

My AIPS grant covered the first six-month phase of my dissertation research, conducted in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, U.A.E. Research in this phase coalesced around four areas of inquiry. These will be expanded in a second phase of my research for the remainder of 2012.

1. Central to my AIPS proposal was the question of how members of a minority Pakistani immigrant community in Abu Dhabi and Dubai “recalibrate” their participation in mourning ceremonies paradigmatic to Shi’ism. Community members consider themselves to operate under a condition of *pabandi*, or “restriction.” Practically, state regulations aimed at civic order prevent them from performing central mourning rituals, such as parading and self-flagellation in public, during their central period of mourning. While ritual blood-letting to honor the martyrdom of the Prophet’s family members is disallowed, blood donation is encouraged by religious community leaders and the state. Donation sites during central *Muharram* mourning days were organized and coordinated between the community organization and the Dubai Department of Health. I observed participation in blood donation in December 2011, and interviewed organizers and participants, in order to consider how ritual blood letting is made mutually productive of civic virtue and religious virtue. In doing so, the findings expand on recent India-based anthropological work on virtuous flows (Clark-Deces 2005, Pandian 2009) and blood donation in religious experience (Coleman 2009) in order to consider the role of religious expression in civic participation. My findings suggest that genres of poetic expression surrounding self-flagellation rituals are replaced by mantras guiding and encouraging blood donation based both on Qur’anic passages and direct references to the experience of Prophet’s family – a central concern for Shias.

2. In formulating my research proposal, I described various anxieties impacting upon this minority immigrant population in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. I began to attend weekly sermons given at the Urdu Shia centers in both Emirates regularly in December 2011, to listen for the form of the expression of anxiety. Here, I attuned myself to certain denunciations of Western education – for example, perceptions of an anti-Islam politics/agenda in Western scholarship that, in the sermon, took the form of a conspiracy. During this time, I took note of other informants who speculated (in conversations at the *majlis* gatherings) about the location of the Twelfth Imam’s occultation as the “Bermuda Triangle”—a reference I took to be a familiar conspiracy theory. I watched multiple sermons from this year, both live and on DVD recording, as well as three from past years, in order to understand the role of overstatement with in the effort to reconcile/overcome the specter of mysterious unknowns. This was an important mode for me to understand the how oral teachings mix with speculation and rumor to ultimately register anxieties in the form of conspiracy theories.

3. My project seeks to understand the impact of recent traumas and the ongoing experience of “homeland” violence on life in Abu Dhabi / Dubai for Pashto-speaking Pakistanis. One informant, a heavy vehicle driver in Dubai with whom I had several informal conversations in March 2012, described for me his experience being abducted by Taliban forces in 2011. He rendered his months-long ordeal in detail. For him and the others with whom he lives (mostly taxi drivers), I argue that Dubai is experienced as a radical contrast with home. Civil order in Dubai contrasts with the central role of weapons and the importance of personal defense in home-life in Pakistan for many of my informants; one described in detail the range of guns and weaponry held by his home and those of his relatives. Other contrasts are aesthetic and registered in poetry, including songs that mention Dubai directly and remark upon the contrasting architecture of homes between Dubai and Pashto-speaking areas of Pakistan, which I watched with Pashtun informants in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. I collected four such Pashto songs which directly reference and contrast the environment of Dubai / Abu Dhabi. I met with and discussed these themes with one Pashto/Urdu poet living in Dubai, whose work addresses such contrasts.

4. In February and March I began working with a group of Urdu-speaking interior designers from India and Pakistan, who work in Abu Dhabi but live in Dubai. In February, I traveled with them to Abu Dhabi to a construction site where they began negotiating a contract to fix woodwork damages to rooms in a nearly completed high-rise. While they value their work as high-skilled and even artistic, the tenor of the negotiation revealed the contractor’s (de)valuation of the work required as primarily “touch-ups.” Shortcomings for this group – whether in the form of limited work opportunities, financial hardship, or work that is tedious and undervalued – are confronted with a combination of deliberating/attending to aspects of Shia devotion, as well as creative aspirations. Like other workers whose workdays involve long periods of driving, idle-time while driving is filled with deliberation on religious questions; often an examination of themes and arguments carried forward from the audition of sermons, both live at gatherings sites in and around Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and recorded. Additionally, this group’s promotional materials feature an amalgam of photos attributed to their past projects, as well as those of famous world landmarks that they do not, in their presentation, readily delineated from their own work. I take this type of associative attribution in their portfolio as a form of creative aspiration. Both examples speak to the role of imagination in overcoming the shortcomings and tedium of their work experience in Dubai currently. This section of research was based on shadowing work and homelife for this group regularly (5-6 days per week) for three weeks in February and March.

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