Rumour and Myth in the Labour Camps of Qatar

Andrew Gardner  
University of Puget Sound, gardner@pugetsound.edu

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RUMOUR AND MYTH IN THE LABOUR CAMPS OF QATAR

Al Attiya, or the ‘Industrial Area’, is a vast urban grid of both heavy and light industry on the outskirts of contemporary Doha. This ‘Industrial Area’ is perhaps best conceived as the busy backstage to the cosmopolitan and symbolically crowded urban frontstage presented to the visiting world. The towering skyscrapers, spacious shopping malls, residential developments, gargantuan mosques, proliferating museums, astonishing hotels and colossal stadiums of that urban frontstage require construction and service, and by morning in Doha one can readily observe the countless buses carrying men from this peripheral Industrial Area to their workplaces in various parts of the city.

As evening approaches, the roads again fill with Tata and Ashok-Leyland buses as the men return to their labour camps. By nightfall, the industry of the Industrial Area largely ceases, and the area’s function as a residential zone for the transnational South Asian underclass becomes apparent. The gravel roads, once paved but now in disrepair, fill with traffic, and endless crowds of foreign labourers mill about on the shoulders of the wide boulevards. As dusk arrives and then progresses, the men make their way back to the labour camps that are their home for the duration of their transnational sojourn in Qatar. These camps – most typically dormitory-style buildings that, in my experience, vary from unfinished to decrepit – fill the backstreets and the interstices between the heavy and light industry of this busy grid of streets. Beyond that grid, the margins abutting the Industrial Area are dotted with piles of garbage, construction detritus, and abandoned vehicles. A few hundred metres further lies the flat open desert of the Qatari peninsula.

Fieldwork, labour camps, and two urban legends

Most of the men who reside in this Industrial Area work six days a week. Friday is a day of rest – a time for visiting friends from home, shopping in commercial districts, cleaning the backstreets and the interstices between the heavy and light industry of this busy grid of streets. Beyond that grid, the margins abutting the Industrial Area are dotted with piles of garbage, construction detritus, and abandoned vehicles. A few hundred metres further lies the flat open desert of the Qatari peninsula.

Fig. 1. Sikh South Asian labourers at a labour camp on a Friday in the Industrial Area.

and an arm cloaked in a black abaya beckoned him forward out of the window. He ran to the SUV. Four Qatari women inside promised him a ride to his camp. He was wary, but they somehow persuaded him to join them in the back seat. Once inside, the women offered him a drink – perhaps a soda. Unbeknownst to him, the drink contained a heavy narcotic, and once he was physically immobilized by the concoction, he found himself unable to react appropriately to the suddenly problematic situation. The women drove the Land Cruiser through the remaining blocks of the Industrial Area, past the fringe of garbage and detritus, and out into the darkness of the open desert. Paralyzed by the narcotic, the young man was at their mercy, and once they had reached the privacy of the dark open desert, the four Qatari women took turns raping the young man over the long hours of the remaining night. Finally, as the morning sun peeked over the horizon, the women moved the still immobilized young man back into the Land Cruiser. They drove him back to the location where they had originally picked him up. They stuffed QR 2000 (U.S. $550) into his pocket, and pushed him from the back seat of the Land Cruiser onto the hardpan gravel found on the side of the road. The young man stumbled back to his labour camp, told his friends of the night’s horrific misadventure, and his story began to spread like a wildfire from camp to camp in the Industrial Area.¹

Between 2008 and 2010, the labour camps of this Industrial Area were the geographical epicentre of my ethnographic fieldwork. Funded by a grant from the Center for International and Regional Studies at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, I spent those two years following a group of ten new transnational labour migrants through the trials and tribulations of work and life in Qatar. In practice, the project very much resembled the ‘Friday ethnography’ Caroline Osella recently noted as typical of the Gulf,² for the bulk of my participation and observation of the lives of these labour migrants occurred when they were at these labour camps, which, excepting occasional weekday visits in the late evening, meant long visits and sustained conversations on Fridays.

In methodological terms, my project was built upon a foundation of recurring semi-structured interviews with each of the ten participants. Before and after those formal interviews, I spent hours visiting, eating, and, to reduce our anthropological term participant observation to its essence, ‘hanging out’ at these labour camps. This brought me into contact with my participants’ friends, acquaintances, roommates, enemies, superiors, and relatives. Our conversations rambled and roved.

Early in my fieldwork and well before I gathered the aforementioned story, I heard a remarkable urban legend from one of the participants in my study about a pair of Nepalese migrants who fell prey to Vietnamese cannibals. Vietnamese labour contingents were a new and unfamiliar addition to the transnational workforce in Qatar. The following week,
I heard another version of the same story from another project participant in a different (and distant) labour camp. My new-found friends in the labour camps warned me to keep my distance from the Vietnamese camps in the Industrial Area—those men were ‘savages’, my friends claimed, and they would literally try to eat me if given the chance. Over the coming week, the story began to accumulate more details: body parts crammed in a refrigerator, the wafting smells of cooking flesh, human fingers spotted in X-rays, and so forth. Then, to my surprise, the story was reported in the newspapers on the peninsula, only to be retracted a few days later as unverified. In addition to its petroleum resources, Qatar is also blessed with an abundance of conspiracy theories, and many suggested that the retraction was part of the state’s plot to preserve its growing international reputation. This conspiracy theory, popular with many of the men in the Industrial Area, preserved the general assertion of the rumour’s truth. Regardless of its veracity, I began to make it a point to collect these stories that seemed to speed like electricity through the tens of thousands of men consigned to this strange industrial hinterland just beyond the modernity of frontstage Doha. It seemed an anthropological thing to do, for myths and stories have been a valued type of ethnographic data since the inception of the discipline, and to this day they remain a vital frontier in social scientific analysis.1

My own inking regarding the meaning of these myths and urban legends began with Chidester’s (1990) observation that culture, to paraphrase, is simply a story we tell ourselves about ourselves—that these urban legends are first and foremost stories that speak to the collective conditions these migrants face and the meaning(s) they make of those conditions. I would also accept William Rosebery’s (1989) corrective of Geertz’s famous treatise—a corrective that, without dismissing the interpretive mission Geertz delineated, suggested the meanings of the stories cultures tell themselves about themselves are incomplete without sustained analytic reference to the historical political economic context in which they are produced and reproduced.3

To my mind, Rosebery’s concerns with the Geertzian interpretive turn mirror a constellation of other more pressing and recent debates in anthropology concerning the state. In the most general terms, these perspectives move away from a priori assumptions about the constitution or taxonomy of the state, and shift the focus instead to how the state is grasped, encountered, imagined, perceived, misunderstood and experienced in a variety of different venues and contexts.4 This is the departure point I wish to take with my analysis, and the juncture from which I depart was clearly and recently described by Filippo and Caroline Osella, who noted that:

The most recent anthropological turn has explored the part played by gossip, rumor and hearsay in people’s relations to and understandings of ‘the state’ and its work, and hence its effectiveness and reach. This indicates a tension between the way the state produces itself—and is produced through social theory—as disembedded, reified beyond and above the reach of social relations and interests and the lived experience of state apparatuses and bureaucracies which are inevitably enmeshed in complex social relations, and hence continually open to popular scrutiny.5

As the Osellas’ comments imply, the unbelievable (and indeed, impossible) stories that circulate in the labour camps of Qatar, as a form of this gossip, rumour and hearsay, are noteworthy not for the fact that they are most certainly false (that young Qatari women prowl the Industrial Area in new Land Cruisers!), but rather that these urban legends codify and organize the experiences of South Asian labour migrants, their encounter with the state, and their experience—or more precisely, their lack of experience—with Qatar society and its constituent members.6 Indeed, Luise White, in her brilliant analysis of rumour and myth in postcolonial Africa, arrived at much the same conclusion when she noted that rumours and myth are a stronger repository of meaning than factual information or eyewitness accounts, for it is through their falseness, she suggests, that these rumours and myths accumulate meaning and then become ‘a way of talking that encourages a reassessment of everyday experience to address the workings of power and knowledge and how regimes use them’ (White 2000: 43).8

With all of that in mind, I will briefly present a set of additional myths and urban legends gathered from the men I came to know in the Industrial Area of Qatar. After I gathered and codified these stories, I will return to an analysis of the threads connecting these stories and, more specifically, to what we might learn about the experiences and governance of these men from the rumours and stories they tell and retell.

A third urban legend

On a Friday afternoon, a young Nepali migrant found his way to a remote area of beach near one of the few remaining areas of Qatar from which foreign migrants are not actively policed off the city’s frontstage. He was midway through a long walk on this beach when ahead of him he saw some sort of animal. As he approached, it became clear that it was a snake. The snake reared its head, or rather heads, for the animal encountered was, by initial reports, a five-headed snake. The man retreated, and used his mobile phone to call the police, who arrived shortly thereafter. The police, in turn, called the proper authorities—in this case, zookeepers—who were able to capture the animal and relocate it to the zoo. Strangely, the migrant who had first seen the snake perished later that night according to the various versions of the urban legend I gathered.

That is the essence of the story as it was told to me. In the labour camps over the coming days, plans were hatched to visit the zoo on the following Friday. The men wanted to see the snake first-hand, and seemed unconcerned by the fate of the original protagonist in this story. They thought the snake might have supernatural powers, ‘like the snakes you see in the movies’, one young man noted. Another South Asian migrant noted that the snake might be a reincarnation of Shesh Nag or Adi Shesh, the snake that Lord Vishnu sleeps upon; a snake that serves as his throne, bed, and, seemingly, umbrella.9 If that was the case, this particular labour migrant continued, the snake should be as big as this room, and if it was Shesh Nag, then this snake would not be evil. When I pushed these men to more clearly articulate why they would be spared the fate of the original protagonist, they conversed momentarily, and then noted that the original protagonist had perhaps thought ill of the snake, and thereby brought the ire of this powerful god upon himself. Recognizing that I remained dubious as to this snake’s existence, the men also procured evidence in the form of digital photographs that friends had sent (which I would later discover had been pulled from the Qatar Living website’s ‘busy and jocular message boards’).

On the following Friday, the city’s zoo was besieged by South Asian labourers, all of whom returned to the Industrial Area with reports that the state (in their parlance, either the ‘government’ or the ‘police’) had decided to relocate the snake to an unknown location. Some of the men were angry, for they had committed substantial resources to the weekend journey out of the Industrial Area. At the same time, the social effect of this story produced very unwelcome results in Qatar, for suddenly crowds of South Asian men began forming in places where, according to the geography of urban segregation, these men didn’t belong. In a very real sense, these crowds of men disturbed the comfortable segregation that typifies contemporary Doha and the cities of the other wealthy Gulf states.

A fourth urban legend

According to many of the men with whom I spoke over my two years in the labour camps of Qatar, there is an abandoned villa in the coastal town of Al Khor. Although most of the migrants who told and retold this story had, like many contemporary labour migrants, been in Qatar for only a year or two, the story itself begins long ago and long before their arrival in Qatar. As they told the story, a female Indian domestic servant was sponsored, hired, and brought to Qatar by the patriarch of a wealthy South Asian family. In the early 1990s, when the man’s wife was ill in the hospital, they slowly regained their health, woke up to find that all of their remaining living room furniture was piled in front of the
house. Finally, fearing for their well-being, the family moved out. They rented the villa to several other families, but all of them moved out after less than a month. Now the villa lies abandoned. Near to the villa there is a labour camp, and friends report that the men from this labour camp oftentimes see an apparition that haunts the desert hillside – a woman in white, who can speak any language. She calls out to them for help, but as they approach she vanishes. The workers who speak with this ghostly woman get severe body pains and fall sick.

Making sense of these urban legends: A sortie

In the aforementioned essay by Clifford Geertz, he establishes the mission of the anthropologist as one of making interpretive sorties, or venturing an explanation of the observed, and drawing upon the contextual, ethnographic understanding that members of our discipline gain by sustained immersion in the culture in question – or ‘being there’, in Geertz’s terms. The sortie I wish to assemble, traces three threads in these stories presented above, and I readily admit that other lines of analysis are certainly possible (and perhaps more plausible) than those I present here. At the outset, I suggest that these myths and stories can be understood as instruments of governance in that they portray the collectively established boundaries of appropriate behaviour in a cultural setting foreign to these unskilled (and predominantly South Asian) labourers. A close analysis of the content of these myths and rumours, however, also helps us grapple with the connections and contradictions between power, race, class, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender and sexuality in the extraordinarily heterogeneous context of the contemporary Gulf state.

I’d like to begin by suggesting that these stories index the powerlessness unskilled South Asian migrants encounter in the Gulf states. As I and others have argued at length elsewhere, the kafala (or sponsorship system in the Gulf states) structures a set of relations in which the power of the citizen-sponsor and, more often in Qatar, that sponsor’s proxies, far outweighs the power and agency any particular migrant might bring to the table. While there is much more to say about the architecture and orchestration of this system, here I wish to focus on the mechanisms by which this sponsorship system distributes the task of migrant governance and regulation to individual citizen-sponsors, and thereby essentially transfers these everyday apprehensions of the Gulf state – as vague, mercurial and threateningly powerful – to its citizenry. The power of the state is experienced and understood as embodied in the citizenry. Consider, for example, this short passage from one of my ethnographic interviews:

I heard that we are not supposed to make eye contact with Qatari girls. We are always supposed to keep our heads down whenever they are present because if we are caught looking at them, the Qatari men will behead us. So, whenever we ride the bus, we look out of the windows and if we see Qatari girls, we close our eyes.
Obviously it’s these sorts of proscriptions, passed from veteran labour migrants to new arrivals, that become the substance of the embodiment of the experience of coalescing in the sorts of stories I’ve presented here. But here I’m specifically interested in the slippage between state and citizen — how, in this comment, the monopoly on the legitimate use of power, to quote Weber’s often-cited perspective on the state, is transposed from the state to ‘the Qatari men’. The state, in these conceptions, is not the reified and disembodied complex of apparatuses, bureaucracies, laws and procedures that characterize its presentation, but rather a configuration of powers inseparable from their embodiment in individual citizens.

Considering the fact that most of the unskilled labour migrants live in an almost entirely male world for their years abroad, it is also perhaps worth noting the recurring and central role that women play in these rumours. The women in these urban legends humanize the vast contingents of unskilled male labour that currently stream to the Gulf. As others have noted, the active and cosmopolitan imaginary at the junction between Gulf migration and the human rights discourse seems fixated on a particular sort of trafficked female ‘victim’ (of the very sort that makes an appearance in the abused domestic servant story I collected in the labour camps). To my mind, these stories redress that simplification, and attest to the emotional and experiential complexity of the male migrants’ collective experiences in the Gulf — men who exist not only as a disempowered and homogeneous mass by the calculus of the Gulf migration system, but who also fall easily into the limiting nomenclature of ‘labour’ within the lexicon of scholarly analysis.

Andrew Gardner
University of Puget Sound
gardner@pugetsound.edu

Andrew Gardner is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington, USA. His fieldwork and research with labour migrants in the Gulf States stretches back more than a decade, and he is the author of City of strangers: Gulf migration and the Indian community in Bahrain. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).

1. See Gardner 2010c.
2. In some versions of this story, the four women kill the protagonist and toss his body into the desert, which leaves the storyteller with the seemingly insurmountable task of explaining how the details of this story came to be known.
5. Note that Roseberry never questioned the focal point of Geertz’s analysis: he welcomed anthropology’s penchant for symbolic analysis. But, as part of Roseberry’s commitment to an anthropology with a deep intellectual commitment ‘to the understanding, analysis, and explication of the relations and structures of power in, through, and against which ordinary people live their lives’, he chided Geertz for his inattentiveness to the historical political economic forces that shaped the meaning of the ‘story’ Geertz analyzed. See Geertz 1973; Roseberry 1989: 6.
7. And, continuing, that, ‘While the [Gulf] “state” might remain difficult to define and locate, its effects on people’s lives are then significant and tangible, especially for migrant labour that has to navigate and confront, as it does in the Gulf states, complex migration regulations, hostile bureaucracies and stringent residency laws on a daily basis’. These statements were part of an early draft of a paper presented in Doha, Qatar, as part of the Center for International and Regional Studies’ Migrant Labor in the Gulf Working Group.
8. And they are particularly fascinating because these rumours, in moving across linguistic, cultural, national, and religious groups, codify a set of experiences that transcend the cultural particularities of the many different peoples (and cultural groups) constituting Qatar’s imported workforce.
10. Shesh Nag is the snake associated with Vishnu, and both Vishnu and Shesh Nag are conceived as ‘manifestations of a single divine presence’ (Krishnan 1967).
11. In terms of ‘being there’, my experience in the Arabian Gulf states includes three months in Saudi Arabia (1999), several months in the UAE (2002-2003), two years in Qatar (2008-2010), and ongoing return visits to Qatar since that time.
13. See Gardner 2010a; 2010b for a more in-depth analysis.
14. For one rendition of this argument, see Ahmad (2012).

Fig. 7. Crowds of labour migrants in the Industrial Area’s commercial centre on a Friday afternoon.