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Intersectionality and the Labour Market in the United Arab Emirates: the Experiences of African Migrants

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Abstract. The Arab Gulf region is one of the major destinations of labour migration besides Europe and North America. While the majority of migrants come from South and South East Asia as well as from neighbouring Arab countries, the region has also become an attractive destination for migrants from Africa. In particular, business hubs such as Dubai and Doha have attracted traders, jobseekers, and recently also students from various African countries. So far, little attention has been devoted to the growing presence and heterogeneity of these migrants, or to variations in their migration experiences. Moreover, several studies have highlighted social hierarchies as a structuring element of Gulf societies, and have identified multiple vectors of inequality, including ethnicity, gender, and class. In this paper, we will adopt an intersectional approach to studying the experiences of African migrants in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in particular in relation to their integration into the labour market and the recruitment of business partners. Similarly to migrants from other parts of the Global South, African migrants and entrepreneurs are exposed to a variety of structural constraints that impact on their entry into the UAE economy, often channelling them into low-paying, elementary occupations. Yet once they have entered the system and regularized their stay, they may explore alternative routes to improve on their situation. As the case studies investigated in this paper will show, African migrants flexibly use their intersecting positionalities, in particular ethnicity, nationality, race, and gender, to renegotiate their place in the segregated UAE economy and seek upward professional and social mobility.

[intersectionality, migration, labour market, United Arab Emirates, Africa]

Introduction

The Arab Gulf region is one of the top regional destinations for international migration besides North America and the European Union (United Nations 2017). Offering a wide range of business and employment opportunities, the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, have attracted some 25 million foreign nationals from all over the world, who constitute approximately 50 percent of the region's total popu-

lation (GLMM 2016). While the majority come from South and South East Asia, followed by migrants from Arab countries, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union, there has also been a small but growing number of migrants from different parts of Africa (cf. Abusharaf and Eickelmann 2015; Nyarko and Melitsko 2010).

A crucial characteristic of the GCC countries lies in the fact that labour market regulations are closely intertwined with immigration control. The *kafala* or sponsorship system regulates the entry and stay of foreigners. It has been described as “essentially an employer-led, large-scale guest worker program that is open to admitting migrant workers, but at the same time restrictive in terms of the rights granted to migrants after admission” (Ruhs 2013:98). Legal frameworks slightly differ from country to country and also change over time (Mednicoff 2012; Zahra 2015). But generally, under the *kafala* system, a foreigner can only reside and work legally in a GCC state if s/he is sponsored and employed by a private or state institution or by a citizen of the state in question. Some categories of foreigners are allowed to sponsor dependents or domestic workers, provided they meet the minimum monthly salary requirement. In selected locations, such as Dubai, wealthy foreigners can also acquire residency by purchasing property in the city’s freehold zones.

As compared to Europe and North America, acquiring a work, business or tourist visa to enter the GCC countries is relatively easy, as it is for nationals from countries in the Global South. This makes migration to the GCC countries attractive. At the same time, critics of the *kafala* system argue that it allows exploitation and abuse of workers, as it gives legal power to the sponsor, while placing the migrant in a position of structural vulnerability (e.g. Gardner 2010; Human Rights Watch 2006, 2007; Longva 1999). Indeed, as a particularity of the *kafala* system, the sponsor (*kafeel*) is responsible for the foreign worker’s rightful employment, residency, and eventual departure. The *kafeel* is also required to inform the authorities of any contractual changes, and is entitled to restrict the worker’s mobility and change of employment. The GCC states have thus effectively delegated to citizens, sponsors, and their proxies much of the responsibility for governing the population of foreign workers (Lori 2012; Gardner 2014).¹

The *kafala* system generally does not permit long-term stays or permanent settlement. Consequently, migrant workers usually arrive in the Arab Gulf States with two-year or three-year contracts. Once the contracts expire, migrants are supposed to leave the country immediately unless contracts are renewed or extended. However, as Valenta et al. (2019) have shown for the United Arab Emirates, population censuses indicate that there has been a growing number of migrant workers who have

1 Foreign workers can also enter the GCC countries using a tourist or business visa, but must find employment before their visa expires. Some have resorted to irregular ways to circumvent the *kafala* system (Fargues and Shah 2017). Here, the sale and purchase of work visas through an unofficial method known as ‘free visa’ stands out. As indicated by Longva and confirmed by our own research, it represents a rare instance of migrant workers’ and sponsors’ collusion to subvert the *kafala* system (Damir-Geilsdorf and Pelican 2019; Longva 1997; Pessoa et al. 2014).

stayed in the country for more than the usual three years – at times more than 10 or 15 years. Among others, these include migrants from Yemen and Sudan, of whom 97 percent and 95 percent respectively have resided in the UAE for more than four years (Valenta et al. 2019:5). Moreover, the migration profile of the UAE compiled by the United Nations (2014) indicates that in 2013 6.19 million out of 7.83 million migrant workers (i.e. 79 percent) were between 20 and 45 years old, while those older than 45 years amounted to less than 360,000 persons. The age distribution may be attributed to employers' preference for a young and productive workforce as well as the fact that foreigners are largely excluded from social security measures, such as health coverage and retirement pensions, for which they have to compensate with private insurance plans, often inaccessible to low-income workers.²

Foreigners, including people born in the country, are generally excluded from citizenship in the GCC countries.³ Here, citizenship is characterized by a differential system of inclusion and exclusion that strongly privileges nationals over non-nationals and produces different forms of belonging and integration in the labour market (e.g. Dresch 2006; Kanna 2011; Lori 2012). Nationals enjoy several benefits and privileges which are denied to non-nationals, e.g. entitlement to social security. Similarly, nationals are mostly employed in the public sector, where employees enjoy generous compensation packages and desirable working conditions (Daleure and Al Shareef 2015; Sherif 2013). Conversely, the overwhelming majority of foreigners are channelled into the private sector, which offers far fewer benefits, and is notorious for worker exploitation (Human Rights Watch 2006, 2007). Migrant entrepreneurs can only open a company if they are in partnership with an Emirati national who functions as the business partner and company sponsor, and who is officially the main shareholder.

The labour market is ethnically segregated, and recruitment practices openly steer workers toward specific occupations that are associated with certain ethnicities and/or nationalities (Ewers and Dicce 2016; Nagy 2006), a practice branded as institutionalized racism in liberal democratic societies. Accordingly, Gulf Arabs are more likely than other migrants to work in the public sector, while access to high-paying jobs in the private sector is often restricted to migrants from the Global North (Al Ariss and Chun Guo 2016:583). Furthermore, there is an established hierarchy of occupations and pay scales. Salaries of migrant workers often vary depending on their nationality. A study by Vora, for example, revealed that companies openly exclude job applicants from India from certain high-paying jobs and pay them lower salaries and fewer bonuses for the same work than their colleagues from the Global North (Vora 2008:385–88). Other studies indicate that African migrants often face deskilling in the UAE labour market,

2 See also Kathiravelu 2012 for migrants' strategies for establishing alternative social security networks.

3 Valenta (2017) compares migration systems and policies in the GCC and the EU. He argues that while the GCC countries offer opportunities to larger numbers of temporary labour migrants, they are highly restrictive regarding acquisition of permanent status or citizenship compared to the EU member states.

whereby employers disregard their academic or professional qualifications, directing them to low-paying jobs which require little or no skill (Malit and Tchiapep 2013).

As ethnographic research has shown, there is considerable variability in the ways migrants experience and handle the *kafala* system (Gardner 2014; Vora and Koch 2015). While so far, no systematic intersectional analysis has been realized, researchers have identified multiple vectors of inequality and exploitation, notably gender, class, and ethnicity (with ethnicity, race, and nationality often being used interchangeably). Gender clearly plays a significant role in structuring Gulf societies, both for migrant women and women of Emirati background, though in different ways (Dresch 2006; Longva 1993; Sonbol 2012).

Our aim in this study is to adopt an intersectional approach to analyze the experiences of African migrants in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in particular in relation to their integration into the labour market and the recruitment of business partners. Consequently, we seek answers to the following research questions: What positionalities do African migrants hold in the UAE economy, both as employees and entrepreneurs? What strategies do they use in negotiating their insertion into the segregated (formal and informal) UAE economy? How do ethnicity, nationality, race, and gender affect their experiences in the labour market? Are they able to achieve upward professional and social mobility?

We argue that, while in the beginning African migrants are generally channelled into low-paying, elementary occupations, they are not clearly positioned in the UAE labour market. There is leeway for negotiation and upward professional and social mobility. This will be illustrated by the following three case studies, which highlight different challenges and strategies. While African migrants are locked into a system where ethnicity, nationality, race, and gender are prime vectors of inequality, the case studies show how they try to use these positionalities in their own favour. The case studies also suggest that compared to Western contexts (Creese and Wiebe 2009; Helgertz 2010), the UAE economy values soft skills, work experience, and entrepreneurial spirit over education and professional qualifications.

Conceptual and methodological framework informing our analysis

We adopt intersectionality as both a conceptual and methodological framework for our analysis. Intersectionality was introduced to draw attention to the connections between different vectors of inequality. Rooted in feminist sociology, it also functioned as a critique of academic feminism from a Black, activist, and more inclusive perspective (e.g. Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Crenshaw 1989; Lutz 2014). It highlights the interlocking and mutual constitution of different forms of social positioning such as gender, class, and several others as opposed to viewing them as separate and essentialist categories. Scholars, such as Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981) opened the concept up for anthro-

pological analysis and included other categorizations. Despite a lack of consensus on the definition of intersectionality, its key proponents agree that members of minorities tend to experience inequalities in varying configurations and degrees of intensity. At the same time, social actors not only endure disadvantage and constraints, but actively negotiate and make use of their multiple and intersecting identities (Lutz 2015). While gender, class, ethnicity, and race have been the focus of much intersectional analysis, there may also be other social positionings that matter in specific social contexts (Nash 2008; Osanami and Ngeh 2017). In recent years, intersectionality has become a relevant approach in migration studies (Anthias 2012; Bastia 2014). While much of the theoretical analysis has drawn on research in the United States and Europe, there are few studies focusing on other parts of the world. A notable exception is the volume edited by Plüss and Chan (2010), which looks at intersectionality in transnational contexts in different parts of Asia. As this and other studies make clear, there is variation in the ways intersectionality plays out in different regional, historical, and cultural contexts.

By adopting intersectionality as an analytical and methodological approach, it is our aim to identify the social positionings relevant for migrants in the UAE, and to understand how they intersect and interact with each other. Based on the literature and our fieldwork, we argue that the relevant categories include ethnicity, nationality, race, and gender. Drawing on the methodological proposals of Anthias (2012) and Lutz (2014), we work in a context-specific and topic-oriented way, and focus not only on individuals' structural constraints but also on their abilities to flexibly negotiate and utilize their multiple and intersecting identities.

This contribution draws on research conducted since 2008, which included short but repeated periods of fieldwork in the UAE, each lasting between two and four weeks. The first three field visits were conducted by Michaela Pelican in 2008, 2011, and 2014, while the fourth visit was carried out by Jonathan Ngeh in 2015. We have utilized a variety of qualitative methods, including participant observation, qualitative interviews, autoethnography, and audio-visual documentation.⁴ Informal conversations and semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 89 interlocutors, including migrant workers, employers, and recruitment officers. Our sample included migrants from different parts of Africa, including the Horn of Africa, North Africa, West and Central Africa. Particular attention was paid to migrants from Cameroon, Nigeria, and Ghana, several of whom have been interviewed repeatedly over the past years so as to document their personal and professional trajectories (see also Pelican 2014, 2015; Damir-Geilsdorf and Pelican 2019). The majority were between 25 and 35 years old and, when we met them, had spent between one and seven years in the UAE, sometimes interrupted by temporary stays in their home countries. While several – both men and women – were married and had children, they often left their families behind with

⁴ Autoethnography was used by Jonathan Ngeh to come closer to migrants' first-hand experience of everyday economic and social life. In particular, he focused on migrants' experience of shared living arrangements ("bed space"), which is the subject of a different paper.

the aim of earning enough money to return after a few years and start a business back home. Furthermore, we talked to UAE nationals and migrants from other parts of the world whose work and/or everyday interactions brought them into close contact with African migrants. To complement and cross-check our data, we also collected secondary data from newspapers, social media, government reports, and archives.

Migration from Africa to the Arab Gulf States

Much has been written about Arab and Asian migration to the countries of the GCC (e.g. Gardner 2010; Kanna 2011; Vora 2013). Yet in more recent years, the Arab Gulf region has also become an attractive destination for traders and job seekers from different parts of Africa, as economic linkages between the two regions have been steadily growing. Within the UAE, migrants' presence is concentrated in the burgeoning cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The literature on Africa–Gulf connections is relatively limited. Abusharaf and Eickelmann (2015) emphasize that the varied relationships between Africa and the Gulf region have long been overlooked, despite the two regions' geographic propinquity and long-standing economic and cultural exchanges. The Horn and East Africa can look back on a long history of relations with the Gulf, such as in the context of slavery, forced labour, religious mobility, and Indian Ocean trade (Hopper 2010; Keshodkar 2014; Khalifa 2006). Conversely, migrants from Western and Central Africa are relative newcomers. In the UAE, a start was made by traders who began to frequent the region in the late 1980s, and whose need for intermediaries to facilitate their stay soon paved the way for more permanent forms of migration (Marchal 2005). Furthermore, Dubai's reputation as a global city, and the relative easiness of getting a visa have attracted many African migrants in search of business and employment opportunities.

Detailed information on the numbers and nationalities of African residents in the UAE is hard to come by, as the UAE government specifies its publicly accessible data not by nationality but by region (see also de Bel-Air 2018). The Labour Force Survey of 2011, conducted by the Dubai Statistics Center, indicated 23,125 migrants from non-Arab African countries as salaried and self-employed workers in the Emirate of Dubai.⁵ The most recent available data set for 2016 from the Dubai Statistics Center differentiates migrants according to regional groups and gender. It shows that while the percentage of the African workforce (2.9 percent) is rather insignificant as compared to

⁵ Dubai Statistics Center, *Labour Force Survey*, 2011, <http://www.dsc.gov.ae/EN/StatisticalProjects/Pages/ProjectReports.aspx?ProjectId=16> (accessed 22.3.2014, no longer accessible). Unfortunately, more recent information on the absolute number rather than the percentage of African migrants has not been made available.

Asian (82.6 percent) and non-GCC Arab workers (6.4 percent), it comes close to the size of the European workforce (2.7 percent) (de Bel-air 2018:13). Detailed statistics of the workforce in Dubai, differentiated according to regions and gender is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Dubai: Percentage distribution of employed population by nationality group and sex (2016)

	Total	Males	Females
UAE	4.0	3.0	9.2
GCC countries	0.1	0.1	0.0
Other Arab countries	6.4	6.2	7.7
Asia	82.6	86.0	66.3
Africa	2.9	1.6	8.9
Europe	2.7	2.1	5.3
North America	0.8	0.6	1.8
Caribbean & Central America	0.1	0.1	0.1
South America	0.1	0.1	0.1
Oceania (Australia, New Zealand, etc.)	0.3	0.2	0.6
Total non-Emiratis	96.0	97.0	90.8
Grand total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Dubai Statistics Center, Labour Force Survey 2016 (as presented by de Bel-air 2018:13)

Other statistics differentiate between different types of occupation, and indicate that African migrants are primarily represented in services and sales (51.78 percent), elementary occupations, i.e. low-skilled jobs (15.28 percent), and as professionals (10.97 percent)⁶. They are hardly present in the public or industrial sector. The occupations associated with African migrants in these statistics resonate with our own findings – which, however, are based on a relatively small sample and thus qualitative in nature. The majority of our interlocutors were employed in the import/export sector, also known as “cargo business” (Pelican 2014); followed by the hospitality sector (hotels, formal/informal restaurants); and elementary occupations, such as security services, driving and domestic work⁷. Many of them, while officially employed by a company, were freelancers working on their own account (Damir-Geiltsdorf and Pelican 2019). Finally, a growing number of the Africans in our sample were employed as professionals, for instance in the banking, medical, and real estate sectors. It has to be noted that most African migrants we met during our research were of middle-class back-

6 Dubai Statistics Center, *Percentage Distribution of Employed 15 Years and Over by Sex and Nationality Groups – Emirate of Dubai, 2012*. http://www.dsc.gov.ae/Reports/DSC_LFS_2012_02_21.pdf (accessed 22.03.2014; no longer accessible).

7 Domestic workers are not considered in the official statistics, as domestic work is legally placed outside of the formal employment sector.

ground and had acquired secondary, tertiary or professional education as well as work experience before coming to the Arab Gulf. Many were multilingual, which proved a valuable asset in the UAE labour market due to its international outlook.

Intersectional analysis of African migrants' experiences

An important observation from our fieldwork relates to the salience of ethnicity, nationality, race, class/education, and gender in African migrants' experiences. As the subsequent examples illustrate, this applies to migrants' integration into the labour market as well as the recruitment of business partners. Moreover, ethnicity, nationality, and race are closely interrelated and have often been used interchangeably by our interlocutors.

Case study 1: Tanko advancing from security to real estate

At the time of our interview in 2015, Tanko was a male Cameroonian in his mid-twenties. After his secondary school education in Cameroon he did a clerical course at the National School of Administration and Magistracy in Yaoundé. Upon graduation, he was employed in the secretariat of various state establishments for close to five years before he decided to leave the job and “seek greener pastures” in Dubai. His first job in Dubai was working with a security company. He started on a salary of 1,000 AED (243 EUR)⁸ monthly, and after nine months his salary was raised to 1,800 AED (436 EUR). After one and a half years in the security job, he decided to search for a better-paying job. He was aware of the challenges imposed by the *kafala* system on changing jobs, specifically that his current employer had to agree to prematurely release him from his work contract. His first attempt to get a real estate job failed on the grounds that he had neither the required two years' work experience in the real estate industry nor a driving license. A month later Tanko asked a real estate broker – a man from India who regularly came to the luxury apartment tower where Tanko's security company had stationed him – how to get a real estate job. The broker told Tanko that his manager “is a Black man”⁹ and advised him to contact the manager and send him his curriculum vitae. He gave the manager's email address to Tanko, who followed his advice. Tanko was called for an interview, during which he found out that the manager was a Cameroonian. At the end of the interview he was assigned the task of

8 XE - The World's Trusted Currency Authority: <https://www.xe.com/>. Conversion rate: 1 AED = 0.242391 EUR. Date: 12/05/2019.

9 We have opted to capitalize the terms *Black* and *White* in this article in order to emphasize their social and historical construction and the political meanings they entail rather than using them as descriptive adjectives.

finding five apartments for rent and five customers who needed apartments within four days. Tanko accepted the task, and returned after four days with a list of seven vacant apartments and eight customers, including the contact information of both apartment owners and customers. He was offered the job, but faced the challenge of how to get out of the contract with the security company he was working for at the time. After discussing his desire to leave the security job for a real estate job with his present employer, the latter agreed, but asked him to pay 5,000 AED (1,212 EUR) for the termination of the contract. With only 3,000 AED (727 EUR) in his account, Tanko sat at his security post wondering how to resolve the issue, when the owner of an apartment in his workplace walked up to him and asked why he seemed troubled. Tanko explained his problem to the apartment owner, who was an Egyptian Muslim. The man asked Tanko how much money he needed, and eventually went to a nearby ATM, withdrew 2,000 AED (485 EUR), and gave it to Tanko, saying: "Take the money and solve your problem; I am African too". Tanko spoke so highly of this Egyptian man: "I can never forget him even if we don't ever meet again". Tanko used the money to cancel his previous work contract and signed up with the real estate company. The CEO of the company quickly became pleased with Tanko's performance and about a year into the job promoted him to the position of branch manager. At the time of the interview there were seven real estate brokers working under Tanko. They included two Nigerian men, a US-American man whose parents came from Pakistan, a Pakistani man who was born and raised in the UAE, a British man of Indian descent, a Chinese woman, and Hajar, a Tunisian woman, whose story we will explore in a later section of this paper.

Several authors have highlighted the role of ethnicity, nationality, and race as structuring features of Gulf labour markets (Ewers and Dicce 2016; Nagy 2006; Mahdavi 2011; Vora 2008). Most pertinent to our case of African migrants is the study by Malit and Tchiapep (2013) which illustrates that Cameroonian and more generally African migrants face structural disadvantages in finding adequate employment in Dubai. Firstly, they often experience "deskilling" (occupational downward mobility), because their educational certificates are not recognized or because they have no previous work experience in the UAE. Secondly, occupations tend to be associated with particular nationalities, both in general perception and in hiring practices. According to their data, the usual occupations for Africans in Dubai are in security services and frontline hospitality (e.g. doormen, reception staff, waiters, shop assistants); that is, jobs that are generally poorly paid and offer limited chances for professional advancement. Thirdly, the salary range is linked to the employee's nationality, with Africans being located toward the bottom end; a practice perceived as discriminatory or racist by most of their interlocutors (Malit and Tchiapep 2013:16-20). The findings of Malit and Tchiapep resonate with studies on Asian migrants in the UAE that highlight the limiting effects of these positionalities on migrants' economic and social mobility (e.g. Vora 2008). They are also reflected in the experiences of some of our interlocutors. In Tanko's case, however, we see that there are not only disadvantages but also opportunities for African migrants to secure well-paid white-collar jobs.

Interestingly, we find in this example that being Black or African or Cameroonian can be advantageous in situations where it is possible to evoke sympathy and solidarity on the basis of shared racial, regional or national identities. Generally, practices of alienation and discrimination against foreigners appear to promote the need for solidarity between foreign migrants (Ngeh 2011:107). This also applies to the UAE context, where migrants strongly rely on solidarity networks along national, ethnic and religious lines, as illustrated by Kathiravelu (2012) for the case of South Indians in Dubai. In addition to these dimensions, the case of Tanko has shown that the categories of race and region (Black, African) are equally relevant in the ways migrants relate with each other, and can benefit from incidental acts of solidarity (as in the case of the Egyptian apartment owner) or develop relationships of mutual trust and professional support (as in the case of the Cameroonian manager).

It is remarkable that, unlike the real estate firm which rejected Tanko's application on the grounds that he lacked a driving license and working experience in the industry, the company with the Cameroonian manager did not stipulate such requirements. Although several factors influence hiring decisions (e.g. social capital, human capital, and prejudices), sociological studies on hiring practices indicate that cultural and/or ascriptive (dis)similarities between employers and job applicants matter in employers' hiring decisions. In a study of elite professional service firms in the USA, the author argued that "evaluators constructed and assessed merit in their own image, believing that culturally similar applicants were better candidates" (Rivera 2012:1017). Another study in the USA that examined ascriptive inequalities in the workplace notes that "most superiors, regardless of their race and sex, tend to fill power positions they oversee with ascriptively similar others" (Elliott and Smith 2004:384). These findings echo a recent study on the UAE, which argues that cultural and nationality-based stereotypes serve as a sorting system through which job positions are allocated to foreign workers (Al Ariss and Chun Guo 2016). The above argument provides a plausible explanation of how Tanko, with no work experience in real estate and possessing only a secondary school diploma and a professional training course in clerical work, was able to get a job as a real estate broker in a firm whose manager shares the same cultural, national, and racial background.

Another interesting finding of our study is the variation in experiences and perception of racism by low-income and high-income Africans. Similarly to the findings of Malit and Tchiapep (2013), low-income migrants were likely to acknowledge discrimination and racism as a problem in Dubai's labour market and also to recount personal experiences from their everyday lives which they perceived as racism. Recurrent examples from our interviews include employers who excluded them from high-paying jobs, or offered them less money for the same job than other, non-African employees. Those they held responsible for these practices were human-resource managers and other low-level managers to whom they answered directly, most of whom were Indians or Filipinos. Consequently, several of our interlocutors expressed a somewhat deprecating view of Indian and Filipino migrants who, as indicated by various authors (e.g.

Vora 2013), are equally targets of discriminatory practices in the UAE labor market. On the other hand, medium- and high-income African migrants were less likely to acknowledge racism as a problem in Dubai, and often pointed to their individual success as a proof that anyone can achieve her/his goal if they work hard. Tanko was among this group, as were others who were employed in the banking sector, in an international hospital, or running their own businesses. Those who acknowledged racism attributed the problem to a globalized economic system that supposedly benefits Whites over others. This view completely ignored the state's openly racist policies and the hiring prejudices of the national and foreign employers in the UAE.¹⁰

Case study 2: Hajar navigating the male-dominated work environment

While Tanko's case has illustrated the ways in which ethnicity, nationality, and race can be used to navigate the UAE labour market, and how income levels are correlated with experiences and perceptions of racism, this section will focus on how gender interrelates with these positionalities. Gender has generally been acknowledged as a significant factor shaping the experience of migrant workers in the Gulf States (Longva 1993; Nagy 2006). While much research has centred on women involved in the domestic sector and in sex work, two closely related fields with a large demand for female workers (e.g. de Regt 2010; Fernandez 2010; Mahdavi 2011), little has been written about the gendered experience of women in semi-skilled jobs. For example, in her study on domestic workers in Kuwait, Longva (1997) noted that unequal power relations between migrant workers and Kuwaiti citizens are structured according to gender, ethnicity, and nationality, and have produced distinct hierarchies: with Kuwaiti men at the top, followed by Kuwaiti women, Arab men, Arab women, Asian men, and Asian women (listed in declining order). Except for the first and the last, all groups are sometimes in a "male" (or superior) and at other times in a "female" (or inferior) position. A study on the migration of Ethiopian domestic workers to the Gulf states found that domestic workers are ordered in a racialized hierarchy, with Filipina women at the top signalling the highest status and commanding the highest salary, followed by Indonesian and Sri Lankan women, and African women at the bottom (Fernandez 2010:4). Similarly, Mahdavi's (2011) work on female migrants in Dubai illustrates how the demand for sex work is stratified according to migrants' perceived skin colour and national origin. She indicates that Arab and European women command the highest prices, followed by East Asian women, and lastly African women (Mahdavi 2011:53). In this section, we will look at the strategies African women use to successfully navigate the UAE economy.

10 Similarly, Pelican (2015) has argued that Cameroonian migrants generally do not question the neo-liberal system of immigration and labour exploitation in the UAE, but rather play along with it, trying to exploit it for their own benefit. They generally blame fellow migrants or brokers, but not the system, for their maltreatment or exploitation.

Like their male counterparts, many of the African women we have met during our fieldwork entered the UAE formal and informal economy in low-paying, elementary occupations. Many worked as shop assistants or touts for businesses selling fabrics, garments or beauty products. Others worked in security services or in the hospitality and entertainment sector, such as in a hotel or restaurant, running an informal eating place in their apartment (which is illegal), or performing in a nightclub. African women are also present in the domestic sector, though less prominently than women from South and Southeast Asia. As we learned from employers and the manager of a placement agency in Dubai, the demand for domestic workers from Africa is generally characterized by distinctions along ethnicity, nationality, and race. The demand is highest for women from Ethiopia and Somalia who are familiar companions, as they look back on a long history of mobility between the Horn of Africa and the Arab Gulf. Women from the Horn of Africa have gained entry into many economic sectors; and as we have been told repeatedly, some have also intermarried with Gulf nationals and have become part of the local society. In recent years, women from other parts of Africa, including East and West Africa, have entered the market for domestic work, some as a way to gain residency and entry into the UAE economy. They often bring along educational qualifications and professional experiences that qualify them far beyond the domestic sector. Some stand out for their linguistic competencies, such as speaking several European languages, which make them attractive as nannies for international families based in the Gulf.

While many women were placed in low-end jobs, we also came across a number of African women who successfully navigated the UAE formal and informal economy and achieved upward professional and social mobility. Among them was Esther, a Cameroonian nurse who started off as a phone assistant and ended up as a qualified nurse in a private maternity hospital after successfully taking the national nursing exam. Another case was the successful businesswoman Jeanne, who began as an employee in a catering company, then opened her own restaurant and finally became a hotel manager, running a general trading company on the side.¹¹ To illustrate how women navigate the gendered challenges of the UAE labour market, we will focus on the example of Hajar, the female real estate broker from Tunisia working in the company managed by Tanko.

Hajar had lived in Dubai for two years and was in her late twenties at the time of the interview in 2015. She was a Muslim, and married to a Tunisian man with whom she had a 3-year-old son who lived with her parents back in Tunisia. After graduating from high school in Tunisia, Hajar completed a professional programme in clothing design and acquired a diploma (*technicien de qualité d'habillement*). She worked for a textile company and finally travelled to Dubai to meet up with her husband. The couple used to live in the building where Tanko worked as a security guard. Tanko became close to the couple and started to work with Hajar on a side business, facilitating visas

11 For a more detailed description of the cases of Esther and Jeanne, see Pelican 2014.

to the UAE for migrants from North Africa.¹² According to Tanko, he realized from his transactions with Hajar that she was a good businesswoman with much potential. When Tanko started working in real estate, he encouraged Hajar to apply for a real estate job in their firm. At the time, however, she worked as a receptionist in a super-market and did not want to quit. Later, she lost her job and was employed by a different real estate company from the firm managed by Tanko. She was on a fixed salary of 3,000 AED (727 EUR) monthly, and her job was to attract clients. She did not get the opportunity to work as a broker and felt that there were limited opportunities for her in this firm. At some point she expressed her frustration to Tanko and told him that she would like to switch to his company. Tanko was hiring at the time and decided to recruit her.

Interviews with Hajar and observations at the real estate company indicate that she strategically navigated between positions in ways that enabled her to take advantage of her multiple identities (African, Arab, Tunisian, Muslim, and female). Hajar strongly identified as African, especially in friendly conversations with her West African colleagues as well as in reference to experiences of racialization and depreciation as migrants from Africa. For example, during her first interview with Jonathan she asked him several questions about his family background and educational experience in Europe. After listening to Jonathan's replies, she responded:

[...] the image that people have about Africans is that we are lazy, uneducated, we are stupid, come from nothing, from a poor background. And by this I do not mean that we don't have anything, but that we have bad governance which ruins so many things. So, coming from a poor family and country, and sacrificing to get a diploma and to travel to so many countries and succeed, is because you [Jonathan, the interviewer] are intelligent and have a good qualification. I don't think they accepted you because they like you. They don't know you, so they admitted you [referring to Jonathan's admission to study in European institutions] because you are qualified.

Notice how Hajar uses the pronoun "we" repeatedly, clearly identifying as African. Also, in this quote, she views Jonathan's experience of travelling and studying in Europe as an accomplishment, which discredits the negative representation of Africans as stupid and lazy. In other words, she identifies as African, as belonging to a people she describes as hardworking and smart despite their impoverished situation. While it is hard to ascertain the actual impact of Hajar's identification with Africans on her relationship with her African co-workers and boss (Tanko), identifying with a group can increase "one's perceived similarity to and liking for other members" (Zdaniuk and Levine 2001:503) as well as engender solidarity with group members. In the above

12 Many African migrants in the UAE make an additional income by acting as migration brokers, mostly for aspiring migrants from their home countries. In this context, facilitating visas is a common side business and is considered part of the "cargo business" (see also Pelican 2014, 2015 for more information).

case, Hajar's close relationship with Tanko led him to recruit her into the firm when the opportunity presented itself.

While foregrounding her African identity in these instances, Hajar also capitalized on her identity as an Arab Muslim in other contexts. With different brokers in the real estate firm, sometimes competing to represent a client or facing each other at opposite ends of the negotiating table, internal competition in the workplace is common. The branch manager, Tanko, encouraged internal competition, saying "it is good for business". During an interview with Hajar at her workplace, one of her clients, a middle-aged man from Syria, and his teenage daughter came to see Hajar concerning an apartment the man wanted to buy. As we tried to conclude the interview so she could attend to her client, a Nigerian male colleague attended to the Syrian man in one of their conference halls. Our interview continued for another seven minutes before Hajar went to see her client, who was in discussion with the Nigerian. She went in and a few minutes later Tanko joined them for a brief moment before he walked out smiling. Later on, the Nigerian colleague came out, seemingly disappointed. After the meeting Tanko called Hajar and congratulated her for outmanoeuvring the Nigerian colleague. He explained that in real estate "if you are too nice, people will double-cross you". Then he noted that the Nigerian colleague was trying to steer the Syrian client away from Hajar so he could represent him. Unfortunately for him, as Tanko explained, Hajar went in and switched to talking in Arabic with the Syrian, discrediting her Nigerian colleague as unreliable. As a Muslim woman from North Africa who speaks Arabic, Hajar was able to connect with the Syrian man and his daughter in a way that her Nigerian colleague could not. She used this to her advantage to position herself as the better broker to represent the Syrian client. As compared to other, Black African migrants, Hajar is positioned rather differently in the UAE racial and ethnic hierarchy. While emphasizing her African identity, she obviously manages to pass as Arab and Muslim in a way that migrants from other parts of Africa cannot. Besides ethnicity, religion is an additional enabling vector which has been recognized by several of our interlocutors, as in the case of Mohammed and Ali which will be introduced below.

When discussing the need to work hard in order to provide for the family, Hajar described herself as a woman and a man: "I am a lady but a man at the same time because ever since I was like fifteen years old, I was the one caring for myself and my family". With "caring", she pointed to the double roles of nurturing and breadwinning. She explained how as a young girl she had to assist her mother at home with cooking and other housework. And now that she was an adult, she continued to fulfil similar responsibilities in her home. On the other hand, she narrated an early experience when she was fifteen years old and spent the holidays with an aunt who was married to a very wealthy man. The aunt, as Hajar recounted, regularly gave her pocket money in addition to providing generously for her. She saved the money and sent it to her parents. Hajar also worked during holidays, when she was not visiting relatives, and used the money to support her parents and siblings, some of whom are male and older than her.

As an adult today she works full-time outside of her home and provides for her immediate family as well as supporting her parents and siblings.¹³

Surprisingly, Hajar downplayed the problem of gender inequality in the workplace. We see this in the interview regarding her experience of working with men. As one of two female employees in the branch office, when asked about the kind of challenges she faced as a woman, she said there were none. Instead, Hajar emphasized that she got along better with men than with women and that those close to her were mostly men. As Powell and Sang (2015) have shown for some women working in male-dominated professions in the UK, they tend to do very little to resist the dominant power structures, even when they recognize sexism as a problem in the workplace. Powell and Sang view the women's reluctance as a possible result of their assimilation into male-dominated industries or because challenging sexism in such situations risks further exclusion or isolation (ibid.:930). The latter point emphasizes the vulnerability of women in the workplace, which appears to be pronounced in the UAE context where "there remain significant traditional socio-cultural values and legal and organizational constraints that inhibit the role of both local and expatriate women" (Stalker and Marvin 2011:288). Migrant women generally face more obstacles in the workplace than their female Emirati counterparts, as they are often relegated to subordinate roles in gendered and racialized work spaces (ibid). Against this background it is understandable that Hajar downplays gendered challenges and focuses on her achievements in a male-dominated work environment.

The examples of Hajar and Tanko have illustrated the gendered challenges that African women and men face in accessing qualified jobs and advancing their careers in the UAE labour market. In the next section, we will look at African migrants' entrepreneurial aspirations and the strategies they use to establish their own businesses in line with the requirements of the *kafala* system. As the example of Mohammed and Ali will show, references to shared ethnicity, nationality, and race can be helpful in finding viable international and local business partners, some of whom may face similar experiences of racialization and social marginalization.

Case study 3: Mohammed and Ali allying with their Emirati business partner

With Dubai being a well-known business hub, many African migrants have come to the UAE not only in search of employment, but to engage in business. The import/export sector or the so-called "cargo business" has been one of the areas that has attracted their entrepreneurial spirit (Pelican 2014). While some have invested in setting up general trading companies, others have opened ethnic restaurants or beauty shops,

13 Generally, female and male migrants make an effort to support dependants and family members back home. Recent research, such as by Atekmangoh (2017) on Cameroonian migrants, indicates that families in Cameroon increasingly invest in sending their daughters abroad, because the latter seem more reliable in sending remittances and supporting their families back home than their male counterparts.

generally catering to the needs of an African clientele. They occupy economic niches that include traits of both ethnic and transnational entrepreneurship (see also Drori et al. 2009). Most are small businesses, employing only a few staff members and straddling the line between formal and informal employment.

At the time of our first encounter in 2008, Mohammed was a Muslim Cameroonian in his late twenties. Together with his Nigerian business partner Ali, he was running a general trading company, importing timber from Cameroon and selling it to furniture companies in Asia. Mohammed had been living in Dubai for four years, while their company was less than one year old. Mohammed belongs to the Fulbe ethnic group¹⁴ and grew up in a cattle-herding family in the Anglophone part of Cameroon. After completing secondary school, he left his rural home to look for work in town. With his adventurous spirit and his mother's support, he eventually made it to Dubai. He first worked in a construction company where he was recruited as a foreman. One day he had a work accident, which left his hand partly paralyzed. He decided to quit the job because of the lack of safety and health insurance. Subsequently, he worked as a business tout, before he met his current business partner Ali. Ali was in his early thirties and from a wealthy Nigerian family background. Like Mohammed, he was a Muslim and belonged to the Fulbe ethnic group. After completing secondary school, Ali continued with Islamic and Arabic Studies in Nigeria. He then moved to Saudi Arabia where he acquired a diploma in business management and worked in a tourist company that provided visas and accommodation to religious tourists from Nigeria. He got married and brought his Nigerian wife to Saudi Arabia, but later ran into visa problems. Eventually, he decided to move with his family to Dubai, where it seemed easier for foreigners to acquire residency and establish a business. In Dubai, Ali found employment with a general trading company run by a Nigerian. The company was interested in the timber trade and commissioned Mohammed to research the logging and export of timber from Cameroon. Ali and Mohammed became friends and eventually decided to open their own general trading company. They teamed up with a third business partner, a naturalized British of African origin, who invested capital in the company.

As Mohammed explained, his close relationship with Ali and his family not only emerged from their shared interest in business, but also from their shared ethnicity, language, and culture. Here we may draw on the classical work of Abner Cohen (1969) on Hausa (im)migrant communities in Southern Nigeria, where he emphasized the role of ethnicity as an important economic and social capital and the key condition for participation in translocal trading networks. Ali and Mohammed saw their shared Fulbe identity not only as constitutive for their trust relationship, but also as a marker of social distinction. Mohammed, for example, highlighted Fulbe religious and cultural values, such as self-control and reticence, and contrasted them with the purported

14 The Fulbe are dispersed over the Sahel and Savannah belt from West to East Africa.

indecent conduct of South Asian workers as well as the consumerism of Emirati nationals. Similar arguments of social distinction and exclusion along the lines of ethnicity, nationality, and race have been put forward by many of our interlocutors. For example, some Africans distanced themselves from low-skilled South Asian construction workers, whom they considered to be at the bottom of the local social hierarchy, thus positioning themselves in a mid-range social stratum. Unlike migrant workers from India or Southeast Asia, only very few Africans work as labourers in construction. As some of our African informants argued, construction work does not pay, and is beneath their ability and dignity. They would rather work in security services or cargo where they were not so much exposed to physical work in Dubai's harsh climate, and where they envisaged a higher income. Their perception was inspired by their expectations and investments in coming to Dubai, as well as their educational background and experience in the informal economy. There is also a slight racial judgment in this statement, as our African interlocutors drew self-esteem from the fact that they were not at the absolute bottom of Dubai's social hierarchy. Their arguments largely resonated with established discourses in the Gulf States that correlate occupation with nationality and social hierarchy (see also Ewers and Dicce 2016; Nagy 2006).

To open a company in the UAE, it is not only necessary to prove one's merit and secure reliable business partners. It is also legally required to have an Emirati sponsor who officially owns the majority share of the business.¹⁵ The sponsor mostly acts as a "sleeping partner" who facilitates the company's legal paperwork, for which he is paid a yearly recompense. Yet finding a "sleeping partner" requires some effort, as Emirati nationals tend to keep to themselves, and constitute a minority with less than thirteen percent of the population (de Bel-Air 2018:9). Making their acquaintance is a rare occasion. As our interlocutors told us, many draw on the existing contacts of other companies, as nationals often sponsor multiple businesses, which provides them with a steady income. Others attempted to establish direct contact with potential Emirati sponsors by targeting locations or institutions frequented by Emirati nationals. For example, several Muslim interlocutors mentioned the mosque as an institution where they might encounter Emirati citizens receptive to their cause. In Mohammed's case, he met their company's sponsor when he previously ran into problems with the immigration service due to overstaying his visa. As Mohammed explained, the officer in charge of his case was a sympathetic "Black Emirati" who helped him to renew his visa. Mohammed made a point of building rapport with the officer by keeping in regular contact and introducing him to his friends and collaborators. Eventually, the officer agreed to become their company's "sleeping partner", for which he was being paid 15,000 AED (3,636 EUR) on a yearly basis.

15 The situation is different in free economic zones which have their own rules and regulations (Khan and Harroff-Tavel 2011:294). However, none of our interlocutors were employed or had a company there.

Mohammed's case is interesting in two ways: firstly, it illustrates the ambiguous role of nationals, as his sponsor was an immigration officer in charge of sanctioning migrants' (il)legal stays, and at the same time a "sleeping partner", benefiting from the informal revenues generated by the *kafala* system.¹⁶ Secondly, Mohammed's reference to his sponsor as a "Black Emirati" highlights the relevance of race in linking up with potential business partners. It resonates with comments of other interlocutors who highlighted the existence of Emiratis of African descent whom they considered more approachable than purely "Arab Emirati". The latter were often characterized as racist and dismissive of Africans. As Ali recounted: "Even though you are a Muslim, if you are Black, Arabs look down on you. They treat you like you are worthless. They insult us Blacks". While Ali's experience reverberates in many of our interlocutors' accounts, it also talks to the experiences of Emirati nationals of African descent.

The role of race as a vector of inequality even within the Emirati population has been outlined by Khalifa (2006) in her succinct analysis of African influence on culture and music in Dubai. To understand the contemporary presence of Black Emirati, we need to take into account historical connections across the Indian Ocean World, linking the Gulf with Africa and Asia (e.g. Abusharaf and Eickelmann 2015; Al-Rasheed 2005). The presence of Africans in the Gulf is rooted in the region's history of slavery. It peaked in the nineteenth and early twentieth century with the demand for slave labour in the pearl-diving industry, which later declined with the introduction of cultured pearls from Japan. In 1905 British sources estimated that Africans accounted for 28 percent of the population of today's United Arab Emirates and for roughly 17 percent of the total population of the eastern Arabian coast under British protection (Hopper 2010:158). As Khalifa (2006) argues, African slaves and their descendants not only played a significant role in the region's economy, but also contributed to Emirati culture. Their influence is reflected, for example, in musical and dance performances. However, in public perception and current scholarship, African–Emirati connections have largely been ignored, which she attributes to historical and political factors.¹⁷ Khalifa's analysis highlights the compromised social status of Emirati of African descent. The current tendency among Emirati rulers and nationals to underplay transnational historical connections and emphasize Arab identity is reflected, for example, in national dress codes, heritage initiatives, and marriage policies (Dresch 2005; Khalaf 2005). From a Gulf nationalist perspective, individ-

16 See also Damir-Geilsdorf and Pelican (2019) on informal arrangements between employers and migrants as a result of the labour market demand.

17 According to Khalifa, most African slaves and their descendants integrated into the local society, adopting its religion and culture. They relinquished their African past and were granted membership in Emirati society. Furthermore, as Khalifa (2006:233) tells us, even today "descendants of slaves are still socially and to a certain extent financially attached to Gulf rulers. Therefore, historians fear that revealing the truth would jeopardize the groups' position and the religious, human, and civil rights image of Gulf countries" (Khalifa 2006:233). The negation of African heritage is particularly pronounced in the UAE, and differs from other Gulf States, such as Oman.

uals with a hybrid background may count as second-class citizens. Conversely, from the perspective of African migrants, they are among the primary people to relate to among the national citizenry.

As the case of Mohammed and Ali shows, shared positionalities, such as ethnicity, nationality, and race, can serve as a basis for lasting business relations. When we met Mohammed and Ali a few years later, their business had been affected by the global economic crisis and they had incurred significant debts, rendering the company close to bankruptcy. Their Emirati business partner agreed to act as guarantor for Ali when he faced legal prosecution. As Mohammed explained, the Emirati partner's support was mainly motivated by his own business interests, as he was a "sleeping partner" of several companies and faced the risk of losing business credibility if one or more of his companies went bankrupt. Later, Mohammed encountered the same situation as Ali; but in his case, the Emirati business partner no longer intervened, and eventually the company had to be closed. As this and other examples illustrate, shared positionalities, such as race, ethnicity, nationality, gender or class, may be useful in initiating business or employment relationships. In the long run, however, economic performance is indispensable for upward professional and social mobility in the UAE's formal and informal economy.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper was on the insertion of African migrants into the labour market in the United Arab Emirates, in particular the city of Dubai. As we have seen, migration to the Gulf States is guided by the *kafala* system, which regulates both migrants' stays and work in the country and subjects them to the authority of local sponsors. From the literature we know that the labour market in the Gulf States is ethnically segregated, and occupations are correlated with specific nationalities (Ewers and Dicce 2016; Nagy 2006). Similarly, African migrants are largely channelled into primary occupations and the lower ends of the service sector. At the same time, the case studies presented in this paper suggest a somewhat more complex picture: compared to the established stereotypes of the "French doctor", the "Indian engineer", or the "Filipino nurse", the positioning of African migrants seems more flexible, as African nationalities are not necessarily associated with specific occupations, thus permitting them some leeway to manoeuvre in the labour market.

To better understand the migration and work experiences of Africans in the UAE, we have analyzed how different social positionings interact with each other, and how migrants make use of and negotiate their multiple and intersecting identities. In particular, we have focused on the role of ethnicity, nationality, race, and gender as relevant categories used by African migrants to manoeuvre between legal constraints, economic opportunities, and social challenges. The case of Tanko illustrated labour insertion as

well as upward professional and social mobility through shared ethnicity, nationality, and race in relation to employers. Hajar's example highlighted gendered challenges, such as juggling family and professional life, as well as capitalizing on ethnicity and language with regard to customers. Finally, the case of Mohammed and Ali exemplified strategies for realizing entrepreneurial aspirations by referring to shared ethnicity and race to build trust with business partners and local sponsors. In all three cases, these positionalities had both restricting and enabling capacities. Moreover, the case studies showed that while shared experiences of marginalization and racialization can engender solidarity and support along the lines of ethnicity, nationality, and race, migrants' professional relationships are generally based on mutual economic interests, or else are not sustained.

While our analysis highlighted examples of upward social and professional mobility in the UAE labour market, what is striking is the pace at which this mobility has occurred. Some interlocutors have been able to get well-paid jobs or to realize their entrepreneurial aspirations in the first two to five years of their stay in Dubai, often by changing employers. We saw this with Tanko, who went from being a security guard to a branch manager of a real estate firm in less than three years; or with Mohammed and Ali, who opened their general trading company in the fourth year of Mohammed's stay in Dubai. In both cases, besides the skills they acquired from their previous job(s), they did not obtain any further training or education in the UAE before receiving better job offers. In either case, it is remarkable that migrant workers are achieving such upward mobility in less than five years, and often without costly (or only with limited) additional training in the UAE. Conversely, in the Global North ethnic minority migrants from the Global South tend to spend several years studying and learning additional skills before being able to experience similar mobility in the labour market (Creese and Wiebe 2009; Helgertz 2010). We may concur that the UAE economy values soft skills, work experience, and entrepreneurial spirit over education and professional qualifications. The GCC countries thus offer valid business and employment opportunities that from the perspective of African migrants may outweigh the well-known challenges of the *kafala* system.

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