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# **Ethnography, Anthropology and Migration to the Arabian Peninsula: Themes from an Ethnographic Research Trajectory**

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# Ethnography, Anthropology and Migration to the Arabian Peninsula: Themes from an Ethnographic Research Trajectory

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**Abstract:** This paper provides an overview and evaluation of ethnography's contribution to our understandings of labor migration to the Gulf States of the Arabian Peninsula. It posits ethnographic research as a complementary research method that helps discern complexities and relations that can be quantitatively explored, but also suggests that ethnographic research has distilled a set of themes and issues that are best ascertained and pursued with qualitative methods. Based largely on the author's own research agenda and experience, this paper focuses on four primary ethnographic themes that thread through more than a decade of work: theorizing and framing the *kafala*, labour migration as an industry, migration and structural violence, and the household basis of labour migration.

**Keywords:** Sponsorship, Foreign Labour, Unskilled Labour, Arab Countries, Trafficking, Ethnography

## Introduction

In 2010, my colleagues and I embarked on a quantitative analysis of labour migrants in Qatar. Our subject population was limited to those migrants who made QR2,000 or less per month, part of our decision to focus the project and analysis upon the circumstances of the transnational working class employed in Qatar and, by proxy, the other hydrocarbon-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula. In total, the project surveyed 1,189 migrants, all of whom were part of a statistically representative sample. Our intentions with this project were multifaceted. In part, we wished to learn more about the often-criticised circumstances of this transnational proletariat. In part, I hoped the project might confirm the frequency of circumstances and situations that I and others had ethnographically observed over the past decades. And recognising the quantitative vernacular of governance, our team also hoped to produce findings that might be readily used by policymakers and ministry officials with the power to make sig-

nificant – albeit oftentimes incremental – improvements to the lived experience of the many foreigners at work on the Arabian Peninsula.

In crafting the questionnaire at the centre of this project, our team relied heavily on the work of a handful of ethnographers who, over the past twenty years, have delved into the lives of the transnational proletariat at work on the Arabian Peninsula. I count myself among that group, and I relied heavily on my own fifteen years of ethnographic observations and analysis in designing and steering this quantitative endeavor. With that in mind, the purpose of this short essay is to distill four of the ethnographic themes that shaped the design of our quantitative project. Perhaps such a thematic distillation might be of use to other researchers, journalists, and activists who are part of the global scrutiny these migratory conduits now attract.

Ethnography has grown increasingly reflexive, and as an ethnographer of Gulf migrants, my own research trajectory merits mention. My first ethnographic experience with migrants occurred in 1999 as part of the project assessing the livelihood of contemporary Bedouin pastoral nomads in Saudi Arabia. In part, that project noted that foreign workers were deeply embedded in the Bedouin livelihood contemporary at that time. After two months in Al Ain, UAE, in 2002, I proceeded to Bahrain, where I spent a year in an ethnographic exploration of the Indian community there. Many of my subjects and much of my time was spent in labour camps in and around Manama. Subsequently, between 2008 and 2010, I lived in Doha, Qatar, where I conducted several ethnographic projects focused on the transnational proletariat at work there. Since 2010, I have been returning to the region periodically while conducting several other ethnographic projects, including the project mentioned at the outset of this essay.

The numerous ethnographic research projects comprising this research trajectory are the basis for the themes and points described in this paper. Many facets of these points were present in ethnographic work that preceded my own research projects, and several have been developed at more length by other ethnographers in the last decade. Moreover, this distillation is certainly not a comprehensive assessment of ethnography's contributions to our understanding of gulf migration. But these four threads are woven through my own ethnographic trajectory in the region.

## Theorizing the *Kafala*

Anthropologists and ethnographers have contributed to a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the *kafala* and its complexities. This understanding, established by Anh Longva (1997) in her groundbreaking ethnographic work, remains central to much contemporary ethnographic and anthropological work focused on the migrant presence in the region, including my own. That understanding recognises the *kafala* as a system for governing and regulating migrants in the Gulf States. What marks the *kafala* as unique when compared to other systems of migrant governance in the contemporary world, however, is the diminished role of the state. In the Gulf States, substantial portions of the responsibility for the governing the population of temporary foreign workers are distributed by law and custom to citizens, sponsors, and their proxies. That theorization is foundational in the work of many ethnographers who study migration in the region, including my own.

The distribution of these responsibilities to citizen-sponsors and their proxies results in a migration system that produces extreme variability in the migrant experience. This understanding of the *kafala* helps explain the commonplace observations that have characterised more than a decade of ethnographic work in the region: while some migrants describe or report extraordinary challenges, frustrations, and exploitations in this migration system, others are obviously and recognisably prospering as a result of their transnational sojourn. By distributing significant portions of the responsibility for the regulation and governance of migrants to citizen-sponsors and their proxies, the migrant-receiving states of the GCC essentially maintain the structural conditions that produce variability in the migrant experience, for in these structural conditions the experience of any particular labour migrant is highly dependent on his or her employer and/or sponsor. It is at this juncture of the migrant system where this variability is born, and it is important that quantitative analyses of the migrant experience not elide this variability through an over-reliance on the averages and means that fail to apprehend this quality of the sponsorship system.

Indeed, the systemic governance structured by the *kafala* can produce conflicting tensions. In recent work, we ethnographically explored how the *kafala* systematically produces a small, durable population of undocumented (or “illegal”) migrants. Among migrants facing the non-payment of promised wages or other significant problems with their sponsors or employers, illegal employment under the strictures of the *kafala* often emerges as their only viable coping mechanism. Some migrants even opt for the vulnerabilities of illegal employment in exchange for the freedom of leaving employers, a freedom prohibited in the *kafala*. In essence, it is the structural frictions of the *kafala* and the relations it fosters that produce the illegal workforce present in the region.

This mode of migrant governance also helps explain ethnographers’ observations of the role that class, gender, and ethnicity play in this migration system, for the distribution of power to sponsors and employers is the doorway through which culturally held ideas and constraints concerning class, gender, and ethnicity enter migrants’ experiences in the region. Ethnographic attention to class, ethnicity, and their interaction in the experiences of Gulf migrants has been substantial and diverse in thematic focus, bridging scholarly conversations concerned with both labour migration and diaspora. Gender has similarly been an analytically lucrative variable in scholarship, with a long and established legacy of ethnographic research concerning the constraints, burdens, and challenges of female migrants, particularly those employed in the domestic sector. Indeed, although the state distributes significant responsibilities for the governance of migrants to sponsors and employers, even the limited employment rights and protections nominally guaranteed by the state are unavailable to migrants employed in the domestic sector, as it is defined in law as distinct and separate. As a result, it is in domestic sector employment that the logic of the *kafala* is most visible and the variability of migrants’ experiences are the most extreme. In both components of the workforce, however, ethnicity, gender, and class have been central threads in the explication of the *kafala* and its role in orchestrating the variable migration experiences typical of the Arabian Gulf States.

## Transnational Migration as a Profit-seeking Industry

While migration and mobility have been key features in the Indian Ocean world for centuries, the last decades of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a transnational, profit-seeking migration

industry. The keystone in this industry is the commodification of the right to work in the Gulf States: migrants from decades past report paying little or nothing for the right to work in the Gulf, but today migrants pay \$1,000 or more for two-year labour contracts. In both sending and receiving states, a constellation of stakeholders, entrepreneurs, and other entities have emerged to facilitate the flow of labour to the states of the GCC, and simultaneously, to extract profit from it. Ethnography has been instrumental in asserting and illuminating the profit-seeking and transnational nature of this migration system.

The profit-seeking nature of this system is largely normalised in our contemporary world, but from the migrant's perspective, there are multiple junctures both at home and abroad where individuals extract profit from their migration. The profit-seeking nature of this migration industry merits sustained consideration, particularly because these migrants and this migration flow are increasingly viewed through a prism focused on migrants' human and labour rights — aspects of their existence that are not necessarily aligned to the profit-seeking nature of this enabling industry.

In addition to this migration industry's profit-seeking nature, however, ethnographic research has also highlighted the transnational footprint of this industry. As many ethnographers recognised years ago, the study of Gulf migrants requires multi-sited methodologies to capture the social fields in both sending and receiving states. Like the migrants themselves, the industry that facilitates their sojourn is distributed across space. In some manifestations, it includes dalals, labour brokers, moneylenders and other parties in the sending states, as well as manpower agencies, employers, and sponsors in the receiving states. This brief and abbreviated taxonomy reveals the essentially transnational quality of this migration industry: labour migration to the Gulf States is one of the many arenas of contemporary life where we see processes, connections, and relations transcending the dominion of the nation state. In my own ethnographic work, one small contribution I have made to this conversation concerns the fact that this transnational profit-seeking industry is riddled with both misinformation and disinformation, a social fact which clouds the capacity of potential migrants to understand and assess the risks of their prospective migrations.

## Structural Violence and Gulf Migration

Some ethnographic work has also focused on the structural violence that underpins much contemporary migration to the Arabian Peninsula states. The concept of structural violence is one that encourages analyses to conceptually link the challenges and suffering of individuals (in this case, transnational labour migrants) with the broader structural forces that shape their lives and choices. In implementation, the concept connects broad forces – neoliberalism and state austerity, development and underdevelopment, structural adjustment policies, post-colonialism, and more of this ilk – with the lived experience of migration and the economic and social violence that often peppers the lives of those in it. The concept of structural violence asserts that connection and pushes ethnography to demonstrate it.

In the logic of structural violence, aspects of Gulf migration that would otherwise be consigned to the margins of analysis and causation are instead spotlighted. The concept of structural violence encourages us to connect the presence of Sri Lankan migrants in the Gulf with the longstanding civil war of

the past decades and with the aftermath of the tsunami that followed it. Structural violence connects the underdevelopment of Nepal and the frictions underlying the Maoist insurgency with the increasingly large contingents of Nepali labourers migrating to the region. Structural violence seeks to clarify the relationship between the faltering aspirations of development in many Asian and African states and the arrival of increasing numbers of labour migrants with few viable options at home, wherever that may be.

By exploring these connections, anthropology and ethnography have increasingly become multi-sited endeavours: to grasp and describe the migrant's world and lived experience, we must understand the political, economic, social, and cultural context at both ends of these migration flows. In aspiring to this understanding, ethnography of this ilk highlights factors and processes that are often omitted from our conceptualisation of migration — the underdevelopment, poverty, civil wars, class and caste frictions, and all the collective forces that make this migratory journey the most viable option for many men and women around the world. This has allowed the study of Gulf migration to remain committed to incorporating the inequality that characterises our contemporary world into our understanding of this particular migratory arena.

### **The Household Basis of Gulf Migration**

Finally, in my own work I have tried to better understand and foreground the household basis of Gulf migration and to understand the migrant's decision in that context. The household basis of Gulf migration has been visible at multiple junctures in my own ethnographic work. It is perhaps most clearly visible in the financial arrangements that allow individual migrants to obtain employment in the Gulf States. As previously noted, most Gulf migrants pay \$1,000 or more for the contract that allows them to work there. These costs, paid in the sending states, typically comprise debt that is borne by the migrant's household, and prototypically involves mortgages and liens on the productive assets of the migrant-sending household. These debts often remain in place for the duration of the migrant's first contractual sojourn in the Gulf States. Most Gulf migrants are important components of household livelihood strategies.

The household dynamic behind Gulf migration is also visible in many of my ethnographic explorations of the individual migrant's decision to migrate, and in others' as well. Those decisions are often made at the household level and are deeply intertwined with household livelihood strategies. In my own ethnographic work, I have recurrently charted how the expected remittances from Gulf migration support household goals of increasing landholdings, eradicating burdensome debts, expanding or improving the home, enhancing siblings' or children's educational prospects, contributing to a sister or daughter's dowry, sustaining parents' retirement, and much more. Notably, in addition to the *kafala*, these obligations to the household comprise another force that oftentimes locks migrants into problematic employment situations in the Gulf States.

Incorporating the household as the fundamental unit of analysis allows us to grasp the number of lives involved in migration to the Gulf and straightforwardly implies that the number of lives embroiled in Gulf migration is much larger than the number of migrants currently at work on the peninsula. It also

complicates and challenges the portrayal of migrants in the image of homo economicus — as rational, individual agents who decide to depart their homes for a better life. Instead, this understanding frames migrants as emissaries of complex household livelihood strategies. Notably, research that attempts to frame migrants' experiences individually fails to capture the dynamic contextual factors that ethnography has charted at both ends of these migration flows.

## Concluding Thoughts

This brief essay seeks to clarify the relationship between qualitative ethnographic work and the substantial quantitative work now focused on labour migration to the Gulf States of the Arabian Peninsula. Ethnographic research has long been lauded for its capacity to facilitate quantitative research – to help understand complex social worlds in more detail, and to help build a foundation for asking better and more precise questions via quantitative methodologies. This complementary role of qualitative ethnographic research certainly holds true in the context of migration to the Arabian Peninsula, and in my own research experience as well.

But ethnography and anthropology have also fostered a series of themes and conversations that are unique to the ethnographic approach and are principally fostered by ongoing, sustained, and firsthand ethnographic fieldwork. Because the ethnographic enterprise is built on a foundation grounded in holistic inquiry, ethnography seeks to understand a constellation of connections and relations that often escape the ambit of other disciplinary and methodological approaches. As discussed in this essay, concepts like structural violence seek to connect the Gulf migration experiences to geopolitical and socio-economic issues that characterise the experiences of the sending states. More generally, ethnography is typically attentive to the complex interactions between the social, cultural, political, and economic forces at work in both sending and receiving states, to the lives of individual migrants as well as the households and communities from which they come, and to the macroscopic forces at work in the regions and states at both ends of these migration flows.

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## Endnotes

1. The principal findings are reported in Gardner et al. (2013).
2. This list includes Anh Longva (1997), Sharon Nagy (1998a, 1998b), Sulayman Khalaf and Saad Alkobaisi (1999), Michele Gamburd (2000), Filippo and Caroline Osella (2000), and others.
3. Notably, that project was sponsored by the Qatar National Research Fund as part of the National Priorities Research Programme. In that sense, this essay was, in part, made possible by NPRP grant # 09-857-5-123 from the Qatar National Research Fund (a member of Qatar Foundation). The statements made herein, however, are solely the responsibility of the author.
4. In addition to Longva's work (1997, 1999), see Gardner (2005, 2010a, 2010b) and Frantz (2008, 2013).
5. See Pessoa, Harkness and Gardner (2014).
6. For example, Gardner (2010a), Vora (2008, 2009, 2011, 2013), and Osella and Osella (2009)
7. Ethnographic research concerned with female migrants in the domestic sector has been substantial and sustained, with notable contributions by Gamburd (2000), Nagy (1998), Frantz (2008, 2013), Strobl (2009), Johnson (2011), and Ahmad (2010). Attention and analysis of masculinity has been less common — see Osella and Osella (2000).
8. See Gardner et al. (2013). For more detailed examinations of labour brokerage in this transnational migration industry, see Jureidini (2014), Breeding (2012), and Gamburd (2000).
9. Gardner (2012), Gardner et al. (2013), Jureidini (2014), Breeding (2012), and Gamburd (2000).
10. See Gardner (2012)
11. Gardner (2010a, 2010b), Mahdavi (2011), Qureshi (2013), Johnson (2011)
12. To explore the conceptual background behind this concept, see Galtung (1969), Farmer (2004), and Schepers-Hughes (2004).
13. One of these Sri Lankan migrants' stories and the framework of structural violence is centrally featured in Gardner (2012).
14. One of these Nepali migrants' stories and a theorization of how structural violence shaped his decision to migrate is featured at length in Gardner (2012, 2015).
15. See Gardner 2010a, 2011, 2012.
16. Ibid; Osella and Osella.

### About the Author



**Andrew Gardner** is an Associate Professor at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington. He is a sociocultural anthropologist and ethnographer by training. For the past decade, Andrew's fieldwork has been focused on the places, peoples, and societies that interact in the hydrocarbon-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula. He has conducted extensive fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Qatar. Between 2008 and 2010, he also served as an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Qatar University. In addition to numerous journal articles and book chapters, he is the author of *City of Strangers: Gulf Migration and the Indian Community in Bahrain* (Cornell, 2010), which explores the experiences of Indian transnational migrants in Bahrain, and more recently, the co-editor of *Constructing Qatar: Migrant Narratives from the Margins of the Global System* (2012). His current scholarly pursuits explore the nexus between migration, urbanization, and urban planning in Doha.

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