

Playing Cosmopolitan: Muslim Self-fashioning, Migration, and (Be-)Longing in the Tajik Dubai Business Sector

Accepted version of an article published in *Central Asian Affairs*:

Stephan-Emmrich, Manja. "Playing Cosmopolitan: Muslim Self-fashioning, Migration, and (Be-)Longing in the Tajik Dubai Business Sector", *Central Asian Affairs* 4, 3 (2017): 270-291.

Manja Stephan-Emmrich

Institute for Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
manja.stephan-emmrich@hu-berlin.de

Abstract

Linking Central Asian and Gulf studies, this article explores how young, well-educated, and multilingual Tajiks involved in Dubai's various business fields create, shape, and draw on a sense of cosmopolitanism to convert their uncertain status as "Tajik migrants" into that of economically autonomous "Muslim businessmen." Specifically, Tajik migrants mobilize religion to claim belonging to Dubai as a "Muslim place," while they simultaneously make sense of their experiences as Central Asian labor migrants in Russia and pious Muslim travelers in secular Tajikistan. "Playing cosmopolitan" is a transnational social project that merges the political project of branding the Arabian Gulf with the lived realities of a culturally diverse mercantile Persian Gulf. Thus, Tajik Muslims engage in alternative forms of belonging abroad. Pointing to the mutual conditionality of longing and belonging in migrant cosmopolitanism, the article offers a nuanced picture of everyday life in Dubai that goes beyond the "spectacularity" of the city, challenging the prevailing representation of Tajik Muslims' engagement in transnational Islam as a security matter only.

* This work is part of the research project "Translocal Goods: Education, Work, and Commodities between Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, China, and the United Arab Emirates," which since May 2013 has been supported by VolkswagenStiftung (the Volkswagen Foundation) under grant number Az. 86870 (<https://www.iaaw.hu-berlin.de/de/querschnitt/islam/forschung/netz>). I am grateful for the fruitful discussion of an earlier version of this article during the conference "Religion Branding? Central Asia's Integration into the International Scene through Religion," organized by the Central Asia Program at the George Washington University in 2016. Finally, I especially want to thank Marlene Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse for generously supporting the writing process and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments, which helped to improve the argument.

Keywords

Tajikistan–Gulf relations – cosmopolitanism – transnational Islam – self-fashioning – business – migration

In September 2012, I joined a women’s gathering hosted by Fatima, the wife of a “Dubai *biznesmen*.” Fatima, in her early 30s, regularly spends the summer with her family in their two-story house in the southern outskirts of Tajikistan’s capital city, Dushanbe. The rest of the year the family lives in the Dubai emirate. Fatima’s husband, Ahmad, is involved in the fur coat business and simultaneously runs a small cargo company exporting kitchenware, home accessories, and roof tiles from Dubai to Dushanbe. When the two businesses began to flourish in 2008, Ahmad bought an apartment in Dubai, and since then the family regularly commutes between Dubai and Dushanbe. The day before the family returned to the emirate, Fatima invited me for what she called *osh-i Arab*, i.e., a modification of *osh-i palav*. While the latter is a traditional Tajik rice meal mixed with carrots, lamb meat and a high portion of cotton oil, Fatima reduced the high fat-level and added various “Arab” spices she had bought in Dubai.

When I arrived, other guests were already chatting in the guestroom. Two of the women, dressed like Fatima in clothing appropriate for the Gulf (a black *abaya*, combined with a black *hijab* and gloves), were introduced as Fatima’s Dubai friends (*dugonahoyam az Dubai*); that is, the wives of her husband’s business associates. With their “Arab style” (*Arabskii stil’*) clothing, they stood in contrast to the other local women, who were dressed in multicolored, flowery dresses. The table was set with Arab bread, Iranian sweets, and dried dates from Dubai, served in chrome and gold-plated crockery—the latest trend in tableware as seen in Dubai’s shopping malls. Later, when Fatima served the main dish, she explained to her guests: “Anytime I feel homesick for Dubai, I cook *osh-i Arab*.” She then described the health-promoting effects of low-fat Arab food, which helps her to concentrate on the Koran recitations (*tajvid*) she regularly performs when in Dubai. After a bit of silence, one of Fatima’s friends joked: “Oh look, we are Tajik women dressing like Arabs do, eating Arab food, feeling homesick for Dubai but always missing our families when we are there [in Dubai]. Our husbands do business with Iranians and Arabs, our friends are Arabs, Afghans and Africans.” Fatima added: “We are international(*zanhoi bainalmillaly*)!”



ill. 1 & 2 *Famous Tajik pop singer Farzona and a tradeswomen dressed up in fashionable “Dubai style” clothing*
photos by Abdullah Mirzoev, 2013

Being Muslim in Dubai

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in different places in the United Arab Emirates and Tajikistan between 2010 and 2014. It takes the growing economic and cultural links between Tajikistan and the Gulf as a point of departure and explores how migration, business, and transnational Islam intersect in the Tajik business sector in Dubai. Focusing on young, educated, male Tajik migrants,¹ who successfully participate in Dubai’s vibrant transregional trading and Russian tourist business, the article illuminates how well-educated, multilingual Tajik migrants in the Gulf create, shape, and draw on a sense of cosmopolitanism to convert their vulnerable and uncertain status as “Tajik migrants” into that of independent and successful “Muslim businessmen.” Following recent studies on migrants’ transnational religious strategies, I use the term “playing cosmopolitan”² to depict the various ways in which Tajiks in Dubai mobilize religion in order to stake their claim to Dubai’s

1 Although Tajik men and women are likewise involved in the Dubai business, this article exclusively focuses on Tajik businessmen and their wives.

2 Samadia Sadouni, “Playing Global: The Religious Adaptations of Indian and Somali Muslims to Racial Hierarchies and Discrimination in South Africa,” *Global Networks* 3 (2014): 383–400, doi: 10.1111/glob.12065.

spatial image and reality as a “Muslim place” and thus make their existential experiences as “migrants” meaningful. The Tajiks I met in Dubai created and drew on the cosmopolitan dimension of their Muslim identity to successfully integrate into the Iranian, Afghan, and Arab commercial networks that dominate Dubai’s formal and informal business sectors. Doing so, they become active agents in globalizing Central Asia “from below,”³ while simultaneously contributing to the political imaginaries of—and the lived realities in—the United Arab Emirates.

However, cosmopolitanism is not exclusively discussed as an economic strategy here. Statements such as Fatima’s “we are international” point to spatialized identity politics that bear an obvious tension between “the desire to identify with a transnational ummah and the irrepressible trend towards the vernacularization of Islam.”⁴ When playing cosmopolitan, Tajik migrants in Dubai engage in transnational Muslim politics;⁵ i.e., politics that go beyond the limits for constructing Muslim and other identity at home. They thus do not only contest the limited definitions of identity set by the post-Soviet secular nation state, Muslim society, and religious institutions at home. When constructing a self-identity as cosmopolitan Dubai businessmen, Tajik migrants also challenge the negative image of provincialism as the “backward,” “un- skilled,” and “foreign Muslim” Other they have to cope with when facing racial discrimination and structural exploitation in Russia. Finally, the provincialism of rural migrants in Tajikistan’s capital city feeds an urban anxiety among a new globally aspiring middle-class that travels with the well-educated urban sophisticated migrants to Dubai.

This article draws on a cosmopolitan perspective to investigate the complex realities of globalization across national boundaries. Following Vora and Koch, who argue that “migration patterns and migrant experiences in the Gulf cannot be bound by territorial status but rather implicate global patterns,”⁶ I explore how Tajik migrants’ transnational religious strategies relate to the opportunities and constraints of Dubai’s business sectors, while they simultaneously respond to migration regimes set by an aggressive nationalism combined with

3 Marlene Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse, *Globalizing Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Challenges of Economic Development* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2013).

4 Jafrelot, Christophe, “Transnational Learning Networks Amongst Asian Muslims: An Introduction”, *Modern Asian Studies* 48, no. 2 (2014): 338 (Networks of Religious Learning and the Dissemination of Religious Knowledge across Asia).

5 Peter Mandaville, *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma* (London: Routledge, 2003).

6 Neha Vora and Nathalie Koch, “Everyday Inclusions: Rethinking Ethnocracy, *Kafala*, and Belonging in the Arabian Peninsula,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 15, no. 3 (2015): 541.

xenophobia in Russia and a Muslim-unfriendly and corruption-promoting secularism in Tajikistan.

According to Beck, Tajik migrants' try to re-fashion their work experiences abroad as part of the "cosmopolitanization of reality." That is, a process that is not intentional but the result of "the dynamics of global risk, of mobility and migration and from cultural consumption."⁷ When Fatima publicly displays her family's progressive life in Dubai among her friends at home, she links two different kinds of cosmopolitanism. One is the spatial product of the emirate's political project of branding "Dubai"—a project that constructs Dubai as a modern, global, futuristic metropolis. Tajik migrants do not only consume Dubai's cosmopolitan image. They mediate it materially, display it bodily, and thereby contribute to a global consumerism that services the political idea of the *Arabian Gulf*. The second form of cosmopolitanism is a lived reality grounded in Tajik migrants' daily encounters with the cultural diversity and transregional past of the *Persian Gulf*. It materializes in an urban environment, which mixes the economic life and culture of Indian Ocean mercantilism with that of Afghan trading worlds⁸ under the umbrella of a "distinctive Indo-Persian Islamic sense of community."⁹

Cosmopolitanism, as used in this article, consequently refers to the product of a particular social context rather than to the adoption of a distant normative European model.¹⁰ This framing is in line with recent works on migration that point to the social contextuality and vernacular rootedness of "migrant cosmopolitanism" or "cosmopolitanism from below," and that emphasize the desire of not-so-economically privileged actors to find, or at least imagine, a place in the world of global economy.¹¹ But the article goes a step further. I argue that when Tajik migrants play cosmopolitan, they simultaneously refer to the complexity of belonging and longing, shaped by the possibilities that Dubai's

7 Ulrich Beck, "Mobility and the Cosmopolitan Perspective," in Weert Cancler, Vincent Kaufmann, and Sven Kesselring (eds.), *Tracing Mobilities: Towards a Cosmopolitan Perspective* (Burlington, vt: Ashgate 2008), 26.

8 Magnus Marsden, *Trading Worlds: Afghan Merchants: Across Modern Frontiers* (London: Hurst, 2016).

9 Magnus Marsden, "Crossing Eurasia: Trans-Regional Afghan Trading Networks in China and Beyond," *Central Asian Survey* 35, no. 1 (2016): 12.

10 Bruce Grant, "Cosmopolitan Baku," *Ethos: Journal of Anthropology* 75, no. 2 (2010): 125.

11 Pnina Werbner (ed.), *Anthropology and the New Cosmopolitanism: Rooted, Feminist, and Vernacular Perspectives* (New York: Berg, 2008); Ulrich Beck, "The Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 19, no. 1–2 (2002): 17–44; Loren Landau and Iriann Freemantle, "Tactical Cosmopolitanism and Idioms of Belonging: Insertion and Self-Exclusion in Johannesburg," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36, no. 3 (2010): 375–390.

economic fields, urban environments, and political realities offer them, and the limitations they face and try to overcome. Doing so, Tajik migrants in Dubai produce a sense of cosmopolitanism and therewith situate themselves and make a place in the world through referring, re-evaluating, and re-making specific histories of global engagement.¹²

Situated at the intersection of Central Asian and Gulf studies, the article aims at providing a more nuanced picture of how transnational Islamic practices are shaped, reflected, and re-evaluated by Tajiks outside the territorial borders of their country. Although not all Tajik migrants in the Gulf engage in a transnational religious self-fashioning; those engaged in transnational Dubai business lifestyles like Ahmad and Fatima involve in materially mediating both the idea of Dubai as a “Muslim place” and the image of the Gulf as a site of a “pure” and “authentic” Islam. In that sense, the article challenges prevailing political representations of cross-border Muslim travel and the “Islamization” of selves and lifestyles in Tajikistan’s public sphere as a security issue beyond state control and regulation. By contrasting the cosmopolitanism Tajiks migrants in Dubai engage in with the lasting normative effects of what has been constructed as negative cosmopolitanism during the Soviet era, the article also aims at deconstructing the “myth” of radicalized Tajik youth who through traveling to the Middle East adopt a “foreign” and “dangerous” Arab or Salafi-inspired Islam.¹³

Possibilities and Constraints in the Tajik Dubai Business

Many actors have influenced the evolution of the Tajik Dubai business.¹⁴ They can be grouped into three categories:

- Pioneers: post-Soviet Tajikistan’s old and new political elite (most of them influential warlords from the pro-government and opposition parties in the civil war);

12 Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, “‘I am Gulf’: The Production of Cosmopolitanism in Kozhikode, Kerala, India,” in Edward Simpson and Kai Kresse (eds.), *Struggling with History: Islam and Cosmopolitanism in the Western Indian Ocean* (London: Hurst, 2007), 2.

13 John Heathershaw and David Montgomery, “The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim Radicalisation in the Central Asian Republics,” London, Royal Institute of International Affairs, Russia and Eurasia Programme Research Paper, 2014.

14 The ‘Dubai business’ is complementary to the ‘China business’ of Kyrgyz middlemen and entrepreneurs in China examined by Philipp Schröder, <https://www.iaaw.hu-berlin.de/de/querschnitt/islam/forschung/netz/philipp-schroeder-1/the-china-business>.

- Entrepreneurs: young, well-educated, university-trained male urbanites from middle-class families; and
- uneducated followers: close-knit work migrants from Russia and rural youngsters from villages and remote areas.

In the mid-1990s, Tajikistan's then-political elite discovered Dubai as an attractive tourist destination and a potential trading hub. Due to historical and cultural relations¹⁵ and military connections in neighboring Afghanistan, cross-border trade began to flourish between the United Arab Emirates and Tajikistan—primarily in luxury cars, smartphones, flat-panel televisions, and modern kitchen appliances, but also in Dubai's well-established Afghan diaspora community. Facilitating social mobility and wealth, the established commercial ties with the Gulf region induced many Tajiks to follow suit, fueling a Dubai boom that reached its apex in 2010.

Well-educated, young Tajik men with degrees in international relations, economics, or journalism from one of the country's national universities or Turkish high schools were particularly attracted to Dubai. Many of them had pursued additional study at an Islamic university in the Middle East, preferably at Cairo's Al-Azhar or a university in the Hejaz. By drawing on their multiple language skills in Farsi, English, Russian, and Arabic, and capitalizing on their secular and religious knowledge, this group of people successfully utilized their foreign contacts to integrate into established Iranian, Afghan, and Arab commercial networks in Dubai. These "innovative small-scale entrepreneurs" significantly contribute to Tajikistan's "bottom-up" integration into the Gulf's global economy through establishing private enterprises and thereby "embracing the risk of failure."¹⁶ Combining their university degrees with an advanced Islamic knowledge, many of them become successful street brokers (*kamak*), economic middlemen (*posrednik*) like Ahmad, whereas others such as Farrukh, whose story will follow later, manage to pursue a career in the prestigious real estate

15 Tajiks and Afghans share a long history of cohabitation, kinship relations, and exchange. Even during the Soviet era, many Tajik families continued to maintain close relationships with kin across the Tajikistan–Afghanistan border. After the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the succeeding civil war in 1992, several thousand Tajiks fled to neighboring Afghanistan. Because of the shared Persian language and the shared Persian Islamic tradition, Tajiks feel a strong cultural bond with Sunni Muslim Iranians, with Baluch people in Iran, and with the Dari-speaking Tajik population of Afghanistan.

16 Rösenthaller and Schulz, "Introduction. Forging Fortunes: New Perspectives on Entrepreneurial Activities in Africa", in Ute Rösenthaller and Dorothea Schulz (eds.), *Cultural Entrepreneurship in Africa* (New York, London: Routledge, 2016), 1.

sector, combining high earnings with social mobility and spiritual well-being. Like Ahmad and Fatima, many Tajik migrants in Dubai started to invest in a transnational business that link Tajikistan's markets with a globalizing Islamic consumer culture.¹⁷ Once businesses are firmly established, many Tajiks working in Dubai give relatives back in Tajikistan positions as purchasing agents or local partners, thereby consolidating the transnational structure of their economic enterprise. This eventually allows some of them to reside with their families in the United Arab Emirates, like Fatima's husband Ahmed does, while simultaneously remaining bound to their birthplace and cultivating forms of multiple belonging.

Dubai's appeal as a business- and Muslim-friendly urban site has also attracted Tajik migrants based in Russia, who, like "Iskandar," left their jobs in Moscow seeking better safety and respect as Muslims:

Of course, Moscow is a better place [than Dubai] to earn good money. But you are not safe [there]. The streets are full of criminals and drunken guys. They attack you ... But I even didn't trust the police. They don't protect you but take your money! ... I wanted to return home [from Russia to Tajikistan]), but as a Gharmi¹⁸ you cannot live a good life. If you have a good business, they¹⁹ come and destroy everything. They even find you in Russia. That's why I came to Dubai. I don't have rights here and cannot move up in my job. ... But (here in Dubai) I am safe, autonomous (*ozod*), and I am respected as a Muslim. You know, Dubai is a real Muslim place (*mamlakati Musulmonho*).

Like Iskandar, many Tajiks have tried to find their niche in the booming Dubai business in order to escape the religious discrimination and structural exploitation that Muslim migrants from Central Asia have to endure at their workplaces and in daily life in Russia as the "black" (*chernye*) and "backward" (*churka*, i.e., "tree stub") other.²⁰

17 Manja Stephan-Emmrich and Abdullah Mirzoev, "The Manufacturing of Islamic Lifestyles in Tajikistan through the Prism of Dushanbe's Bazaars," *Central Asian Survey* 35, no. 2 (2016): 157–177.

18 Gharm is a city and region in the Rasht Valley, i.e., an area in the northern part of Central Tajikistan that was a hotbed of the opposition forces during the Civil War of 1992–1997.

19 Here, he refers to the powerful position of the Rahmon clan and the despotic regime they established in the non-state and informal economy sector in Tajikistan.

20 Madeleine Reeves, "Clean Fake: Authenticating Documents and Persons in Migrant Moscow," *American Ethnologist* 40, no. 3 (2013): 508–524.

The majority of Tajiks in the United Arab Emirates work in the Russian tourism sector where they concentrate in offering tour guide service and selling fur coats together with other migrants from Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Sub-Saharan Africa. The fur coat market began to flourish in Dubai's old city center around the Creek side, in Dubai Deira, when Russia's urban middle class discovered the United Arab Emirates as a luxury holiday site and a place for conspicuous consumption from the mid-1990s.²¹ Subsequently, many Tajiks, with their Russian language skills and cultural experience as part of the Soviet empire (*shakhrvandhoi shuravy*), became involved in the fur coat business. They became traders purchasing fur coats in China, vendors selling Chinese fur coats in Dubai Deira as fakes of high-quality Greek products, or they started working as a *kamak*, i.e., a street broker who directs Russian tourists to fur shops and gets a commission when they purchase something. However, it was the *kamak* business that evolved as a lucrative economic sector in Dubai because it enabled Tajik migrants to make a considerable amount of money within one holiday season.

Nevertheless, Dubai is a volatile and precarious sector shaped by Tajiks' limited access to the emirate's sponsorship system (*kafala*) that monitors migrant workers' visa and legal status. Only a small group of Tajik migrants may enter the formal job sector, while the majority integrates in the ethnicity-based networks of the *kamak* business. As a street broker, a *kamak* only needs a tourist visa, which allows short-term stays but not work permission. Like other migrant workers in Dubai, Tajiks are perpetual visitors,²² and, since long-term residency is hard to get, they are pushed toward business activities in the gray zone between formal and informal, documented and undocumented work. This situation makes them more vulnerable to arrest and deportation by the local police. But at the same time, business networks in Dubai offer many possibilities for advancement, as well as facilitating alternative forms of citizenship and "belonging despite exclusion."²³

21 After Saudi Arabian and British tourists, the ex-Soviet Russian-speaking states provide the third-biggest group of tourists in Dubai. For instance, in 2007 about 300,000 Russian tourists visited Dubai. See <https://thearabianpost.com/TAP/2015/09/dubai-hopes-to-see-return-of-russians.html> and <http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/society/dubai-s-fur-business-feeling-the-heat-1.1484942> (accessed October 9, 2016).

22 Sharon Nagy, "Making Room for Migrants, Making Sense of Difference: Spatial and Ideological Expressions of Social Diversity in Urban Qatar," *Urban Studies* 43, no. 1 (2006): 119–137.

23 Vora and Koch, "Everyday Inclusions," 542.

We Do Business; We Aren't Migrants!

Although Tajiks are newcomers in Dubai's business sector, some of these "small-scale entrepreneurs" became successful. Due to their knowledge, cultural competences, and social contacts, they easily navigated the commercial activities within and across the Iranian and Afghan diaspora in the Gulf. None of my interlocutors belonging to this group perceived themselves as "migrants" (*migranty*); instead, they insisted that they were "doing *biznes*" or "being *biznesmen*."

Besides, Tajik migrants in Dubai are highly aware of the critical discourse on migrants' vulnerable status in the Gulf. However, since the majority of them work in the informal sector and do not have an Arab sponsor (*kafeel*), structural exploitation is something they associate foremost with migrants working in Russia. When constructing a self-identity as businessmen, my interlocutors often stressed the level of autonomy (*ozody*) they experience and can cultivate when working, for example, as *kamak*. Even Tajiks with a legitimate employment contract and a long-term residence permit like Kamal, whose story will be introduced later, try to run a parallel business as middlemen or *kamak* to limit dependency on their employers.

Fashioning their informal work as a proper Muslim business, Tajiks also seek to differentiate themselves from other Asian migrant workers in Dubai who predominate in low-skilled, poorly paid jobs in construction or in the home care and hotel service sector. Besides, Asian migrants are perceived as non-Muslims and do not fit into the Tajiks' idea of Dubai as a Muslim place.

In many conversations I had with Tajik migrants in Dubai, the meaning of the term "Dubai businessmen" was closely associated with the idea of *kamak* work as an honorable profession. This work identity relies on multilingualism, a university education, cleverness, ingenuity, as well as the ability to "speak in a cultivated way (*gapi mulloim, gapi bomadaniyat*)" and "to look always clean and freshly dressed." When returning to Dushanbe, many Tajik *kamak* can capitalize on their professional reputation and accumulated wealth and enjoy a high social status. Once, when joining a wedding celebration in Dushanbe's southern outskirts, I observed how a young man introduced by the host as a close relative and a *Dubai biznesmen* was invited to take a seat at the most honorable place in the guestroom (*bolo*), a place usually reserved for elderly people.

In sum, the volatility of the Tajik Dubai business combined with the emirate's limited possibilities for legal work and regime of deportation²⁴ turn Dubai

24 Andrew Gardner, "Why Do They Keep Coming? Labor Migrants in the Gulf States," in Mehran Kamrava and Zahra Babar (eds.), *Migrant Labor in the Persian Gulf* (London: Hurst, 2012), 43.

into a transitory place comparable to the working and living conditions faced in Russia or Tajikistan. As a consequence, Tajiks involved in the Dubai business are pushed to be constantly mobile, to combine different modes of travel and pursue precarious livelihoods. Precariousness here is understood as both a socioeconomic condition and an ontological experience. On the one hand, there is the Tajik migrants' lived experience of risk, ambient insecurity, and uncertain futures. On the other hand, the term applies to processes of subjectivization in translocal regimes of migration that rely on self-responsibility, flexibility, creativity, and opportunism. When claiming to "do business" in Dubai, Tajiks migrants in Dubai embrace both the negative and positive components of their precarious lives, as well as embracing a certain optimism by opening up to a possibility for entrepreneurship, social mobility, and a different mode of subjectivity.²⁵ This subjectivity is closely related to individual projects of inner reform (*isloḥ*), that conflate religious self-fashioning with the making of an entrepreneurial self. This reformism is shaped in Dubai's various cosmopolitan business spaces.



ill. 3 *On Dubai Deira's vibrant Al-Nasser Square: Muslims performing the Friday prayer nearby the Red Mosque*
photo by Stephan-Emmrich, December 2013

25 Vassilis Tsianos and Dimitris Papadopoulos, "Precarity: A Savage Journey to the Embodied Heart of Capitalism," *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies* 10 (2006), <http://eicpc.net/transversal/1106/tsianospapadopoulos/en>.

Dubai Deira: Connecting with Iranian and Afghan Businesses

Tajiks involved in the fur coat business work and live in and around Al-Nasser Square, near the Baniyas Square subway station in Dubai's old city quarter, Deira. By calling Al-Nasser "our square" (*maydoni mo*) or "Tajik square" (*maydoni Tojik*), Tajiks claim belonging to the lived spaces of Dubai's historical city center around the Creek side. Al-Nasser square offers a complex ethnic and cultural composition shaped by past and present processes of trade and migration. The cosmopolitan environment of this part of the city, also called the "migrant quarter," developed out of the transregional and transcultural commercial ties and networks spanning the Indian Ocean, thereby linking both the historical port city and today's global city with the people, places, and commercial goods of Asia, Africa, and Europe. While most of the migrants and long-term residents in Dubai Deira are from South and South-east Asia, there are also well-established Iranian and Afghan diasporas, whose members, together with migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, and the Caucasus, shape urban life and dominate Dubai's transregional tradebusiness.²⁶

Tajiks adopt this cosmopolitan city space when dwelling in Dubai Deira's cheap, overcrowded and often culturally mixed migrant guesthouses run by members of the old established Afghan and Iranian diaspora. There, they quickly connect with Afghan traders, Baluchi businesspeople from Iran, and Arab migrants from Egypt or Syria. While business relations with the latter groups are based on Arabic language skills and alumni networks in Cairo and elsewhere, Tajik migrants connect with Sunni-Hanafi Iranians (mostly Baluchi) and Afghans on the basis of cultural and religious familiarity. Referring to a "shared cultural tradition" composed of the Persian language and a body of literature deeply inspired by Sufi-Islamic philosophy and ethics, Tajiks prefer to stay with Dari-speaking Afghans or Sunni-Hanafi Iranians simply because they are perceived as culturally "closer" (*nazdik*) than Uzbeks or Kyrgyz from Central Asia—or even Uzbeks from Tajikistan. Members of the latter group are

26 Yasser Elshashtawy, "Transitory Sites: Mapping Dubai's "Forgotten" Urban Spaces," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 32, no. 4 (2008): 978ff; Vora, Neha, *Impossible Citizens. Diba's Indian Diaspora* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013); Michaela Pelican, "Urban Lifeworlds of Cameroonian Migrants in Dubai," *Urban Anthropology* 43, no. 1–3 (2014), 255–309; Kathiravelu, Laavanya, *Migrant Dubai. Low Wage Workers and the Construction of a Global City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

not considered “trusted familiars,”²⁷ and Tajiks would not consider them “our brothers” (*barodari mo*) or as belonging to the same “people” (*milat*). When dwelling in migrant guesthouses, Tajiks become acquainted with different cosmopolitan traditions formed in and through historical trade-related networks and transregional mobilities. Moving in this Persian world of Muslim business contacts, Tajik migrants like Kamal successfully pursue economic, social, and spiritual careers in Dubai.²⁸

Kamal has worked and lived in Dubai since 2009. Like the majority of his countrymen he began his urban career as a *kamak* in al-Nasser Square before he, backed by an Afghan roommate, invested in the second-hand car business with some Afghans and an Iranian Baluchi. Thanks to his multiple business trips to Iran, Kamal established connections with the Iranian diaspora in Dubai²⁹ and eventually became the manager of a fur coat salon in Deira, owned by a Dubai-based Iranian entrepreneur.

Kamal calls the showroom of the fur salon where he works “my office” (*ofisi man*). Here, he regularly meets his Tajik and Afghan business partners to exchange information over a cup of tea; he confers with the Iranian shop owner or the shops’ Arab sponsor (*kafeel*). Kamal also briefs newly arrived *kamak* workers, and he regularly shares his Islamic knowledge among his co-workers and fellow countrymen as part of his self-image as a religiously trained person who “knows Islam.” He uses his office to store and manage the money his *kamaks* earn, and, when needed, uses their money for his own business purposes until they return home to Tajikistan. Altogether, he is an accepted religious authority among Tajik *kamaks* in Dubai; he has advanced proficiency in Arabic and extensive religious knowledge due to his study at Yemen’s Al-Iman

27 Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella, “Migration, Networks and Connectedness across the Indian Ocean,” in Mehran Kamrava and Zahra Babar (eds.), *Migrant Labor in the Persian Gulf* (London: Hurst, 2012), 128.

28 Abdullah Mirzoev and Manja Stephan-Emmrich, “Crossing Economic and Cultural Boundaries: Tajik Middlemen in the Translocal ‘Dubai Business’ Sector,” in Manja Stephan-Emmrich and Philipp Schröder (eds.), *Mobilities, Boundaries, and Travelling Ideas: Rethinking Translocality Beyond Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, forthcoming).

29 Most Iranians live in the Bastaki area north of the Creek, where they cultivate social (through marriage) and cultural (through Arab language) ties with Emiratis. Thus, Iranians are important gatekeepers to stable employment in the trade, tourism, or real estate business, and they may provide access to the Emirati sponsorship system. See Ali Parsa and Ramin Keivani, “The Hormuz Corridor: Building a Cross-Border Region between Iran and the UAE,” in Saskia Sassen (ed.), *Global Networks, Linked Cities* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 183–207.

University; and his business is built on trust. Besides his social position as a *shaykh* (an honorific title used by the kamaks working in his shop), Kamal has a sterling reputation as a “big businessmen” because he invests his and the kamak’s money in small charity projects to support the Tajik community both in Dubai and at home. Whenever I visited him in his shop, Kamal stressed his international business contacts and his Arabic language proficiency, which has also made him the formal translator between the shop owner and his Arab sponsor. Projecting himself as a cosmopolitan businessman, Kamal has demonstrated his personal capacity to enlarge the scope and scale of his economic activities by bridging ethnic and regional boundaries.

Tajik migrants can elevate their social status through religion as well as through economics, especially when kamak business is put on the same level as trading (*tijorat*) and thus associated with the Prophet Muhammad, who himself was a trader. Once, while sitting with Kamal in his office and debating the properness of the kamak profession, he emotionally called out: “We are Muslims, we do business (*biznes*), we do trading (*tijorat mekunem*). We just follow the example of our prophet!” Consequently, business or trading is often articulated as the most suitable work for a Muslim. This position corresponds to the Salafi views that Tajiks encountered in and around in Dubai’s multiple migrant guesthouses or in their workplaces, and they invoke it as a powerful resource to legitimize their involvement in undocumented work. The following story is an example.

The negative image Salafis have in Tajikistan as followers of a “foreign” and “radical” Islam “dangerous” for the social coherence of the Tajik nation was a controversial and often-debated topic among Tajik migrants in Dubai. Kamal, however, had a clear position. He willingly sweet-talked them for the sake of his business and his own profits (even though he knows that the kamak working with him do not have a work permit):

I met a lot of them [Salafis, *salafih*] when I studied in Yemen ... [Salafis] from many nations. [In Dubai] we do business together. They are all good people, pious Muslims (*dindor*). They are big businessmen doing good (*kori nek*) for society. ... They do trading like our prophet did. ... Like me, many Tajiks come to Dubai. We want to do proper work (*kori sof/pok*). We are Muslims [and] tired of feeding our president’s family.³⁰ ... Bribes here, bribes there (*porakhur*). As long as they [his kamak] do not cheat, are righteous (*insofkor*), and work hard (*kori mehnaty kunand*), they do

30 A common term to refer to the political elite, i.e., the Rahmon clan.

nothing wrong and they will get what God provides them (*risq*). They just do business, they serve their families, their community.

Kamal advocates a Salafi position by using key terms (*insofkor* or *kori mehnaty*) from Persian philosophy and the Sufi-influenced local Muslim tradition, which up to now determine the concepts of morality and civility (*odobu akhloq*) in Tajikistan.³¹ Moreover, he propagates a positive image of Salafis because their value-driven interpretation of the Muslim trade business confirms his pious endeavors. Their interpretation justifies Kamal performing the *hijra*, i.e. the religiously motivated emigration from his birthplace to Dubai, in order to flee the secular environment shaping Tajikistan's public sphere. For Kamal, secularism is a regime that forces Muslims to do forbidden work (*kori harom*), i.e., to serve a corrupt and nepotistic regime that stigmatizes and criminalizes educated Muslim travelers like him for his "Salafi" sympathies.

When stating, "We are international!" Tajiks migrants in Dubai like Kamal articulate a sense of cosmopolitanism that links business strategies with a certain openness to religious diversity. As the African historian Lecocq has argued in his work on Tuareg mobility and urban cosmopolitanism, "The essential element shaping the participation of groups and individuals in pattern of globalization and the creation of cosmopolitanism is not to be found [merely] in forms of mobility, but in the shape, constitution, and potential of human networks."³² Leaving one's own ethnicity or kin-based networks and moving abroad, "where the network is thin, and dependency unequally balanced between those who move and those who are already there,"³³ Tajik migrants in Dubai can become economically active and successful outside kin- or ethnicity-based institutionalized Tajik migrant networks abroad. Kamal with his ability to crossover, translates cultural and economic contexts into a reform-driven Muslim identity that simultaneously embraces an ethnic or culture-based Tajikness and a rather global oriented self-identity as proper Muslim and successful businessmen.

However, and as the following story of Farrukh shows, Tajik migrants play cosmopolitan in very different, sometimes contrasting and competing

31 Manja Stephan, *Das Bedürfnis nach Ausgewogenheit Moralerziehung, Islam und Muslimsein in Tadschikistan zwischen Säkularisierung und religiöser Rückbesinnung* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2010).

32 Baz Lecocq, "Tuareg City Blues: Cultural Capital in a Global Cosmopole," in Anja Fischer and Ines Kohl (eds.), *The Tuareg Society Within a Globalized World: Saharian Life in Transition* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), 43–44.

33 Ibid., 49–50.

ways. Doing so, a cosmopolitan Muslim identity also can become a marker of socioeconomic distinction within the Tajik migrant community in Dubai itself; particularly when Tajiks are able to join Arab-dominated business fields.

Sheikh Zayed Road: Adopting the World of “Corporate Dubai”

Encompassing sites such as the Dubai Marina, Downtown Dubai, and the shopping malls and tourist attractions along Shaikh Zayed Road, “new Dubai” is the spatial representation of the city’s highly touted global cosmopolitan future. In what Ahmad Kanna has termed the “city as corporation,”³⁴ global business meets luxury and exclusive tourism, and heritage-for-consumption development projects try to “sell Arabia” and display an invented Emirati national history that mixes an exclusive Arab-ness with a modern Muslim identity. Devoid of cultural hybridity and Western modernity, the image of an “authentic” Arabian Gulf aims to serve the consumer aspirations and well-being of high-spending tourists and international business executives.³⁵

The material representations and ideological underpinnings of Dubai’s urban planning directly reflect the local demography. Only 10 percent of Dubai’s population is Emirati; the rest are foreign residents (European businesspeople, Asian and African entrepreneurs, migrant workers, and diaspora families). Moreover, the government is complicit in promoting an elitist and exclusive Emirati nationalism displayed in the spectacular architecture of “new Dubai.” A sharp demarcation is created that disregards Tajik and other migrant workers and their cultural lifestyles. Even more, the cosmopolitanism of the “foreign Other,” contributing to the multicultural life and transregional commercial networks in “old Dubai,” is interpreted negatively as something that dilutes the purity of Emirati culture and Muslimness. Urban planning by the Emirati state therefore legitimizes migrants’ and other foreigners’ exclusion from political and social citizenship.³⁶

Nevertheless, like many other foreigners in the emirate, Tajik migrants consume the global cosmopolitanism of “new Dubai” in materialistic ways. Thus, they claim belonging to the city and actively contribute to “the naturalization of racial, national, and other categories that circumscribe Gulf

34 Ahmed Kanna, *Dubai, the City as Corporation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

35 Vora, *Impossible Citizens*, 47–49.

36 *Ibid.*, 36.

geographies and forms of belonging.”³⁷ They visit Dubai’s tourist sites with their families or co-workers on weekends and holidays; they have dinner in Arab restaurants; and they guide Russian tourists on their sightseeing tours through “new Dubai.” When the wives of Tajik migrants like Fatima buy fashionable *abaya* and *hijab* or stylish home decorations in Dubai’s many shopping malls, they also consume the publicly advertised Arab elitism.

However, their face-to-face encounters with “real” Emiratis in Dubai are very limited (even the police conducting street raids are non-Emirati Arabs). Still, Tajiks both in Dubai and Tajikistan try, or at least aspire, to create connections with Arabs, either through business or marriage, in order to upgrade their social status back home in Tajikistan. Meanwhile, the perception that Emiratis are unreachable has created ambivalent feelings toward Arabs in general. Tajiks discuss the corrupt practices of local policemen, the ill-mannered behavior of Arab kids, and the lack of urban taste (*odob-u akhloq*) among Arabs whom Tajiks met during their student days in Cairo or when visiting the Hejaz while performing the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. The topics of these discussions stand in sharp contrast to Emiratis’ posh lifestyle and the Tajiks’ assumption that Arabs have a high level of religious knowledge because of their proximity to the holy sites in Mecca and Medina, to the truth of the Koran due to their language proficiency, and to the proximity to the prophet Muhammad’s family. This assumption feeds into an idealized view of Arabs as proper Muslims and promotes the association of Dubai’s hyper-modernity with an Arab Islam. Accordingly, through consumption, Tajik migrants long to become part of a new global, post-Western Muslim modernity, which combines autocratic Islamic governance with neoliberal economy.³⁸

Arab-led companies and enterprises in Dubai’s Islamic economy push this narrative as they help propagate the image of a rising global, and rather elitist, Muslim entrepreneurialism associated with the corporate spirit in the “new Dubai” area.³⁹ Entering Arabs’ business worlds through formal work contracts marks a successful career in the Dubai business. Besides, many of the young, well-educated, and urban sophisticated Tajiks in Dubai absorb the spirit of global Muslim entrepreneurialism cultivated in some Arab companies in order to distance themselves from the poorly trained rural newcomers.

Drawing on theological discourses circulating in the corporate environment of Dubai’s Islamic economy, some of the Tajik employees I met articulated a

37 Vora and Koch, “Everyday Inclusions,” 547.

38 Kathiravelu, *Migrant Dubai*, 39.

39 “Chat with Dr. Sayd Farook,” *Gulf Elite*, <http://gulfelitemag.com/chat-with-dr-sayd-farook-islamic-economy-entrepreneurship-and-the-dubai-startup-ecosystem/>.

sense of cosmopolitan Muslim elitism. They attempted to distance themselves from their countrymen by labeling them as “migrants” and constructing them as the Tajik Muslim “other.” One of these people is Farrukh, a young Tajik men in his early twenties whom I accidentally met in a Pakistani restaurant in Dubai Deira. With help from his older brother, who has been working in a Dubai-based charity company since 2005, Farrukh got a two-year job contract in a real estate company near Sheikh Zayed Road; everyone else in this office is Arab. During our discussion, he insisted on not being called Tajik and pressed me to speak only in English. “I am Muslim,” he often stressed during our business lunches, articulating his desire to belong to a new, global, and elite class of Muslim professionals. In this way, he distinguishes himself from the Tajik kamak business, which, unlike many other Tajik migrants, was not his route for entering Dubai’s business scene:

My company works for international clients. I only speak English and started to learn Arabic as well. ... Because in my office we are only Arabs. I don’t come here [to Al-Nasser Square], only sometimes for lunch. My workplace is close to Sheikh Zayed Road. This is my world ... I don’t mingle with Tajik migrants (*migranty*) here. They do kamak work, which is *haram*. They get commission from the fur coat sales. According to the Sharia (*shariyat*), this counts as *riba* (usury). For Muslims it is not permitted to engage in such kind of work. But the majority of Tajiks doesn’t know Islam very well. ... Also, many (Tajiks) don’t have a work permit. They work illegally (*ghayriqonuny*). I don’t like that.

By referring to a prominent legal debate on Islamic economy (particularly Islamic banking), Farrukh demonstrates his savoir faire in global Islamic discourses and thereby emphasizes his superior position and the successful urban career he made as a Tajik in the Dubai business sector. Furthermore, by pointing to the undocumented status of most Tajiks in the emirate, he plays with the negative image that the informal economy had during Soviet times, and, according to the normative Soviet discourse, associates kamak work with cheating, impurity, disorder, and shame;⁴⁰ an image Farrukh wants

40 Deema Kaneff, “The Shame and Pride of Market Activity: Morality, Identity, and Trading in Postsocialist Rural Bulgaria,” in Ruth Mandel and Caroline Humphrey (eds.), *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of Postsocialism* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 33–52; Emil Nasritdinov and Kevin O’Conner, *Regional Change in Kyrgyzstan: Bazaars, Cross-Border Trade and Social Networks* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010); Henryk Alff, “Basarökonomie im Wandel: Postsowjetische Perspektiven des Handels in Zentralasien,”

to overcome through pious self-fashioning and doing proper work. His back-ground as the son of a diplomat, who belonged to the well-connected urban elite of the late Soviet Union, impacts his current mindset and reveals an urban fear of a provincialism, which travels with the Tajik migrants and jeopardizes the value of the Dubai business as an important marker for social distinction. Fashioning a piety compatible with reformism and neoliberalism, Dubai's vibrant field of Islamic economy offers Tajik migrants new ways of "being Muslim" and a new self-image belonging to the umma outside nationality, ethnicity, or culturally determined identity frameworks. Simultaneously, the Muslim entrepreneurialism discourse pushed in the Arabian Gulf empowers Tajiks to make sense of their precarious visa status and risky economic undertakings, as well as to legitimize their undocumented and often illicit business practices by attaching a religious meaning to them.

This also becomes obvious when Tajik migrants wear national Gulf dresses (*thawb*) at their workplace. Selective clothing is a strategy to obscure ethnic identity and avoid being recognized by Russian clients as "Tajiks"; it is also a practice of camouflage done to be publicly invisible (also to the local police). Jamal is a kamak I run into nearby Banyas Square in November 2013. Working for a fur salon in Dubai Deira, he usually wears a white *thawb* at work and explained:

I don't want to be recognized as a Tajik. Russians don't like us, really. Once, I invited one Russian tourist to visit our [fur coat] shop. But he became very angry and rant, "Hey, get lost damn Tajik. I came [to Dubai] to recover from you guys [Tajik migrants]. So, get off my back." Therefore, many of us wear Arab clothing [at work] to hide. I started to wear it after returning from the Hajj. ... In such dress you are invisible for the local police as well. As you know, policemen became very clever and conduct their raids now in plainclothes. So, we cannot escape quickly enough.

Wearing Arab-style clothing can also be an attempt to display a successful spiritual image as a reform-minded Muslim. Performing the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca is a part of this image, and Tajiks do everything to feel assimilated in Dubai as a "Muslim place." By claiming to belong to the city that way, Jamal seeks to transcend the stigma of being a "Tajik migrant" and the boundaries this stigma produces in both Russia and Dubai. The situation of Tajik migrants resembles the way young Egyptians aspire to make global modernity their own

Geographische Rundschau 65, no. 11 (2013): 20–25; Stephan-Emmrich and Mirzoev, "The Manufacturing of Islamic Lifestyles."

by migrating to Europe. Anthropologist Samuli Schielke, in his work on migratory expectations in Egypt, links cosmopolitanism with longing and emphasizes that Egyptian youngsters' horizon of possibility is strikingly limited and restricted.⁴¹ Following his notion of cosmopolitanism as "a modality of both action and imagination," I argue that Tajik migrants in Dubai engage in a world evoked by the spatial representations and realities of Dubai's cosmopolitan business spaces, which in reality is full of borders and "inhabited by people who try to cross them."⁴²

Re-thinking "Migrant Cosmopolitanism"

Tajik migrants participate in Dubai's various business endeavors through different economic and religious practices. They adapt to and interact with a culturally diverse and dynamic urban Muslim environment and thereby show a competence to maneuver through different systems of meaning. Utilizing different cultural registers to be successful, Tajiks become cosmopolitans in Hannerz's sense.⁴³ However, when Tajik migrants play cosmopolitan, they do not only celebrate cultural sophistication. They at the same time produce as well as cope with boundaries and exclusions, which draw from a wide range of meaning-producing structures and experiences. While a shared cultural proximity allows Tajik migrants to capitalize on Afghan and Iranian business networks and join processes of cultural and economic globalization, the "corporate" and elitist world of the Arab-dominated global Islamic economy in Dubai is hardly attainable. But Tajik migrants still aspire, imitate, and consume habits, lifestyle products, and discursive references to Arabs' business worlds and thereby articulate belonging to the Gulf outside the structurally limited framework of citizenship. According to Vertovec, the production of new arrangements through cosmopolitan practices does not occur in an "unbridled horizon of cultural appropriation and enactment."⁴⁴ Social actors are

41 Samuli Schielke, "Engaging the World on the Alexandria Waterfront," in Knut Graw and Samuli Schielke (eds.), *The Global Horizon: Expectations of Migration in Africa and the Middle East* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012), 175–192; see also Grant, "Cosmopolitan Baku," 134.

42 Schielke, "Engaging the World on the Alexandria Waterfront," 178.

43 Ulf Hannerz, "Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture," in Mike Featherstone (ed.), *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization, and Modernity* (London: Sage, 1990), 237–251.

44 Steven Vertovec, "Cosmopolitanism," in Kim Knott and Sean McLoughlin (eds.), *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities* (London: Zed Books, 2010), 66.

always “embedded in a constellation of relations and structures”⁴⁵ that shape and constrain their actions in multiple ways.

But how does the cosmopolitan attitude Tajiks display materialize, aside from cultivating multilingualism, internationalism, or urban sophisticatedness? Many Tajik men in Dubai dream of marrying an Arab woman but are unable to due to the high dowry (*mahr*) expectations and their status as foreign migrant workers. In other words, the Muslim business cosmopolitanism of Tajik migrants in Dubai is not necessarily only a lived experience, but above all an imagination—a longing—that reveals the limitations and constraints placed on them not only in the United Arab Emirates, but also in Russia and even in Tajikistan.⁴⁶

Pointing to the mutual conditionality of longing and belonging inherent in cosmopolitanism, I have also shown how Tajiks, when moving in and across their culturally diverse business networks or when engaging in cosmopolitan Muslim spaces, simultaneously emphasize sameness and cope with difference. Doing so, Tajik migrants in Dubai thus do not preserve but continuously reevaluate and reformulate identity and therewith become deeply involved in ethics of obligation or local engagement. This goes beyond what Landau and Freemantle have coined “tactical cosmopolitanism,” i.e., a strategy used by migrants in South Africa to capitalize on cosmopolitanism’s power without becoming bound to its spatial responsibilities.⁴⁷ In the context of Tajik migrants’ engagement in reform-minded self-making projects linked to Muslim business and entrepreneurialism, such an understanding of vernacular cosmopolitanism runs the risk of narrowing down the complexity of my interlocutors’ lives in Dubai to economic benefits only; thereby obscuring the fact that political, social, and above all spiritual regimes matter and form the context in which my interlocutors act as, dream, and strive to become cosmopolitan.

By adopting religious strategies, Tajiks convert their status as “migrants” into that of “Muslim businessmen.” This article has critically scrutinized the often one-dimensional and politically charged conceptualization of “foreign migrant workers” in the Gulf, which obscures Tajiks’ active involvement and symbolic work in different forms of (non-)religious placemaking. Thus, the article has offered a more nuanced picture of everyday life in Dubai that goes beyond the “spectacularity” of the city. It also challenges the narrow understanding of

45 Ibid.

46 Schielke, “Engaging the World on the Alexandria Waterfront.”

47 Landau and Freemantle, “Tactical Cosmopolitanism and Idioms of Belonging.”

Dubai as merely a “Middle Eastern” city⁴⁸ that is part the Arabian Gulf. Instead, it focused on how Dubai is imagined and shaped by Tajiks as a “Muslim place.” With its cosmopolitan gaze, the article has offered insight into how Central Asian affairs, such as the excluding cultural politics of urban middle classes, or the moral assessment of corruption in the state-dominated job market, are “carried across” by Tajik migrants to the Gulf and negotiated by them outside their “home” region. Nevertheless, the precarious conditions under which Tajik migrants in Dubai play cosmopolitan indicate the crucial role national regimes and forms of secular and nationalist governance play in determining how migrants negotiate, re-value, and articulate Muslim identity under the global condition. Putting emphasis on the complex links between religion and economy, this article has also exemplified the limits of methodological nationalism to understand Islam in Tajikistan and wider Central Asia as a lived reality shaped by translocal, mobile livelihoods. Arguably, Tajiks’ engagement in cosmopolitan Muslim contexts can result in a heightened openness toward religious diversity and a heightened mobility within and across different Islamic traditions. Rather than pushing a much invoked and state-feared “Arabization” that imports a de-culturized, puristic Salafi Islam hostile to local and culturally formed Islamic practices, the existential experiences of Tajiks migrants-as-businessmen in Dubai can contribute to a more diverse and differentiated picture of transnational Islam.

48 Vora, *Impossible Citizens*, 3.