In setting out to explore the context of interactions between Indian transmigrants and citizen-hosts on the island of Bahrain, I begin with a quick overview of the history of the transnational conduits that, over hundreds of years, have carried South Asians from their homes to the Gulf. In the remainder of the chapter I present a more in-depth analysis of Bahrain’s complex history. Still, the points I make in this chapter are fairly straightforward. First, the processes one might identify as transnational have a long history on the island—long enough that they precede the solidification of the nation-state by many centuries. Second, although Bahrain shares much with the other petroleum-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula, that commonality should not obscure the particular history of the island’s place in the regional and global political economy. Finally, this particular history, and the social relations that comprise it, played an important role in shaping the structure of contemporary relations among the peoples of Bahrain, including both citizen and foreigner.

Finally, a brief comment about some of the terminology that I use in describing particular components of the Indian community in Bahrain: as Sarah Mahler has observed, anthropologists concerned with people on the move need to remain attentive to the differential access individuals have, and their differential participation in, the transnational processes and social fields we study (1998, 81–82; see also George 2000, 148–49). The basic bifurcation between the working and professional classes, as described by Karen Leonard (2002, 214) in her work on the Indian diaspora in the United Arab Emirates, becomes the basis for my use of the terms diasporic elite and transnational proletariat, terms that I imagine are unfamiliar and perhaps
unwelcome additions to the growing lexicon of appellations used to describe people on the move. By *transnational proletariat* I mean the Indian foreign laborers in the working class, usually men, alone, with families behind them in India. Their gaze remains fixed on their home in India, and they are transnational in the sense that their social fields, collectively and individually, are spread between two nations but free of neither. Conversely, I switch to *diasporic elite* to describe the middle and upper classes of the Indian community on the island. These professionals, skilled workers, engineers, educators, and merchants typically bring their families with them to Bahrain. Their tenure on the island may be short or long, but as a community their history is now centuries old. Their long-standing presence in Bahrain, and the disparate ties they maintain with points around the globe, doesn’t necessarily make them less transnational than their impoverished countrymen on the island, but it does conform to the basic pattern of a diasporic, if not cosmopolitan, existence. These terms, and the division they connote, are mentioned only in passing in this chapter, but they emerge as central to the structure of my analysis in the chapters to come.

**An Overview of Transnational Labor in Bahrain**

The Middle East is a major destination in the global migration of labor. The principal receptors of these migration flows are the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states—Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Oman. Together, these states host a foreign population of well over 10 million men and women, a figure that must be gauged in comparison with a total population, including foreigners and citizens, of over 30 million (Kapiszewski 2001, 39; 2006, 4). As these figures suggest, the petroleum-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula are an important juncture in the transnational migration of labor, a node in the transmigratory network that, looking outward from South Asia, certainly belongs in the same constellation as western Europe and North America. These figures also suggest a noteworthy and unique aspect about the migratory waypoints on the Arabian Peninsula, for the proportions of foreigners to citizens are astoundingly large. In all the GCC states, foreign labor comprises a majority of the total workforce, and in several states (Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar) foreign workers comprise an absolute majority of the population. As James Clifford observed well over a decade ago, diasporic culture and its language are beginning to challenge “the binary relation of minority
communities with *majority* societies” (1994, 311). In the cities of the Arabian littoral, that challenge is both discursive and demographic, for foreigners numerically predominate in many of the public spaces of the cities, they work behind the counters of businesses and shops at the foot of the tall glass skyscrapers of central Manama, and they crowd the narrow streets of the souk on Friday afternoon. The sheer scope of these foreign populations has fundamentally altered the social fabric of the urban agglomerations that dot the shores of the Gulf waters and has also shaped the social and political structures of all the Gulf states (Longva 1997, 2000, 2005; Louër 2008).

Although the sources of these migration flows, and hence the demography of foreign labor in the Gulf states, have varied significantly over time, since the 1970s South Asian transmigrants have come to dominate these Indian Ocean conduits. In general terms, the history of the South Asian presence in the Gulf can be divided into three overlapping periods. For much of known history, merchants from the Indian Subcontinent maintained a strong presence in the Gulf, moving cloth, rice, and other foodstuffs, spices, and a variety of other materials westward to the Gulf, and sending pearls—the region’s primary export for many centuries—back along that same route (Palgrave 1982; al-Muraikhi 1991; Slot 1993; Buckingham 1971; Carter 2005). Members of powerful South Asian merchant families, the vestiges of which still maintain a presence in the cities of the contemporary Gulf, often served as bankers and financiers to the ruling families or strongest tribes in the region, and those Indian merchant families’ long-standing presence in the region constituted the historical framework for the migratory conduits that today connect the Arabian Peninsula with the ports of the Indian Subcontinent.

The British presence in the region forged a larger and more sustained connection to the Indian Subcontinent, and hence forms the second of these three periods. After devastating several Gulf ports with its navy, Britain imposed the 1820 General Treaty of Peace, an event that gave international recognition to the Sunni rulers of Bahrain and what later became known as the Trucial States (now the United Arab Emirates). Although the island was never a formal colony, its eventual status as a British protectorate, combined with the tenor and scope of Britain’s relations with the island’s indigenous peoples, placed the island squarely in the ambit of the British Empire. For many decades, Britain’s relations with the region’s rulers and governors were administered via British India’s colonial bureaucracy. With each passing decade, the British Crown extended its involvement in the region, encouraging the rulers of Eastern Arabia to form government
departments and institutions modeled on the European state (customs, education, public works, municipalities, police, secular courts, hospitals, and the like). Many of these new departments and institutions were run or supervised by British colonial civil servants (often from India) in the private employ of the rulers. These new departments and institutions also drew increasing numbers of low-level Indian bureaucrats from the Subcontinent to the cities of the Gulf. British representatives in the Gulf also fostered the transmigration of private entrepreneurs to serve this growing population of quasi-colonial bureaucrats and to contribute to the ongoing construction of a Western-style private sector. In essence, then, the second wave of South Asian migrants arrived on the coattails of the British Crown. Many of the established families I came to know during my fieldwork on the island—members of the diasporic elite in Bahrain—arrived as part of this second migration flow. Their fathers or grandfathers crossed the Indian Ocean to work for the burgeoning number of government bureaucracies and institutions or, equally likely, to engage in various entrepreneurial activities in service of the increasingly wealthy population in the region.

The latest chapter in the history of migration from South Asia to the Arabian Peninsula began in the 1960s, gathered speed in the 1970s, and in many ways continues to this day. The development of the oil industry throughout the region, in conjunction with vast increases in the global demand for that oil, filled government coffers and led all of the Gulf states to establish a variety of modernization plans, including infrastructural projects (new highways, bridges, buildings, museums, universities, mosques, and so forth) as well as new bureaucracies, expanded state apparatuses, and comprehensive welfare systems. Although the impetus for these projects was already in place at the end of the 1960s, the oil embargo of the 1970s, by increasing state wealth manifold, fueled a dramatic increase in the number and scope of these projects. At this historic juncture, South Asian migration to the Gulf grew rapidly. The type of South Asian passing through these migratory conduits also shifted. In the past, transmigrants to the Gulf were typically skilled workers or entrepreneurs. While the flow of these transmigrants continued, the new arrivals were predominantly unskilled laborers. These men filled new positions generated by the increasing number of infrastructural projects on the island.

These historical factors explain the increasing flow of transmigrants to the island, but scholars have provided a number of other explanations for why South Asia in particular came to play a predominant role in providing labor to the Gulf. South Asia contained a comparatively inexpensive
supply of educated and trained clerks, supervisors, and assistants (Holden 1966; Kapiszewski 2001, 4, 62; Azhar 1999, 101; Weiner 1986), and many of them spoke, read, and wrote English—the language of the growing transnational private sector. In addition, and in comparison with the established flows of Arab migrants to the Gulf, South Asian laborers usually arrived unaccompanied by families, and hence the costs of reproducing that labor supply were largely borne by the sending states. As other scholars have suggested, the fact that many South Asian transmigrants were neither Arab nor Muslim also made for a more pliable and docile workforce (Nakhleh 1976, 77; Weiner 1986, 53–54), or, from another angle, a population that the citizenry was more willing to exploit. Through this confluence of forces, and building on long-established connections generated through both mercantile and imperial relations, the South Asian presence in the GCC states grew rapidly over the last decades of the twentieth century. Although remnants of the first two periods of the South Asian migration to the island can still be discerned today, it is this last component—the transnational proletariat—that has come to numerically dominate the South Asian populations in the cities of the Gulf.

My own ethnographic work, combined with that of the handful of other scholars with experience investigating one or both ends of the migratory conduits that connect the Gulf states to South Asia and points farther abroad, suggests a series of patterns that characterize the transmigrant experience in the GCC states (Longva 1997, 2000, 2005; Nagy 1998; Leonard 2002, 2003; Khalaf and Alkobaisi 1999; Gamburd 2000). Foremost, these are “guest worker” populations. Although there are a few notable exceptions, naturalization is neither encouraged nor readily possible. Both discursively and practically, Gulf states and Gulf citizens alike reinforce the temporary nature of these transmigrants’ tenure in the GCC states, even though many foreigners stay for years, for a lifetime, or in the case of some families, for generations. In spite of both the size and long tenure of many foreign populations in the Gulf states, South Asians forge lives largely separate from the host society: in Bahrain, for example, the transnational proletariat dwell in decrepit apartment buildings in the central urban slums now largely abandoned by the citizenry, or bunk in labor camps on the semi-industrial periphery of the city. Families of the diasporic elite send their children to separate schools (e.g., the Indian School, the New Indian School, the Pakistani School) and join social clubs specific to their home nations or regions (e.g., the Young Goans Club, the Pakistani Club). Intermarriage between citizens and noncitizens is uncommon, and
many of the elite Indian families I spoke with—families that, in some cases, have been in Bahrain for several generations—had never been invited to a Bahraini house. As Longva (1997) remarks in her acute analysis of relations in Kuwait, interactions in these plural societies are largely confined to the arena of work.

Another pattern that characterizes the transmigrant experience pertains to the kafala system. Excepting those who arrive illegally—a point I examine in detail in the coming chapters—all South Asian workers arrive through the kafala (sponsorship) system, the framework by which transnational migration in the GCC states is organized and controlled. Through the kafala system, individual foreign workers are linked to a particular job and, more importantly, to a particular citizen or corporate sponsor (a *kafeel*). This relationship has a contractual facet in the sense that the men and women who cross the Indian Ocean to work in the Gulf sign contracts that oblige them to work, typically, for two years at a set level of pay. These contracts also oblige the sponsors to pay a certain rate, to cover travel costs, to provide a vacation period, and so forth. As I argue in the following chapters, by binding foreign workers to individual citizens, the kafala system is the keystone in the systemic and structural violence levied against foreign workers in the Gulf. At the current juncture, it suffices to say that the kafala relation represents a central concern in the lifeworlds of most of the foreign workers.
workers I interviewed, and as such it plays a predominant role in patterning their experience abroad. At the same time, there are significant and substantial changes on the near horizon in Bahrain, for the kingdom has recently announced plans to dismantle portions of the sponsorship system. These changes are discussed in the final chapter of this book.

There are also gendered, ethnic, national, regional, linguistic, and religious patterns to the migratory conduits between South Asia and the Gulf. The vast majority of transmigrants in the Gulf states are men. Indeed, on a Friday afternoon, when many foreign workers have at least some portion of the day free, the central streets of Manama are overtaken by South Asian men. Female transmigrants, both fewer in number and less visible, are also present in the Gulf. The largest contingent serves as domestic workers, a vocation generally seen as one of the poorest paid and most vulnerable components of the foreign population (Longva 1997, 70; Kapiszewski 2001, 181–82; Strobl 2009). At the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum, many professional women arrive from Asia to work in various capacities for the transnational corporations that serve the region; other women arrive on a family visa reserved for foreign workers meeting the minimum income threshold.

The various national and ethnic groups that migrate to the island find their way—or are slotted—into particular types of work: Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis work in construction and the service sector, Filipinos work as concierges and run beauty parlors, whereas Indonesian and Sri Lankan women work as housemaids. In part, the association of particular national and ethnic groups with particular sorts of work can be explained by chain migration and the labor brokerage system: brokers serving one portion of the workforce utilize connections they’ve established in particular regions of South Asia. At the same time, chain migration—the process by which one transmigrant from one particular place uses his or her knowledge and contacts to pave the way for additional transmigrants—also structures the workforce in this manner. Finally, and perhaps as a result of these processes, employers in the region come to believe that particular sorts of people—specific ethnicities or nationalities—are “naturally” better for certain sorts of positions and hire accordingly. Altogether, these interlocked processes have forged a workforce deeply patterned by ethnicity and nationality. These patterns, and the processes undergirding them, characterize all the states of the GCC.

What I have omitted in this chapter are the historical factors and socioeconomic processes that have generated this abundant and willing labor
force in South Asia. In comparison to the ethnographic literature concerned with foreign workers in the Gulf, this literature is relatively large (Gamburd 2000; Osella and Osella 2000a, 2000b; Kurien 2002; Silvey 2004; Perttierra 1994; Sekhar 1996; Nair 1999; Nambiar 1995; Brochmann 1993; Eelens, Schampers, and Speckman 1992). I have also omitted the growing literature that traces the complicity of the United States and western Europe in maintaining these Gulf regimes and, hence, in maintaining the particular order that shapes the lives of foreigners and citizens alike. Holloway (1994), for example, argues that the nature of the contemporary state requires understanding its particular place in global capitalist relations (see also Sharma and Gupta 2006). Although these factors are certainly essential in providing a complete map of the structural forces that produce the episodic violence foreign workers face in Bahrain, they are beyond the scope of the analysis I provide here.

**Early History**

The state of Bahrain is a collection of low, geographically unremarkable islands off the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia. The two largest islands, Awal and the smaller Muharraq, are separated by a shallow bay that was once traversable by human and donkey at low tide. For millennia Bahrain served as an entrepôt on the maritime trade routes between Asia and the continents to the west. In the third millennium BC the island was known as Dilmun. Its strategic location on the route between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, combined with an abundance of freshwater springs found on the island and in the shallow waters that surround it, enhanced the island’s mythos—it is Edenic Bahrain to which wise men and heroes are transported to live out an eternity in the epic of Gilgamesh. The island was also known to the Greek Empire: an admiral under the command of Alexander the Great purportedly visited Tylos (the Greek name for Bahrain), and Pliny made note of the island’s renowned pearl beds. Islam arrived in 640 AD, but the religious continuity that followed did little to steady the fate of the small island, which, at the fringes of various empires, continued to change hands in the passing centuries.

The Omanis, building on their strategic location at the mouth of the Gulf, captured the islands in the fifteenth century, and they are responsible for Arad Fort, a large fortress that today has been refurbished as a national and iconic emblem of Bahrain’s long history. The next century
belonged to the Portuguese. Their fleets conquered ports from the Strait of Hormuz north to those on the southern fringe of the Mesopotamian delta. Historians have remarked on the peculiarity of Portuguese control—noteworthy for how little influence these outposts had upon the people, culture, artwork, and architecture beyond the fortress walls (Khuri 1980, 16). Perhaps as a result of this insularity, the Portuguese were driven from the island in 1602 by the indigenous population, and the rebellion’s merchant-leader appealed to the Persian Empire for protection (Lorimer 1908, 836; Khuri 1980, 17).

The Persian grasp on the island was not firm, and the Omani fleet regained control of the islands for a brief period in the eighteenth century. The Persians returned in 1753, but they did so amid a climate of relative chaos. The Arabian Gulf was a notoriously difficult, if lucrative, mercantile venue. Caught on the seams of empires, the ports on the Arabian side of the Gulf often functioned as maritime city-states—as important trading bazaars connecting the inland tribes with the production of the East, and also as sovereign entities capable of collecting fees from passing boats. By the eighteenth century, the English had expanded eastward into Asia, but the Gulf remained beyond their sphere of control. The primary arm of their imperial enterprise, the English East India Company, had become aware of Bahrain and its riches from Portuguese deserters as early as 1613, but had been unable to locate the island and its surrounding pearl beds (Lorimer 1908, 838).

In 1782, perceiving weakness in Persia’s position in Bahrain, the ‘Utub (a maritime Arab tribal confederation from Zubara in western Qatar and Kuwait) descended on Bahrain by sea. The ‘Utubi combatants defeated the Persian forces in the field, and those of the local sheikh’s forces still alive retreated to the fort. The ‘Utub plundered the market town of Manama, and after taking possession of a Persian vessel, they retired en masse to their home port on the Qatari coast. After a failed counterattack by the Persian fleet, the Kuwaiti ‘Utub intercepted a Persian messenger upon the seas, and they turned south to assist their tribal brethren. This time, upon arriving in Manama, they seized the town and burned it. The Persian troops retreated to the citadel, where they withstood a two-month siege by the ‘Utubi forces, which now included the Zubara contingent as well. The citadel—and Bahrain as a whole—eventually fell to this Zubara clan, otherwise known as the Khalifa family (Lorimer 1908, 839).

The island that the Khalifa branch of the ‘Utub came to rule was already a transnational hodgepodge of peoples. The axes of difference among these various groups recur throughout this book; perhaps the most important
to our purposes here are the sectarian differences. The ‘Utub, and more specifically the Khalifa, were a Sunni conglomeration of extended families that maintained a strong tribal ethos, in stark contrast to the nontribal Shi’a they came to rule. As a mercantile hub for the region, Bahrain also included significant populations of Persians (also, for the most part, Shi’ite), Basra Arabs, Hindus, and Jews. In many ways, the arrival of the Khalifa seemed merely another chapter in the island’s long and tumultuous political history. The arrival of the British, however, brought this era of changing political control to an end.

One final note on Bahrain’s early history: on the outskirts of contemporary Manama, the capital city and international hub that has spread south to encompass nearly all of the hinterland villages of the island, one can still see the remnants of the famous Bahraini burial mounds, or tumili—fields of small dirt hillocks stretching as far as the eye can see. Although many of these graveyards have been destroyed by construction projects, estimates as to their original number reach 150,000 (Clarke 1981, 69). Even today, the vast scope of these remains suggests something unfamiliar to those of us from the New World, for they yield a clue as to the sheer number of lives that have been lived on the small island. That many of those lives were connected to other places along the Gulf littoral, the Arabian Sea, and the northeastern reaches of Africa is difficult to gauge against the permanence of their rest in the southern plains of the small island. The early historical sources we have for Bahrain, however, clearly portray a city, people, and marketplace intricately connected to the emergent global system. And for much of the island’s history, the lives that passed on the island intersected with the lucrative trade wrought by the pearl beds surrounding the island.

**Pearls in the Global Ecumene**

That the fates of entire peoples, communities, and states might be buffeted by a single commodity was a point clearly developed by Sidney Mintz (1985) in his exploration of the intricate connections among sugar, nascent capitalism, and the colonization of the New World, and reinforced by Wolf’s (1982) more expansive consideration of the development of a world system. Bahrain, under a variety of designations, appears in the numerous historical documents that chart the earliest years of Eric Wolf’s revision of world system theory, and the islands’ mythic notoriety had much to do with the rich pearl beds that surround it. Greek accounts noted the presence
of “fish eyes,” as pearls were known, and later accounts mark their presence in the markets of Manama.\textsuperscript{11} By the nineteenth century, when the small island had become thoroughly enmeshed in the mercantile trade routes of the Indian Ocean world, Bahrain emerged as the principal pearl market in the Arabian Gulf (Lorimer 1908, 245). The pearls of the Gulf were considered higher in quality than those of Ceylon (Buckingham 1971, 456), and they made their way to markets on several continents. Many of the earliest historical accounts spend time describing the minutiae of this livelihood (Buckingham 1971, 454–57; see also al-Muraikhi 1991, 77–90).

During the period after the Persian defeat in Bahrain, pearling vessels were principally controlled by the Sunni tribesmen of the island—members of the ruling al-Khalifa clan as well as the handful of other Sunni tribes that made their home on the island (Khuri 1980, 36; Franklin 1985, 75). The Khalifa rulers extracted revenue through a system of levies on the industry (Farah 1985, 5). Boats plied the waters around the islands, and the pearling crews, composed of both Arabs and slaves of African origin, worked the bottom of the sea in depths exceeding seventy feet.\textsuperscript{12} Work was seasonal: the boats spent just over four months on the seas around Bahrain, beginning in June when the sea is hot and calm. Working vessels returned to the island only occasionally to replenish supplies. At the conclusion of the pearling season, crews passed the winter months in idle anticipation of the next season (Buckingham 1971, 456–57). Divers shared in the profits obtained by the sale of pearls, each receiving an advance at the beginning of the season and a second advance during the off-season. Both payments were debited against future earnings, oftentimes forging a growing chasm of debt and servitude into which future generations of the laboring class were born.

The work of pearling itself was difficult. A typical pearling dhow held a crew of sixty, including the divers, pullers, ship’s boys, captain’s mate, and captain (Jenner 1984, 27).\textsuperscript{13} The captain sailed the dhow to the chosen location, and the anchor was lowered. Divers quickly descended to the bottom, accompanied by two ropes, one with a stone weight, the other with a collection bag. After collecting ten or twelve oysters from the sea bottom, the diver surfaced while the pullers retrieved the haul. The divers worked in shifts, and after a sequence of ten dives, the diver warmed himself by the fire while another took his shift. The pearl merchant’s vessel traveled among the dhows of his fleet, and the merchant courted buyers one at a time on the deck of his vessel.

The importance of the pearl industry precedes available historical accounts. By the eighteenth century, Bahrain was a central hub in regional
commerce. The pearl trade was certainly the cornerstone of the island’s position, but the gleam of the pearl often obscures other important attractions of the island. Bahrain functioned as a source of fresh water for passing ships. The islands contained numerous freshwater springs, and the shallow waters around the island also bubbled with fresh water, for which the local population configured technologies for extracting the fresh water from saline (Buckingham 1971, 456–57). The interior of Bahrain, by all accounts, was a veritable garden. In his trip to Bahrain in the early nineteenth century, Buckingham observed “no less than three hundred villages scattered over the small island, and every portion of the soil is cultivated; producing dates, figs, citrons, peaches, and a species of almond, called loazi, the outer husk of which is eaten as well as the kernel” (452).

Agricultural production was, for the most part, a Shi’ite activity, and although their interior villages were connected to the booming port of Manama by trade, they were disconnected from the wealth derived from the pearl industry (Khuri 1980, 36). Palgrave, in the colonial discourse typical of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, states that the “fifty or sixty hamlets that lie scattered in its interior [do not] keep up much communication with the thriving emporium on the north-west, and hence their inhabitants bear an almost savage look, indicative of an uncultivated mind, the result of isolation” (1982, 210). These “uncultivated” minds were responsible for much of the agricultural production on the island and were hence part of the reason that the emporium to the northwest thrived in its role as a gateway to the populations of the eastern peninsula.

The Sunni inhabitants of the island controlled the production of pearls, but the distribution of this commodity brought diverse populations to the island. In the seventeenth century, Venetians, Jews from Aleppo, and Banias from Gujarat were the chief exporters of Gulf pearls (Slot 1993, 498). By the early 1800s, however, the bulk found their way to the markets of the Indian Subcontinent (Buckingham 1971, 454). As pearls reached the markets of India, products of the Subcontinent flowed back to the markets of Bahrain along the same lines of trade; a short list included “cotton and silk fabrics, embroideries, rice, spices, coffee, sugar and tea, fiber ropes, timber, metals, iron and sundry gewgaws all coming from India” (al-Muraikhi 1991, 106). With a reliable mercantile connection to the Subcontinent, Bahrain rose from an important entrepôt to the preeminent emporium of the western Gulf (Lorimer 1908, 245). The success of the Indian merchants in this equation enhanced their power on the island. By the end of the nineteenth century, they controlled the customs port and served as personal bankers to the
ruling family. From the 1890s to 1965, the Indian rupee served as Bahrain’s principal currency.

After many centuries at the crossroads of regional trade routes, and with its increasingly solidified mercantile connections to the Indian Subcontinent and to the Arabian Peninsula’s interior, the port of Manama was widely recognized as a heterogeneous and multicultural trading hub. As Palgrave ably noted in his 1862–63 travel diary,

The arrival of strangers, many or few, from north or south, is an every hour occurrence here; and a passing look, or a chance “good morrow,” was all the notice taken of us by the many who thronged the landing place…. Mixed with the indigenous population are numerous strangers and settlers, some of whom have been established here for many generations back, attracted from other lands either by the profits of commerce or of the pearl fishery, and still retaining more or less of the physiognomy and garb of their native countries. Thus the gay-coloured close-cut dress of the southern Persian, the saffron-stained vest of ‘Oman, the white robe of the Nejd, and the striped gown of Baghdad, are often to be seen mingling with the light garments of Bahreyn, its blue and red turban, its white silk-fringed cloth worn Banian fashion round the waist, and its frock-like overall; while a small but unmistakable colony of Indians, merchants by profession, and mainly from Guzerat, Cutch, and their vicinity, keep up here all their peculiarities of costume and manner, and live among the motley crowd, “among them, but not of them.” (Palgrave 1982, 205–12)

The historical record repeatedly remarks on the heterogeneous character of the island. Certainly a plethora of different cultural and ethnic groups made their home on the island. Some arrived by choice, such as the Indian merchants, and others by force, such as the African slaves who worked the sea bottom for the bounty of pearls. Moreover, the indigenous population, if one can even be delineated, included a variety of groups demarcated not only by the Sunni/Shi’a schism but also by regional affiliation, such as those with a genealogical connection to Persia or the eastern districts of Saudi Arabia. In most cases, the pluralism of the social milieu did not extend to the local level: villages were homogeneous, and within the port city of Manama, specific quarters became the home of particular groups.

Nor should this portrait of premodern Bahrain be conceived as a sort of static social arrangement. The booming pearl industry of the late nineteenth
century reshaped society on the island. As the connections to the pearl markets of India solidified, agricultural land in the hinterlands of the main island was abandoned. “Production for internal consumption continued,” Nelida Fuccaro states, but the “export of agricultural produce, especially dates, decreased considerably as the local agricultural workforce increasingly became absorbed in fishing and pearling controlled by the new tribal elites” (2000, 54). The industry thrived as the market for pearls and other luxury goods expanded in the decade following the First World War.14

In 1893, however, in Japan, Kokichi Mikimoto, the son of a noodle vendor, patented a process for cultivating pearls. After he spent another twelve years perfecting the process, cultured pearls began to make their way into the global market as Japan’s first successful export. In Bahrain, the impact of this technological shift was slow, and the industry continued to thrive in the 1920s. When the U.S. stock market collapsed in 1929, however, demand for luxury goods dwindled, and in the early 1930s, with the global prominence of the cultured pearl, the Bahrain industry collapsed (Zahlan 1989, 22).

Although the pearl trade in Bahrain all but vanished in the decades that followed the global collapse of the industry, the legacy of the relations of pearl production established over the course of centuries lingered on. Like the pearl beds, petroleum provided the basis for an essentially extractive industry; the tributary relations between the Sunni royal family and the captains of the pearling dhows were in some sense replicated with oil production, albeit under the guise of legitimacy provided by the quasi-colonial bureaucracy now present on the island. Furthermore, the indentured servitude and circle of debt that characterized relations between pearl boat captains and the divers constituted an early rendition of the contemporary kafala system. Like the pearl divers of the last century, transmigrant laborers today arrive with a burden of debt that is difficult to escape. Finally, for many centuries Bahrain’s lucrative pearl industry drew foreign traders, merchants, and laborers to the island. The petroleum era, while drawing new groups of individuals from afar, was nonetheless only the latest chapter in a long history of transregional migration through Bahrain.

The Arrival of British Imperialism

The British entry into the Gulf region, premised upon the strength of their maritime forces, was a gradual one. The arrival of the Khalīfa Arabs
to Bahrain, of course, marked a significant milestone in Bahraini history, but in the larger context of the Gulf their arrival was but one chapter in the history of tribal relations in the region—a set of relations carried from desert to sea. With the long-standing presence of the Persians, the Utubi Arabs, the Omanis, and the famous “pirates” of the lower Gulf (the tribes of what today are the United Arab Emirates), the Arabian Gulf of the eighteenth century has been characterized as a veritable “free-for-all attack and counterattack, alliance and counter-alliance” in which ports and territory frequently shifted hands (Franklin 1985, 64).

In entering this regional stage, the British sought legitimacy through the eradication of these attacks and counterattacks, or of “piracy,” the nomenclature used by the Europeans to describe the fiercely competitive economic warfare waged by the various ports of the Gulf (Franklin 1985, 61; Onley 2004, 31, 36–37). Piracy, although often portrayed as a guerilla response to the encroachment of the Portuguese, French, English, and Dutch, also relates to the gradual erosion of the Persian Empire and the stability it granted to mercantile activity in the region, to the increasing volume of trade in the region, to the rise of the fundamentalist Wahhabis (Saudis), who waged war on Indian shipping during 1797–1819, and most importantly, to the fact that British definitions of piracy often included the Arab enforcement of a “protection fee” system that mirrored the relationship between caravan routes and tribal homelands on the peninsula (Khuri 1980, 19–21; Onley 2004, 36–37, 42–43).

The British, after devastating several ports through naval attacks in December 1819, imposed an antipiracy treaty on the rulers of what came to be known as the Trucial States (now the United Arab Emirates) in early 1820, to which Bahrain was admitted at its ruler’s request. The local rulers promised to abstain from all forms of maritime raiding, including piracy, in return for Britain’s promise to protect them from this raiding and arbitrate any disputes arising from it (Onley 2004, 31, 36). This treaty, known as the General Treaty of Peace, yielded international recognition to the rulers and their families, and thereby reinforced their positions as the hereditary leaders of their respective sheikhdoms (Zahlan 1989, 7–8; Onley 2004, 66). Responsibility for the enforcement of this and subsequent treaties was given to Britain’s Gulf Resident in Bushehr, who took his orders from the government of India (Onley 2007, 14–20). The Gulf Resident maintained a representative in Bahrain who reported to him on a regular basis. In the nineteenth century, this man was a locally recruited Indian or Arab merchant with the title of Native Agent, whereas in the twentieth century
he was a Briton with the title of Political Agent (Onley 2007, 136–88). Through this agency, Bahrain emerged as a vital node in what Onley calls British India’s “informal empire.”

A calculated move by many accounts, the presence of the British Residents and Agents in the Gulf served multiple ends. Britain’s growing involvement in the region was ostensibly based on the protection of trade routes to India and the East. In practice, the British political presence also enabled a British company, the British India Steam Navigation Company, to dominate the vital long-distance trade between India and Gulf ports, particularly Basra, Bahrain, Dubai, and Muscat (Landen 1967, 99–101). Furthermore, the stabilization of borders and regimes in the region turned group competition inward rather than outward (Franklin 1985, 66).

Through exclusive agreements signed between the local rulers and the government of India in the late nineteenth century, Britain took control of the external relations of the Gulf sheikhdoms, turning them into British “protected states” (Onley 2007, 21–29). This move would become the window for Britain’s increasing involvement in the internal affairs of the port cities and their surrounding territories. The British concerns expanded to include “port facilities, pearl production, exports and imports, and a general political order that stimulated international trade” (Khuri 1980, 86). In Bahrain, direct connections to the markets of India and other ports far afield drew increasing numbers of merchants and traders to the city: Germans, other Europeans, and a contingent of fifty Jewish pearl merchants who had arrived in the 1890s sought the protection of the British Agent on the island (Khuri 1980, 86). The Agent’s extraterritorial jurisdiction in Bahrain, granted by the Exclusive Agreements of 1880 and 1892, allowed him to try all legal cases involving foreigners in Bahrain and to try with a Bahraini judge all cases between foreigners and Bahrainis (Onley 2007, 119–27). The former were tried in the British Agency Court, whereas the latter were tried in the Joint Court. Over a century ago, then, we can see traces of the dual system that continues to characterize the arrangements in all of the contemporary Gulf nations.

As the jurisdiction of the British Resident and his Agents expanded, power was centralized in the court system. The British Agency Court was formally established in 1919, with the Joint Court being established soon after. A secular court for Bahrainis was also established in the 1920s, run by a British colonial civil servant privately employed by the ruler of Bahrain: Sir Charles Belgrave, who oversaw the creation of the modern government of Bahrain, with its departments and institutions, between 1926 and 1957.
(Khuri 1980, 89–90). Councils and governing bodies were established, eclipsing the indigenous institutions of leadership. The degree of involvement by the British in Bahrain outpaced British efforts among the other fledgling states of the western Arabian Gulf. In Bahrain, the British became involved in the minutiae of everyday internal affairs, and in 1946, the political residency—the locus of the British Empire’s regional presence—moved from Bushehr to Bahrain. British air force, naval, and army bases were established on the island in 1932, 1935, and 1961, respectively, and numerous British commercial firms located their regional headquarters in Manama (Franklin 1985, 86; Zahlan 1989, 49).

Petroleum and the Global Political Economy

In his comprehensive analysis of the Gulf region during the British era, Lorimer explains Bahrain’s strategic importance to the British imperial interests in the region. He also spends some effort describing the pearl industry and concludes by stating that should the pearl beds fail, “the Shaikhdom would shortly be reduced to comparative insignificance” (1908, 245). Some twenty-two years after his book was published, the pearl market did collapse. The veracity of the argument underlying Lorimer’s prediction, however, remains in question, for the international collapse of the pearl market neatly coincided with the discovery of oil in Bahrain.

In October 1931, Bahrain’s first oil well was drilled at Jebel al-Dukhan, the sole mountain on the main island. Seven months later, the well began to produce 9,000 barrels of oil a day, and the region’s petroleum era was under way (Zahlan 1989, 51). Larger discoveries followed, but few of them were in Bahrain. Nonetheless, with a sufficient supply of petroleum, as well as the economic benefits of its stature as the epicenter of the British presence in the Gulf, Bahrain boomed in the decades that followed the discovery of oil. In fact, for much of the twentieth century, Bahrain paced modernization in the Arabian Gulf even as the coffers of nearby nations began to surpass its own.

The British, who by then were managing all external affairs of the small island nation (as well as a sizable portion of the internal affairs), granted one-third of the oil royalties to the Khalifa leadership (Franklin 1985, 87). These monies, and the jobs produced by the growth of the oil industry, stimulated the local economy and wrought fundamental changes in Bahraini society. To sketch a basic outline of the impact, one can point
to the physical relocation of many families out of the central districts and into the newly constructed suburbs of Manama; one can note the education of women, as well as their entry into the labor market; one can point to the government’s construction of universities, hospitals, schools, roads, palaces, mosques, and other infrastructural components that, together, conditioned fundamental changes in the day-to-day activity of most Bahrainis, and, furthermore, changed the locations of that activity; one can also note that more frequent travel by Bahrainis, for both work and pleasure, increased contact between Bahrainis and foreigners.

At the same time, many Bahrainis had difficulty accessing the wealth generated by the industry. Most of the jobs in the oil industry, particularly in its earliest decades, went to foreigners, and often to Indian nationals (Franklin 1985, 88). As already described, Indians had been on the island in significant numbers for centuries. With the rapid development of the petroleum industry, and with the continuing expansion of the British-managed government bureaucracy, the need for trained professionals and the assorted clerks, supervisors, and assistants who spoke English far surpassed the supply of educated and trained Bahrainis (Holden 1966, 176; Kapiszewski 2001, 4). Moreover, those citizens who did gain a foothold in the industries on the island often departed for other pursuits. As Seccombe and Lawless (1986, 111–12) state, many of the Bahrainis who gained formal or informal training under the foreign-run industries on the island quickly found their way to other alternatives—establishing their own businesses, working in the private sector, or themselves migrating to work in nearby countries. As a result of this confluence of factors, the flow of foreign labor to the island increased steadily over the middle decades of the twentieth century, and the wealth generated by Bahrain’s petroleum industry coexisted with significant periods of unemployment for citizens.

In 1971, the year Britain withdrew its military from the Gulf and terminated its nineteenth-century treaties with the Gulf rulers, Bahrain declared its independence from Britain. Two years later, the OPEC embargo resulted in the overnight quadrupling of the income generated by petroleum (Zahlan 1989, 61–62). Independent and instantly wealthy, Bahrain experienced a quickening in its pace of development. At this juncture in history the flow of labor to the region reached unforeseen highs: between 1971 and 1981, the population of non-Bahrainis jumped from 37,885 to 112,378 (Directorate of Statistics 1999, 16). Put another way, in 1971 one out of every five individuals on the island was a noncitizen foreigner. Ten years later, one out of every three individuals on the island was a foreign worker.
Not only did the number of foreigners working in Bahrain grow but the sources of that labor shifted rapidly in the 1970s. In particular, inter-Arab labor migration was rapidly eclipsed by the arrival of South Asian laborers from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and numerous other nations of the Indian Ocean. This shift in labor is frequently linked to the OPEC embargo, an event that, as noted, multiplied the island nation’s income practically overnight and hastened the establishment of large development projects, and hence fueled a demand for labor that the citizenry itself could not meet (Azhar 1999, 101; Weiner 1986). Although the laborers arriving from South Asia in the 1970s were certainly filling positions that Bahrainis were unwilling or unable to take, the simple correlation between this flow of transnational labor and the demand in the Gulf labor markets has been closely examined and challenged by other scholars. Emile Nakhleh, for example, observes that six years after its inception, the Bahrain Petroleum Company began to extensively employ Indians and Iranians in response to the 1938 labor strike by citizen-employees (1976, 77). Other research suggests that the British government precariously balanced its interests in maintaining good relations with the royal family, minimizing or altogether excluding foreign interests from gaining a foothold, and finding a productive and capable workforce for developing oil production and other related industries on the island (Seccombe and Lawless 1986, 94–96). Labor from the Indian Subcontinent threaded the complexities of these demands: beyond providing a capable, trained, and inexpensive labor force, Indian laborers were already British subjects and, from the perspective of the island’s Sunni leadership, less politically volatile than Arab or Persian labor (Seccombe and Lawless 1986). The idea that these new labor forces were politically docile and less culturally troublesome than non-Bahraini Arab laborers is a recurring theme in analyses of the historical context of transmigration to the Gulf (Nakhleh 1976, 77; Weiner 1986, 53–54).

Although the petroleum reserves in Bahrain were, in the end, the smallest in the Gulf, Bahrain continues to rely on oil for a substantial portion of its national income. Estimates vary significantly, from 50 percent to 77 percent of the state’s total income (Seikaly 2001, 179; Wright 2008; Ali 2009), but even these figures fail to convey the intricacy of this dependency, for many of the island nation’s diversification projects depend heavily on petroleum and gas in their productive capacities. Nonetheless, the Kingdom of Bahrain has arrived in the twenty-first century with a collection of economic strategies aimed at diversifying its economy. The nation’s commercial and financial sectors, while increasingly eclipsed by
the metropolis of Dubai to the south, continue to draw global corporate
ties to the island. The nation’s bureaucracy—itself a complex nego-
tiation of the island’s quasi-colonial legacy and the vested interests of the
ruling Sunni sect—continues to keep pace with change and reform in the
Gulf. The stellar wealth of nearby nations is absent in Bahrain, however,
and the harsh reality of a diminishing resource base, the “golden bubble”
that financed the rapid changes of the past century, is better known in
Bahrain than in any of the petroleum nations of the Gulf littoral.

**Bahrain in a Regional Context**

Much of the scholarship concerned with the petroleum states of the
Arabian Gulf portrays them as a fairly homogeneous set of neighbors.
Ample evidence supports this fact. The Sunni ruling families of several of
these modern states share an overlapping genealogy, and even the com-
mon folk of today’s Gulf states trace familial connections across multiple
national borders. Five of the six nations of the GCC are Sunni-ruled, but
only in Bahrain does that Sunni leadership rule over a Shi’ite majority.20 In
her seminal attack against the Orientalist portrayal of the “Islamic” city as
a conglomeration of particular morphological features, Janet Abu-Lughod
(1987) describes the “feel” of the cities of the Middle East—the spatial and
personal semiotics indicative of the divide between public and semiprivate
urban space (169). One might easily add to this rendering the sound of calls
to prayer, the smell of sheesha, the tight winding streets of the older quar-
ters, or the minarets that reach from low neighborhoods to the sky. The
cities of the Gulf littoral also have a common feel to them, with long wa-
terfront corniches, modern highways connecting the rhizome-like network
of traffic circles, each with a monument at its center. The cities themselves
are a testament to these similarities: all of these neighboring nations are
principally urban, with great majorities of the population dwelling in and
around the cities of the region.

All of these cities are highly transnational. In all the nations of the GCC,
foreigners constitute a majority of the total workforce. In Kuwait, Qatar,
and the United Arab Emirates they constitute an absolute majority of the
population. Dubai, the cosmopolitan hub of the United Arab Emirates, is
now 90 percent foreign. The cities of the Gulf are busy with development.
Suburbs sprawl into the desert, and the airports hum with international
traffic. Monumental architecture proliferates: the world’s tallest building
(Burj Dubai) now stands in the Emirates, and newly constructed luxury neighborhoods in the shape of palm trees (and visible from space) have emerged off the coast of Dubai. Bahrain, like its GCC neighbors, periodically announces plans for astonishingly massive new developments and projects. Throughout the Gulf, gleaming new buildings appear with great frequency, and the sound of construction is a constant backdrop to life in the cities of the GCC nations.

All of the Gulf states possess significant reserves of petroleum and hence significant sources of wealth. On the coasts of Saudi are cities of iron that reach out to the sea. Refineries dot the western shores of the Arabian Gulf, and for every stratotanker that rounds the Strait of Hormuz and passes into the open ocean, millions of dollars flow into the countries of the Gulf. Beginning with the discovery of oil beside Jebel al-Dukhan, the “mountain of smoke” south of Manama, and gaining momentum in the 1970s when the embargo quadrupled petroleum income overnight, the pace of change in the Gulf has shaped similar societies with similar results. The Sunni leadership of these nations invested heavily in the public sector. Although great portions of the private sector came to depend on human capital from abroad, the hallways of the expanding government bureaucracy became the bastion of the citizenry. This particular relation to the state, described at length in the penultimate chapter of this book, is a bond shared by the citizens of all the petroleum-rich nations of the GCC.

There is also a connection among Gulf Arabs—a bounded, mutual identity shared by those who dwell in the oil-rich nations of the Gulf, a communal identity more localized than the often-noted bond of the umma, or Muslim world. The boundaries of that communality basically fit al-khaleej, or the Gulf Arab states (Dresch 2005, 1). Beyond the domain of lineage shared by some members of the Gulf society, this affiliation is built on the parallel economies of the region. The citizenry of these Gulf nations have, together, undergone massive transformations in the past decades. The wealth derived from the oil reserves forged large public sectors: educational opportunities were expanded, housing programs were created, health systems to serve all citizens were constructed. Although the diverse components of the Gulf states’ citizenry have benefited unequally from these developments, the large public sectors and the entitlements they provide are widely recognized as essential components of the ruling families’ ability to maintain their hegemony through the distribution of wealth via the conduits of the state (Champion 1999; Kapiszewski 2001, 5–9; Longva 1997, 46–52). This set of relations—of tribal relations organized within the
bureaucracy of the state—is one facet of the shared experience of the citizenry of the Gulf states.

The flow of foreign labor to the Gulf began during the British era, but the wealth produced by rising oil prices in the 1970s expedited modernization plans, and in all the nations of the Gulf foreigners arrived in huge numbers to perform the myriad tasks of building “modern” nations. This large foreign workforce, then, is another aspect of the shared experience of the Gulf nations. Indigenousness and nationalism, the strange bedfellows of the contemporary Gulf, exist in dialectic with the highly transnational demographics of the region. In the urban milieu of the Gulf, citizens are often minorities in their own land. In Longva’s ethnography of citizen/foreigner relations in contemporary Kuwait, one informant described his feelings as follows: “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” (1997, 124–25). This feeling of a society besieged by rapid, external change is another condition shared by all the petroleum-rich GCC nations, and the sense of belonging to the state incorporates ethnic, racial, religious, and tribal boundaries under the rubric of citizenship.

The similarities among Gulf nations are substantial, and the components I describe here are the basis for some mutuality in the identities purveyed by the inhabitants of the region. There are, however, many noteworthy differences. Perhaps most important, oil was discovered first in Bahrain. Hence, the benefits of that wealth—including a variety of social programs, job opportunities within a large state bureaucracy, low-cost loans for houses, land grants, and much more—began to accrue in Bahrain first. The first schools in the Gulf region were created in Bahrain, and the citizenry has long prided itself on its position as a beacon of modernization in the Gulf. Its position in relation to the other Gulf states as the primary hub for British imperial activity and transnational corporations facilitated its position at the forefront of the region’s integration with the global political economy.

The island’s declining oil reserves (and hence its declining wealth) have in some ways undermined Bahrain’s role as pacesetter for modernization in the region. In Dubai to the south, taller buildings rise by the month, more wealth courses through the economy, and unlike Bahrain and the other smaller urban conglomerations of the Gulf littoral, Dubai has emerged as a true global city in the region. Yet Bahrain’s declining resources have
forced the nation to cope with the difficult task of economic diversification, and in this sense the small island nation again sets the pace in the Gulf, for the Bahraini state today faces a set of conditions that all the nations of the GCC will sooner or later share. In terms of the policy environment forged during and after the British era, Bahrain again led the other Gulf nations in devising alternatives to petroleum dependency. These projects resulted in the refinery, the aluminum industry, and other industrial production, as well as a booming financial sector. More recently, Bahrain has instigated a set of labor reform policies that again place it at the forefront of change in the Gulf.

This attempt to turn away from direct dependence on petroleum, while not fully successful to date, depended heavily on the island’s experience as the hub for the quasi-colonial activity in the region. The British constructed an air force base on Muharraq, a naval base in Jufair (southeast of Manama), and an army base in Hamala (in western Bahrain), in addition to multiple other projects; the construction of Awali, an “American”-style compound on the island, only enhanced the island’s position as expatriate friendly. As Gulf-wide oil production increased, Bahrain emerged as a service center to the activities of the surrounding nations: the relative security and openness of Bahrain attracted a wide variety of financial, administrative, and service offices to the island. In the parlance of al-khaleej, the Bahrainis are the “beggars of the Gulf,” a sentiment that is often also commonly phrased as the “Indians of the Gulf.” The lessons learned as both beggars and handmaids to the British imperialists, however, proved essential to Bahrainis in developing their nation as the service and financial hub to the more conservative surrounding nations (see Zahlan 1989, 83).

In the twenty-first century, Bahrain retains its reputation as one of the most hospitable of the Gulf nations. The foreigners with whom I spoke—many of whom had experience in the other nearby Arab countries—repeatedly said that Bahrain was the easiest adjustment for expatriates: you can wear shorts in public without fear of the mutaween (the religious police of Saudi Arabia), one man remarked; you can practice your religion at one of the handful of churches and temples discreetly tucked about the city, others stated. In general, my informants reported, the Bahrainis are particularly worldly and educated. Hindi music booms from the passing cars filled with Bahraini teenagers, observed a friend as we walked down a busy boulevard, and the audience of the Bollywood films I attended was an even mix of Indians and Bahrainis. And, as other expatriates noted, you can get a drink at one of the many bars on the island.
This liberalism is peculiar to Bahrain. On weekends, teenagers and families from nearby countries stream into Bahrain over the causeway that connects the island to the mainland. Bahrain is a weekend destination for those from more conservative environs: the hotel bars fill with European expatriates, Indians and Filipinos, Saudi men, Bahrainis, and individuals from all the other regions of the globe who visit, live, or work in this transnational city-state. International corporations (many of which do business in Saudi Arabia) often choose to locate their regional headquarters in Bahrain. The island’s relative liberalism, wrought by its long transnational history and its intricate connection to Britain, is the primary attraction. Yet it is an uneasy liberalism—both a lifeline to the nation’s economy and a target for the more conservative and disenfranchised elements of Bahraini society.

**Transnational Bahrain**

To the claim that Bahrain has a long history of hosting the processes now called transnationalism is the obvious response that much of this history preceded the existence of the nation-state. As in other regions of the globe, here nations were something quickly constructed and, in many senses, something foreign and imperial imposed on the more geographically fluid tribal structure characteristic of the Arabian Peninsula. There are good arguments to this end: that the lines drawn by colonial powers were mostly a matter of convenience, part of the predilection of a bureaucratic empire that needed to organize the people and terrain it encountered, and to do so in a particular fashion before it could proceed to conquer and exploit. Or one could convolute the terms of the argument and instead take the ebb and flow of peoples and powers across Bahrain’s shores—from the Mesopotamian chapter lost to history, through the arrival of the Greeks, of Islam, of the Portuguese, of the Omanis, of the Ottomans, of the Persians, and of the maritime Arab tribes of the Gulf’s western shores—as evidence enough that change, rather than stability, was the norm for islands between two seas. Instead, the arrival of the British, the legitimacy they conferred on the Khalifa family, and the continuity of those provisions suggest that it was the constancy of change that came to an end with Britain’s Treaty of Peace.

What has come to be called transnationalism in the contemporary literature casts one eye to the role of the nation-state and the corporations, economies, and cultural flows that transcend them. The other eye—and
this is the métier of the anthropologist—sifts through the contextual factors of these individuals whose lives are stretched between two or more states, and in this context I find the basis for the argument presented in this chapter: that the historic relations of production configured in the past provided a template for managing the dramatically large flows of foreign labor to the island. The shape of the Bahraini state, the expectations of the citizenry, and the experience of Indian foreign workers on the island today echo the island’s experience of British imperialism, the tribal legacy of its leadership, its role as a maritime mercantile hub, and the relations of production forged by the exploitation of the pearl beds surrounding the island.

The processes underlying the contemporary transnational movement of peoples around the globe are not new. For much of known history, Bahrain functioned as an important node in regional and Indian Ocean circuits. Although never a true empire, it was often an important jewel in others’ crowns. At particular junctures in history, Bahrain stood alone, or functioned as a mercantile city-state for the seafarers of the Gulf. Throughout this history, the mix of peoples that composed the island’s population reflected the heterogeneity of these long-distance connections. In the chapters that follow, I turn to the Indian diaspora—the largest of the foreign populations working on the island today. This Indian community, outsiders to the tribal relations of the Arab leadership, is nonetheless one of the most historically important populations in the kingdom. Their lives on this island have been shaped by the complex history of interactions between foreigner and citizen—a history in which the agency of the Sunni leadership, as well as the Shi‘ite population, forged a particular set of relations with the global political economy of oil production, with the quasi-colonial administration long present on the island, and with the nearby nations of the Gulf.