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City of Strangers: Gulf Migration and the Indian Community in Bahrain.

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The multifaceted system that governs foreign laborers in Bahrain—a system of arrangements, norms, laws, ideas, and beliefs—has been the center of attention in my analysis. The danger in focusing so closely on the structural violence this system produces, however, rests in the portrayal of Bahraini citizens as what Anthony Giddens called “structural dopes” (1979, 52)—as nothing more than the empty vessels through which foreigners are governed or, in the vocabulary of my analysis, as the faceless agents of the structural violence endured by the foreign laboring class. In this chapter my primary task is to remedy that shallow portrayal. By turning the analytic lens on the Bahraini citizenry, I illuminate their experiences, both complicate and humanize their portrayal in this book, and better contextualize the structural violence that foreign labor endures.

With the abundance of attention paid to transnational communities and their relationship to the states from which they come, the impact of transnational movement on host nations is often eclipsed—hence Mahler’s call to examine “the role transmigrants play in transforming those communities that they occupy which are not their communities of origin” (1998, 93; see also Reitz 2003). In illuminating the Bahraini perspective, I also investigate the considerable role the large transmigrant communities have played in shaping the experience, identity, and social relations of the Bahraini people.

The argument at the foundation of this chapter can be summarized as follows: the system by which foreigners are governed, as described in previous chapters and rooted in the institutions and policies of the state, is a strategic response to the challenges and pressures of the contemporary
global order. Decades of dependence on inexpensive, educated, and trained transnational laborers who, together, remain integral to the construction and maintenance of the Gulf-wide vision of modernity has left much of the citizenry poorly positioned to compete in the private sector. Instead, the state itself emerges as the locus of their power in the global system. The habitus of everyday interactions with foreigners and the institutional governance of transmigrants on the island become two facets of an increasingly invigorated state. The state is the tool through which the citizens negotiate the impacts of the transnational flows of people, capital, ideas, and culture. The state, however, is also the tool through which citizens insulate themselves from the logic of those transnational flows. Potential resistance to the inequalities codified by the Bahraini state is trumped by the state’s ongoing role as the nexus of the citizens’ collective resistance to the neoliberal calculus of the global political economy.

The Nation as Host

One afternoon during my fieldwork a Bahraini friend, Abdullah, suggested I accompany him to the house he had occupied as a child. His father, and his father’s father, had been prosperous merchants in the city of Manama, and the significant dwelling was only a ten-minute walk—through winding alleys, down a few long boulevards, and then back again into a few winding alleys—from my small flat in the neighborhood of Hoora. Like many others in the middle class, his family had long ago abandoned the city center for the suburbs. Indeed, this house had been rented to a large contingent of South Asian laborers, and the detritus of their impoverished existence could still be seen in the now-empty rooms of the decrepit villa.

The house itself fit squarely within one aspect of the island’s historic architectural vernacular. The interior was impervious to the eyes on the street—yielding only a few doorways and high windows to pedestrians. This description hints at an old trope in the literature concerning the prominence of the public/private divide in the spatial arrangement of life in the Middle East, and without straying too far down that path I add that the house was arranged around a central courtyard. Like both historic and contemporary homes on the island, it included a majlis, or reception room near the front of the house, in which members of the family hosted guests. These greeting rooms represent a liminal space that bridges the divide between public spaces outside the home and the private space of the home’s interior.
What was perhaps most interesting about this house, however, was that it also included a small and separate living quarters located at one corner of the home. The single doorway to this apartment led to the street, so that no passage was possible between the main house and the guest apartment. My host was in the midst of a long narrative about his childhood—describing, for example, how he used to sit in the room upstairs listening to the Beatles—but I eventually asked him about this separate apartment and its purpose. He said that the small apartment was constructed to accommodate the foreign merchants with whom his father and grandfather traded. I later confirmed that this feature was common enough among merchants’ houses from that era, and the episode I describe here sank into the recesses of the field notes I maintained while on the island.

I eventually returned to this field note with particular interest, for over the intervening years I have come to think of the layout of this traditional merchant’s home as a spatial metaphor that speaks to the transnationality of the island and, more specifically, to the way that the Bahraini citizenry and state have configured their relationship to the peoples and cultures they host on the island. Consider the house that Abdullah’s grandfather constructed and its small apartment in which traveling merchants might stay: this guest apartment was at once part of the house, but also clearly distinct and separate from it. His grandfather, like many others on the island, constructed a home in this manner to accommodate the presence of foreigners while, at the same time, insulating the private sphere from foreign incursion. This spatial relationship within the merchant’s home helps us understand a key aspect of the Bahraini national imaginary that congeals around the idea of hospitality and the roles of host and guest.

The conceptualization of the nation-as-host is certainly a product of Bahrain’s particular historical circumstances. With its rich pearl beds and capable port, the island emerged as a regional entrepôt in the larger trade circuits of the Indian Ocean world. This trade brought much of that world to the island’s shores and produced centuries of conditions whereby the indigenous Bahrainis and other early arrivals negotiated their identity against the heterogeneous cast of foreigners, who included merchants, traders, slaves, conquerors, and many others who passed through the bustling port. Moreover, in the last centuries Bahrain functioned as the seat of the British colonial presence in the region, a situation and set of relations that produced an even more complex form of hospitality as the peoples of the island negotiated the legal and political mechanisms for sharing power. Decades of struggle over which peoples on the island were subject to indigenous
Bahraini law and which were subject to British jurisdiction, for example, can be seen as a renegotiation of that line dividing the foreign from the local.

This idea of the nation-as-host takes more practical form in the kafala itself. As described in earlier chapters, transmigrants are tied to particular sponsors: adult Bahrainis often “host” numerous transmigrants, both in the workplace and in the home. From the Bahraini perspective, this relationship entails a responsibility for the behavior of these individuals: foreign laborers are conceived as a type of guest, potentially unruly and incursive, but also potentially a source of profit. Perhaps more illuminating is the sleeping-partner arrangement (described at length in chap. 4) whereby Bahraini citizens sell their right to own and operate a business to foreign entrepreneurs. In a sense, then, the Bahraini partners host the activities of a private sector, and in doing so they establish a profitable relationship to those entrepreneurial activities without subjecting themselves to the logic and, more specifically, the risks associated with the private sphere.
The essential argument I make here is that the notion of hospitality distills a key aspect of the Bahraini experience and helps explain the topography of the contemporary arrangements on the island. The modernization that occurred during the second half of the twentieth century brought rapid and wholesale changes to Bahrain. Both the notion of hospitality and the arrangement of the kafala have deep historic roots in the culture of Bahrain (Beaugé 1985; Longva 1997), but this notion of hospitality reveals more than the architecture of relations between individual citizens and foreigners. It also provides us with an understanding of Bahraini national identity, the Bahrainis’ concept of themselves as individual members of that society, and their collective concept of their relationship with the diverse communities and cultures that stream to the small island. Succinctly, then, I see hospitality as window to Bahraini national imaginary.

Space and the City

As the example of the merchant family’s house suggests, a traditional spatial discourse is part of the relationship Bahrainis established with foreigners on the island. That spatial relationship, illustrated best by the wall between the merchant family’s guest room (as a space for the foreign) and the home itself (as the space for the local), can be projected onto the city as a whole, for Manama and all the many booming cities of the Gulf can be conceived as complex amalgamations of enclaves and discrete cultural spaces. In that amalgamation one can perceive the ongoing tension produced by Bahraini society’s attempt to accommodate what Paul Dresch (2006) has called “foreign matter.”

At the most macroscopic level, the singular urban agglomeration on the island is a growing mosaic of exceptional legal and economic zones. Like many of the other Gulf nations, Bahrain has declared and constructed numerous exceptional zones and spaces as part of its effort to attract foreign investment. Investment parks and freeholder zones are rapidly proliferating on the island. The Bahrain Logistic Zone (BLZ), for example, was recently described in a Bahraini newspaper as “the Middle East’s first boutique multimodal logistics hub focusing on re-export and value-adding logistics activities. With zero tax, goods can be imported and re-exported without incurring customs duties and 100 per cent foreign ownership is permitted.” The key aspect to the BLZ, like many of these exceptional spaces, is the possibility of full ownership of property by foreign
companies. This policy is, of course, in stark contrast to the regulations in place for the surrounding spaces on the island. In effect, these policies seek to consign and compartmentalize the industry and culture of the neoliberal global system to discrete and particular spaces on the island.

The spatial consignment of foreign matter is perhaps most apparent in the location of people in the city. As noted previously, the central portions of the city, once dense Bahraini neighborhoods, have been largely abandoned to the foreign workforce. Middle-class foreigners often find homes in compounds, or in the conglomeration of homes and apartments separated from public spaces by high walls and security guards (essentially what one would call a gated community in the United States). Even more striking, however, is the plan for increased numbers of “bachelor cities”—massive master-planned spaces meant to house and contain large numbers of foreign laborers. Proponents of these plans typically describe the pollutive threat of the largely male workforce, and the bachelor cities are seen as a mechanism for protecting Bahraini culture from this foreign presence.

As the domiciles of many foreigners are cordoned off from public space, so too the social and cultural activities of those populations are also subject to this spatial governance. The restaurants, bars, and beaches that serve the cosmopolitan elite—or better, are funded, designed, and marketed to that foreign elite—are themselves cloistered, exceptional zones in the larger tapestry of the city. Non-Islamic religious activity, while tolerated on the island, is similarly consigned to a few key locations. And the many social clubs that serve the various diasporas on the island are, almost without exception, located in walled villas out of view from the street. Unruly, potentially pollutive, and essentially foreign cultural practices are spatially segregated in the larger arena of the city.

What I chart here is not the successful and comprehensive division of that foreign matter from the local or indigenous space. In fact, the tension and friction generated by these exceptional spaces is a constant: “foreign matter” bleeds beyond its confines, public consternation and occasionally violence ensue, and often the state steps in to negotiate a solution. Rather, my interests are in delineating the forces and ideas behind the compulsion to maintain these exceptional spaces and their distinction. State and citizenry attempt to confine the economic activity of global capitalism, the bodies of the foreign laboring class, and the performance of the many and diverse cultures present on the island to discrete and exceptional spaces. This confinement echoes the spatial relations of the merchant’s house and illuminates the underlying logic of this system: “foreign matter,” as Dresch
(2006) calls it, must be accommodated, for it is inextricably interwoven and, indeed, essential to the national vision widely promoted on the island. Simultaneously, however, the boundaries that distinguish that foreign matter from the local and indigenous must be policed and maintained.

The Welfare State

In late spring 2003 a group of road haulage and construction companies called for a formal protest at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. In 2001, the ministry had passed a ban on foreign drivers as part of a set of policies that furthered Bahrainization in both the public and private sectors. The haulage and construction companies protested the impact of this particular directive, and their complaints were specific: the new citizen-drivers were inexperienced and damaged the trucks; the citizen-employees drove at high speeds and endangered others on the road; the citizen-drivers frequently called in sick, to the point where one business owner contended that half of his workforce was often absent; and the citizen-drivers typically moved on to other jobs within a few months, particularly to positions in the government. As a result, insurance rates charged to the companies had risen, Saudi transportation companies (which employ inexpensive foreign drivers) were beginning to compete for business on the island, and the Bahraini companies were unable to meet their delivery obligations. Although the Ministry of Labor lifted its ban on expatriate drivers in March 2003 for situations in which “suitable Bahrainis” could not be found, permits for foreign workers were still not forthcoming. As the ministry argued, suitable Bahrainis were available.

The haulage and construction companies scheduled the rally at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs for the morning of May 4, 2003. At the last minute, however, it was postponed indefinitely in lieu of a second rally planned for the same morning. A sit-in of unemployed citizens, co-organized by the Wefaq National Islamic Society, the National Democratic Action Society, the National Grouping Democratic Society, and the Islamic Action Society asked all of Bahrain’s “unemployed and those without benefits to join this peaceful sit-in along with their families, to bring attention to their plight.” The road haulage and construction companies issued a statement indicating their solidarity with the unemployed workers. As the spokesman for the haulage and construction companies stated, “Attention should be given to the unemployed and the step to temporarily suspend our protest
is part of our support for 100 percent Bahrainization and the demand that the Labor and Social Affairs Ministry take more active steps to ensure a real solution for the problem.”

That morning some two hundred jobless citizens gathered in front of the prime minister’s office. Many in the crowd waved flatbread above their heads, symbolizing their inability to feed their families. One protester spread his numerous diplomas about on the sidewalk, arguing that his state-approved education as a computing trainee left him unable to find a job. Another sat with his small child and, describing his situation, said he had been unemployed for a year. Ironically, his last job had been as a driver. Along with 60 other workers, he had signed a petition demanding BD150 ($398) per month (a raise of BD30/$80). The company had countered with an offer of BD10 per month. At that point he had quit in protest.

The irony, of course, rests in the coincidence of these two planned events: the first, a set of companies protesting their inability to find and keep skilled citizen-drivers; and the second, planned for exactly the same morning, the former truck driver, along with hundreds of others, protesting his inability to find a job. One imagines that if both rallies had occurred as planned, many of the unemployed men may have found jobs with the trucking companies, and unemployment on the island, estimated to be well above 15 percent over the past decade, would have dropped a decimal point or two. Yet the logic of this imagined scenario depends on a particular set of neoliberal ideas—on the idea of a free and open labor market, as well as the primacy of competitiveness, and on the notion of a government constructed to facilitate a thriving private sector (see Farmer 2003, 5–6). In Bahrain, however, the logic of these ideas has little traction, even among the most disenfranchised citizenry.

In all the states of the GCC, the bonanza of petroleum wealth has yielded governments in which the leadership distributes some portion of the wealth to its citizen-subjects. The content and quantity of this support have varied over time and region; analysis typically focuses on free or low-cost utilities, free or low-cost housing, free education, and free health care (Kapiszewski 2001; Nagy 2004). In Bahrain, widely recognized as one of the poorest of the Gulf states, these benefits have diminished over time. At present the government heavily subsidizes fuel, electricity, water, and some food on the island. Education and health care remain free for citizens. The state also provides low-cost housing to citizens, although the long delays involved in the distribution of that housing are a source of strife for the disenfranchised class of the citizenry.
Perhaps the most significant component of the redistribution of petroleum wealth rests in public-sector employment. Although consolidated data about the public sector are not available, an undersecretary at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs recently stated that 92 percent of the national (as opposed to foreign) workforce is employed in the public sector—“the highest percentage in the world” (Horton 2004). In Bahrain the public sector continues to dominate many activities in the economy, for that public sector encompasses much of the petroleum industry, the aluminum industry, and telecommunications. Employment in those (and many other) sectors is distributed by the Sunni-controlled government. The “tacit guarantee” of public-sector employment for all male nationals remains the bedrock of the state’s relationship to the citizenry (Louër 2008).

In Bahrain and the other Gulf states, the significant entitlements that accompany citizenship are often portrayed as the primary mechanism by which the state and its leadership build and maintain legitimacy (Khalaf 1992; Longva 2000). It is, however, important to distinguish between the benefits available equally to all citizens (such as free health care, government-subsidized utilities, and free education) and those that are distributed unequally to the citizenry (such as jobs in the public sector). In the latter case, the inequalities of this distribution forge economic classes out of sectarian divisions. It was the Shi’ite citizen-participants in this research who pointed out the realities of the situation to me. As they observed, many of the government ministries are predominantly, if not exclusively, Sunni—particularly the ministries of Interior and Defense, both of which are at the center of the state’s repressive apparatus. The unequal distribution of state-controlled wealth complicates theories of the welfare state, for it reveals the sectarian, tribal, and essentially personal logic of patronage at work in the apparatus of the Bahraini state.

The royal majlis, particularly popular with the formal ruler, provided a spatial venue for these personal appeals. One of my informants recalled his experience at the royal majlis:

I went to the emir’s court—this was during the current king’s father’s rule—and back then they gave away all kinds of money. The government here—no secret—it was corrupt. And at the court, people were there asking for money for all kinds of reasons. All kinds of people. I was there to ask for money to help me with my education in the states, because my dad couldn’t help me for the entire stay. So I was there to ask for some money and do the paperwork. Next to me was
this fat-cat royal family member, and I knew his son, so I asked him if he was Ahmed’s dad. He looked at me, but didn’t say anything. He looked like he didn’t want to be there . . . and then I overheard his conversation at the desk, and it ends up he was there to get money for his whole family’s tour around Europe that summer. He was getting the royal court to pay for it! He was a Khalifa, and he didn’t want to pay for it out of pocket, and he wanted himself and his wives to have a free ride around Europe that summer. And then there was this old Shi‘i man, with a long white beard, and he had holes all over his thobe [the long-sleeved ankle length garment typically worn by Arab men in the Gulf], and he was walking around with his son who was on a crutch, and he was trying to get money for his son’s medication. He was anguished, walking from office to office. I was just trying to get money for college. I could have gone to the University of Bahrain, but if the royal family can help me, great. But I felt guilty—I felt it was such a shady society, a shady government that doesn’t really care. And I just wanted to get up and leave the country right there. I can remember both their faces. And yeah, the Shi’a are really on the bottom of the pile.

With the new leadership, these distributions more commonly take the form of royal decrees or orders (a new housing complex for the poor, loans from the state to be forgiven, and so forth). This patron-client model, overlaid upon the relationship between citizen and the state, suggests that the Bahraini state has accommodated rather than replaced the tribal tradition (Nakhleh 1976, 176), and that in both its embodied personal form and as a standard structural bureaucracy the state forges inequality and divisions among the citizenry.

The Bahraini state, then, faces a difficult and seemingly contradictory set of tasks. While it structures difference among its citizenry, it also seeks to build a cohesive and unified sense of nationalism. This latter goal is aided by the presence of the large expatriate workforce of noncitizens against which unified national identity can be asserted. More important, however, the legitimacy of the leadership and the cohesion of Bahraini nationalism both rest on the promise of public-sector employment. The rallies and marches that were an almost weekly occurrence during my fieldwork in Bahrain never challenged the idea of the state as controlling of industry and jobs; instead, invectives emphasized the inequities of the distribution of those jobs, or the inability of the state to provide enough jobs for the people.
burgeoning population of unemployed and underemployed. Through this process the more fundamental question of the state’s legitimacy is masked.

Again one can perceive the pattern first portrayed in my description of the merchant family’s house. Jobs in the public sector are distributed through a complex fusion of a meritocratic logic—that is, who is properly qualified for the job—and a familial, sectarian, and tribally focused logic. The many disenfranchised citizens I came to know do not consider an occupation in the private sector a viable option: they don’t protest the lack of jobs in the private sector but rather the inability of the state to provide them with public-sector jobs. Macroscopically, the relationship between this burgeoning public sector and the private sector resembles the distinction that threads through this chapter, for the state itself is configured as an institution for managing—or hosting—the foreign matter of the private sector, while simultaneously insulating citizens from its logic.

Bahrainization and the Functions of the State

The collection of policies and directives known as Bahrainization is a complex and ever-evolving mix of components, all of which are central functions of the state and important elements in the experiences of both citizens and noncitizens on the island. In its most distilled form, Bahrainization is best represented by those policies that require a certain percentage of citizen-employees in particular types of companies. Edicts are often issued by “sector,” although the sectors often vary in scale: where one edict might be aimed at the private sector as a whole, another might address a specific “sector” such as the hospitality sector, the travel sector, and so forth. Edicts pertaining to sectors are complemented by an ever-changing system of monetary incentives that encourages companies to meet or exceed particular citizen-to-noncitizen ratios within a sectoral workforce. As one of the most active arenas of state activity, updates and alterations to these policies are a constant source of news in the local and international media. For example: “Firms are requested to increase employment of nationals by 5 percent a year until one-half of the labor force is Bahraini. New establishments employing 10 or more workers are required to have 20 percent Bahrainis in their workforce, with further annual increase of 5 percent until 50 percent is reached. Firms of less than 10 employees must employ at least one Bahraini other than the owner” (Fasano and Goyal 2004, 28).
Particular regulations like the one just quoted are singular components of Bahrainization. Although many of these policies are aimed at the private sector in general, the micro-sectoral approach is particularly active. The taxi “sector” was fully localized in the 1990s; today in Bahrain, unlike most of the other nations of the Gulf, taxi drivers must be Bahraini citizens. Similar results have been achieved in other sectors. In a shift that predated my arrival on the island by only a few years, employees at petrol stations were required to be citizens. One of my informants said that the guards at shopping malls are now all Bahraini. Another informant conveyed his impressions of Bahrainization with a story: “My wife and I had a broken washing machine in our flat, and we called for someone to pick it up and repair it. When the repairmen arrived to take the machine away, they were all Bahraini. This too you would not have seen four years ago.” Shortly after my departure, the government announced plans to “Bahrainize” the travel sector, much to the consternation of the legion of foreign travel agents who serve the various transmigrant communities on the island.

Sectoral edicts and mandates governing the ratio of citizens to noncitizens in the workforce constitute the most visible facet of Bahrainization on the island. If, however, we define Bahrainization as those policies and practices that discourage foreign labor from finding and keeping employment on the island, we can include in that category many of those described in earlier chapters, including all those policies and practices that indirectly achieve this same end by preventing or dissuading foreign labor from successfully competing with citizens in the job market. Recently, for example, the government announced its intentions to impose a five-year limit on residence permits, thereby effectively limiting transmigrants’ ability to derive profit from a sojourn on the island. Similarly, policies that prevent individuals from interacting directly with the government, visa regulations that make it difficult to move back and forth between India and Bahrain, a sponsorship system that locks transmigrants into a structured and often-problematic relationship with a citizen-sponsor—all of these policies and practices handicap foreign participation in the job market and thereby encourage businesses to hire Bahraini citizens. Put another way, then, the expanded definition I have delineated here suggests that Bahrainization includes all the edicts, policies, and practices that forge structural differences and impediments for noncitizens in the workplace. And this definition tells us something about the function of the Bahraini state: not only does the state directly deliver wealth to the citizenry (in the form of low-cost utilities, free education, and public-sector employment), but through
Bahrainization it also structures the private sector in ways that are beneficial to citizens and detrimental to noncitizens.

Building on this essential function, the state has emerged as the principal nexus for managing and indeed harnessing “foreign matter,” of which the entrepreneurial activities of the private sector are only one part. In other words, the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of the citizenry is tied not only to its ability to distribute wealth, and not only to its ability to manage the private sector, but also to its role in governing foreign influences on the island. In 2003 and 2004, citizen groups and municipal councils moved against the display of “scantily clad mannequins,” against the pork discreetly served in many Asian restaurants on the island, and against “indecent imagery” in advertisements. Often the social clubs become targets. A Manama Municipal Council member recently declared the intent of the Segaiya neighborhood’s Bahraini population to burn down a building occupied by Asian laborers. In public discussions the issues of sewage and overcrowding gave way to what Councilor Ibrahim Hassan Ismail called the “moral aspect” of the problem: “The tenants, who are usually Asian, roam around in their underwear with disregard to the social and Islamic laws of the country.”

These moral issues are also factors in the relations between the state and the Indian social clubs. The Young Goans Club, formed in 1952 and now one of the oldest of the Indian community’s social clubs, recently boasted of over six hundred members. After complaints from neighbors (who were largely concerned with the proximity of an Iranian school and the possibility of schoolchildren witnessing men and women “mixing”), the club relocated from its central site near the souk, its home for fifty years, to the busy-with-nightlife neighborhood of Hoora. Again, however, the club faced complaints from neighbors. Those complaints eventually percolated from the municipality to the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, the arm of the government that issues permits and oversees the diasporic social clubs. At this juncture, objections to the club focused on its location near a mosque and the presence of a bar on the premises. The ministry revoked the club’s license to serve alcohol, thereby removing the club’s principal source of income. Unable to make rent, the club faced legal action from the landlord and the ministry ordered it closed. Numerous other social clubs have faced similar issues.

As this example suggests, the citizenry’s expectations of the state surpass the simple disbursement of wealth. Although the orchestration of relations with the foreign population remains a central concern of the state, citizens’
expectations have accumulated around this core function. Over time, expectations of the state have come to include the more vague responsibility of safeguarding citizens from the potentially detrimental impacts of global capitalism and, specifically, from the social and cultural worlds of the foreign populations at work on the island. It is here that the contradictions wrought by these circumstances are most apparent: while the vision of a modern, developed, and cosmopolitan nation is actively promoted by the state, much of the baggage that accompanies these activities is less welcome. As the state acts to staunch the spread of particular foreign practices, customs, and behavior, it simultaneously shores up its relationship with its citizenry by reinforcing its role as the principal tool by which citizens mitigate their relationship to the culturally heterogeneous flows that continue to arrive on their shores.

**Resistance in the Workplace**

Many of the small- and medium-sized businesses in Bahrain are actively managed—and often partially owned—by Indian expatriates. Ask one of these Indian entrepreneurs what happens when a young, unemployed Bahraini drops in to apply for a job and they will tell some version of the same story: the Bahraini will demand to work a single shift, ending his day at two in the afternoon or thereabouts. This stance is often the first point of negotiation. Should the Bahraini yield to the employer’s demand to work the regular two shifts with a midday break, or should the employer find a way to accommodate the request for a single shift, the Bahraini will move on to a brief discussion of pay, set somewhere at or above the government-mandated minimum for nationals (nearly twice that of the going market rate for labor). If an agreement is reached, more problems are likely to ensue. The Bahraini will drift into work late. He will stand about, talking with the other Bahraini workers, and rarely help out unless under direct supervision. Even if extra pay is offered, he is unlikely to show up on weekends or holidays to assist with, say, an urgent shipment. In the end, he won’t stay at the job long—perhaps a year, perhaps less.

Although there are exceptions to this scenario, the basic thread of the story was repeated in numerous interviews I conducted with Indian business owners on the island. When asked about the reasons for this problem, business owners pointed to a culturally inherent trait of laziness or lethargy among the indigenous citizenry. As one business owner described
the frustrations he and other business owners face with the requirement to employ Bahrainis, he observed that because of the incentives and directives comprising the government’s Bahrainization policy, Indian-owned businesses are desperate to hire Bahrainis. Indian business owners and managers, however, are “going to be so restricted with what they’ve got, in terms of the kind of people, how qualified they are. The effort that they [Bahrainis] would normally put in is half as much as an expatriate. When you think about wanting to put a Bahraini in, well, they’re so lazy. They just don’t do as much.” Another merchant who employs dozens of Bahraini citizens stated, “I think the basic problem is with their attitude. They’re just not used to working—especially hard work. They’ve taken it very easy all these years, and that has passed on to the younger generation. And that’s one of the basic reasons that you can’t rely on them.” Or, as a Bahraini acquaintance related:

The things people say about the Bahraini work ethic—well, I agree with it in general. They feel like they’re entitled to more than what they’re getting, and they feel like they shouldn’t be doing as much as they are for it. A lot of people criticize Bahrainis for not performing as well as Indian workers…. You can see it firsthand. Just go into any place. Go to Jasmis [a fast-food restaurant that has begun to employ Bahrainis] or any retail place. See how the Bahraini man or lady behind the counter treats you. They’ll be talking to a co-worker or on the mobile, or they’ll yell to the person behind you.

Although the popular comprehension of Bahrainis in the workforce focuses on an inherent laziness and proclivity toward leisure, even my informants place these behaviors within the historical context of Bahrain. In remarking that “they’ve taken it easy all these years” or in arguing that Bahrainis “feel like they’re entitled to more than what they’re getting,” the men quoted here echo scholarly analyses of the structural issues operating in the petroleum states’ workforces. In his analysis of Saudi Arabia, Champion calls the pervasive reticence to work the “mudir syndrome,” using the Arabic word for “director” as a gloss for the common attitude that “nothing less than a position of authority, status, and respect is honorable” (Champion 1999, 5; see also al-Moosa and McLachlan 1985). In general, these analyses focus on the great wealth derived from petroleum reserves and the small indigenous population, a combination of historical coincidences yielding a scenario in which states forge a social contract based on the “legitimacy of
largesse,” largely through public-sector employment (Champion 1999, 16). Others have traced the mudir syndrome to the traditional Bedouin contempt for agrarian work (see Champion 1999, n. 34; Detzner 2003, 48) or to the legacy of slavery in the region (Wilson and Graham 1994, 256). All of these explanations see the citizenry’s contemporary contempt for the workplace, and for menial labor in particular, as a vestige of former social, political, and economic configurations on the island.

The details in this chapter challenge the premises of these analyses and suggest that there are rational and contemporary reasons for these attitudes. First, the large public sector, as the principal form of employment for Bahrainis in recent times, continues to exert its influence on the private sector. In the scenario described by the Indian business owners, for example, the ubiquitous wish to end the workday at 2:00 p.m. reflects the hours typical of the public sector, where the workweek is 34, rather than 48+ hours, and ends at 2:00 p.m. Similarly, the extremely high rates of turnover in private-sector jobs reflect the robust public sector, for many of the young men seeking jobs as menial laborers are merely biding their time awaiting an opening in the public sector. Menial and other entry-level positions in the private sector typically lack benefit packages, unlike their counterparts in the public sector. And whereas the private-sector workplaces function primarily in English, Malayalam, or other languages of the diasporas, government workplaces function in Arabic.

From the perspective of the expatriate business owners, the formidable role of the public sector in shaping the citizenry’s expectations of the private sector causes many problems, and they have configured unique solutions to the issue. Several of the business owners I spoke with were so frustrated by the situation that they simply paid Bahraini citizens to stay at home, thereby meeting the requirements of sectoral Bahrainization regulations without encountering the problems of dealing with citizens in the workplace. As another Indian merchant said, “Maybe out of ten Bahrainis, you can find two or three that work. But first of all, why should you go to the trouble of weeding out two guys out of ten? You have to go through twenty guys before you get three that can work. It’s too much hassle and trouble. It’s just better to pay that guy and tell him not to come.”

I encountered a related scenario at the Bahrain Training Institute (BTI). Describing the chain of events to me, a foreign faculty member remarked that the institute’s custodial staff had been recently “Bahrainized.” Student nationals were hired from the BTI trainee pool at a rate of BD120 to BD130 [$320 to $340] per month, roughly twice the salary of the transmigrant
custodial staff. The citizen-custodians, my informant said, “would show up for work in street clothes and would spend most of their time standing around talking to each other and the other trainees. As a result, the toilets were filthy, there was no soap, and there was no toilet paper in any of the bathrooms. Even the director noticed.” A solution was subsequently devised: the Bahraini day crew was followed by an Indian night crew. The night crew had to do all the work left undone by the day crew. In my interview with one of the members of this Indian work crew, he said that the new schedule means that they—the Indian crew—now have to do twice as much work.

Notions of citizenship and the appropriateness of particular forms of employment also reveal how conceptions of citizenship mingle with ethnic and racial hierarchies in Bahrain. In one of my interviews, I spoke with an Indian restaurant owner about the problems he faced with his Bahraini employees. He said that recently the young Bahraini men he employed informed him that they were unwilling to wait on Indian customers and that they would only wait on Bahrainis. Of course situations like these cause all sorts of difficulties in the contemporary workplace in Bahrain; simultaneously, they are symptomatic of the underlying racial construction of citizenship.

From the perspective of the Indian business owners and managers, the structure of the labor market in Bahrain creates significant impediments to the success of their entrepreneurial ventures. Businesses pay a variety of fees to import foreign laborers who they are then unable to fire (for the contracted period). Owners and managers must also take on a government-mandated workforce of citizen-employees, many of whom are unwilling to perform the basic duties associated with the position. The owners typically attribute the poor quality of Bahraini labor to a sense of entitlement of cultural, or even biological, origins. Yet from the perspective of Bahraini citizens, their decisions about employment and their behavior at work are extremely coherent. Forced by penury to enter the private-sector workforce, the unskilled citizen faces a losing proposition. He is often less educated than the foreign laborer with whom he competes. His English skills—vital to global commerce on the island—are less developed than those of the foreign workers. And his chances for advancement in the Indian-owned businesses of the island are negligible. That he applied for the job at all means he was unable to secure a position in the public sector, and the time spent moving boxes about the warehouse floor is time away from the activities that contribute and strengthen his social capital in the indigenous system—the reinforcement
of social and familial connections, being seen with the right people in the right places, and all the other social activities that, under the Western model, would easily fit into conceptions of “leisure.”

From the perspective of the unskilled citizen, the distended public sector represents the core component of an alternative occupational system. Because this sector continues to function, at least in part, by a genealogical logic, citizens are much better positioned to succeed in this alternative system. Whereas at the most basic level the public sector provides citizens with jobs, we can also conceive of the public sector as a form of resistance to a Western-derived meritocracy in whose calculus the unskilled Bahraini will most likely fail. The durability of this dual economy is certainly in doubt, for as the population grows and the petroleum revenues dwindle, maintenance of the large public sector will become an impossible burden for the state. The expectations of the citizenry, however, and the sense of entitlement constructed over decades in which this dual system flourished are slow to change. After all, there are few places in the world in which a son does not expect to have the same opportunities as his father.

Wasta and the Logic of Leisure

If the public sector operates by a distinct and alternative logic, how might one describe the basic parameters of that system? And what exactly do citizen and state seek to protect, or perhaps preserve, in maintaining this dual system? In this section, I examine the conduits through which citizens access the security and wealth controlled by the state. Along the way, the attributes associated with this citizenry, described by Indian businessmen as a penchant for leisure, an inherent laziness, and an overriding lack of commitment to work, become something more than individual acts of resistance to the neoliberal workplace: in combination with the institution of the public sector, these acts of resistance constitute a systemic effort to preserve an essentially ascribed system of relations configured around the relations of family, kinship, and tribe.

In describing the foundational role of family and kinship in Jeddah—the cosmopolitan hub of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and, in that sense, a setting similar to contemporary Bahrain—Soraya Altorki observes:

The family constitutes a person’s reservoir of economic security, political influence, social support, and psychological succor... Kinship
and friendship links combine the functions that in Western countries are divided between distinct reference groups outside a person’s family, such as neighbors, colleagues, business partners, professional associations, and clubs. In Saudi Arabia these links entail an elaborate system of reciprocal right-duty relationships. Many of these relationships are activated in casual contexts and informal visiting and in sporadic exchanges of favors. They are ritually expressed and reinforced on special occasions such as life-crisis events like birth, naming ceremonies, marriage, divorce, sickness, and death, where the participation of network members is mandatory. A person’s failure to participate in these occasions without an acceptable excuse implies a rejection of his/her role in that network. (1985, 81)

Altorki describes the fundamental importance of casual and informal activity—glossed as leisure in the Western nomenclature—to the social relations of the contemporary Saudi citizenry. Using this model as a springboard for further analysis, I turn to the concept of *wasta* as a window into the mechanics of this system.

*Wasta* is a versatile notion with no immediate parallel in the English language. Generally, the term refers to mediation or intercession by a third party, although it can also refer to the influence possessed by an individual (Cunningham and Sarayrah 1993, 1994; Detzner 2003). Perhaps the closest analogy in English would be social capital, described by Bourdieu as “the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 119). The versatility of the notion was well described by one of my informants:

*Wasta* strictly translates into “intermediary” or “intermediary means.” *Wasta* is a way to get there. When I say that I have a *wasta* in the Traffic Directorate, it means that I’ve got somebody there who can help me cut through the red tape. They can take care of my problem. But that term really evolved new meanings—now you can say, “oh, his dad is a real *wasta*,” meaning he can get stuff done for you. So it refers to a person. But you can also think of it as a process: “*wasta* does its worth.” You’re not talking about a specific person anymore. Or “with *wasta* you can do anything.” “You better get *wasta*” is a very common clause in speech. If you have *wasta*, you can get it done in
a day. It means you can get it done if you have a way—an intermediary way, a way to get in, or someone inside the system. People even talk about Vitamin W—that’s wasta.

Wasta remains an essential feature of the social landscape on the island and has already been defined as the logic by which public-sector employment is obtained (Khuri 1980, 123; Louër 2008, 38). If the relationship between citizen and state is at least partly characterized by an enduring familial and tribal fabric, it is wasta that helps us understand how family and tribe function in a bureaucratic context—how individuals connect with the resources controlled by the government. My informants described many scenarios that might potentially require wasta: securing placement at the University of Bahrain, obtaining the appropriate papers for importing labor, or securing public housing or government loans, for example. Similarly, for both men and women seeking jobs in the public sector, familial, sectarian, and tribal connections—all essential components of wasta—are key factors (Pirzada and Puri 1998). The power of these relations is further magnified, one of my informants added, by the size of the city-state, where it is commonly believed that everyone knows everyone, at least in terms of their family and sect.

The connections between wasta and the public sector are particularly intricate. Unlike the private sector—which is composed of myriad businesses, including both global concerns with formalized hiring policies and local concerns managed or run by expatriates—the public sector is a direct extension of the state, an extension of the ruling family, and a manifestation of its hegemony over the island. Although private businesses are concerned with profit, and thereby at least nominally interested in finding the most capable and least expensive employee for a particular position, the public sector provides ample room for ulterior motives to be exercised in the hiring process. Because of the desirability of these public-sector jobs—both for the comforts of working in Arabic and the short working hours, but also because of the remuneration, and particularly the pensions, low-cost housing loans, and other programs—wasta functions as the mechanism for what Bourdieu called the transformation of capital (Bourdieu 1986; see also Kilankiewicz 1996). The public sector provides citizens with a venue in which their social capital can be transformed into economic capital.

Although an individual’s wasta is constructed on the foundation of his or her location in the social fabric of tribe and family on the island, wasta is not static. Yet building and maintaining wasta are activities whose
logic is difficult to pinpoint. When asked directly about the mechanisms for forging and maintaining social capital, the citizens I spoke with often appealed to generalities about knowing the right people, being seen in the right places, and more specifically, the combination of the two. As one young Bahraini described: “There’s no denying that Bahrainis believe knowing the right people is essential to getting ahead in life. They believe that if they hang out with the right people, one day they’re going to get the right job—that the friend is going to do them a favor. Whether it works out or not, they’re going to hang on to that person . . . because those connections are so important. If you want to get your business registered, and you don’t just want to sit on the list, you have to know someone. You have to have wasa.”

Wasta is accumulated and deployed through networks that rely heavily on familial, tribal, and sectarian affiliation. The genealogical foundation of this system means that foreigners are marginalized in its calculus and that one citizen may have more wasa than the next. As Detzner described in her analysis of Saudi Arabia, “foreigners lack these important connections and are disconnected from the myriad family, tribal and regional allegiances in the country” (2003, 50). Wasta, then, is a form of social capital that largely flows through the exclusive and endogamous social relations of the citizenry.

In systemic terms, wasa contradicts the logic of the global financescape and, in a larger sense, the neoliberalism codified in the rhetoric of Bahrain’s national vision. Although many of the international agencies and states with which Bahrain deals clamor for open markets, good governance, transparency, and equality under the law, wasa provides an alternative set of avenues that inherently favor citizens over noncitizens and Sunni (who maintain stronger tribal allegiances) over Shi’a. In his analysis of the legal framework of Bahrain in the early 1980s, Franklin made a parallel point about the concept of justice: “A universal code of justice was—and is—antithetical to the categorical principle on which his authority and the plural order rested” (1985, 72). That same plural order relies on categorical principles to organize the workforce. Where the neoliberal model lauds open, free, and meritocratic labor markets, wasa comprises the basis of a system that favors those with localized tribal and familial connections over those without. In this system, citizens have more power than noncitizens, and Sunnis have more power than Shi’ites.

As a social force with both deep historical roots and a pervasive presence in the contemporary milieu, wasa represents a key facet of the citizenry’s resistance to the fundamental terms of the global financescape. Faced with
a global and dominant neoliberal ideology that lauds open markets, a meri-
tocratic labor force, and transparency in both public and private sectors, citizenry and state have configured an alternative system in the public sec-
tor. The individual acts of resistance charted in the previous sections are emblematic of a systemic rejection of the terms of neoliberal arena: for the middle and lower classes of the citizenry, the chances for success in the English-speaking, foreign-dominated workforce are negligible. Rather than directly compete for positions with well-trained and linguistically ver-
satile foreign workers, citizen-laborers focus their energies on investing and maintaining the social capital, or wasa, that potentially leads to jobs in the public sector. What looks like laziness, leisure, and lassitude becomes something quite rational: an investment in a cohesive but separate system that coexists with Bahrain’s private sector.

**Tradition, Modernity and Social Change**

Two decades ago, Soraya Altorki and Donald Cole (1989) published their fascinating ethnography of the Saudi Arabian city of ‘Unayzah. In their concluding analysis, they argue concertedly against the idea that the Arabian urbanites they came to know were somehow bound to a tradition-
alisn that was incompatible with modernity. In making their case, Altorki and Cole purvey an economic determinism against the Orientalist preoc-
cupation with Middle Eastern traditionalism: the Saudi work ethic, they argue, is merely a reflection of the economic relations of contemporary ‘Unayzah. The work ethic (or lack thereof) will “change according to eco-

The concept of change in this reasoning masks more than it reveals and simplifies a process that is complex. In Bahrain, the “economic imperatives” include a citizenry with a significant lower middle class now pushed to the margins of the welfare state. Their attitudes—that is, their work ethic, their expectations for employment, their idea of appropriate and inappropriate forms of labor—do not change overnight. Indeed, the fifteen years of epi-
sodic violence between members of the Shi‘ite underclass and the Sunni-
controlled state can be read as resistance to the “economic imperatives” of this period.

As Altorki and Cole suggested for ‘Unayzah, the story of Bahrain is not a story of a people trapped in the gravity of their own traditions. It is, however, a story about how tradition—imagined, partial, revised, and
contested—becomes a tool by which the citizenry and state seek to insulate themselves from the logic of the global and neoliberal system in which they are now enmeshed. To put this narrative into context, it's not that citizens in Bahrain don’t want a booming and modern nation, or that they feel no allegiance to the hypermodern and cosmopolitan national vision promoted by the dominant elite; rather, it is that they don’t want to submit themselves to the logic of a system in whose competitive, market-based calculus the great majority of the citizenry are poorly positioned to succeed. The divide between the public and private sectors, the social and ethnic distinctions that characterize the contemporary Gulf, and the mechanics of the kafala system all become part of the orchestration of this bifurcated system, and hence part of the process by which a distinctive and alternative socio-economic system is maintained. That alternative system provides citizens with a refuge from the grinding logic of the neoliberal system.

Hospitality, as a practice with a long tradition in Arab cultures, helps explain how the relationship between these two systems is locally conceptualized. In Bahrain, those ideas and practices were developed over centuries of coexistence with the foreign peoples who passed through the port of Manama. Beginning with a description of a merchant family’s aging house, I have connected the layout of that house to the social, economic, and indeed, cultural structure of the contemporary island. Citizens host the foreigners integral to their collective national vision of modernity. They use the role of host to conceptualize and structure their relationship to the cultural aspects of that foreign matter. This role provides a culturally familiar mechanism for embracing the presence of global capitalism in the shared national vision of modernity without accepting the underlying values of that essentially neoliberal system.