

Dubai Camel Market Transnational Workers: An Ethnographic Portrait

SULAYMAN N. KHALAF

Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage

Abstract

The paper presents an ethnographic documentation of life conditions and work patterns of transnational camel workers in the UAE. The ethnographic evidence presented is based on field work carried out in 2005 in Dubai Nad Al-Sheba camel market and in the adjacent camel racetrack and camel farms. Intermittent field visits were also carried out during 2007 and 2008. The data is presented in the form of short synopses of kin-related workers who come from Asian and Arab countries, such as Pakistan, Sudan and Syria. The main thesis of this study revolves around how members of the various ethnic groups working in the market managed in spite of the transitory, precarious and underclass globalized life conditions at the margins of Dubai city to reconstruct numerous aspects of their local communities. They activated traditional multiplex relationships as survival mechanisms. These included the utilization of traditional social capital, symbiotic economic networks, family nesting, kinship bonding and mutual support for fellow ethnic migrants. Locality here is equated with the activation of village/tribal social habitus. [Keywords: Dubai, camel market, migrant workers, globalization]

The Dubai Camel Market (DCM) is a bustling space during the racing season. Huddled modestly next to the camel racing track with its grand stadium, and with the high-rise skyline of Dubai city in the background, it is the working and living space of around 1000 workers in the larger burgeoning camel heritage industry. A stroll through the market on a winter day reveals a multitude of faces, ethnic dresses, languages, and cooking smells. Shop workers are surrounded by a plethora of camel accessories which spill over on the pavements, while truck drivers unload bales of fresh fodder. Nearby, trains of camels make their way to the racing track for their daily practice.

This paper presents an ethnographic documentation of life conditions and work patterns of transnational camel workers in the UAE.¹ It is based on field work carried out in 2005 in Dubai's Nad Al-Sheba camel market, with further visits in 2007 and 2008. Data will be presented in the form of short synopses of kin-related workers who come from Asian and Arab countries, like Pakistan, Sudan and Syria. Additional data on Dubai, camel races and adjacent camel farms provides the context for understanding the workings of DCM. Data collected in these multiple sites (Hannerz 2003) enables a portrayal of the workers' lives and their everyday environment. The fieldwork methods I

employed for data collection were primarily participant observation in the DCM observing, talking and occasionally sharing meals with informants. I also went to Friday prayers in the local market mosque with some workers, and conducted unstructured interviews with shop keepers, shop workers, camel trainers and handlers. Conversations and interviews were conducted in Arabic, which posed an occasional challenge for me as the Urdu and Hindi-speaking informants had difficulties in expressing themselves fully in Arabic.²

Contextualizing Dubai camel market workers

Before exploring the lives of the camel market workers, it is necessary to introduce camel racing as it has evolved in the United Arab Emirates and the position they came to occupy in it. A set of guiding questions will direct us to theorize conditions of these workers in Dubai, a city that is described as “an emerging global city” (Elshehtawy 2004). Why is camel racing occurring on such a large scale at this particular time, and why have thousands of transnational camel workers flocked to the UAE in the last two decades? How have those workers come to the camel market? What are their national/ethnic backgrounds? How do they work and live? What type of relationships do they have with each other and local customers? What are some of the strategies and modes of adaptation they developed to cope with the seasonal patterns of work in the camel racing business? How are they positioned in global processes at large and in Dubai in particular? As transnational migrants, how do they configure their lives while working on the margins of a rapidly changing city? How are they positioned within the UAE national cultural industry of camel racing? I raise these questions in order to contextualize the place and role of transnational camel workers in the Emirates in the growing national heritage industry and the larger oil and global trade maintained globalized political and cultural economies. To examine these questions we have to go beyond the camel races and heritage revival and contextualize them in broader processes of oil and political economies, the building of a modern nation-state and the role of global forces in the local culture.

Dubai: an emerging global city

My personal experience in Dubai in the last 16 years has allowed me to witness Dubai transforming and reinventing itself as a global city that no longer depends so much on oil but increasingly on trade and business (Khalaf 2006; Abdulla 2006; Al Rasheed 2005). The majority of Dubai’s population are transnational migrants,

mainly Asians, Arabs and Westerners who have migrated because of the oil economy and Dubai's free market economy.³ Dubai has the highest proportion of immigrant population to native population in the world. This aspect is viewed by globalization theorists as significant criteria in the make up of global cities.⁴

There are manifest and hidden conflicts, juxtapositions and forms of exploitation and domination in the modern social cityscape (Khalaf and Alkobaisi 1999). According to Elsheshtawy, Dubai as an

emerging global city has become a border region in which one can detect a variety of 'conflicts': West/East, modernization/fundamentalism, Arab/Asian, and so on. These conflicts are resolved spatially through a policy which on the face of it attempts to reconcile through co-existence, but a closer examination reveals an exclusionary direction through the development of clearly defined 'borders', i.e. zones or enclaves (2004:196).

In addition to the tens of thousands of highly paid transnational professionals, Dubai also harbors hundreds of thousands of low paid migrant laborers, marginalized in economic, political and social terms. In spite of the dependency of the economy on their skills and labor, they remain confined to marginal exploited positions, not only in Dubai but in other Gulf cities as well (Longva 1997 and 2000; Louër 2008; Gamburd 2004; Gardner 2008 and 2009; Khalaf and Alkobaisi 1999).

In the mainstream discourses on globalization, these "lower-class sectors and spaces" have not yet received sufficient attention. In Sassen's view the account of dominant globalization "operates like a 'narrative of eviction' as it excludes a whole range of low-paid workers who often locate themselves in the informal economy" (1998:82). This paper documents the lives of marginalized transnational migrants who work on the margins of the city. They work with camels which have recently been elevated from their old traditional desert ecology to national cultural icons in the new globalized cultural economy of the UAE (Khalaf 1999, 2000).

Dubai camel market workers are transnational migrants involved in the production of a newly invented cultural heritage sport (*reyadha turatheyyah*). Within the social/economic geography of Dubai, they have come to occupy a literally marginal space on the outskirts of this rapidly growing city. Unlike the Bedouins of yesterday who depended on the camel in their nomadic desert life and moved freely across open and free desert range, today's Pakistani and Sudanese camel market workers operate most of the time within a fixed and bounded market space, about half square kilometer in size, under the shadow of Dubai's glittering skyscrapers. Major world cities, Sassen writes, "are the terrain where a multiplicity of globalization processes assumes concrete localized forms. The localized forms are, in good part, what globalization is all about" (Sassen 1998:xxv). DCM explored in this paper

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Figure 1. Camels going to practice on race track with the stadium and city high-rise in the background, 2005. Photo by author.

represents one of these localized forms that are embedded hurriedly within the Dubai larger global urban terrain.

Camel racing as a growing cultural phenomenon in the UAE

Khaiti writes,

It is ironic that the same forces behind making Dubai a modern and global city have now realized the importance of local identity in the development of the city. It was not enough to be global city; Dubai needed to be unique. Dubai needed to be a city with its own regional and cultural assets; with its own identity. The view was shared by the government and the inhabitants who felt the loss of the past cultural heritage (2007:2–3).

The camel has returned and is celebrated as one of the significant Emirati identity symbols in new forms and annual cultural festivals (see Figure 1). As Khaiti suggests, the Emirati economy and its larger global context have affected the camel in two different ways. While oil wealth initially led to the marginalization of the camel, it later empowered Emiratis, represented by their shaikhly ruling elite, to come to the rescue of the camel by shifting its role to a new national cultural domain of camel racing. This shift in the uses of the camel and its subsequent transformation into a national cultural symbol fits well within the broader heritage-oriented ideological outlook of the Emirati nation-state (Khalaf 2000).

The global process is viewed as a two-edged sword, representing simultaneously challenges and opportunities for the Emiratis and their national culture. On the one hand, global cultural flows have been perceived by Emiratis as threats to their traditional culture, on the other hand Emiratis utilized global flows (such as modern technologies, finance, migrant labor, know-how, transnational agencies and agents) to invent and reinvent their national heritage culture in ways directed towards identity building and other political purposes. For example, the huge flow of transnational migrant labor has played a major role in the invention of the Emirati camel racing culture. The majority of the 120,000 people involved in camel racing are different transnational laborers (Al-Mansoori 2004:194; Khalaf 2000) who come from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, India, Bangladesh, Sudan, Somalia, Yemen,

Oman, Egypt, Syria, Australia, England, Holland, or Germany. The heavy reliance on foreign labor in the camel racing industry reflects the larger dependency on expatriate labor in the UAE and the Gulf region.

Staging camel races involves local and global agents and resources. Yet the symbolic cultural capital generated in the races is systemically appropriated by the Emiratis and their national ruling elite by way of state-controlled media. Recognition of the role of migrant camel laborers in the staging of races is absent in this media coverage. The implicit idea is to safeguard the national culture and not dilute the image of the camel as a national cultural icon, but rather produce a media discourse that celebrates the newly produced camel racing culture as authentic (*asil*) and a unique component of the Emirati national culture and identity.

In the UAE, and other Gulf countries, the invention of heritage such as camel racing is a national industry. The term inventing heritage traditions (Hobsbawm 1997) refers to cultural practices which are considered traditional, yet in fact are quite recent inventions often deliberately constructed to serve particular ideological goals. The use of material and non-material cultural elements derived from different phases of the past is conscious cultural policy to produce and manage the past and its culture for the needs of the new Gulf States (Marriot 1963). Traditional economic activities, such as camel racing, pearl diving and dhow racing, have been invented as cultural attractions in large annual festivals. There has been a plethora of television series reconstructing the former way of life in these Arab Gulf communities. State-supported heritage clubs, societies and folklore dance troops have been mushrooming throughout Gulf societies (Hajar 2000; Hurreiz 2002; Al-Mansoori 2004; Khalaf 1999; Boussaa 2003). New wealth and global modern mass media have been utilized to invent and reproduce local culture, with particular emphasis on building nationalistic political ideologies and imagined communities (Anderson 1991) that view indigenous heritage as the basic component in their politico-cultural identity.

In view of this national cultural policy and the growing heritage industry, camels and camel racing constitute a significant traditional cultural resource. The huge cost of the races, the prolonged media coverage they receive annually, and the state pageantry that accompanies the final races contribute to this cultural significance. As huge events, camel racing involves the mobilization of labor, capital, and the integrated organization of many people, agencies and institutions. The 120,000 workers involved include laborers in camel farms, shepherds, trainers, vets, specialists working in mobile camel clinics, nutritionists, jockeys, and shopkeepers and traders in camel fodder and accessories in the camel markets located near UAE major cities and towns. Over the last two decades camel racing, often referred to as “heritage sport”, has grown at a phenomenal rate (Khalaf 1999, 2000).

The organization of camel racing

Contemporary organization of camel races in the UAE is radically different from the pre-oil era. In the past races were held occasionally in small local communities to celebrate religious holidays, weddings and the occasional visit of a shaikh. Today, all aspects of the races have changed. The most obvious development is the construction of several modern racetracks with huge stadiums designed with heritage-oriented aesthetic features. For example, the Nad Al-Sheba race track is an integrated camel facility built by the Dubai local government. Stretching over 25 square kilometers, it contains two racing tracks. Close to the starting line is a large enclosure to keep camels waiting in their groups for races. The stadium, which faces the finishing line, is built to resemble a large white tent perched on a hill of immaculate lush green lawns, swaying palm trees and flowering shrubs. It can seat over 1000 persons and includes a VIP section in the centre (see Figure 2).

In addition to the track and stadium, the Nad Al-Sheba racing complex has other facilities including 164 shops in the camel market which specialize in camel fodder, medications and accessories. The racing complex also has a mosque, veterinary center, medical and drug testing clinic, and a large area of about 4 square kilometers of fenced space used primarily as a camp for guest participants from neighboring Gulf countries during the final month of the races.



Figure 2. The stadium of Dubai camel racetrack, 2004. Photo by author.

A successful racing camel is not produced by good genes alone. Equally important are training, high quality health care, feeding, and other management aspects. Many of the renowned camels are owned by shaikhs (members of the ruling elite) whose attachment to camels and their financial support has given rise to the Camel Racing Association (CRA) in the UAE. In hierarchical terms, next to the shaikhly owners are a few merchant families particularly in the emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah. The Bedouin tribesmen's position as owners is based on the collapse of traditional camel herding and transport economy, and their capacity to shift their traditional knowledge and skills to the breeding and training of racing camels. Many of these Bedouins only own a few camels, but they rely on the generosity of shaikhs to employ them as trainers. Under the supervision of these

Bedouin manager/trainers (*mudhammers*) are the vast numbers of transnational migrant workers. They include young trainers, shepherds, caretakers, grooms, farm cleaners, drivers, jockeys (until 2006 when they were replaced by robots), cooks, and workers in camel markets. It is ironic that the production of camel racing as a national heritage takes the form of “the global assembly line” (Sassen 2001:10). There is a hierarchy in the wages of the foreign workers. For example, the starting wages for Bengalis and Indians are 500 Dirhams, Baluchis receive 600 Dirhams, junior Sudanese 800 Dirhams, while the more experienced Sudanese trainers/pickup drivers receive 1200 Dirhams per month. All workers receive free food and board in the camel farms.

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The Dubai Camel Market (DCM)

The Dubai Camel Market is known officially as Nad Al-Sheba Market, in reference to the area where it is located. The market specializes in products relevant to camels (fodder, medications, accessories like ropes, blankets, canes, camel jockey outfits, and building materials for camel enclosures and farms). The market is located adjacent to the racetrack, and benefits from the activities of the long winter racing season. In addition, it serves the year-round needs of workers living in the hundreds of camel farms (*izbas*) within the Nad Al-Sheba area and its desert environs.⁵



Figure 3. A view showing part of Dubai camel market, 2005. Photo by author.

The market is a subculture that revolves around camels and their seasonal appearance on the racetrack. It was built in the mid 1980s by Shaikh Hamdan al-Maktoum and is still referred to as *Souq Hamdan* (Hamdan’s market) by older traders. It has grown rapidly and now includes 116 small shops arranged in symmetrical rows around the perimeter of a large central area (see Figure 3). There are 48 fodder selling open units known as *dikkas*. DCM is administered by the Dubai Municipality, who rent out shops to needy Emirati women, such as widows or those with low family income, for a modest annual rent of 500 Dirhams. These women in turn rent the shops to migrants for upwards of 2000 Dirhams/year.

The shops are small and of standard size: 3 meter wide, 5 meter long and about 4.5 meter high. Each shop has an attic about 1.3 meter high. Many owners have transformed these into sleeping spaces. They have a metered electricity supply, and all have AC units which facilitate their use as living spaces, particularly during the hot summer months when temperatures reach 44°C. In the centre of the camel market are three



Figure 4. Abundance of camel accessories displayed in front of shops, 2005. Photo by author.



Figure 5. Workers and shoppers of different nationalities, with sacks of camel fodder piled in front of shops, 2005. Photo by author.



Figure 6. View of the back of shops showing one worker attending to his kitchen, while two others are grooming themselves, 2005. Photo by author.

buildings; each is open on one side and subdivided into 16 units, *dikkas*, for selling camel fodder and farm equipment.

For workers, the small shops are their sleeping and living space and house their cottage industries (see Figures 4 and 5). This is also the space for bargaining, buying and selling, and sharing meals on the floor. Most workers spend more than twenty hours a day in these tiny shops. Many spend days and perhaps weeks without venturing beyond the market. Each shop has wooden extension as a kitchen with an entrance from the back, where simple meals are cooked. These kitchens are about one square meter and about 1.5 meters high. They have small gas cookers and are cluttered with a few cheap kitchen utensils and bags of rice. A man who cooks can hardly get his body in this kitchen box (see Figure 6). Fresh bread is bought daily from the market's bakery. Because of the cramped conditions in shops, many goods are stacked outside on the pavement, leaving only narrow entrances into the shops. At night shop keepers throw thick plastic sheets over their goods, as protection from the humidity or rain.

The three bathrooms and shower units are barely adequate for the market community, and large queues form in the mornings. Similar conditions are found in the camel farms (*izba*), where four to six young men share a room for

sleeping, eating, and socializing. The DCM workers' housing conditions are similar to those of other unskilled migrant workers in the UAE and the Gulf (Khalaf and Alkobaisi 1999; Alkobaisi 1992).

Daily and seasonal work in the camel market

With the call for dawn prayer (*salat al-fajr*), the market stirs as scores of the faithful make their way from the shops to the nearby mosque. Upon return, most of them go back to sleep for another hour or so. By six o'clock the market is starting to swing into action. The camel fodder *dikkas* get busy early, as pickup trucks arrive to buy fresh alfalfa that had arrived during the night. Trade is busiest between 7 AM and 11 AM. Most small camel races finish around 10 AM. This brings trainers, jockeys and drivers to the market for grocery shopping or refreshment at the four restaurants. The shops have parking spaces in front. Most customers drive up to shops and conduct their business without leaving their air conditioned cars.

After 11 AM business slows down, and by 1 PM the market is deserted. At the backs of shops cooking pots are filling the air with the aroma of Asian spices. Between 1 and 2 PM, owners and workers are often sitting on shop floors around large metal food trays. While passing the shops at this time I was always greeted with an invitation to join them. I accepted an invitation for Friday lunch with Pakistani shop workers. This lunch was a simple meal: rice flavored with tomato sauce was on a large tray. There was bread, but no meat or vegetables.

The market takes a long siesta until the heat of the sun has dissipated around 4 PM (see Figure 7). *Salat al-asr* (afternoon prayer) marks the second part of the market day which lasts until around 8 PM, one or two hours after sunset. In the evening, shopkeepers gather in small groups on rugs placed on the sidewalks in front of the shops. This is social and leisure time for this diverse male community. The day is over between 10 and 11 PM, except for those who will be busy late receiving fresh alfalfa from pickup trucks that come from farms.

Most migrant workers in the camel market lead a simple and religious life. While the city glitters on the near horizon with numerous attractions for entertainment and pleasure, the camel market workers ignore it almost entirely. It is only a six minute drive from the market. Yet, the social



Figure 7. Camel workers resting in their sleeping space inside the shop, 2005. Photo by author.

distance is considerable for these poorly paid workers who do not want to venture into avenues of consumerism and entertainment. In fact they rarely go to the city and they conduct their lives within the perimeters of the market. The market is a safe ground and it costs very little to entertain friends in village ways, where male/female segregation is the norm. Hospitality is usually modest with sweetened cups of tea. Arab workers visit the city more often, particularly during the mild winter and spring seasons. But they avoid going to restaurants and cinemas to save their earnings. Most ordering of shop supplies is done by telephone and through wholesale traders who send their monthly supplies of goods, thus minimizing the need to go to the city. The one exception is to purchase gifts when workers go to their home country. Workers buy these in popular markets.

The market is most active during the winter season of camel racing, from mid-October to the end of March. Once the grand final races are over, the market feels the hard pinch. Business in most of the shops drops radically. Some workers take lengthy holidays back home. They often prolong their stay in their home communities for several months, but not longer than six months as this is the period a migrant is allowed outside the UAE without losing his residency visa. Many of the young migrants with small wages choose not to return home for several years.

Social and employment patterns

In the early phases of its development, the camel market was the domain primarily of Baluchis from Pakistan and Iran, and Indians. However, in the last four to seven years Syrians, Sudanese, Iranians, and Egyptians have joined the Baluchis. Approximately 1000 migrants work and live in the market. Most are connected with the small shops, as owners employ their own relatives and nationals as assistants and

workers. Among those not directly employed in shops are about 40 Baluchi workers who sell fresh alfalfa in the open air; two dozen workers who help to load trucks; and around 40 truck owners/drivers who are often seen sitting in the shade of their trucks in little groups, waiting to transport camels or camel fodder from the market to the farms scattered in the desert (see Figure 8). Depending on the load and the distance, one truck trip can earn the owner/driver about US \$30–50 for



Figure 8. A Pakistani worker selling fresh camel fodder with fellow workers socializing in the background, 2005. Photo by author.

four to six hours of work. A few owners use their trucks as mobile shops selling inexpensive dates imported from Iraq and Iran for camels.

The social geography of the market is characterized by ethnic/national clustering in particular services and businesses. Baluchis from Pakistan or Iran are mainly involved in camel ropes, accessories, and they sell fodder such as maize, barley, mixed cereals, dates, honey and alfalfa. The Sudanese, who are relative newcomers, only sell fodder. They have no experience in making ropes and other crafts that require sewing machines as they come from camel-herding communities. Ethnic and national differences are visible by the clothing worn by members of the various ethnic groups (Longva 1997, Khalaf 2005). For example, the Sudanese perceive the various ethnic groups in terms of their own tribal worldviews and customs.

We Sudanese support each other whether we are tribally related or not. The Baluchis, because they are tribesmen, are similar to us in many ways but when they eat out in the market restaurants each one pays for himself. A Sudanese will pay for the lunch of any other Sudanese who enters the restaurant after him as he is considered, according to tribal custom, a host in a de facto manner to all those who enter the restaurant space after him.

The Indians eat alone and this is considered anti-social:

You will see him eating standing by himself with his plate of rice and curry. We Sudanese do not like or respect all that rope spinning and sewing Baluchis do all day long. In our tribal homeland spinning is women's work that men distance themselves from.

The Baluchis, on the other hand, regard the Sudanese as lazy and more interested in socializing with each other than in working. The various ethnic groups largely keep to themselves in their everyday sociability, cultural intimacies and leisure.

Career trajectories of camel market workers.

Some migrant workers in the camel market have worked elsewhere in the Emirates before their current jobs. Eissa, a young Sudanese man, has a university degree and worked for two years as an accountant in an electronics company before deciding to move to the camel market. His choice of the camel market was influenced by his acquaintance with many tribal kinsmen who worked in camel farms as shepherds and trainers. His own Bedouin tribal camel-related background further attracted him to the market. In 2000, he managed to get sponsorship with a fodder company (*sharikat a'laf*), and then was encouraged to move to Nad Al-Sheba market through kinsmen who knew the camel business.

He rented a *dikka* for Dhs. 6000/year and began importing fodder, primarily from Sudan. The business suffered during the first year but he persisted and trade began improving gradually in the second year. He managed to bring in his younger brother as a salesman and truck driver. His brother learned to drive in Dubai and now transports fodder to the farms. In the third year he brought in a cousin to help in the shop, which then had expanded to two *dikkas*. In this, Eissa's fifth year, he succeeded in sponsoring his maternal uncle. In spite of the numerous drawbacks to his family life, Eissa noted that his business was doing well. He commented, "I used to earn Dhs. 2500/ month as an accountant, but today this sum is hardly enough for the petrol of my cars and the mobile phone bills."

In a similar pattern a Syrian veterinarian, Hamad, was originally sponsored to come to the Emirates by a younger brother, who in the early 1990s worked in a restaurant in Dubai. When Hamad arrived he worked for three years as a veterinarian in Fujairah, and then for four years in a private veterinarian clinic in Dubai. He quit his job and because of visa regulations had to leave the UAE for seven months, but on his return he opened the camel pharmacy at Nad Al-Sheba in 2002 and persuaded another younger brother, who was working as a sales representative in a store in Al Ain, to join him as a partner. His brother believes it is a good move as there is greater security and less work pressure. They paid the former shop tenant Dhs. 40,000 as "key money," and now pay Dhs. 20,000 as annual rent. The fact that they still use the shop attic as their sleeping space indicates that their business is progressing slowly.

Finding a haven and opportunity

The camel market represents a potential haven for itinerant young migrants who are driven by harsh need and job insecurities to seek help from their ethnic, village or tribal kinsmen and friends. They hang out in the market to work as porters, or sell fresh alfalfa on the pavements. They sit outside in the heat of the day to capture the attention of customers for their fodder. Some may not have legal residency permits, but once they save sufficient money, they purchase visas from sponsors (*kafeel*). Bakri's story illustrates how the market can provide opportunities for young men. A 26-year-old man from the Al-Kawahla camel tribes in North Eastern Sudan, Bakri arrived in the Emirates in August 2000. He recalls, "we thought that the Emirates is God's paradise on earth. They talked about it in such rosy words that made us believe that in two to three years one will return home as a rich man." When Bakri arrived he was shocked by the difficult reality of migrant lives in the Emirates. He was lucky in the beginning to secure lodging with his cousin, who had been working in Abu Dhabi airport for the last 15 years. Later he went to the Suwaihan region in search for work as a camel shepherd. "I went around from one camel farm to another but luck did

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not come my way quickly. They were very harsh days. I used to sleep anywhere, even on the soft red sand day after day.”

As Bakri continued his narrative of his early experience, he noted the support that Sudanese migrants provide for each other. “We Sudanese stick together and go out of our way to help each other. Once a fellow Sudanese who is in need stands before you, you have to help him. Everyone knows this about the Sudanese.” When Bakri arrived at the Eissa Sudan Camel Fodder Shop in the Dubai camel market, he was hired as a worker in a small secondary *dikka*. He receives Dhs. 1000/month and manages to send about 90 percent of it to support his large family of thirteen. He is the eldest brother, and is the family breadwinner.



Figure 9. Two Sudanese in front of their fodder shop with stacks of dried alfalfa and maize imported from Sudan, 2005. Photo by author.

Chain migration

Migrants who succeed in adapting to work and life in the Emirates often use chain migration to bring in more migrants primarily recruited from their own families. The job of the original migrant is like a bridgehead that facilitates and supports his kinsmen as new migrants. Whether in the camel market or in camel farms, I noted how new migrants relied on utilizing home-based kinship and friendship strategies to initiate their migration and to obtain jobs and settle in their work. They later expand their adaptational repertoire as they seek to benefit even more from their migration (Khalaf and Alkobaisi 1999). Eissa, the Sudanese accountant turned fodder importer (see Figure 9) is a good example.

Eissa lives and works with four of his close kinsmen. The support they provide for each other covers all aspects of their lives. A few months after Eissa arrived in the Emirates, his younger brother (who had arranged for his visa) returned to the Sudan after working for five years as a camel trainer in a farm in Sharjah. He married and remained in the Sudan, leaving the more educated and skilled Eissa to continue to build the migratory family nest. Similarly, Hamad, the Syrian veterinarian was brought over by his younger brother who then left to start his family and small business in Syria, leaving the more educated and skilled veterinarian to continue in the Emirates.

Golam, the owner of a shop selling ropes and accessories, is in his early fifties. He wears a thick salt and pepper beard and a turban. He struggled hard over the last 25 years before he settled in the market. He and his younger brother alternate their stay and supervision of their small business. The slow summer months allow him to go to *al-bilad* (home) every year. Three years ago he helped his nephew, Amir, to join him in the shop. Now Amir works on the sewing machine seven days a week, and doubles as a salesman when Golam is absent. He receives Dhs. 600/month from his uncle. The UAE government recently issued a regulation that all migrant workers should have a minimum of ten years of education. Amir, who is basically illiterate like his uncle, bought a certificate and paid to have it authenticated. About six months ago another young man, a cousin of Golam, arrived in the shop. He is 22 years old and is learning how to spin and braid ropes and other accessories. As a newcomer, he will not be paid any wages for the first six months until he has learnt the trade and proven himself.



Figure 10. Market workers making camel accessories inside their shop, 2005. Photo by author.

These examples illustrate the role kinship plays in the migration process. Litwak (1960) has noted the efficiency of the extended family in supporting migration, as it is more effective in supporting the migration of other family members than the nuclear family, or individuals. The family nesting reflects itself in the life and work of these migrants. They are together 24 hours a day—they work, sleep, eat and socialize in the small space of the shop (see

Figure 10). I visited the shop two years later in December 2007, and Golam's cousin was sitting behind a sewing machine, a relatively fast promotion from rope spinning.

Social capital and networks of compatriots

Migrants who arrive in new territories resort to traditional social capital they have with their communities of origin. The tribal-village habitus can enrich their lives and provide the support they need. In the camel market, the migrants' lives are characterized by transience, uncertainty, insecurity, and pressing demands from home. In view of the fact that they are potentially weak and threatened, they capitalize on their bonds of friendship and kinship to secure support.

While sitting with informants for many hours in the market, I observed that their work patterns allowed them to engage in prolonged

sociability. The market is similar to a total institution in Goffman's sense of the term, as those migrants work, live and spend their social leisure time in the same space. All the Baluchis know each other by name; they drop in casually into each other's shops, they hug, slap each other on the shoulders, they joke, they cook and eat together and often pray together. They even cut each other hair. There is a sense of closeness, intimacy and trust. Shopkeepers frequently walk in to borrow small cash sums from each other to give change to customers. The compounding of the workers' lives and work within the confined space of the market gives it "encompassing and totalizing" effects, which are important characteristics of total institutions that often are symbolized by physical barriers to the outside world (Goffman 1961). While the physical barriers in the market are only partial, the economic, social and psychological ones are evident in the general adaptive behavioral repertoire of the market workers. These encompassing and totalizing features will be much more pronounced when in 2009 Dubai Municipality moves the market to the new relatively isolated desert location, 40 km east of the city.

Many workers in the *dikka* shops escape during the summer heat to join their friends who sleep in the air-conditioned shops. They carry their small rolled-up foam mattress and join in for a cooler sleep. Some Sudanese visit their friends and kinsmen in a nearby camel farm once or twice weekly to socialize over meals and watch television. On one camel farm five Sudanese cousins who lived in one room frequently received their friends and relatives in the evening to share a typical Sudanese dish called *asida*, made from cooked dough over which they pour crushed okra and a spicy sauce. At one such meal they noted "*ihna mujtama al-asida*" (we are the *asida* society). The frequency of shared meal of *al-asida* creates common sentiments that sustain the social capital as a generalized currency utilized for the support of each other in all sorts of unpredictable circumstances. The generalized use of social capital among migrant workers and their kinsmen is an important asset for coping with the economic, social and psychological pressures and uncertainties in the Gulf.

While the utilization of kinship/friendship bonds is an important coping strategy for Asian and Arab migrants, such bonds can also be appropriated by more established migrants to enhance their economic capital. In the case of Golum's family, the young newcomer cousin worked for six months without wages, while the nephew Amir received only Dhs. 600/month despite working long hours every day on the sewing machine. Golum hired an unrelated young man to make camel accessories as a way of expanding his business. This worker from the Sind region in Pakistan is only employed for 6 months/year as Golum sees no need for him in the slow summer months. Golum exerts control over his young kin workers. They are not allowed to visit Dubai city for entertainment, or even go to watch Indian movies. He refuses to have chairs that they can pull out in front of the shop to relax and watch the market. Amir explained that Golum views these chairs as a potential distraction from their work. Clearly, kinship and social bonding can

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be a double-edged sword: it benefits some materially more than others. The young newcomers are easily exploited by their own elders.

Symbiotic and adaptive relationships

The camel market workers utilize numerous strategies to survive and to maximize their material gains. Young Baluchi migrants who still lack sufficient capital to buy a truck or start their own shop often sell *jat* (alfalfa) in the open air under the hot sun. They work in groups of two or three to negotiate with the *dikka* shops to use their frontage to display their fresh grass, which is sold in bundles for about Dhs. 5. Each group pays around Dhs. 500–600/month for the use of *dikka* frontage. The Sudan River Fodder *Dikka* makes almost its entire annual rent of the shop from such young alfalfa sellers. Similarly, rope-making shops send materials to Afghani and Bengali farm workers to make things for them when there is high demand. Even Bengali mosque imams are involved in making accessories for the Baluchi shops. These piece workers get paid minimal amounts. This leads to the creation of chains of production and exchange relationships within the market itself but also stretching into the desert to agricultural and camel farms. This networking also involves medium-size truck owners who hang out on the periphery of the market resting under the shade of their vehicles and waiting for their respective friends in the shops to call on them to take large fodder deliveries from the market.

The socio-psychological effects of migration

Several of my Sudanese and Pakistani informants elaborated on the negative effects on their life and family welfare. As a total working process, migration has alienating effects on the migrants and their families. These negative effects include: a) prolonged absence from home, which reduces family size and negatively affects population growth in the local community, b) weakened family life in general and an increase in divorce, c) the impact on child raising, as migration leads to strengthening the mother's role and seriously weakens the father's position in the socialization process, d) matters related to family honor may surface more frequently with the absence of the father, e) the migrant's role in his home community becomes weakened as he cannot participate effectively in the making of that community, which therefore becomes for him more of an imagined than a lived social reality, f) the migrant's work in the Emirates conditions him often in negative ways as it becomes extremely difficult for him to return to traditional herding and/or agricultural modes of life, g) there exists a pervasive emotional alienation in the migrant's life as all significant others in their social world live thousands of miles away. In their attempts to reach out to them regularly they end up spending a sizable portion of their incomes on telephone calls, h)

prolonged sexual frustration, as many male migrants are young, yet their wives live thousands of miles away. Informants reported that sometimes young men find themselves driven to search for sexual satisfaction within the liberal global scenery of Dubai. This leads to squandering the young migrants small savings, i) living for long periods in an all male community represents a socially fractured existence that is devoid of the personalized human intimate sociability, sensibilities and sentiments. The men miss seeing their children grow up. In contrast to negative effects, migrants note that there are positive aspects to migration.

Most of the positive notes revolve around achieving economic security for themselves and their families. A relatively long migration enables many migrants to accrue sufficient capital and gain new economic experiences to start their own small business back at home. This dialectic accounts for the love/hate relationship that many migrants have toward migration. This tension of ambivalences and anxieties is reflected in migrants' thoughts about their infrequent trips home to be with their loved ones. Returning home is a costly venture, as most migrants come from large families and social customs dictate that those returning from work in the Gulf come back with suitcases filled with gifts. For the Sudanese migrants the return with what they call *al-jenta* (suitcase) is viewed with great ambivalence. In addition to the travel expenses, the gifts that are expected in the *al-jenta* can, on the average, cost US\$1000. The migrant is taxed in multiple ways: relative deprivation and a harsh lifestyle, emotional and social alienation in relation to his family, remittances expected to be sent regularly to support numerous family members, and the gift-filled *jenta*.

Many Sudanese camel shepherds and shopkeepers expressed openly their anxieties over the material and social cost that visits with *jenta* inflict on them. Subsequently many are less inclined to travel home each year. Some stay two or three years at a time. They also related their concern about the negative impact of prolonged absence on their family life and the well-being of their nuclear and extended families. These multiple effects on transnational migrant laborers in DCM illustrate the jest of Tsuda's notes on transnational migration, "We must be wary of over-emphasizing the agentive and emancipatory effects of global mobility as a means to escape, subvert, and resist global capital, political oppression, and the hegemony of the nation-states" (2007:23).

My conversations with migrants revealed how they are torn by two opposing forces. On one hand, they have to deal with the basic need for sharing life with significant others, including wives and children, parents and siblings, and local community neighbors. On the other hand, they hope for an escape from poverty and the degradation it brings. When I asked Golam why he migrated to the Emirates in the first place, without hesitation he pointed to his stomach and said in his broken Arabic, "*Batin, batin, batin , nas masakien fi al bilad*" (stomach, stomach, stomach, people are miserably poor in our homeland). The average migrant camel worker lives a life of an alienated soul, laboring in a strictly male world, bearing, dreaming, waiting and saving his meager wages season after

season. He justifies his alienated condition by actualizing his sense of masculinity and manliness as the bread winner, providing a relatively decent material life for his family back home. Being the agent at the center of this dialectical tension creates existential voids and agonizing personal troubles and personal and economic opportunities. Balancing the demands generated by such harsh dialectic is the story of migrants in the camel market and camel farms.

Conclusion: marginalization, exclusion and production of locality

In conclusion, the ethnographic description of the Dubai camel market workers leads us to make several theoretical points. Appadurai maintains that globalization leads to “deterritorialization” which in turn “brings laboring populations into lower-class sectors and spaces of relatively wealthy societies” (1998:36). The case of the Dubai camel market with its many migrant workers illustrates this statement. Large numbers of transnational workers live and work in a marginalized space on the periphery of a wealthy global city. They contribute in significant ways to the production of a nationalist cultural project for the Emiratis. Yet, their contributions are excluded from the Emirati media. Their material rewards are meager.

I have shown how members of different ethnic groups working in the Dubai camel market, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the transitory and precarious globalized conditions of their lives, manage to reconstruct aspects of their local communities. They manage to produce a locality in Appadurai’s sense of the term (1998:178), in a fractured and precarious form as it is continuously challenged by external demands and forces. Appadurai maintains that “the task of producing locality (as a structure of feelings, a property of social life, and an ideology of situated community) is increasingly a struggle for such transnational marginalized migrants” (1998:189).

Due to their marginal position in the host society, the numerous demands and challenges created by the host state and other agencies, and the insecurities of their economic life, these migrants have activated traditional relationships as survival mechanisms. They include the utilization of traditional social capital, symbiotic economic networks, family nesting, kinship bonding and mutual support for fellow ethnic migrants. Locality here is more of a conceptual sociological notion referring to the processes described earlier, where DCM workers constructed a set of social, economic and psychological aspects of the village/tribal habitus as illustrated by the Pakistani and Sudanese migrant life stories. Being local in a globalized world of Dubai can be viewed, as Bauman puts it, “a sign of social deprivation and degradation” (1998:2). This is deprivation and degradation in an economic or political sense, and not in the social and cultural sense, as most of DCM workers have their own sense of tribal pride, and moral and religious self-esteem. Zygmunt Bauman notes:

Globalization cuts both ways. Not only does it valorize the local in cultural sense, it constructs the local as the tribal. Globalization involves the reallocation of poverty and stigma from above without even the residual responsibility of *noblesse oblige* (1998:37).

With its geographic location on the periphery of the city and its poor living and work conditions, the whole market is absented from the five-star hotel tourist maps and the Emirati national media during the refined final cultural spectacle of camel racing.

The creation of village-like local communities as a visible feature in the urban configurations has been documented in many anthropological and sociological studies. In classical urban sociological studies Robert Park and his colleagues in the 1930s and 1940s showed that small urban ecologies can be maintained in the midst of large urban centers, as they managed to keep social features of small local communities (Park 1952; Park and Burgess 1925). Globalization processes because of their speed, intensity and large scale are simultaneously generating *glocalization* as a condition and process of life usually occurring in large cities. Globalization processes in the UAE are simultaneously creating two markedly different conditions: one of wealth and high levels of consumerism and the other of poverty and harsh life conditions. In the case of these transnational migrants, consumerism is avoided to meet local costs of residency permits and, more importantly, to support family dependents at home. This resonates with Sassen's views on the global city as "a space of power and empowerment." She states, "I see the global city as enabling the emergence of two critical forms of agency in a global economic system: global corporate capital and the mix of disadvantaged actors increasingly assembling in large cities" (2005:17).

Finally, there appears a "consistent paradox" in the lives and aspirations of the Dubai camel market workers. They feel that the *local community* life they lead is harsh, transient, precarious, fractured and incomplete, yet they spare no energies to perpetuate this condition. They labor hard and pay significant sums of money to renew work residencies in the Emirates. They sometimes resort to illegal means to reenter and/or remain in the Emirates. Thus we can say that the camel market for the migrants is an exile and refuge at the one and same time, and in this lies the contradictions and tensions of their migrant lives.

Notes

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²With the passage of several weeks in the winter of 2005 I became a familiar face in the Market and once I was seen around I heard cries from the shops welcoming me in for tea or a cold drink. I often felt that workers were in the mode of welcoming a sociable distraction or break from their daily work monotony. After a few weeks I reached a point when I began seeking the company of these men and ended up spending many evenings socializing with them until midnight. The use of my camera helped me not only in documenting the flow of their daily life in detail, but it was also an activity that captured their keen interest, particularly when I distributed as gifts many prints of the photos I took of them in the market.

³According to the census conducted by Statistical Center of Dubai, the population of the emirate was 1,422,000 in 2006, which included 1,073,000 males and 349,000 females. Taken from article, "Dubai Demographic Profile." www.datadubai.com

⁴"The Emirati nationals' share of the total labor force increased from 9.1 percent in 1995 to 9.3 percent in 2004" (Narayanappa 2007:441). This highly imbalanced labor ratio correlates to a high degree with the imbalance of the UAE population structure which is heavily tipped in favor of the non-nationals. The nationals have become a minority in their country representing less than 17 percent of the total population.

⁵Due to the expansion of major construction projects in Dubai, the Nad Al-Sheba race track was relocated in 2007 to Al-Leseili (Al-Marmoum) some 40 km east of Dubai. A new camel market has already been built next to this race track, and there are plans to relocate the Nad Al-Sheba camel shops in the near future.

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