

Remigration and Social Change – Prospects for the Migrant Worker Sending Countries of the Middle East

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I. INTRODUCTION

This study is about culture. It suggests that migrants adopt, collectively, new cultural attitudes which they will attempt to maintain after getting re-settled back home. Here, migrants are not seen as “mere actors of social change”, nor as abstract rational fulfillers of the logic of capitalist accumulation. Migrants are individuals who have shared a collective cultural experience which will influence their re-integration into their native societies.

Given the case of peasants, migrating as low-skilled workers to the oil-producing countries of the Gulf, we face a specific and, in many ways, a unique type of migration:

In the 1970s, traditional systems of seasonal peasant contract labour (like the *tarahil* (system in Egypt¹) was gradually transformed into an open and free migration pattern to oil-producing countries.

The male peasants migrate abroad for a period of 8–10 months per year, for 3–5 years on average before they settle back home again.

They are mostly groups of friends and relatives that migrate together and stay together during the migration period.

The work-contract and the type of work allows them to live in collective residence schemes (camps, squatter places etc.).

These specific conditions might explain why migration, here, remains oriented towards an increase of the cash-budget of the peasant household back home, rather

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¹ Tarahil originates from *rihla* (travel) which signifies a contract labour system for small and landless peasants. Here, peasants were brought in shifts for 40 days, to work in huge agricultural or construction schemes. In the times of Arab socialism, primarily, village-based private contracting provided labour for state organized development and construction schemes (Stauth, 1983).

than towards a transposition of the worker's family, for a long and continuous period of time, to the working place in the host country. Migration has always been an appendix of peasant societies (Wolf 1966). The specific nature of low-skill labour migration to the oil-producing Gulf states has to be understood in terms of an articulation process of various peasant societies of the region with the booming (or declining) accumulation centres of the oil-producing countries of the region. I have outlined, in a theoretical perspective, such forms of articulation in an earlier debate on peasant households in a world economy (Stauth 1984).

II. REMIGRATION: WHAT SHOULD WE EXPECT FROM THE RETURNEE MIGRANT TO DO?

The collective experience abroad brings about new social attitudes which could determine the social behaviour of the returnees:

1. Peasant migrants, in most cases for the first time in their lives, become passport holders, while preparing for their trip abroad. The passport, however, is only a symbolic expression of a new form of statehood. While the peasant migrant crosses borders, he becomes aware of his national status, and nationality becomes a component of status and social stratification. Left alone by his local patrons, he becomes aware of the problems of illiteracy in dealing with alien administrators. The experience of travelling exposes him to new modern regulation schemes where self-restraint and purified attitudes become necessary. The collective living in dwellings or in camps, again, requires a new type of regulative attitude. All these new attitudes signify a transition from peasantry to citizenship.

2. Living under deprived conditions, in an affluent consumer-oriented society, increases wants and fantasies. A peasant migrant participates in a new "world of goods". Consumerism becomes a new value as a form of social participation. Spending rather than saving behaviour among the peasant, seems to appear as a new social skill. Cash, thus, emerges as a means of social regulation as much as of social distinction.

3. Migrants leave their wives alone and live for long periods in a roughly regimented, male-dominated surrounding. The "world of women", so overwhelmingly the other part of their social existence at home, becomes a distant world of fantasies and imagery. There, the picture of the modern purified woman emerges as an ideal type, classifying all other images as savage, threatening or impure.

4. Peasants' affinity to myths, magical practices and popular Islam, in Egypt, has been documented extensively (Blackman 1927). Working as a migrant in an Arab-Islamic country, where modern myths of the identity, between the spoken and the Koranic language, the political and the social order and true Islam have been created, Egyptian Fellahin, for example, are taught to believe that their own popular Islamic practices, at home, relate to mere paganism. Migrants might easily adopt a

religious habitus which refers to the purified representations of Islam. This new habitus turns into a classificatory attitude, in everyday life, which then identifies individuals and their behaviour, things and goods, symbols and imagery as being pure and religious or filthy and pagan. In the perception of the habitus of the Egyptian peasant, for example, the prevalent classification between *baladi* (local, village) and *frangi* (foreign, luxury) turns into a new distinction pattern between *dini, islami* (religious, Islamic) and *baladi, gahil* (local, pagan).

One could observe that the structural determinants of the collective attitudes of migrants have also been operating within the rural society of the sending countries, which, since the 1970s, have become more openly incorporated into the global economic and cultural frames. Greater importance of the nation-state, the continuous spread of consumerism and consumer culture, new roles of women and a changing function of religion are the determinants which also operate within the framework of the home-societies of the region. However, while communities, at large, remain in a position of "encapsulation", (Blok 1981), returnee migrants, who emerge, on the basis of a collective experience, as individualized social actors, develop new attitudes which refer to and strengthen such structural changes. Returnees develop

- (i) an attitude of individual citizenship towards the state;
- (ii) new behaviour patterns towards consumption goods and commodities,
- (iii) new forms of imaginative classification of women and
- (iv) a new awareness of the role of religion in modern social life.

The structural and the individual determinants of the social behaviour of returnees need further evaluation in order to understand the social behaviour of returnees, to identify the potentials for social change and to analyse how the pattern of collective experience, outlined earlier, operates within a framework of reintegration.

"Etatization" of Peasantry: the Creation of an Individual Citizen

Today, the transformation of rural populations, which, to a large extent, have been tied to mixed patterns of subsistence production and agricultural capitalism within a framework of the maintenance of village communal relations, becomes a problem of greater importance [Bielefelder Studien zur Entwicklungssoziologie (1979); Elwert (1983); Stauth (1983a); and Scheffler (1985)]. In many ways, however, it is the state which has a decisive influence on development or underdevelopment of rural areas and, thus, on implementing conditions favouring or hindering migration (Standing 1982). These studies make us believe, however, the problem of transformation of peasantry today has become a problem of socio-cultural change. New forms of "civilizing" peasants, however, are in operation. Ideal

and material ties to the local communities in the imaginative context of the production of new social realities, within the framework of nationalism and the nation-state, has become more important.

Individualism and citizenship imply a new struggle for social membership and full participation in late capitalism (Turner 1986). Further expansion of citizenship also depends upon social conflict, modernization and the progressive features of migration.

Patron-client relations remain a decisive element of the social structure in all the middle eastern societies (Gellner and Waterbury 1977). Given the rather specific conditions of the Lebanese socio-political development of the last few years, these traditional relations have led to a disintegration and segmentation of social structures and, specifically, to a fractionalism and separatism within the party and the state apparatus and clientelism became an overwhelming pattern not of traditionality but of social change itself (Johnson 1977). Modern clientelism is related to new types of fractionalism within the sections of the state administration on the local level. And the group of remigrants in rural areas develop an own clientelist way of interaction with political leaders and state agencies.

Consumerism: Participation in a New World

Like the passport, the employment contracts and the various paper procedures related to the migration process, contribute to the restructuring of the migrant's self-perception and self-consciousness, as an individual citizen of the society. Participating in regular work, the earning of a regular income and entrance into a new pattern of consumption are contributing to reshaping his personality. The "world of goods" thus emerges as a new pattern of communication (Douglas and Isherwood 1979).

A new destination for "cash and carry" creates new senses of individual taste and attitudes towards goods. While the "moral economy of the peasant" (Scott 1976) stressed the peasants' concern towards subsistence and the strategies of survival in a perspective of "just life", consumer culture demands hedonism and permissiveness. While saving, once, was the attitude of an utilitarian mind in a world of scarce resources, spending is experienced as a new way of social action and a new pattern of socializing in an affluent society (Semsek and Stauth 1984).

An increasing competition has been observed within the extended family patterns, and as a result of this, a further diminution of household patterns has taken place, focusing on a nuclear family. The cash nexus reduces the community and solidarity nexus. But, the stressing need for security and the scarcity of the dwelling space, besides other reasons, suggests that certain social functions are maintained within the extended family pattern. This rising conflict between the cash nexus and the individualism on the one hand, and the community nexus and the need for security and subsistence on the other hand, contributes to shape a new scope

of rapid social change, within the peasant society of the labour-sending countries. New forms of clientelism might arise due to the fact that the stay-at-homes take over the new roles of domination, by making use of the power vacuum left behind by migrants. There, the extension of the patriarchal family, through the extension of social ties and control (separate from the shape of the economic management of the household, but influencing it), is a general pattern to be observed.

Segregation and New Forms of Gender Relations

It has been argued that the process of "feminization of agriculture" [Boserup (1970); Illich (1983)] is a result of male outward migration which leads to strengthening the economic position of women in rural areas and to an amelioration of their social status. This view, however, does not take into consideration the fact that the process of migration is a "civilizing process". Self-restraint, the deprivation of sex, the disgust of prostitution and the fixed points of imagination and idealization of women as the "white", the purified, or the sacred Muslim sister, lead to new attitudes towards women. The returnee, having once participated in this process, also tends to devalue agricultural work. Moreover, agriculture of small peasantry loses its overall social significance. It is, therefore, observed that the economic strength of rural women could also lead to their social deprivation. As for the Middle East, one can observe that the traditional form of separation of sexes and the sexual division of labour (Beck and Keddie 1978), and the culturally imprinted contradiction between the pure, the educated woman [cf. Antoun's "Modesty Code", Antoun (1968)] and the practically active woman [cf. el-Messiri's "bint al balad", el-Messiri (1978)] becomes restructured in a "modern context". This restructurization entails new ideological imprints in everyday practical life. Abaza (1987b) has reflected these ideological struggles in terms of feminist policies in Egypt. Returnees at various levels of social life, face the problem that the new images of women contradict the prevailing forms of sexual division of labour. This leads, virtually, to a continued social conflict. The concept of feminization of agriculture, furthermore, entails the problem of utilization and instrumentalization of the patterns of solidarity and social security embodied in local village communities: both, the material as well as the imaginative ties maintained with the village could also lead to new forms to utilize not only village resources for the luxury consumption of males but also the ideological utilization of communal solidarity, on the level of regional and national ideological orientations, is a pattern to be traced [el-Sohl (1985); Chaker (1985)].

Religion: Instrumentalization Against Essentialization

In the modern world, with growing concern on religious matters, the attitudes of returnee migrants towards religion is of significance with respect to their reintegration into the local society. Little, in fact, nothing is known to me that refers to specific studies in this field.

As for the Middle East, the Islamic revolution in Iran has put forward the question whether other countries in the region would follow this example and develop new forms of Islamic fundamentalism, Islamization has engaged the interest of many authors, and most of them argued along an orientalist perspective [Said (1978); Ibrahim (1980)]. The overwhelming east-west dynamics of socio-cultural interaction lead to an emphasis on the problem of modernization and secularization of the religion of Islam [Zubaida (1985); Vali and Zubaida (1985); Johansen (1981)]. These studies rarely include the evaluation of the relation between the ideological orientations and the processes of social stratification. They are dedicated to elaborate certain general patterns of the reactions of the oriental societies while confronting western culture [for the most recent version, see Bruno Etienne's "L'islamisme Radical" (1987)]. Instead, we would like to stress upon the religious attitudes of the new social strata in the village society. The reference to Islam, by the new rural stratum of returnee migrants, becomes a tool for social distinction within the village community. The socio-religious distinction does not aim at a specific idea of salvation or the utopia of a new state. It is, rather, a means of legitimation for a new social position within the communal rural social context. While the fundamentalist and the young educated strata might follow a path of the retraditionalization of the Islamic history, in order to confront the people with the image of a just state; the old class and the village notables might adopt the tolerant and integrationist religious attitudes of the classical orthodoxy; women and old left-behind peasants might continue to hold the magical world-views of popular Islam or stick to sufism; the returnee migrants might have adopted a rather instrumentalized and secularized religious attitude which finds its roots in the direct, simplified and purified Saudi version of Islam. This attitude is directed towards a rather immediate habitual, physical and symbolic conquest of the social space and is based on a modern version of what Weber has termed the warrior-ethics of early Islam. It has little in common with all the essentializing and the salvational religious world-views.

III. A COMPARATIVE NOTE ON EGYPT AND PAKISTAN

Perhaps until today, the awareness of the regional and the local diversities within the middle eastern countries is low. Pakistan (like Egypt) has deep-seated regional differences (Khan 1978a). Like Egypt, in Pakistan also, figures on the extent of out-migration to the Gulf States have been overestimated. Figures varied between 4.5 to 9 million, but a carefully stabilized figure would be 3.443 million (Fergany 1987). Pakistani out-migration does not exceed more than about 750,000. However, this figure is too low as recent estimates point to about 2 million migrants for 1986 (Khan 1987b).

There are often ambiguous conclusions made on the socio-cultural behaviour of the returnee migrants, but these are merely drawn from socio-economic data.

Although important issues, such as the use of remittances and consumer behaviour, give us a fairly good background analysis on the macro-patterns of the socio-economic attitudes of the returnee migrants, the actual attitudes of the returnees in the socio-cultural context of their home communities, on the micro-level, remained widely unstudied. What Rhoades has stated for the Intra-European return migration, one is tempted to postulate the same today, for the Middle East-sending countries. More local level research is urgently required (Rhoades 1978). While the impact on women's roles and family structures has, recently, attracted the attention of researchers both, in Egypt and in Pakistan [for Pakistan: Abbasi and Irfan (1984); Rahat (1983); Imdad (1987)], the impact of migration and the returnees on changes in the local power structure, on the relation between the mass culture and popular culture and on the religiously founded attitudes in everyday life remained, obviously, issues outside the context of return-migration research. This, perhaps, could be explained by a statement made by Nadir Fergany, a prominent Egyptian researcher in the field. He points to the fact that the boom of the migration process in all the sending countries, virtually, coincided with the boom in agriculture, the Green Revolution and the new opening-up policies, and, in fact, there is a problem of how to differentiate the effects of return migration from the socio-cultural changes operating within the home society (Fergany 1987). This methodological problem, however, could be easily solved, as I have attempted to show, in an approach that tackles the returnee migrants as a *social group* which is constituted by collective cultural experience and which operates, not merely against, but within a pattern of change in the local society.

A fairly general statement could be drawn from the literature in the case of Pakistan. It is well noted by macro-economic surveys that the greatest share of the remittances i.e. 62 percent, goes into consumption with recurring consumption (57 percent) as the greatest item. Indeed, however, before judging these spending patterns as luxurious or conspicuous, it would be necessary to study the impact of these consumer patterns on the extent and on the structures of local market networks and production schemes [Gilani *et al.* (1981); Khan (1987b)].

Pakistani low-skilled migrants to the Middle East like the Egyptians, do not stay longer than 3, 5 years (Burki 1984). As I have suggested for the Egyptian case, returnee males tend to avoid agricultural and peasant work. Burki expresses this in rather general terms: while women are supposed to work, men are observed to spend their time in local politics (Burki 1984).² Imdad, however, speaks of a new phenomenon: returnees might spend a lot of money to hire labour and machinery for the

² One should, however, stress here that the mysteries about the political behaviour of the returnee migrants which already have attracted the local press as well as the international one in the case of Intra-European return migration, should not be applied in the case of the Middle East. In Yugoslavia, for example, returnees were blamed for having lost a sense for socialism, while in Spain and Italy they were accused for the rise of leftist movements (Rhoades 1978). It would be pitiful to fall into similar stupidities in terms of relating returnees to Islamic fundamentalism.

cultivation of their land, but, also, they might continue to use women's work inside the house intensively in order to gain respect while maintaining a traditional set-up (Imdad 1987).

There is much debate about the reinforcement or the destruction of family ties for a specific case in Egypt: Abaza (1987b); Imdad's findings show a trend towards an extended family situation among the migrant families vis-a-vis a nuclear family situation among the non-migrant families, a view strongly supported by others e.g. Abbasi and Irfan (1984). Here, perhaps, too little attention is given to the fact of an overall intensive separation of economic (and specifically cash) relations and kinship structure (providing for recreative and protective functions). Extended co-residential family patterns might not necessarily lead to extended corporate and co-operative units of common consumption and production, but rather encourage competitive individualism (Imdad 1987) or lead to the maintenance of a separate nuclear family household management system (Abaza 1987a).

Migration and return have an impact on matrimonial practices but contradictory observations have been made. While, in the case of returnees from Britain, hypergamous marriages, as a frequent pattern, have been observed enabling returnees to forge new links with the high status families (Dahya 1973), in the case of returnees from the Middle East, Imdad points to a change from exogamous to a rather endogamous marriage behaviour and to a marriage selection among the own class of "nouveau riche" return migrants (Imdad 1987).

There, obviously, emerge new rites and cultural practices which relate to return migration. These include the symbolic communication of the image of the host-community and the returnee's perception, back home, in everyday life-styles and occasions. Dahya's (1973) mentioning of the specific return feasts (similar to those of the returning *haggi*) points to a whole range of a new symbolism, integrating mass-cultural symbols and traditional popular cultural practices of which the emergence of new stylish, pompous grave-yards might only be another expression.

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