

Book Review

Abusharaf, Rogia & Eickelman, Dale (Eds.), *Africa and the Gulf Region: Blurred Boundaries and Shifting Ties*. Gerlach Press, Berlin, Germany, 2015. ISBN: 978-3-940924-71-4. Hardcover, p.

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Received: October 24, 2020 Accepted: October 29, 2020 Online Published: November 2, 2020
doi:10.22158/sss.v1n2p80 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sss.v1n2p80>

This review provides a critical and evaluative analysis of *Africa and the Gulf Region: Blurred Boundaries and Shifting Ties*, edited by Rogia Abusharaf and Dale F. Eickelman. The review is organized according to the major themes, ideas, and issues that emerged through an analysis of the text. This book represents a collective endeavor guided by the two editors, Abusharaf and Eickelman, with thirteen writers contributing to the nine chapters provided within. Both editors emphasized that historical and ongoing Arab-African relations are shaped by interactions, intermarriages, and migrations among the local people from the two regions. These relationships and the interconnectedness between Arabs and Africans have been constructed through a bottom-up (people-to-people) approach to relations. This bottom-up construction has played a critical role in developing consistent and linked interactions between the elites and old empires on both sides of the Red Sea that demarcate the geographical boundaries between Africa and the Arabian Peninsula (the contemporary Arabian Gulf countries). Therefore, Africa and the Arabian Gulf Region share a degree of diversity that is sometimes quite astonishing and, yet, quite thrilling, as it is a region characterized by a crossroads of cultures, religions, ethnicities, historically deep and diverse identities, and distinct ideological traditions.

Each of its nine chapters is comprehensive and makes an interesting contribution to the book as a whole. Those who contributed to this groundbreaking, thought-provoking piece of literature examined the Arabian Gulf and African relations through the lens of culture, archaeology, social and economic history, anthropology, linguistics, mythologies, gender roles, and contemporary politics. As a result,

several themes materialize while reading the book. Inevitably, issues of mutual benefits and the reciprocal exchange of materials, products, people, religious convictions, traditional rituals, and ideas have characterized the enduring relations between the two regions. For example, topics such as soft power, familiarities, culture, and food security invoke legitimate investigations into the recognized and celebrated ties that bind Africa and the Arabian Gulf Region. Africa and the contemporary Arabian Gulf countries share a unique relationship illustrated by the cultural and social resilience and endurance exhibited by the people of both regions. This unique bond is recognized, identified, and understood within the context of continued exchanges, shared experiences, genealogical links, and socialization between the various cultures that exist in the two regions.

In Amira Sonbol's chapter, classified here under the theme of "land of Punt," the author explains how the connection between Old Egypt and the East African coast developed and flourished as a result of sustained conquests, rivalries, trade, slavery, and religious visits that spawned from the bonded cultural and linguistic networks and similarities as well as from various disparities. Furthermore, the text powerfully presents discussion on gender relations, in particular, on the traditional female circumcision. Remarkably, the author contends that slaves were both a source and a means of transferring and circulating cultural practices and traditions within the context of slave trade in Africa. These ancient historical rituals, practices, events, and factors may have helped to shape contemporary relations between the people and countries located along the coastal sides of the Red Sea.

Contributor Al-Johara Al-Thani investigated various mythological narrations about the Queen of Sheba (or *Bilqis* in the Arabic tradition) from ancient Ethiopia and Yemen in constructing the distinct identities found in the two countries. The issue of identity and hegemonic rule is instrumentalized to illustrate how similar the commonalities and familiarities between the eastern side of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula are. However, these commonalities and similarities in culture, language, religious practices, and convictions were stimulated by the documented factual history of forced migration and slave trade between Africa and the contemporary Arabian Gulf countries. Another contributor, Matthew Hopper, identified the four routes that fostered slavery from Africa to the Arabian coasts of the Red Sea and to the Arabian Gulf. Paradoxically, religion and shared culture fell short in containing or eliminating the slave trade between Africa and both Arab countries and Persia in the Gulf. Consequently, the contemporary governments of the Arabian Gulf countries intentionally managed to conceal their communities' history of slavery in the past. This observable contradiction was powerfully expressed by Hopper:

In contrast to the official statements by Gulf governments, which tend to cloak the presence of Africans and their traditions in the region with a mask of ambiguity and cosmopolitanism, the history of the arrival [of] Africans in the Gulf is primarily tied to forced migrations through the history of the slave trade (p. 52).

In other words, the Gulf countries are deliberately attempted to downplay and hide the legacy of slavery in the region so as to make it as a forgotten history. Following the same theme of slave trade

between the two regions, the slaughter of Arab Zanzibari in East Africa in 1964 carried out by the revolution of the leftist groups and organizations is considered a devastating and tragic event that haunted relations between the Africans on the east coast and, in particular, the Omani people in the Arabian Gulf in the context of the slave trade. As Ali Mazrui wrote (as cited in Abdullahi Ibrahim, 2015), “Afro-Arab reconciliation involves not only memories of the Zanzibar revolution, but even more fundamentally, memories of Arab involvement in the slave trade in Africa” (p. 87). In his account of the notion of the “politics of denial,” writer Abdullahi Ibrahim uncovered historical factors and accounts depicting the scale of atrocities committed during the incident. His effort is intended to explain the different means and venues that formed the mindset for rejecting the denunciation and the consistent refusal to label the incident as genocide. In addition, the writer convincingly establishes the connection and relativity between the killings in 1964 in Zanzibar in the context of the motivation and scale of contemporary conflicts in different areas of Africa, such as the conflict in Darfur in Sudan.

The last three themes supported in the book are presented through different arguments (a paradigm shift) intended to clarify the closed relation between Africa and the Arabian Gulf countries. Michaela Pelican explored a distinctive and unfamiliar group of Cameroonian migrants in Dubai to reflect on the relationship between the Gulf countries and far West Africa. The author presents a renowned point of view in assessing the migrants’ integration, accessibility to migration, and citizenship by employing different liberal and capitalist theories to a fast-growing economy situation such as Dubai. The Cameroonians’ experience in Dubai shows how the exploitation and inequalities that confront migrants are similar to the conditions found in other migrant-receiving countries. The other theme converges on the influence of regional geopolitics, exemplified by the case of Qatar’s investment in food and agricultural development in Africa within the food security context. The detailed chapter highlights the risks and challenges the Gulf countries experience in mitigating the risk and scarcity (already uncertain) of food and water in coping with their rapid developmental and demographical growth, security threats, and the despair of the arable land and water resources in the Arabian Gulf region. The last chapter focuses on the Arabian Gulf countries’ contributions to aiding and developing health institutions and capacities in the African countries. The Gulf countries are wealthy in terms of the revenue they acquire from exporting hydrocarbon resources, which provides them with a great opportunity to counter health threats and risks in neighboring regions. Mariam Bhacker and Muhammad Zaman present their views on the relationship between Africa and the Arabian Gulf from the perspective of the Gulf Region’s health engagement and diplomacy with Africa. Geographic proximity, migration, consistent interactions through investments, travel between the two regions, a shared human development agenda, and most importantly, a soft power means of attraction and persuasion are cited as reasons the Arabian Gulf countries chose to engage in health support and development in Africa.

Despite these multiple factors that have contributed to constructing the historical, socioeconomic, political, and security elements of the relationship between Africa and the Arabian Gulf countries, the book’s contributors somehow successfully present the most important factors and themes to improve

our understanding of the ancient and deep interconnection between the two regions. These writers pursued a wholistic style in covering various underrepresented topics. However, some themes and issues were absent from the analyses presented in some of the chapters, such as the role of regional institutions or organizations, both political and militaristic, from both regions in advancing or eroding the people-to-people relations. Nevertheless, scholars who concentrate on the Arabian Gulf, Middle East, and African studies may well benefit from this book because of the diversified points of view, inclusive information, and topics presented from a holistic perspective. These topics, issues, and themes are important because of the intense and substantial contemporary rapprochement and involvement of the Gulf countries in trade, politics, development, aid, and security, in particular, pertaining to terrorism, illegal migration, and human trafficking and piracy in Africa. Notably, the book is free of concealed or recognized preferences, because the contributors convey the information from different points of view, including both the African and Gulf perspectives alike. Therefore, it is an interesting and informative piece of academic literature well worth reading.