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A Material Geography of ‘Dubai Business’

Making and Re-Making Muslim Worlds across Central Asia and the Gulf

Abstract: Tracing the circulation of Korans donated by Saudi Arabia across multiple migratory contexts in the United Arab Emirates, Tajikistan, and beyond, and understanding their transfiguration from a sacred text into a prestigious consumer good, this chapter explores the materialities and immaterialities of Tajik migrant religious, economic and social worlds that meet and intertwine in the context of ‘Dubai business’. Giving impetus to a stronger consideration of the material turn in the research on translocality and transregionality, the chapter illustrates how cultural imaginaries, while travelling via prestigious commodities across geographical regions, and socio-economic contexts mesh with spatial ideas of urbanism, cosmopolitanism, and piety. In the worlds of Dubai’s transregional trading business, tourism and charity, an exclusive notion of ‘bourgeois Islam’ is fabricated – a contested assemblage of knowledge, lifestyle aspirations, cultural hegemony, and social distinctedness, through which Tajik migrants re-fashion an elitist Muslim self along different notions of mobility, work and belonging.

Charitable gifts that *matter*: Korans donated by Saudi Arabia

Twenty-nine-year-old Maruf from Dushanbe was working as a sales manager for men’s fashion in a medium-sized shopping mall in Dubai when we met in winter 2013. Since his employment contract was linked to a multi-year residence permit, Maruf was able to buy an apartment for his wife and two children in the neighbouring emirate of Sharjah, which he shared with his older brother and his family. Maruf arrived much too late and visibly annoyed for our lunch meeting in a Persian restaurant near his office, where I had been waiting for him for quite some time. Looking stressed, he welcomed me with the words “Unfortunately, I can’t stay long either”, while simultaneously waving at the waiter for the order and starting to complain about the working conditions at his workplace: “We employees are not treated fairly. We always have to work longer

than agreed in the contract and have far too few breaks. But he can do this to us, he is the boss”, he explains and – after a short hesitation – adds: “He is Arab!”. While we wait for our *palav-i shīrīn*, a Persian-style sweet rice dish with chicken, his favourite one in the restaurant, he digs around in a big and heavy bag under the table and hands me two copies of the Koran he brought from the *awqāf*-centre¹ (religious endowments) in Dubai, which he visits regularly to take Koranic lessons and receive advice on religious questions. The book is a beautiful, golden decorated, high-quality edition entailing a parallel German translation and published by the King-Fahd-complex in Medina, Saudi Arabia.² Heavy in my hand, the Koran obviously mattered, as it caused a change of mood in Maruf. Still annoyed about the feeling of superiority that resonates in the ‘Arabness’ his boss displays at the workplace, Maruf, while looking at the Koran in my hand, begins to tell me with enthusiasm about the philanthropic spirit in the centre. For him, the generosity he experienced in the centre stands in sharp contrast to the narrow framework within which the secular Tajik state is willing to serve the religious needs and sensibilities of its Muslim citizens. Praising the variety of different Koran translations that are freely distributed there – even in Russian – Maruf directs my attention to the special aesthetics of the edition that he had just given me: “What a great edition! Praise be to Allah! You can look for such editions in Tajikistan for a long time, right?”. “What are you going to do with the other Koran copies in your bag”, I ask him, and add “Do these copies also contain translations?”, “Yes, in Russian. They are for my brother”, is Maruf’s answer, “He is going to Moscow next week, for his business”.

As this small and rather random episode from my multi-sited field research in the United Arab Emirates (henceforth UAE) and Tajikistan in 2013 and 2014 shows, Korans donated by the Saudi royal family (henceforth: Saudi-donated Korans) travel as much as Maruf and his brother do. Moreover, both migrants and Korans share social lives, that are interwoven, translocal and, as such, marked by mobility, multiplicity, transition and circulation in and across the multiple and intersecting worlds of what this chapter is about, and what I analytically determine as ‘Dubai business’. In Arabic language or provided with a

¹ *Awqāf*, the plural of the Arabic term *waqf*, designates charitable endowments that operate under Islamic law. While Gulf charities cover a wide range of philanthropic activities run by a multitude of state- and non-state organisations and private actors, the majority of charitable endowments Tajik migrant visit in Dubai are assigned to *The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments* (GAIAE), a legal authority close to the government. The emirate of Dubai alone actually runs 700 registered *awqāf*-centres.

² The King-Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Koran produces 10 Million copies per year and translates the Koran in 39 different languages.

Russian translation, Saudi-donated Korans travel from Dubai's multiple charitable foundations (*awqāf*), which are regularly visited by Tajik migrants for various religious services, into the apartments of Tajik migrant families residing in the UAE. There, they are used for daily prayers and family rituals. Korans of this kind can also be found in the bookshelves of the neighbourhood mosques in Dubai or other parts of UAE, where I accompanied Tajik migrant women to Koranic recitation (*tajwīd*) circles. Moreover, Saudi-donated Korans were shared in migrant accommodations, where many male bachelor Tajiks live temporarily and get to know their future business partners in the fur coat trade and tourism business. I also encountered Korans of this type in fur coat show rooms in Dubai, in which Tajiks worked as managers and were involved in *da'wa*³ activities among their business partners. Besides, Saudi-donated Koran copies also cross nation-state borders. At the time of my fieldwork, they were part of the ritual equipment of so-called 'Arab mosques', sponsored by rich Dubai businessmen especially in rural regions of Tajikistan. Eventually, Saudi-donated Korans entered migrant households in Tajikistan; as prestigious souvenirs, gifts, and as religious objects whose semiotic power and aesthetics fire the social imagination about the 'Dubai business' as a notion for economic success, religious progress and social mobility.

'Dubai business'

In post-soviet Tajikistan, migration has become a way of life that integrates Tajik Muslims as creative and mobile actors in processes of economic and cultural globalisation. Labour migration to Russia is still the dominant livelihood strategy in the country. However, since the 1990s, the Gulf has developed as an alternative migration destination for Tajiks. Like Maruf and his older brother, those Tajiks who were able to establish themselves in the field of 'Dubai business' in the 2010s formed a small group of university-trained, urbanely socialised, multilingual and religiously aspirated younger and middle-aged Tajiks driven by their aspiration to pursue Islamic life projects in a Muslim country abroad.⁴ A religious revivalism, which has affected Tajikistan since the 1980s

3 "Calling to Islam" or "Calling to God" is a central component of Islamic mission directed at non-Muslims as well as Muslims. At the core of religious programmes of modern Muslim revitalisation movements, *da'wa* is especially directed at Muslims to turn back to God and to orientate one's life according to Islamic principles.

4 Stephan-Emmrich 2017a, Stephan-Emmrich 2017b.

and then especially after independence, brought about a stronger orientation towards the wider Muslim world, particularly to the Near and Middle East. The increase in religiously motivated work and study migration, tourism and pilgrimage, particularly to places in the Arab world, confirms established sacred geographies that places ex-Soviet Tajik Muslims at the periphery of the Muslim world. Meanwhile, the model of Gulf urbanism that materialises in circulating spectacular media images, high-prestige commodity goods, migrants' narratives and that is being carried to Tajikistan via infrastructural investments, had brought about a reconfiguration of space, spatial narratives and social imagination.⁵ Accordingly, in Tajikistan, Dubai has become a preferential migrant destination not only as a new regional hub in the Gulf with geographical proximity to Mecca, the major pilgrimage destination for Hajj and Umrah. In migrant narratives Dubai has also become a trope for a 'Muslim-cum-business-friendly-place' that flourishes due to an Islamic form of governance and aristocratic leadership that promotes social justice, as well as Sharia-compliant economic activities that are corruption-free, and allows for combining work and piety.

Followed by the lure of the Gulf boom that reached Tajikistan in the early 2000s, Maruf and his brother got involved in the 'Dubai business', hoping to combine their desire for economic success with spiritual and moral progress and social upward mobility. With Maruf's employment in retail and his brother's combined work as both a manager in an SUV car showroom in the emirate of Ajman and as a middleman in an auto parts business that spanned Dubai, Dushanbe, Moscow and Istanbul, the brothers found their place in the complex, exclusive and volatile socio-economic worlds of the 'Dubai business'. While Gulf migration opened up many worlds of work and business for them (formal and informal, trade, tourism, retail), it simultaneously created a new horizon for the two brothers to imagine being and becoming a better Muslim, as well as to strive for a 'good Muslim life'.

This chapter employs the term 'Dubai business' to analytically grasp the complex and entangled relationship of people, things, ideas and places and the multiple economic, social and religious worlds, in which these entangled relationships are embedded. Thus, the analytical scope of the term is multifold: While the term encompasses the place where Tajiks go to find work, as well as the type of work they pursue there, it also speaks to the market mechanisms of place-branding in which Tajik migrants are involved. As business is done not only *in* but also *with* Dubai, Dubai is being transformed into a brand that is sold and consumed in and outside the emirate. In addition, and in a more metaphor-

5 Mirzoev and Stephan-Emmrich 2016.

ical sense, the term has the capacity “to refigure a larger conceptual field, to bring material (social) and mental worlds into closer conjunction”,⁶ as well as connecting compartmentalised fields of knowledge in area studies, anthropology and migration studies. A dynamic time-space configuration of material and immaterial flows, transfers and transformations, ‘Dubai business’ conflates labour migration, continental and maritime trade in luxury goods such as fur coats, SUV cars or smartphones with the fields of Russian middle-class tourism, Muslim pilgrimage, Islamic education and Gulf charity. In this quality, I understand ‘Dubai business’ as providing “a transregional platform” of connectivity, interaction and exchange that is dynamic and “intermediate in scale”.⁷ This platform assembles a plurality of actors, practices, places, things, ideas, identities, and multiple worlds across Central Asia, China, South Asia, Europe and the Near and Middle East. ‘Dubai business’, however, also encompasses social reality, human experience and the inhabiting of migrant lifeworlds – all are shaped by the resonance and mutual relationship of neoliberal capitalism and Muslim piety.⁸ Like Dubai itself, it is a production site for migrant hopes, middle-class dreams and aspirations, for emotional attachment and elusive belongings. In the multiple worlds of ‘Dubai business’, an exclusive notion of ‘bourgeois Islam’ is fabricated – an assemblage of movement, social imaginaries, and experiences that offer migrants a resource for reshaping the self along various notions of migration, work, and belonging.

Tracing the circulation of Saudi-donated Korans across multiple places in the UAE and Tajikistan, as well as understanding their transfiguration from a sacred text into a prestigious consumer good, this chapter explores the material reality of migrant religious, economic, and social worlds that meet and intertwine in the context of the ‘Dubai business’. In addition, the chapter aims to provide an impetus for greater consideration of the material turn in the research on translocality and transregionality, showing how religious imaginaries travel within and across geographical regions and different migratory contexts, and how these ‘immaterialities’ intertwine with notions of place, modernity, progress, future, and the pious Muslim self.

⁶ Daniels 2011, 182.

⁷ Ho 2014, 888.

⁸ Atia 2012, Tobin 2016, Schielke 2015.

Exploring Muslim worlds through mobile things: Connectivity, mediation, transition

In the context of transregional questions, research into the mobility of material objects is beginning to gain importance, albeit slowly at the moment.⁹ Following the trajectories of Saudi-donated Korans and their ‘social, yet mobile, lives’¹⁰ through practices of gift exchange, consumption, usage, collection and representation, the focus of this chapter moves beyond Korans as things themselves, to the multiple Muslim worlds and world-making processes these religious objects co-shape and that span distances across places, regions and continents. Thus, attention is given to the interconnectivity and co-constitution of Korans as things, their materialities and geographies, with the places and spaces they move through, and the religious ideas they carry with them.

Integrating the material turn into area studies allows for a differentiated understanding of ‘Muslim worlds’, their plurality, and their making and re-making, that links spatial notions of ‘area’, ‘region’, or ‘*trans*-region’ with phenomenological notions of ‘everydayness’ and ‘lifeworlds’. Both concepts draw attention to “the paradox of plurality and the ambiguity of intersubjective life”¹¹ that shapes the lived experience and their existential significance for migrants and other actors. Meanwhile, the question of how migrant lived experiences and the knowledge whereby migrants live an everyday life that is “plural, complex, and essentially unsystematic [in] nature”,¹² can be *empirically* grasped is also relevant for the ‘Dubai business’ as a social reality. Being fluid and elastic, transregional entities cannot be fixed. They have no clear and continuing boundaries and ‘keep slipping away’ when explored.¹³ Such a combined understanding of Muslim worlds complicates any neat compartmentalising of historiographical and geographical categories, as it also demands a transregional methodology that produces ethnographies which are “thick, socially and historically”.¹⁴ Back to the materiality, sensuous presence, aesthetic dimension and mobility of ‘things’, Saudi-donated Korans *matter*, as argued in the chapter’s methodological intervention, as they allow to link spatial and existential ap-

⁹ Juneja 2019, Ho 2014.

¹⁰ Appadurai 1996.

¹¹ Jackson 2013, 9.

¹² Schielke and Debevec 2012, 3.

¹³ Verne 2019, 85.

¹⁴ Ho 2014, 885.

proaches to explore multiple Muslim worlds through the three conceptual lenses of 'connectivity', 'mediation', and 'transition'.

Firstly, the term 'connectivity', with its processual, transformative dimension, is preferred to the more static term 'connection' in order to "focus on entanglements, spaces of transactions and translations, as well as on the 'brokers' that operate in therein, thus actively shaping, as well as being shaped by connections".¹⁵ Tajiks act in different ways as brokers within and between the multiple worlds of 'Dubai business'. In economic terms, in their position as middlemen they link different business fields (trade and tourism), while in cultural terms, Tajiks rely on multi-lingual competencies and cosmopolitan orientations to be mobile within and across – and thus connect – different worlds, that is the Arabophone and Persophone worlds of trade and business with the Russophone world of tourism and conspicuous consumption.

Secondly, according to Verne,¹⁶ transregional entities like the 'Dubai business', although they cannot be fixed, have effects that can be experienced (and empirically researched) in human and non-human relationships, places, practices, and migrants' senses of self. As such, effects are materially mediated, for example through things that act as medium. Following Meyer and Houtman¹⁷ in their plea for rematerialising scholarly approaches to religion, things such as Saudi-donated Korans are "instances and instantiations of the 'everyday'". Their materiality forms the "texture of lived, embodied experience". Moreover, visible and tangible, things both form and mediate the living and enabling conditions of "the religious".¹⁸ Since media rely on indexicality to produce symbolic representations, religion and religious experience cannot be analysed "outside the forms and practices of its mediation".¹⁹ Even more so, "the modes of mediation are part of the religion's configuration".²⁰

Thirdly, migration is a transformative process providing symbolic capital as well as promoting multiple forms of change.²¹ Just as Tajiks' religious experience and their Muslim self are re-configured in the context of 'Dubai business', the Saudi-donated Korans and their material properties need to be thought through their transformative states, as they "transform, mutate, morph, and

¹⁵ Brosius and Pfaff-Czarnecka 2019, 5.

¹⁶ Verne 2019, 85.

¹⁷ Meyer and Houtman 2012.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

¹⁹ Meyer and Moors 2006, 7.

²⁰ Lundby 2013, xii.

²¹ Salazar 2018, 6ff.

thus continue in dynamic circulations”.²² Accordingly, the concept of transition emphasises Tajik migrants’ creativity and potentiality to re-shape and re-create the social and material world they live in,²³ as it allows to “unravel the processes of transformation and reconfiguration” that take place in the multiple contexts (worlds) of ‘Dubai business’, and that “interrupt existing matrices of geography and aesthetic practice”.²⁴

A tense homeness: Migrant accommodations

Entry into the multiple worlds of Dubai’s trading and tourism business happens in the private migrant apartments or low-budget hostels in the Creek area, where Tajik migrants mostly reside and share rooms with Sunni Iranians, Afghans, and sometimes also Arab migrants. Operated and managed by members of Dubai’s Afghan diaspora, which has successfully positioned itself in the real estate market, Tajiks appreciate these accommodations for the cultural ‘nestedness’ they experience there. Equipped with an Afghan janitor who takes care of the security of the migrants’ private belongings and is often also the cook who prepares a culturally familiar hot meal once a day, Afghan migrant apartments or hostels create trust and provide a sense of home. As an exclusive Muslim space, migrant accommodations foster conviviality and friendship, and they provide a platform for building business relations. By sharing their living space with Afghan, Baluch and Sunni Persian-speaking traders, brokers and business professionals, Tajiks gain access to established commercial networks in the luxury car, spare part, mobile phone or jewellery trade businesses. They are thus able to expand their business networks in Dubai beyond ethnic networks bases on kinship, peer-group (in Tajik *hamsinf*, *hamkurs*), or neighbourhood affiliation (in Tajik *hamsāya*). This interweaving of life and work is articulated in the statement “We prefer to stay with Iranian or Afghan guys, as we are one family. We speak the same language, we trust each other, we are brothers that share not only living space but also our businesses”. Thus, Tajiks cultivate a sense of ‘Persianness’, which is also articulated in the preference for Afghan and Iranian restaurants. Associated with this ‘Persianness’ is a repertoire of cultural knowledge, experience, and imagination that Tajiks draw on to mediate

²² Tolia-Kelly 2013, 157.

²³ Kalir 2018, 350.

²⁴ Juneja 2019, 24–25.

creatively between different business worlds (tourism and trading business) as economic middle-men or to be mobile as brokers in transcultural contexts.²⁵ In this intermediary role, Tajiks connect to the cosmopolitan trade networks in the Persian Gulf, and thus to a world that links Muslims, markets, and households across the Gulf, the broader Near and Middle East, South, Central, and East Asia, and Eurasia through a complex set of knowledge, skill, work ethics, and social relationship.²⁶

Tajiks' notion of the Ummah as a business community emphasises moments of equality, solidarity, and the sharing of a common set of cultural knowledge and practices. When Tajiks act out their 'Persianness' as a cultural consciousness articulated in terms of language practices and cosmopolitan lifestyles, they transcend local, national, and regional identifications that assign them the status as 'peripheral' Muslims (in the rigid secular environment at home, in majority Turkic-speaking Central Asia, and in the wider Muslim world). Such post-national narratives of sharing and belonging, however, obscure the plurality and difference of the Muslim worlds Tajik co-make, appropriate, and cohabit. With their preference for Afghan and Sunni-Iranian roommates, Tajiks in Dubai articulate their refusal to live or do business with Turkish-speaking Muslims from Central Asia and the Caucasus, and even with Tajiks from Uzbekistan. Due to differences in language, cultural traditions and the history of mobility and migration that connect other Muslims in Central Asia with Dubai, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz migrants make their own business worlds in Dubai, based on transregionally operating Turkophone trading and migration networks.

Differences can also be found within the Persian-speaking business community itself. The following episode shows how difference materialises in hierarchical business relationships. Lunch at the accommodation, which is included in the monthly rent Tajik migrants pay to the Afghan owner, is the only time of the day when all roommates get together to eat, socialise, and relax. Once, I was invited by two Tajik street brokers to join them for lunch with their roommates. After the meal, when tea and cake were served, we remained sitting and talked with two Baluchi car dealers and an Iranian mobile phone shop owner. After lunch, the conversation sluggishly shifted from family and business matters, food prices in local supermarkets to the politic situation at home, and then moved on to religious matters. When the conversation switched to questions about Sharia-compliant work, the Iranian roommate named Iskandar got up, brought a copy of the Koran, which looked similar to the one Maruf had brought

²⁵ Mirzoev and Stephan-Emmrich 2018, 104–14.

²⁶ Marsden 2016.

for me from his favourite endowment, and spontaneously started to engage in *da'wa*. After we followed Iskandar's speech for a while, one of the two Tajik brokers apologised politely and left the room as inconspicuously as possible. Later he explained to me, "He (Iskandar) does *da'wa* all the time. It is a deed of merit (in Tajik *kār-i savāb*) and he speaks well, but I can't always bear it, because he uses *da'wa* to praise Iranian civilization. In Islam, all Muslims are equal, Iranians are not superior. But he is my business partner, I depend on him. So, I ain't saying nothing, [and] just leave the room".

While Iranians and Afghans cultivate a cultural and religious superiority, Tajiks are assigned the inferior position of 'the little brother'. Due to the Soviet past, Tajiks are perceived by their roommates as insufficiently educated in both religion and the history of Iranian culture and civilization, as they were largely cut off from Islamic discourse, religious knowledge flows and cultural education over a long period of time. Accordingly, Koran copies such as those sponsored by Saudi Arabia and available in Dubai's many charitable endowments, when used, or when circulating within migrant accommodations, pass mainly from Iranian and Afghan roommates to the new Tajik business partners, and not vice versa. Used for *da'wa*, or in the gift economy of Muslim charity, Koran donations 'sign' an a-symmetric business relationship that translate Tajiks' subordinate position as economic newcomers and peripheral Muslims to the 'Dubai business' into their position of learners in religious matters.

Muslim elitism: Doing *da'wa* at the workplace

The multiple ways in which religion intersects with Dubai's business worlds can be further traced through the way Tajik migrants themselves use Saudi-sponsored Koran copies for *da'wa* activities at the workplace. One of the two Tajik brokers who invited me to join lunch in their accommodation works for fellow-countrymen Bahodir, a and manager of a fur coat show room at the time we met. Fluent in Russian and Arabic, Bahodir held a mediating position between Russian clients, the Afghan shop owner and his Emirati sponsor (*kafil*), as he often operated as a translator between the two. He also supervised the Tajik street brokers attracting tourists to visit the fur coat shop. Additionally, to bridge the time between client visits, his management duties and that of the street broker's supervision, Bahodir run his own transregional trading business with care spare parts, in which partners in Dubai, Tajikistan and Russia were involved.

On the day I visit him in his shop, there is not much going on. We drink tea, he shows me the latest collection of furs, and while we wait for customers, a Tajik enters the room, whom he calls his business partner. He is a surgeon who emigrated to Russia from his neighbourhood in Dushanbe in the early 1990s. He regularly comes to Dubai for holidays and meetings with his business partners. Lounging in the representative black leather armchairs, in which Bahodir usually holds his customer conversations, and drinking tea, the two men first discuss the prices of car spare parts in Russia, Dubai and China, before the surgeon asks Bahodir for religious advice. His son wants to do a job pleasing God in Russia and asks Bahodir what the criteria are for his decision. As the conversation draws to a close, Bahodir goes to the desk, takes two copies of the Koran, decorated with gold, out of the drawer and hands them over to his partner, who stows the books in his bag and leaves. Some days later, when visiting Bahodir again, I found him behind his desk involved in the religious instruction of some newly arrived migrants from Tajikistan, who were sitting around his desk listening to him. What I immediately noticed was, that he recited from a Koran of the same type that he had given to his partner from Russia a few days earlier. Strikingly, the semiotics of the prestigious religious object Bahodir used for *da'wa* not only confirmed his religious authority, which he gained through his studies of Islamic law (*fiqh*) at al-Azhar university, but was also expressed in the honorific title *shaykh*. As we will see later, it is the aesthetic authority of Saudi-donated Korans, through which Tajik newcomers are integrated into Dubai's business worlds, inculcated with work ethics based on Islamic principles and equipped with a cultural repertoire that allows them to position themselves in Dubai's superdiverse migrant world. Simultaneously, prestigious religious objects that travel between Dubai, Russia, and also Tajikistan, materially mediate the appreciation and affirmation of transregional business relations. Thus, migrant networks also provide an infrastructure for the circulation of religious ideas; here a Muslim elitism that builds on the idea of being part of Dubai as a regional hub, where lived realities of a religious economy in the trading and tourism business intersect with representative and spatial politics of urban hypermodernity.

An elitist notion inherent to Tajiks' self-understanding as Muslim businesspeople is also articulated through statements such as "We are businesspeople, not migrants!"²⁷ Such positioning points to the strong socio-economic and cultural differentiation within the Tajik migrant community, but also from Central Asian and other Asian migrant communities in the Gulf, along the lines of eth-

27 Stephan-Emmrich 2017a, 279.

nicity, race, religion, class, and the valuation of migrant work. Such elitist self-positioning goes hand in hand with specific translocal lifestyles and a new publicly displayed piety. Cultivating specific housing and eating practices in Dubai and Tajikistan, preferring particular Muslim fashion styles, consuming religious tourism offers to Saudi Arabia, or using prestigious religious signs such as Saudi-donated Korans or Arab language styles, Tajik migrants both in Dubai and at home participate in globalising discourses on the 'right' and 'authentic Islam', which are central to the cultivation of new Muslim middle-class sensibilities in wider Asia.²⁸ With their identity as Muslim businessmen, Tajik middlemen distinguish themselves from the new generation of unskilled, educationally disadvantaged rural migrants (in Russian *migranty*)²⁹ from their home country who, due to their lack of business knowledge, urban skills and experiences of working in convoluted economic fields in a superdiverse urban environment abroad, are perceived as a threat to the good reputation Tajiks enjoy with their Afghan and Iranian business partners in Dubai.

Tajiks' self-fashioning as businesspeople also draws a distinction from Indian, Pakistani and other Asian migrants in Dubai, who work under precarious conditions in the low-wage sector.³⁰ Jobs as hotel employees, street cleaners, construction workers, laundry boys, or porters at the Dubai Creek harbour, were considered inferior and "dirty work" (in Tajik *kār-i nāpāk*) because of the migrants' dependence on the *kafāla* sponsorship system, and thus their vulnerability as economic actors. In contrast, the 'Dubai business' offers great flexibility to move between informal and formal work, to be mobile 'under the radar' of the emirate's strict migration policy, and to realise social careers.

The strong emphasis on an exclusive Muslimness coincides with the striking invisibility of Tajiks in Dubai's public space and goes in line with their rejection or even denial of any form of publicly displayed 'Tajikness'. This stands in sharp contrast to Russia, where Tajik migrants run numerous ethnic restaurants and thus co-shape the urban landscape, and further to Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Uyghurs and Tatars, who run restaurants and bistros in the Dubai Greek area. Since the other ethnic groups from Central Asia and the Caucasus are newcomers in Dubai to the same extent as Tajiks are, the desired invisibility is rather explained by a transnational migration regime based on political mechanisms

²⁸ Thimm 2018, Lücking and Eliyanah 2017, among others.

²⁹ Tajiks in Dubai prefer the Russian term *migranty* when describing their inferior status and the related negative experiences they face with the racial migration regime in Russia as migrants from Central Asia, and particularly from Tajikistan.

³⁰ See for example Laavanya Kathiravelu's monograph *Migrant Dubai* (2016).

of racial profiling and discrimination, that has a strong impact on Tajiks' self-perception as 'second-class' Muslims, citizens and migrants. Performative affiliations via religion, which, as seen, are always multiple, can thus be interpreted as an attempt to overcome this peripheral and negatively connoted sociocultural position. This is reflected not only in the decision of many Tajik street broker in Dubai to wear Arabic clothing but also in the refusal to speak Tajik with me, favouring English or Arabic.

Fostering hegemony: Dubai's charitable endowments (*awqāf*)

Meanwhile, Tajik migrants' re-positioning and re-configuring as 'peripheral' Muslims cannot be understood without considering the material and immaterial circulations that take place in the field of Gulf charities in and beyond the UAE. This goes in particular for the sense of 'Arabness' displayed by Tajik migrants and the cultural and political hegemony that is fostered through this performative concept of elusive belonging. Like other states in the Gulf, the UAE have dispensed their charitable activities in parallel with Western humanitarianism and therewith gain a significant share in the modern expansion of Islamic philanthropy made possible by the oil boom in late 20th century.³¹ This becomes obvious in the 700 existing religious endowments in Dubai, that were frequently visited by Tajik migrants for the purpose of religious education and counselling. Through these endowments, The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments (GAIAE)³² promotes multiple philanthropic projects to increase religious awareness, spreading Islamic culture, and developing mosques and Koranic centres.³³ When Tajiks visit charitable endowments in Dubai to ask for religious guidance or take Koranic recitation classes there, they simultaneously consume the endowments' core values, such as belonging to the nation, or loyalty to the ruler.

³¹ Lacey and Benthall 2014, 1.

³² The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments (GAIAE) is a strategic platform for sustainable endowment (*awqāf*) development. GAIAE was issued by the UAE president in 2006 and operates as an independent legal authority. Besides its crucial role in providing and maintaining religious infrastructure, supporting Islamic affairs and piety, the *awqāf*-System in the UAE holds a crucial role in development, particularly in the social, health, education and humanitarian sectors.

³³ <https://www.awqaf.gov.ae/ar/Pages/default.aspx>, accessed April 30, 2021.

Moreover, the endowments offer the otherwise rare opportunity for Tajiks to socialise with Arab Muslims. These encounters produce highly ambivalent notions of 'Arabness'. At the same time, they confirm a hierarchical relationship between the two groups that builds on a religiously superior status of Arabs who are perceived by Tajiks as 'better Muslims' due to their proficiency in Arabic as a sacred language. Besides, the exotic image that Tajiks have among Arab Muslims in Dubai as 'ignorant ex-Soviet Muslims' makes them a sought-after target group for missionary work (*da'wa*). In Maruf's words: "When you go back home from Dubai, you are a religious person (in Tajik *dindār*). The knowledge about our religion is literally lying around on the streets here. As former Soviet Muslims we have an exotic status here. Because our religious education is so poor, we get free lessons everywhere, at the workplace, at the market, in the endowments". However, encounters with Arabs are shaped by ignorance and stereotyping on both sides. Visits to charitable endowments are often accompanied by uncertainty when Tajiks are identified by Arab staff as Shiite Muslims because of their Persian first names, such as Firdaus, Mahdi, Irfan and others.

But Dubai's pious endowments also provide a space to experience moments of sameness. Against the background of a booming Muslim volunteer service in the region, Gulf charity co-produces a mobile, cosmopolitan class of aid workers.³⁴ Tajiks in the 'Dubai business' share with Arab and other Muslim volunteers working in Dubai's endowments the spirit of 'pious neoliberalism' in the new Middle East middle classes that drives them to pursue Islamic life projects that conflate economic rationales, professional careers, and upward social mobility with the pursuit of spiritual advancement, moral self-perfection, and piety.³⁵

As circulating charitable gifts, Koran copies matter here in two ways. Firstly, they involve Tajiks in commoditised social relations as they are reinforced in the context of Gulf charities. In their quality as prestigious goods, or "inalienable possessions",³⁶ Saudi-donated Korans, when given as a pious donation, enable the construction and overcoming of hierarchy by establishing a source of lasting social difference.³⁷ Accordingly, Korans are things endowed with symbolic power that cannot be separated from their owners. Through the act of donation, Korans are transfigured from a sacred text into an ambiguous commodity that points to the antagonistic structure inherent in its function as a gift,

³⁴ Li 2014, 379.

³⁵ Atia 2012, 811ff; 816ff.

³⁶ Weiner 1992.

³⁷ Mills 2004, 240.

forcing the recipient to “confirm a subjugation”.³⁸ Following this interpretation, Koran donations to Tajik migrants are embedded in the socio-political context of Gulf charity. Thus, they instil and reinforce “the common sense of hegemonic relationships” that cements demonstrative aristocratic hierarchy and neo-traditional authoritarian structures.³⁹ This logic of gift-giving makes Emirati nationals and other Arabs working in Dubai’s endowments active agents in maintaining their status as “a dominant wealthy population group amid the influx of rapid immigration and multiculturalism”.⁴⁰

In this sense, and as a second argument, Koran donations involve Tajik migrants in the circulation and exchange of prestigious consumer goods. By embedding them in mechanisms of place-branding, Saudi-donated Korans are provided with an exclusive commodity value that goes far beyond their religious authority as a sacred text. Labelled as just another consumer good brought from Dubai as *dubaiskyj* (in Russian ‘made in’ or ‘from Dubai’), the Korans mediate the process of transforming Gulf cities like Dubai into brands and thus “into an easily readable object of consumption”.⁴¹ In their quality as a medium, circulating Saudi-donated Korans reconfigure migrants’ religious experience, as they index the cultural and political hegemony of the Arabian Gulf, and thus a socio-economic project of urban development with a political, programmatic, and brandish agenda that feeds Arab nationalism in the region. The Arabian Gulf as an idea, a utopia, that “claims reversal of the cultural hegemonic order in the region”,⁴² is spectacularly represented in the hyperreality and hyper-exclusivity of Dubai’s urban landscape. These representations are not uncontested as they simultaneously epitomise success and progress and dominance and arrogance.⁴³ However, Tajik migrants consume this ambivalent idea of the Arabian Gulf when visiting iconic buildings, tourism sites and shopping malls, but also when going to charitable endowments and praying in Dubai’s spectacular mosques. Using, gifting, or circulating Saudi-donated Korans, Tajiks engage in a sense of ‘Arabness’, through which they attach themselves to the Arabian Gulf as an exclusive modernisation project in the region, from which they are explicitly excluded because of their temporary migrant status.

³⁸ Parkhurst 2014, 345; 346.

³⁹ Ibid., 345.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 350.

⁴¹ Bromber et al. 2014, 10.

⁴² Ibid., 1.

⁴³ Ibid., 11.

Conclusion: A material geography of ‘bourgeois Islam’

Tracing the mobility of prestigious religious objects through multiple socio-spatial contexts and the process of their consequent transfiguration into an indexing consumer good, this chapter explored ‘Dubai business’ as a fluid and dynamic spatiality that transcends taken-for-granted spatial orders and conventional unitary area frames such as ‘Central Asia’, ‘the Middle East’, or ‘the Gulf’. An assemblage of migration, trading and tourism business, and Islamic life projects, ‘Dubai business’ evolves as a dynamic transregional platform of material and immaterial exchange and circulation that connects, creates, and forms multiple entangled Muslim worlds (economic, social, and religious, Persophone, Arabophone, Russophone, post-Soviet, among others). These Muslim worlds are appropriated, inhabited, shaped, and experienced by Tajik migrants in multiple ways.

In line with Enseng Ho’s⁴⁴ methodological advocacy for “thick transregionalism”, this chapter suggested a phenomenological approach to understand the existential dimension of transregional spatial entities. Focusing on connectivity, material mediation, and transition, the chapter has shown how ‘Dubai business’ shapes migrants’ lifeworlds in multiple ways. As illustrated, Tajiks are involved in Dubai’s tourism and trading business world via Persian-speaking networks. While ‘Persianness’ provides an important cultural repertoire for economic development and spiritual advancement, Tajik migrants’ display of ‘Arabness’ articulates their strong longing for attachment to the more prestigious, but exclusive, Arab world of business, commerce, and cultural hegemony. Obviously, the Muslim worlds that Tajik migrants inhabit in Dubai are simultaneously real, experienced, and sensed, and thus materially existing *and* imagined. At the same time, these worlds are contested. When claiming to belong flexibly to both the *Persian Gulf*, with its historically grown cosmopolitan trading culture, and the *Arabian Gulf*, a political project that promotes an Arab nationalism that seeks to overwrite the cosmopolitan and transcultural heritage of long-established economic and cultural connectivities across the Indian Ocean,⁴⁵ Tajiks situate themselves in the actual political and cultural discourses on regional supremacy.

⁴⁴ Ho 2014, 885.

⁴⁵ Among other studies see Vora 2013, 36ff.

Through their involvement in transregional networks of Muslim mobility, trade, and connectivity, Tajik migrants creatively participate in processes of economic and cultural globalisation, as they are re-worked in intermediate regions such as the Gulf. Although Saudi-donated Korans are not the only Korans used by Tajik migrants and their families, their multi-local presence points to Saudi Arabia's external reach and the country's influence to shape globalised cultural and political fields through international religious donations. Globalisation has revitalised the idea of the Ummah, as a postcolonial form of imagination for Muslims, particularly in migrant and diasporic contexts. Migrant narratives of the Ummah as a business community that creates moments of sharing, solidarity, as well as a sense of belonging to something larger that promotes post-national orientations, confirms Appadurai's diagnosis that "imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only escape".⁴⁶ At the same time, different conceptions of what the Ummah is, are worked out in complex interactions of every day Muslim sociabilities, that emphasise diversity, difference, fragmentation, and reproduce existing notions of 'centre' and 'periphery'.

Tajiks' positioning within the Ummah is framed through their sensed 'peripheral' status among Muslims in Central Asia and the wider world. Fashioning an exclusive migrant identity as Muslim businesspeople articulates their desire to overcome ethnic, regional, and national concepts of identity, inherent to the notion of 'Tajikness'. This observation is in line with the refusal to share business and living spaces with Turkish-speaking groups from Central Asia. Additionally, a sense of an elitist 'Muslimness' indexes Tajiks' socio-economic position in the highly pluralised and hierarchical migrant world in the Emirates, where they operate as 'free' businesspeople independently from the Emirati *kafāla* sponsorship system. Tajiks, in that way, reproduce racial discourses about low-wage labour Asian migrants, mainly from South Asia. The latter group of migrants, as shown, was not perceived as part of Dubai's Muslim business worlds by Tajiks. As a form of cultural and political situatedness, Kresse⁴⁷ has argued that peripherality can favour a cosmopolitanism that grounds on flexibility, openness, adaptability, and creativity to engage in multiple discourses, debates, and cultures on different scales. This offers a repertoire of knowledge, experience, and skills, Tajiks can draw upon while abroad to fashion their intermediary status as economic middlemen and cultural brokers. This goes hand in hand with the experience of both superiority and subordination.

⁴⁶ Appadurai 1996, 7.

⁴⁷ Kresse 2013, 80–82.

This social reality complicates the common understanding of centre and periphery and creates ambivalent narratives of belonging and the imaginary notion of the Ummah as a normative entity.

With their aesthetic authority and mobile biography, Saudi-donated Korans operate both as a medium and as 'icons', through which processes of socio-economic, religious and cultural positioning and re-positioning of Tajik migrants can be traced as well as embedded in translocal and transregional fields of mobility, connectivity, and exchange. So, how do ideas (religious experiences, ideals, and ideas of place) travel between the Gulf and the home of Tajik migrants? The blueprint of Gulf urbanism is being increasingly adopted in other parts of the Muslim world, in the course of transforming post-colonial urban landscapes into globalising places of living, working, and leisure that serve the new needs of the middle class and the demands of both local and international visitors.⁴⁸ In Tajikistan, the aspirational world of 'Dubai business' finds its way into private households mainly through prestigious goods that travel in the pockets of migrants. Thus, Saudi-donated Korans play a role in terms of their indexicality for an exclusive 'bourgeois Islam'. An aspirational migrant project oriented towards middle class lifestyles and social mobility, the notion of 'bourgeois Islam' is inseparable from 'Dubai' as a brand that epitomises progress and success in the context of a hypermodernity that is highly exclusive.⁴⁹ When Tajiks use Saudi-donated Korans from Dubai for their daily prayers or individual Koran recitations, during ritual gatherings or as a travel souvenir visibly displayed in the wall unit, they consume the exclusivity attached to the notion of 'bourgeois Islam', and thus participate in this project while they themselves stay at home. Moreover, Saudi-donated Korans are passed around in private gatherings where the wives of returned migrants flaunt Dubai's lifestyle among relatives and neighbours as they show off the latest Islamic fashion, modern kitchen appliances and trendy tableware that their husbands brought from Dubai. Thus, Saudi-donated Korans become a marker of social distinction and, in this capacity, a commodity whose symbolic value is created by desire, as the Korans also index the taste, cosmopolitanism, and exclusive urbanity of their owners.

⁴⁸ See the works of Adham 2014, Choplin and Franck 2014.

⁴⁹ Bromber et al. 2014, 3.

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