Britain's relations with the Gulf states were managed through British India.⁶ That conduit brought an increasing number of South Asian bureaucrats to the region, along with an entrepreneurial class to serve the growing foreign population. The simultaneous development of the oil industry attracted even more migration, including both skilled and unskilled Persians, Arabs, and South Asians.

The last and ongoing chapter in Gulf migration commenced in the middle of the twentieth century, gathered speed in the early 1970s, and continues unabated to this day. Vast increases in the global demand for petroleum combined with the rapid development of the industry to meet that demand yielded great wealth to the Gulf States. Each state subsequently devised modernization plans focused upon infrastructural development: new highways would be built; new universities, museums and mosques would be constructed; suburbs would be extended into the desert hinterlands. The newfound wealth generated by the OPEC embargo filled state coffers and increased the scale and scope of this development. Faced with extensive plans and extremely small indigenous labor force, the Gulf States turned to relatively inexpensive South Asian labor sources. Building upon the historic migratory connections of the two earlier periods, vast contingents of South Asian laborers flowed to the Arabian Peninsula. As a result, the type of migrant arriving in the Gulf States shifted: where in the past the typical migrant was a merchant, entrepreneur, bureaucrat or skilled professional, in the final decades of the twentieth century the typical migrant was an unskilled laborer. Although the flow of skilled and professional migration continued, and migration from other Middle Eastern countries continued, these other transnational communities were eclipsed by the vast contingents of South Asian laborers now present in the Arabian Peninsula States.

⁶ See Onley 2007 for an in-depth examination.

For much of the history described here, the region's migratory destinations were port towns, undelineated areas, sheikdoms, or quasi-colonial protectorates. Today, however, they are modern states. When speaking of the Gulf States, one is typically referring to the six contemporary states comprising the membership of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In Arabic, these states are often referred to under the singular nomenclature of al khaleej, a common term that yields some indication that these states make up a single sociocultural area, at least in the minds of many of the people indigenous to the Arabian Peninsula. The Gulf States, then, include Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman (and thereby exclude Yemen, also on the Arabian Peninsula, and Iraq and Iran, neighbors on the Persian/Arabian Gulf).⁷ In 1950, the six GCC states were estimated to contain 4,020,000 people. Today, the most recent estimates suggest a population of 38,350,000, and although natural growth rates in the Gulf States are some of the highest in the world, the exponential population growth in the second half of twentieth century has more to do with migration, and particularly the transnational migration of unskilled labor.⁸ Together, the GCC states comprise the third largest bloc of receiving states in the world (after North America and Europe).⁹

As this suggests, one of the unique characteristics of Gulf migration is the extraordinary proportion of these foreign populations to the indigenous citizenry. Unlike migration flows in other parts of the world – migration flows in which even substantial foreign populations are accommodated as minorities in the host country – in the Gulf States the situation is often reversed. In Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait, citizens are vastly outnumbered by the population of foreigners building and operating these strikingly modern and wealthy states, and in all the Gulf States foreigners make up the majority of the work force. And while the foreign workforce is proportionally quite large, ethnicity and nationality are not evenly distributed amongst its strata. Rather, the most lucrative positions not occupied by citizens are held by other Arab migrants, “westerners,” and smaller numbers of

⁷ Five of the six GCC states are ruled by Sunni “families,” while the sixth, Oman, has Ibadi leadership. All six states have been described as ethnocentric in nature (Longva 2005), and the Political tribalism that predominates is largely focused on the expansive role of the public sector (Al Naqeeb 2005; Willoughby 2008).

⁸ United Nations 2009; Kapiszewski 2006

⁹ ECSWA 2007: 4

Persians and South Asians.¹⁰ The lower socioeconomic strata are occupied almost entirely by South Asians, although small populations of Sub-Saharan Africans and Arabs (typically Egyptians) can also be found in low-skill or unskilled labor positions. Labor contingents from Southeast Asia have also recently begun to join the South Asians at the bottom of the transmigrant hierarchy. Overall, research points to the Gulf-wide solidification of these categories into durable cultural ideas about ethnically appropriate labor.

The presence of these large foreign workforces means that “foreign matter,” a concept Paul Dresch used to refer to both foreign people and the culture they bring with them, cannot be consigned to enclaves or easily swept out of sight.¹¹ Rather, as sporadic research has suggested, local populations often conceive of themselves as a besieged minority in their own country.¹² Consider, for example, the sentiments of one of the Kuwaiti participants in Anh Longva’s fieldwork:

*You have been to Abu Dhabi and Dibai, haven't you? How many local people did you meet in the streets there? One? Two? They are so few compared to the expatriates that they have surrendered the streets to them. Sometimes, I think we should do that too, withdraw to a ghetto where we would be only amongst ourselves... [but] we want to retain our streets, to keep them Kuwaiti. We want to hear Kuwaiti spoken out there, see Kuwaiti people and Kuwaiti manners around us. This is our home. We don't want to lose it!*¹³

The impetus for self-segregation described here is matched by the very real (but never entirely successful) social and spatial segregation of “foreign matter” throughout the Gulf.¹⁴ While the mechanics of this attempted segregation will be dealt with at length later in this article, it should also be noted that assimilation and

¹⁰ “Westerners” here is an ethnic conception that includes the populations from the European states, the United States and Canada, Australia, New Zealand and white South African nationals. This definition of South Asia includes Afghanistan. While analytic assessments of the role of ethnicity in Gulf migration are few and far between, Sulayman Khalaf (2005:256) notes that “the semi-skilled and unskilled Asian and Arab workers experience the greatest exploitation” (256).

¹¹ Dresch 2006

¹² Longva 1997, Cogger 2008; Gardner 2009

¹³ Female Kuwaiti participant, from Longva 1997:125

¹⁴ Sulayman Khalaf 2005; Gardner 2005.

naturalization, particularly of non-Arab migrants, is extremely rare in the Gulf States.¹⁵ The entitlements associated with citizenship, combined with what has been identified as the ethnocratic essence of citizenship in the Gulf States, reinforce the temporary nature of the contracted workforce's presence on the Arabian Peninsula and drive the social segregation typical of these societies.¹⁶ Reflecting again on the comments of the Kuwaiti above, the extensive social segregation in the Gulf is often portrayed as strategically necessary for the preservation of a local social and cultural identity amidst a sea of foreign influence.

The extraordinary proportion of foreign workers in the Gulf States and the siege mentality that has resulted from their presence is also described as the driving force behind the modern formation of the kafala (or sponsorship) system. Historically, the kafala relationship functioned a mechanism for hosting foreigners in the closed societies traditionally typical of the Arabian Peninsula.¹⁷ In that historic formulation, the member or insider "vouched" for the outsider or visitor, essentially taking responsibility for that outsider's presence and behavior in the local society, but also carrying the responsibility for the safety and protection of that individual. With the increasing flow of labor to the Gulf States, this mechanism was extrapolated to a comprehensive legal and state-based system for managing the flow of labor to the region.¹⁸ In its most basic distillation, the contemporary sponsor, or kafeel, vouches for the presence of the foreigner, and thereby assume legal and economic responsibility for that individual for the duration of the contracted period. The kafeel also assumes responsibility for repatriating that individual upon the conclusion of the contract. In return, the sponsor is the only individual for whom the foreigner can work. The foreign worker may not change employers or depart the country without the permission of her or his sponsor. Overall, as many have noted, this system structures a set of relationships in which the foreign worker is almost entirely

¹⁵ Consider, for example, Article 6 of the Bahraini citizenship law, which mandates that Arab applicants for citizenship must have resided in Bahrain for 15 years, while non-Arabs face a requirement of 25 years. Even those non-Arab applicants meeting this requirement report long delays and little success with applications for citizenship (Gardner 2005).

¹⁶ See Abdulla (2005:185) for an excellent and brief explanation of the role of the state. Also: Longva 200, 2005.

¹⁷ Sulayman Khalaf (1992) reports briefly that the kafala system was designed to protect Gulf merchants from foreign competition.

¹⁸ "Sponsorship (kafala) requires the sponsor-employer (kafeel) to assume full economic and legal responsibility for the employee during the contract period" Longva 1999:20.

dependent on the goodwill of the sponsor who profits from his labor.¹⁹ In more abstract terms, the sponsorship system distributes much of the responsibility of managing and governing the foreign workers to the individual sponsors in the Gulf States.

Professional and skilled workers typically arrive in the Gulf through the same cosmopolitan system that allocates human capital in other parts of the world. This system needs no elaboration here. For the semi-skilled and unskilled majority of migrants, however, processes somewhat unique to the Gulf States predominate. Although chain migration arranged through personal connections, remains a significant force in the Gulf, most men and women arrive through a vast and expanding transnational labor brokerage system.²⁰ Manpower agencies in the Gulf States deal directly with manpower agencies in the sending countries. Agents and sub-agents in those sending countries advertise open positions and connect men and women with work opportunities in the Gulf. Research suggests these labor brokers are often key agents in the coordinated deception of potential Gulf workers.²¹ Unlike the elite and cosmopolitan migrants in the Gulf, migrants seeking unskilled or semi-skilled positions – as construction workers, office boys or domestic workers, for example – typically pay large sums of money for a two or three year employment contract. Nearly all the laborers incur significant debts to pay these fees: productive land is mortgaged, savings are depleted, and high interest loans are taken.²² The debts they incur remain lodged in the sending country, although significant portions of that money makes its way across the transnational divide to the agents and sponsors in the host country. While no comprehensive data have been gathered about the average amount of these fees, and although researchers have noted extremely broad variation in prices paid for these contracts, evidence suggests the typical payment amounts to several thousand U.S. dollars.²³ These

¹⁹ Longva 1997, 1999; Gardner 2005, 2009; Human Rights Watch 2006, 2009

²⁰ Perhaps the most detailed explanation of this system can be found in Michele Gamburd's ethnography (2000)

²¹ Gamburd 2000; Silvery 2004

²² For most migrants working in unskilled positions, the debts incurred for this work opportunity involved the extended household and its productive resources.

²³ A recent ILO report (ILO 2009) noted average payments of \$ 1000 in Pakistan and \$ 1400 in Bangladesh. Shah (2006:8) mentions \$ 4,084 for an Iranian migrant and \$ 2042 for an Indian migrant. There is no clear logic underlying the differences in these numbers. Certainly nationality plays an important role, but men from the same country often pay significantly different amounts for essentially the same visa.

amounts should be comprehended in relation to the typical salaries semi-skilled and unskilled labor receives in the Gulf. Again, while no comprehensive data about salaries are available, the 66 laborers I interviewed in Bahrain worked for monthly wages varying from BD120 (\$318) to as low as BD40 (\$106). In Qatar, where I am currently conducting fieldwork, I hear similar numbers -- QR500 (\$137) at the low end, QR900 (\$247) at the high end for unskilled labor.²⁴ As the range of both sets of figures suggests, these contracts may provide an opportunity to, mathematically speaking, walk away from two years of work with several thousand dollars in saving. Alternatively, by this calculus the migrant may concludes his two years with as little as a few hundred dollars in savings.²⁵

Many forces conspire to undermine the tenuous logic of these numbers, and the possibility of concluding two years of service with even the smaller of these figures in hand is far from assured for the semi-skilled and unskilled majority of transnational migrants. Systematic research clearly suggests these transnational migrants face a patterned set of challenges, problems and hurdles.²⁶ Overall, the core problems are numerous and interrelated. Employers frequently withhold contractually promised wages.²⁷ Laborers are often forced to work longer hours than indicated in the contract they originally signed, and they are often not paid at all or not paid overtime rates for these extra hours. Almost all employers retain possession of the laborers' passports, despite the fact that this is expressly forbidden by law in most Gulf States.²⁸ Many men and women arrive in the Gulf State to discover they will be required to work a job different than the one they were contractually promised in the sending country: men, who thought they would be

²⁴ Based upon his research in the United Arab Emirates, Sulayman Khalaf (2005) mentions the numbers \$ 130 to \$ 200 per month as a estándar wage bracket for unskilled positions.

²⁵ More importantly, however, these distant debts combine with the regulation of the kafala to build a highly dependent workforce.

²⁶ al Najjar 2002; Longva 1997, Gardner 2005; Pessoa 2008a, 2008b; U.S. Department of State 2007; Human Rights Watch 2006, 2009; Migration News 2009; ECSWA 2007: 44; ILO 2009.

²⁷ While examples abound, Al Jandaly (2006) will serve fine here.

²⁸ In a recent study using a stree-intercept method to survey low income workers in Qatar, Pessoa and her research team found that 88% of the 169 participants in her study had relinquished their passport to their sponsor (Pessoa et al. 2008b:6). In my fieldwork in Bahrain, all but one of the low-income workers I interviewed were not in possession of their passport. See also Longva 1997, Strobl 2009. The first portion of this sentence, as well as the previous sentence, is supported by most systematic research conducted in the area. Those teams or individuals who ask large numbers of transnational laborers about these issues, or teams or individuals who spend longer periods of time studying smaller groups of men and women in the Gulf clearly corroborate this (Human Rights Watch 2006, 2009; U.S. Department of State 2007; Gardner 2009; Gamburd 2000).

“office boys,” for example, find themselves working construction site laborers. Many foreign workers are charged for benefits for which the employer is contractually responsible, such as return tickets to the sending country, visa renewal fees, or room and board.²⁹ Research in the region also clearly demonstrates that migrants generally remain unable to assert their basic rights in the various courts and venues charged with adjudicating these issues.³⁰ The frequency with which components of this constellation of issues recur in the middle and lower echelons of the workforce, are key factors in the production of an undocumented (or “illegal”) migrant population. Typically, unskilled and semi-skilled migrants who face significant problems abscond from untenable positions with their sponsors, and thereby from the only employer for whom they can legally work. They then seek employment on the black market. As undocumented migrants, they present an entirely different sort of challenge for the Gulf States.³¹

Regardless of class, residence patterns in the Gulf States are highly segregated. Members of the transnational elite typically dwell in somewhat luxurious accommodations. High-rise apartment buildings are increasingly common throughout the Gulf, but large walled compounds remain the predominant urban pattern for elite foreigners. These compounds often combine sets of large villas with agglomerations of spacious apartments. Most of these compounds resemble western gated communities, in that entrance and exit is loosely monitored by security guards. Excepting those foreign workers employed in the domestic sector, most of the semi-skilled and unskilled migrants in the Gulf States dwell in “labor camps,” a singular term that refers to a wide variety of living arrangements common in the region. At best, laborers can expect to room in large, organized camps with basic amenities -- water, air conditioning, a canteen, and transportation to the central urban areas on Friday (the only day off for most men). More typical, however, are ad hoc structures in industrial yards or areas, or decrepit villas in older suburban neighborhoods. The men typically live four to eight to a room. Many of the labor camps in the Gulf have problems with itinerant supplies of electricity or water, and the dispersal of these living areas in industrial hinterlands often prevent laborers

²⁹ Gardner 2005, 2009; Longva 1997, 1999; Human Rights Watch 2006, 2009

³⁰ ILO 2009; Strobl 2009; Gardner 2009; Longva 1997

³¹ Estimates suggest hundreds to thousands of workers in the GCC States are currently undocumented (Kapiszewski 2001: 92-94). See also Crystal 2005.

from easily obtaining groceries, socializing, or generally moving about during the few periods they are not working.³² Most of the Gulf states are currently amidst the construction of “worker cities” or “bachelor cities” that are intended to simultaneously improve the living conditions of these laborers and to more distinctly segregate them from the public spaces in the city..

Overall, the system by which migration to the Gulf is organized has been a lightning rod for international critique. All the GCC States, for examples, have for much of the last decade occupied the lower tiers of the U.S. Department of State’s Human Trafficking Report. The lowest tier is reserved for those countries that, by the U.S. Department of State’s evaluation, are unable or unwilling to make significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking in personas. These sentiments are echoed by the International Labor Organization.³³ International non-governmental organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, continue to issue scathing reports about the problems seemingly endemic to this system. In general, the GCC States historically responded to this sort of criticism by challenging the methodological underpinnings of these reports, by portraying them as part of an ongoing Orientalist rhetoric, by directing attention and blame to the labor brokers in the sending countries, or by noting the extraordinary logistical and bureaucratic challenges posed by the rapid pace of development characteristic of the region.³⁴ In the past few years, however, a plethora of signs suggest the battle lines, once sketched as vociferous western human rights activists versus a recalcitrant or indifferent local population, no longer characterize the situation in the Gulf States. Scholars, Arab and local, now play and increasingly central role in the development of a critical understanding of migration to the region, and overall, scholarly conversations that were previously perceived as threatening are now welcome in the public sphere.³⁵ In Qatar, for example, the Qatar Foundation

³² Gardner 2005, 2009

³³ ILO 2009; Plant 2008

³⁴ e.g. Gulf New (2009s, 2009b); Gulf Daily News (2009a, 2009b)

³⁵ Perhaps the most telling scenario has emerged in Bahrain. In the past, resistance to the international human rights discourse and the changes it recommended was framed in cultural terms in the sense that outsiders were portrayed as meddling in the political and cultural affairs of Bahrain and the other Gulf States. As the impending changes to the sponsorship system approached, however, the public debate in Bahrain shifted from a cultural one to an economic one: opponents of the proposed changes have now framed these rights-related changes as an economically debilitating shift that will slow profits and hamper development on the island.

has sponsored a series of research projects and forums that critically examine the migration experience on the Peninsula.³⁶ The internationally televised Doha Debates had an extended discussion on the topic. And the State of Qatar's National Human Rights Committee most recent report pointed directly to the very same problems described by the critical reports from international governments and non-governmental organizations noted above.³⁷ Several Gulf States are amidst discussions concerning the potential end of the sponsorship system, and Bahrain has embarked on a series of significant experiments aimed at directly addressing the problematic experiences many foreign workers face on the island. Bahrain's Minister of Labor Affairs is at the vanguard of change in the region. As he recently noted,

The prime challenge facing authorities in the Gulf is the elimination of the traditional sponsorship system and creation of an effective governmental body to assume the responsibility of importing manpower needed for development ... We also need to improve working conditions of those workers. Governments must guarantee their rights and that they receive the benefits they were promised when they were recruited.³⁸

These sorts of sentiments are new to the Gulf, and while they certainly don't reflect a consensus in the region, they might more easily be interpreted as a potential harbinger of significant change in the governance of foreign workers in the region.

III. Family and Migration to the Petroleum-Rich States of the Arabian Peninsula

The second half of this paper is directly concerned with the impact of Gulf migration upon families in both the sending and receiving countries. It is widely understood that transnational migration and, more broadly, the increasing flow of human capital,

³⁶ A partial list World include three o the Qatar Nacional Research Fund's recent awardees: Pessoa et al. (2009) Migrant Workers in Qatar (QNRF UREP Grant #05-09-71); Pessoa, Carlson et al. The State of Migrant Workers in Qatar (QNRF UREP Grant #07-12-03); Gardner and Watts (2009) Constructing Qatar: Narratives from the Margins of the Global System (QNRF UREP Grant #05-018-5-002). That list would also include The Human Rights Youth Conference, Migrant Labor Forum (Qatar Foundation, April 18, 2009); should Qatar Abolish the Kafala System? A Student Debate (Qatar University, May 25, 2009); Georgetown-Qatar Center for Regional and International Studies Migrant Labor in the Persian Gulf Research Grant Program (active as of 2009); Carnegie-Mellon University in Qatar's Panel on Immigrant Labor (Sunday, August 24, 2008).

³⁷ State of Qatar (2008)

³⁸ Al Baik, Duraid (2007)

is significantly reshaping family in the contemporary world. With the particularities of the GCC countries in mind, the remainder of the paper will approach the issue of family and Gulf migration through three distinct questions. First, what effect has labor migration to the Gulf States had upon families in the sending countries? Second, how might we unpack and analyze the experiences of those families that accompany the employed family member to the Gulf States? And finally, how have these vast migration flows reshaped families in the host societies?

a. Families in Sending Countries

In 2003, I sat in the small living room of my flat in Manama, Bahrain, with two Tamilian laborers. Both had just survived an intense building fire, and had been left with nothing but the clothes in which they had rapidly departed their rooms in the aging villa in the center of the city. Ten years before that night, Arkesh, one of those two men, had been an entrepreneur in a large village in southern India. He owned a small bicycle shop in the central area of town, and was able to make \$10 or \$12 a day. He even employed two people. Arkesh hadn't really wanted to leave India, but his parents thought he could earn more money abroad. One day his father told him that he was going to go to the Gulf. Arkesh noted that even if you don't earn more money in the Gulf, you earn more respect. If you return from the Gulf people at the tea shop will get up and give you their seat. Gulf migrants are respected. And, Arkesh added, that helps explain why his family pressured him into going to the Gulf. His parents wanted that respect for the family.

He paid 1300 Dinars (\$3488) for the visa to come to Bahrain. His family mortgaged the agricultural land they owned, borrowed some from a moneylender, and borrowed even more from an acquaintance already in Bahrain. Upon arrival, the promised job disappeared, but over the years he was able to find work as a carpenter, electrician, and manual laborer. Although he paid another 1700 Dinars (\$4509) in various attempts to renew or regularize his status on the island, Arkesh spent most of the last decade as an illegal worker. He sends all of his savings from the various manual labor positions home to his parents. Several months before the fire, his parents took out another loan in his name to pay for his sister's dowry. He figures he will need another eighteen months to pay that loan off. Then he hopes to go home. At that

point he will have been gone twelve years. He hopes to start up the bicycle shop again upon his return.³⁹

Several salient points can be culled from Arkesh's story. First, it should be clear that the decision to migrate to the Gulf States was a decision produced at the familial level. For many migrants -- and this is particularly true of South Asian migrants -- a sojourn to the Gulf is a strategic component of an extended family's economic strategy. The individual migrant's interests are clearly subordinate to the needs of the family: as Arkesh describes, remittance are often sent to parents, and the decision to migrate is decision that often doesn't belong to the migrant. While the literature often frames migrants, in the tradition of homo economicus, as rational individual agents, migration research in the Gulf States clearly suggests that most Gulf migrants should be considered emissaries of extended families.⁴⁰ Remittances generated by this migration are used to buy families' basic consumption, as the seed money for entrepreneurial activities, to fund the education of migrants' siblings or children, and in South Asian society, for the dowries of male migrants' sisters or daughters.

Arkesh's story reveals a second important and related point: while these migrants often represent an entire extended family, migration to the Gulf also typically risks the productive assets and savings of that extended household. Because potential migrants face charge of \$1500 to \$3000 for the right to work in the Gulf, poor families often mortgage agricultural land, redirect income from siblings' wages, pawn the gold jewelry that stores familial (and, more typically, maternal) wealth, and so forth. In the Gulf States, South Asian labor is often portrayed as more docile than other sources of labor (and, particularly, other Middle Eastern sources of labor).⁴¹ A better understanding of the organization of these migration flows, however, reveals that what is often portrayed as a cultural trait is more clearly the result of a structural arrangement: poor (and mostly South Asian) migrants risk the well-being of their extended family to simply arrive in the Gulf States. Their reticence to assert their

³⁹ This is from an interview (#B051) conducted by the autor, June 15, 2003.

⁴⁰ Gramburd 2000; Gardner 2009

⁴¹ Nakhleh 1976, 77; Weiner 1986, 53-54

rights is directly related to the fact that they risk their families' well-being with these potential actions.

Although many migrants encounter significant problems in the Gulf States, remittances from the Gulf are undeniably central to the economic activities of countless communities in the Indian Ocean world. Billions of dollars in remittances annually flow from the Gulf, and much of this money finds its way to some of the more impoverished regions of Africa and Asia.⁴² Somewhat recent data suggest that over \$26 billion is remitted every year from the Gulf States, a figure which places the region ahead of the United States in total remittances.⁴³ Particular regions of Asian and the Middle East are highly dependent on Gulf remittances: in the interlinked Kerala communities in which Filippo and Caroline Osella worked, migrants (mostly to the Gulf) made up 27% of the total male working population.⁴⁴ Overall, remittances contribute 22% to Kerala's state income, and the impact of these remittances can be seen at both the family and community level.⁴⁵ Remittances, mostly from the Gulf, also make up the single largest source of Pakistan's export earnings.⁴⁶ Similarly, in the Sri Lankan village in which she worked, Michele Gamburd noted the paramount role these remittances played in the local economy, although she indicated that the "villagers also note with resignation the high proportion of foreign earnings channeled to daily consumption".⁴⁷ While beyond the scope of this paper, the villagers' comment points directly to a much larger argument among development economists: do these remittances drive development (i.e. production) in the sending states, or are those remittances merely consumed?⁴⁸ Finally, migration to the Gulf States has a gender dynamic that directly relates to the function of families in the sending states. Through both chain migration and the emergence of dense nodes in the labor brokerage system, many regions and communities in South and Southeast Asia are intensely connected to the Gulf States. In parts of Kerala, for example, large portions of the young male population

⁴² Jureidini 2003:2

⁴³ ECSWA 2007:28.

⁴⁴ Osella and Osella 2000: 119

⁴⁵ Azeez, Abdul and Mustiary Begur 2009. See also Kurien 1994: 765

⁴⁶ Leonard 2003: 135

⁴⁷ Gamburd 2000: 45

⁴⁸ Mallick 2008; Zachariah and Rajan 2007

are absent.⁴⁹ Perhaps more noteworthy, however, is the impact of the increasing feminization of international migration. Demand for domestic workers in the Gulf States, combined with other positions in the service industry, has created a large and stable flow of female migrants to the Arabian Peninsula. These women come from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, India and several other countries. As absent sisters or mothers often function as the primary breadwinner, gender roles in the sending communities have been reconfigured around the contemporary realities. In some analyses, this female migration has been connected to a crisis in masculinity in the sending countries, with the effects to increased alcoholism and violence.⁵⁰

b. Families that accompany migrants to the Gulf

Although the majority of Gulf migrants arrive as the single emissaries of their extended families, millions of intact nuclear families also migrate to the Gulf States. The dividing line between single migrants, or “bachelors”, and migrant families is almost entirely attributable to economic class, for the Gulf States require minimum incomes for family visas. Kuwait’s monthly minimum salary for the family visa, for example, is set at KD450 ((\$1573), while the UAE recently raised the monthly minimum salary requirement for the family visa from AED 6,000 (\$1634) to 10,000 (\$2723).⁵¹ These state-mandated minimums, however, often prove insufficient, for the costs of living, and particularly the costs of educating children in private schools, pushes the costs of maintaining a family in the Gulf much higher than the state-mandated minimums. These family visas, however, must be understood for the significant changes they render. As Vora observed in the United Arab Emirates, “most foreign families living in the UAE are nuclear and patriarchal,” and this is no coincidence, for the family visa policies of the Gulf States directly contribute to the nucleation of the family.⁵² As noted above, many of the transnational migrants arriving in the Gulf States come from areas in which extended families are the predominant familial form. The Gulf States’ migration policies, however, allow only

⁴⁹ Osella and Osella 2000: 75-79

⁵⁰ Gamburd 2000

⁵¹ Sambidge, Andy. UAE raises minimum salary limits for expats with family. Arabian Business.com Thursday, July 2, 2009. See also Leonard 2003: 138-139 for a description of this system.

⁵² Vora 2008:381

spouses and children to accompany migrants. As a result, the nuclear family can remain intact through the migration process, while the extended family can only be maintained across the transnational divide. The policies and procedures in place in the Gulf States, then, can be seen as one force contributing to the reorganization of the family around its nuclear core.

Perhaps due to issues of access, these nuclear migrant families have been the subject of relatively more ethnographic attention than the much larger bachelor population.⁵³ Collectively, this research suggests migrant families find themselves in a series of complex and ambivalent positions in the Gulf States. With naturalization almost impossible, many foreign families are in the precarious position of making a life and a home in a country to which, in the final accounting, they can never belong. And while this is true in the long-term, there is a more direct anxiety produced by the unpredictability of their relations with their sponsors and with the various localization campaigns, for the duration of their stay is never ensured.⁵⁴ Conversely, research also suggests that these families struggle to replicate the cultural setting of home, to protect children from the perceived negative impact of cosmopolitan westernization, and to instill a sense of belonging to a distant home.⁵⁵ In the final accounting, children in these diasporic families often lose this connection to the homeland. As Karen Leonard describes it, the Gulf unsettled these middle class migrant children's "knowledge of and commitment to their parents' home nations".⁵⁶ As a result, the Gulf States have emerged as a stepping stone to further diasporization, with Canada, England, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States as typical destinations.⁵⁷

These issues are often framed in terms of identity. In the author's ethnographic study in Bahrain, the children of foreign workers spoke at length about their struggle with their placelessness in the contemporary world.⁵⁸ A young South Indian man, for example, noted that as a student at the Indian School, they were primarily educated

⁵³ e.g. Leonard 2002, 2003; Vora 2008; Gardner 2008

⁵⁴ Gardner 2008, Leonard 2003: 139

⁵⁵ Leonard 2002, 2003; Gardner 2008, Vora 2008

⁵⁶ Leonard 2003: 153.-154

⁵⁷ Leonard 2003: 131; Gardner 2008; Vora 2008.

⁵⁸ See also Vora 2008; Salih 2002

as Indian nationals. Hindi and English were the primary language of instruction, and his overarching notion of being Indian -- and Indian first -- was further reinforced by interactions with Bahrainis and Bahraini society, as well as the other national communities on the island. When the young man returned to India for higher education, however, he found himself out of place. He was stunned by the poverty of his homeland, and disconcerted by the lack of opportunities there. Most of all, however, he found that he lacked a "local" Indian identity: his regional language skills were poorly developed, and he was considered an oddity by the other students. He eventually returned to the Gulf, and has now made a home in a country that will most likely never welcome him as a citizen.

c. Impact upon families in the host countries

In this final section I describe the impact of these vast migration flows upon the families indigenous to the Gulf region. This topic remains one of the most unexplored facets of the migration literature in the Gulf States, and certainly the most important conclusion one could reach is that more research on this topic is desperately needed. Nonetheless, we can tentatively point to three basic issues that might potentially guide future research. First, the presence of large numbers of foreigners has produced a widespread insecurity about safety in the region. This insecurity is often expressed around concerns for the integrity of the local family, but also in terms of a social form of safety, as well as the perceived vulnerability to the erosion or loss of cohesive local cultural tradition. Second, the presence of foreigners in the Gulf States, and more specifically, their presence in the homes of the citizenry, has reshaped khaleeji family life and the responsibilities of the individuals who comprise those families. While the presence of these migrant populations has reshaped both men's and women's roles in Gulf society, it has played a particularly important role in altering women's roles in the family. Finally, in these traditionally insular societies transnational migration has fostered a high degree of personal interaction with foreigners and foreign culture. In a sense, the world beyond Arabia has come to the peninsula. Each of these three aspects will be dealt with in turn.

One of Qatar's leading newspapers recently paraphrased the sentiments of a "prominent Qatari woman," who noted that, "the menace of single workers is such

that many Qatari families avoid venturing out on weekends. She suggests the government build a large city complete with the entire needed infrastructure where single workers be accommodated.” She further added that the city should “be located far away from Doha.”⁵⁹ These sentiments echo those heard in other parts of the Gulf. The Kuwaiti Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, for example, recently embarked on the construction of a pair of complexes to house some 12,000 foreign male laborers in the country, and was explicit about its mission to eventually “relocate all bachelors from the residential areas of Kuwait to their very own city to limit opportunities for crime and to appease residents.”⁶⁰ Similar proposals have been publicly discussed in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. While the Qatari woman’s sentiments were framed as a proposal, tens of thousands of laborers already dwell in the vast “industrial area” on the outskirts of Doha—an ad hoc bachelor city.

This sentiment that male laborers unaccompanied by their families -- “bachelors” in the Gulf parlance -- are a menace to local society is widespread in the Gulf States, and while this topic remains one of the least explored in the current literature, it is clear that in all parts of the Gulf many citizens envision the legion of migrants in their midst as a threat to their family, to their personal security, and to the integrity of their culture.⁶¹ In my fieldwork in Bahrain, for example, I was able to track multiple cases of threats and violence levied against foreign laborers. Much of this violence occurred in the neighborhoods where large numbers of foreign laborers were forced to coexist with local citizens, and much of this violence was justified by the citizenry in terms of the vague threats to the security of family and children.⁶² In Qatar, many

⁵⁹ The Peninsula September 16, 2009

⁶⁰ Summayyah Meehan. The Bachelor City. Muslim Media Network. December 11, 2008

⁶¹ Shah 2006:5-6

⁶² Consider a pair of examples from Bahrain. In late 2004, a Manama Municipal Council member declared the intent of the Segaiya neighborhood’s Bahraini population to burn down a building occupied by Asian laborers. Issues of sewage and overcrowding gave way to what Councilor Ibrahim Hassan Ismail called the “moral aspect” of the problem: “The tenants, who are usually Asian, roam around in their underwear with disregard to the social and Islamic laws of the country” (Gulf Daily News, November 9, 2004). These issues continue to this day. Last month, a group of Isa Town residents reported their plan to break into labor camps and force the expatriate bachelors out. Residents reported that there are nearly two-dozen villas in the neighborhood that, together, house hundreds of laborers. As the neighborhood representative reported, while they are concerned about the mounds of dead rats the laborers pile next to their domicile, the (male) citizen’s primary concern is with the safety of their women and children, as they fear those women and children will be harassed by the bachelors. The laborers told the Bahraini area councilor “that they can’t sleep or walk around without rats bothering them, so they strangle them and throw them on the street.” The councilor also noted that, “The problem is that these laborers are not under the sponsorship of

large shopping malls and public parks now enforce “Family Day” policies on Fridays, the only day that most foreign laborers have free. Asian men and other “low class” male migrants are prevented from entering these public places, ostensibly to safeguard these spaces for family use.⁶³

As Sulayman Khalaf has clearly argued, the attempt to spatially segregate the global flow of labor to the Arabian Peninsula is a central feature of the Gulf city.⁶⁴ The sorts of policies and practices that structure this segregation are, however, also connected to the overarching sentiment that an imagined past has been lost. As one Kuwaiti citizen related to the anthropologist Anh Longva, “Imagine seeing strangers everywhere around you, including in your own homes. We used to know all the Kuwaitis, and to trust each other. In the old days, when someone made a promise, you knew he would keep it. We are like a big family. Now, everyone is a stranger. You don’t know whom to trust anymore.”⁶⁵ Perhaps even more to the point, all the Gulf States are quietly spending large sums on internal security. Much of this spending can be seen as a reaction to the size of the foreign populations in these respective countries and, more specifically, as a reaction to recent labor unrest in Bahrain and the UAE. Essentially, the reinforcement of internal security will help ensure the GCC States are able to manage and control potential uprisings by the large foreign workforces.⁶⁶

Interestingly, while there seems to be a widespread notion of trepidation and fear about the impact of such a large foreign presence, foreigners are also deeply integrated in the private lives of most Gulf nationals, and without a doubt the presence of this large foreign labor force has reshaped family life and members’ individual responsibilities. Much of this has to do with the widespread presence of domestic workers in GCC households. In the Gulf States, even middle class households typically have domestic workers. In Sharon Nagy’s fieldwork in Qatar,

the landlord, who just buys houses and rents them out.” The city councilor visiting the area confirmed that the residents are angry, and he warned the bachelors to beware as the residents plan to break into their camps soon if nothing is done (Gulf Daily News, March 14, 2008).

⁶³ The Peninsula, “Malls can enforce their own policies: Official” 13 October 2008; Gulf Times, “Shopping malls determine family day rules” 27 July 2008; Qazi, Sarmad (2008) Shopping Centers Stick to ‘Family-Day’ Policy. Gulf Times. October 12, 2008. See Maruska (2009) for an in depth analysis.

⁶⁴ Sulayman Khalaf 2005.

⁶⁵ Longva 1997: 124-125

⁶⁶ For a discussion of this process in Qatar, see Maruska (2009). See also Surk (2007).

for example, all 43 families she interviewed had servants, and most of them had multiple servants.⁶⁷ In her research in Kuwait, Nasra Shah noted that 87% of Kuwaiti households employ at least one foreign domestic worker.⁶⁸ Put another way, Jureidini found that housemaids made up 7% of the total population in the United Arab Emirates.⁶⁹

Overall, the presence of this large domestic workforce has allowed Gulf families to remain some of the largest in the development world: while modernity elsewhere exerts its pressures upon family size through the heavy investment required in children, the combination of an imported domestic workforce, along with the substantial social safety net provided by the state, has in the Gulf States preserved the highest natural population growth rates in the developed world. In a somewhat recent study, Nasra Shah found a strong correlation between the number of domestic workers in a household and the number of children in a household.⁷⁰ Local women have been largely freed from the labor of maintaining the household, and if not in the workforce itself, have assumed positions of managing the large household.⁷¹ Sharon Nagy's analysis also points to the freedoms rendered by this domestic workforce, particularly in terms of women's presence in the public sphere. She argues that in conservative Khaleeji societies, it is not customary for women to move about alone and unsupervised, but that the constellation of the drivers and housemaids available to contemporary khaleeji women expand their capacity to move about and establish a more public social presence.⁷²

Finally, the widespread presence of foreigners in the GCC States, and particularly their presence in GCC households, has brought the traditionally insular families of Arabian society into close contact with individuals from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. As Sharon Nagy noted in her study of domestic workers in Qatar, "The

⁶⁷ Nagy 1998

⁶⁸ Shah 2002

⁶⁹ Jureidini 2003:6

⁷⁰ Shah 2002

⁷¹ Mai Yamani's article (1994) provides a fine example of this. While the article is ostensibly about the resurgence or re-imagining of a local Saudi cuisine by the Saudi women of Mecca, it becomes clear only at the end of the article that the women of Mecca are not cooking themselves, but rather directing the cooks in their household in the development (or rediscovery) of this cuisine. Note that the appropriate role of "managing" the household and its labor force echoes the management roles that remain respectable vocations for males as well.

⁷² Nagy 1998:95

presence of foreign workers in the house is, for some Qataris, their most direct and intimate source of knowledge about Qatar's foreign residents."⁷³ While domestic workers' place in the family varies significantly, it is clear that many domestic workers are intimately involved in raising the children in the Gulf household.⁷⁴ This is perceived as both a threat and a benefit: children in Gulf households often learn Hindi, Malayalam, or English from their caretakers; at the same time, parents express fear that their children are not immersed in the cultural traditions specific to the region.⁷⁵

⁷³ Nagy 1998: 85

⁷⁴ Gamburd 2000

⁷⁵ Or, in the case of the recent move to promote Saudi nationals as housemaids in Saudi Arabia, local housemaids were portrayed as a safe choice because they didn't practice magic (Sambridge, Andy (2009) First Group of Saudi housemaids start work. Arabian business.com.

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