

## From the Karakoram Mountains to the Gulf: migration, development and religion in the making of transnational spaces

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## From the Karakoram Mountains to the Gulf: migration, development and religion in the making of transnational spaces

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### Abstract

This working paper examines migration as part of a large network of relations between Kuwait and the region of Baltistan in northeastern Pakistan. Apart from migrants, this network involves the participation of philanthropists from the Kuwaiti merchant class who finance development projects in Baltistan and religious clerics from Baltistan who have been educated in the Gulf and who engage in fundraising activities there to contribute to the development of their home areas. Hence, the paper discusses the relationship between migration, development and religion by referring to three accounts circulating in Baltistan of how migration to the Gulf began, the relationship of migration and development, and the role of local religious leaders in it. Migration is central in shaping and reinforcing ties over the course of time between these two regions, but it is rendered invisible in the narratives of charity and development.

This transnational activity is characterised as much as by the crossing of state borders, and thus the actors' engagement in two or more societies, as by the actors being in an ambivalent position in terms of belonging to their own state. The study of this transnational space helps us to understand relations between these two territories in terms of how the participants in the network position themselves vis-à-vis their own state, on the grounds of need and solidarity but also in terms of other interests that are connected to the realities of their respective homelands.<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

On a sunny afternoon in February 2018 I was listening to migrants from Baltistan (in northeastern Pakistan) playing their traditional music in the open fields of a Kuwaiti farm, a few kilometres from the Iraqi border at al-Abdali.<sup>2</sup> Not far away from us, workers from Bangladesh, Nepal and India were sitting in the fields of large farms busily packing sun-ripe tomatoes to be sold in the markets of Kuwait City as part of the small agricultural national production. Foreign workers from Nepal, Bangladesh, India and Egypt participate in the various processes of farming, ranging from supervising, maintenance of equipment and selling the crops and animals in the weekly informal markets. The nationalities of these male workers, mainly hailing from South Asia and Egypt, respond to the racialised and gendered labour differentiation which has been characteristic of the country for decades (Longva 1997; Ahmad 2017, 58–61).

The migrant musicians who travelled with me to al-Abdali for the event are some of the 1,300–1,500 Balti workers in Kuwait, part of the estimated 340,481 Pakistani workforce in that country.<sup>3</sup> Baltistan is the Southern Division of Gilgit-Baltistan (known as the Northern Areas until 2009), an autonomous region on the border with India that is not properly integrated into the Pakistani state

<sup>2</sup> This article adopts the following criteria in the use of Arabic names: the names of places and organisations are transliterated following common usage, while names of individuals and common names are transliterated according to the standards of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (IJMES).

<sup>3</sup> Data from the United Nations Population Division for 2017, International Migration Stock by Destination and Origin, <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates17.shtml>.

because it is part of the Kashmir dispute; therefore residents there are not fully state citizens (Mato Bouzas 2017). This legal status has determined over time strong control by central government rather than the strengthening of regional institutions. Being a disputed territory has affected the region's development, and in the absence of state investment non-government organisations (NGOs) and charities began to arrive in the area in the early 1980s, to some extent to cater for people's most immediate needs. This non-government development sector, supported by foreign and Pakistani sponsors, carries out activities in Baltistan in the fields of rural development, education and health, among other areas, thereby contributing to the region's governance. At the same time, owing to the lack of job opportunities, many men from Gilgit-Baltistan have migrated to Pakistan's large cities and to the Gulf in order to improve their prospects.

This paper contextualises migration as part of a broader network of relations between Kuwait and Baltistan. It traces the connections between philanthropists from the Kuwaiti merchant class who finance development and charity projects in Baltistan and religious clerics from Baltistan educated in the Gulf who, on their return, contribute to charity and migrant activities and are often funded by Kuwaiti sponsors.<sup>4</sup> The relations and practices between the different actors who are involved as individuals or organisations conform to a distinct transnational space that shapes relations between Kuwait and Pakistan. In terms of representativity, the relationship may not involve a large number of individuals and groups, but it has a significant importance in creating imaginaries of solidarity and cooperation between Kuwait and Baltistan (and Pakistan). Fieldwork has consisted of interviews and the collection of data in various locations in Baltistan in June and July 2018 and in Kuwait in January and February 2018. The paper also draws on previous research carried out in Baltistan since 2009.

Migration means in this case the possibility of earning a reasonable income for a period in one's adult life for investment purposes, examples of this being building a house, purchasing land, educating one's family's children and, in some cases, establishing small businesses. Migration is often seen as a temporary life period, as migrants and acquaintances in Baltistan recalled during in-

<sup>4</sup> I will refer mainly to the philanthropic activity of the Marafie family through the Marafie Foundation. Data collected show that there are other relevant families in the merchant class who sponsor charity activities in Baltistan individually. Since I could not interview these individuals during my visit to Kuwait because they were abroad, I will not refer to them explicitly, even though I consider them to be part of this philanthropic group.

terviews. Indeed, if I used the English word »migrant«, I was normally corrected by a reference to *rozgar-ki-talash* (in search of work), expressing the temporariness of the condition and the fact that migrants always return to their homes. However, while interviewing some Balti long-term migrants in Kuwait (who had stayed in the country for more than fifteen years), I realised that this sense of temporariness was often subject to question, as discussed below, because migrants can feel trapped between two worlds or even multiple worlds. As in the case of other South Asian communities in the Gulf, they travel to and fro throughout most of their lives until they are unable to work any more, either because they reach old age or are sick and barred from working, sometimes eventually dying in the Gulf (Vora 2013, 80–81).

Analysis of this transnational network focuses on migrants and their relations with the developmental and religious actors aforementioned. Migration plays a central role in the establishment of ties across nation-states from below, and the actors participating in the network seem to have some involvement in the migration channels that strengthen this transnational activity. Relations within this network can be described as those of mutual support or solidarity; they take place within specific social, economic and religious confines and are characterised by meanings that are shared by the actors involved (Smith and Guarnizo 1998, 13). Locality matters in terms of context because existing social ties are determined by specific conditions at both ends that facilitate an actor's engagement and action (*ibid.*). This exchange can be framed in terms of translocality in the sense that it draws attention to the alternative geographies that existed before or are not limited by the boundaries of the nation-state and because it better grasps experiences in many non-Western contexts (Freitag and von Oppen 2010, 5–6 and 10–11). Religion, understood as a shared belonging to Shia Islam, has sustained ties over time since well before the state formation of Kuwait and Pakistan, and thereby it helps to contextualise the migration process and developmental cooperation in north-eastern Pakistan.

Transnationalism in this case, I argue, is defined as much by the crossing of state boundaries and by being engaged in two or more societies as by being in an ambivalent position in terms of belonging to one's own's state. This ambivalent position determines the kind of engagement that occurs in the location where the activity (migrant, religious, economic, political, developmental work) takes place, and has the potential to ultimately alter that relationship. As Jeanine Dahinden points out, the state plays a strong role in migration issues and in redefining the transnational field, something that has already been emphasised by early scholars in the field of political science such as Robert W. Cox,

who focused on the links of transnational action in matters of labour as carried out by groups in the service of a state's foreign policy (Dahinden 2017, 1480–81; Cox 1971). The transnational dimension can therefore amount to a distinct approach because the practices and ties within a network have the potential to reshape the positions of the participating actors in their home societies, and cannot be understood without this interactional and linking character (Waldinger 2010, 22; Dahinden 2017, 1482). In other words, a transnational approach underscores the existence of spaces that, though initially formed by relations across states (the crossing of borders), have a meaning of their own, and this can be economic, political or social, for example. Thomas Faist defines these spaces on the basis of »stable, lasting and dense sets of ties reaching beyond and across the borders of sovereign states« (Faist 2000, 3). His work (as most studies on transnationalism) centres on migration, and attends to migrants' cross-border ties and practices in order to study what he calls »transnational social spaces«, in which the social space has a social meaning beyond existing territoriality (Faist, Fauser and Reisenauer 2013, 53–55). During my ongoing research, however, I prefer to refer to transnational spaces to emphasise that the point of departure is beyond state borders where place (or locality) matters, rather to stress a specific quality of those spaces (social, political, economic) that cannot be easily singled out. The space formed by actors between Kuwait and Baltistan (not understood as territorial demarcated entities) and their resulting practices is the product of a structure that rests on mutually oriented actions and in which participants are mutually dependent. It can be conceived as a figuration, defined by Norbert Elias in terms of a web of interdependencies whose study provides knowledge at micro- (individual) and macro- (the unit) level (Elias 1978, 72 and 128–31).

The study of this transnational space helps us to understand relations between these two territories in terms of how non-state actors (Kuwaiti philanthropists, religious leaders from Baltistan, migrants, NGOs and charities) position themselves vis-à-vis their own state, on the grounds of need and solidarity but also in terms of other interests that are connected to the realities of their respective homelands. The analysis of this transnational space can help us to grasp how migrants maintain ties across borders but also how migration is functional to other groups' interests, for purposes unrelated to that economic activity. Migrants constitute the numerical majority in the network, and in a way it could be said that Kuwait's relations with Pakistan rest on their shoulders. They lack resources in terms of education, money and work, and they are often referred to as a collective in macroeconomic analyses or in terms of the

subjects' life trajectories in micro-level research. Nonetheless, this paper considers migrants (as labour force) also as a commodity for exchange within the network that helps to legitimise the position of the network's most resourceful actors, such as Balti religious leaders and Kuwaiti philanthropists. Migrants are trapped in a cycle of continued mobility that deprives them of their own family and local attachments in their homeland, while other actors in the network see migration as an opportunity to develop other agendas. The position of migrants, however, must be considered within a set of relations which also provides them with some degree of agency.

The Balti musicians I listened to, cooks and shop assistants in Kuwait City, actively boosted ties across the closed Baltistan–Ladakh border, in the disputed Kashmir region between India and Pakistan. By sharing information with people from both sides of the border (divided families among them), through mobile applications and the internet, they were reconfiguring the divided border community of Baltistan and Ladakh. Being in Kuwait represented an opportunity to carry out these activities with a sense of freedom. Other long-term migrants with more established ties in Kuwait were busy with their smartphones as well. Acting as middlemen to supply labour to the Kuwaiti merchant class, they would call their home area to find potential candidates who were willing to work in the Gulf country, which is a profitable occupation. Through an analysis of these migrants' activities and an exploration of their relations with other actors in Kuwait and in Baltistan, I will provide an account of the functioning dynamics of this transnational space. I hypothesise that these relations, framed on ideas of solidarity, are shaped by a perceived mutual benefit among the main participating actors in both societies, a logic that reinforces the position of some specific groups and individuals as power holders in their respective countries. Migrants – through their jobs and through their position in a set of relationships in their homeland, for example – help to strengthen a relationship of cooperation and support between the two regions.

The paper is structured as follows: the first section discusses migration processes with regard to their influence in the sending and receiving societies; the second section explains, by exploring oral accounts that deal with how development arrived in Baltistan from Kuwait, how migration is intersected with development and charity activities (from Kuwait to Baltistan) and with religious networks; and the third section analyses how transnationalism becomes a source of empowerment for some of the actors.

### **Migration and its influences back home**

Migration impacts both on the receiving and sending societies. The presence of people from other

societies that is perceived as significant or the significant absence of otherwise local inhabitants in a particular place challenge the sending society's social dynamics.<sup>5</sup> As macroeconomic theories of migration would put it, migration to the Gulf responds to the logic of modernisation, in which wealth triggers the industrialisation process in order to improve life standards for the population, only for the citizens in the case of Gulf societies, and to stimulate further investment once the oil reserves run out (Massey et al. 1998, 134–35). Migrants transform places through their various activities and through the creation of new spaces, but at the same time as »outsiders« they become an object of concern and much debate in the receiving societies. Political debates about migration in Kuwait and Pakistan are about numbers. Kuwait's economy constantly demands renewal of its labour force, but the large presence of foreign workers in the country – compared with the number of local citizens – is perceived as threatening aspects of national identity, culture and rights, and the government has sought to strengthen regulatory policies (Longva 1997, 199; Jurkiewicz 2016, 5; Shah 2010, 220–28). Conversely, the absence of these workers from their homeland, in this case Pakistan, has received less attention from scholars, who tend to focus on the »positive« aspects of migration, such as the importance of remittances for the local and national economy (Suleri and Savage 2006; Arif 2016). In this respect, it is necessary to remember that this migration process is characterised by unequal relationships that are determined by the spatial organisation of labour and uneven development, which can be properly contextualised within ongoing peripheralisation processes (Tahir and Naumann 2013, Introduction).

Scholars such as Mezzadra and Neilson have underscored the problematic relationship of labour and capital within the national frame and the contradictory figure of the migrant in the regulation of the labour market. As these authors point out, »the commodity of labour cannot be separated from its bearer«, and they indicate further that the labour force provided by migrant workers has been essentially treated as a »kind of supplement to the stock of labor power present within the bounded space of the national labour market, to meet the needs of capital in its industrial formation without disturbing the reproduction of the national workforce« (2014, 102). This understanding of labour power as a commodity becomes interesting when we address the case of Gulf migration and the transnational network under study. Labour power is not only a commodity in the sense of its

acquisition and regulation, but also implies an objectification of the bearer, that is the migrant, who becomes, through the process of exchange, part of a new set of relationships that may differ from the strictly labour relations.

Migration flows have strong effects in both the sending and receiving societies, and their influence can be analysed through quantitative and qualitative aspects – although this paper will only consider qualitative ones. The influence of migration to Kuwait in Baltistan is visible in the way my friend, Ahmad, while driving around in Skardu, points from time to time to a large house which is either under construction or already finished to indicate that the owner is or has been a migrant in Kuwait. He distinguishes Kuwait from »Saudi«, a more general term that often refers to Saudi Arabia and also encompasses the rest of the Gulf countries. Attitudes shaped by migration processes in the sending societies can also be observed in changes in the urban landscape, through construction patterns, social styles, habits and ideas that imply an incorporation (or imitation) of the societies left behind; exposure to another culture affects mindsets.

Anthropological studies of influences from the Gulf in South Asian societies challenge common assumptions about the migrant experience. The Gulf is sometimes seen as a spatial extension of the homeland, such as in the case of Indian communities in Dubai, and as a context that confronts experiences of religiosity, such as the case of South Asian female converts to Islam in Kuwait (Vora 2013; Ahmad 2017). Political works tend to focus on the »renting« of South Asian Muslim states by some Gulf states, as the case of Pakistan exemplifies in the field of security cooperation (and this can be applied to migration too); and also on the Gulf as a model of Islamic authoritarianism in relation to Islamic national projects in Pakistan (Cohen 2004, 121 and 270; Cohen 2011, 52). Other works address the Gulf's role in the diffusion of more observant Islamic practices through different movements and their possible effects on and tensions in South Asian Muslim societies with distinct cultural traditions (Jaffrelot and Löuer 2017). Classical studies on migration and recent works in the fields of demography and economy tend to consider influences as something measurable and able to provide a fair understanding of the impact of migration processes on the receiving and sending societies (Addleton 1992; Jain and Oommen 2016). Influences presume a degree of representativeness, a traceable causal relationship. However, this focus on influences does not adequately address the question of silences, which in the study of the Gulf's projection in South Asia in the field of migration relates to the lack of relative knowledge on migration processes by future migrants, exploitation by

<sup>5</sup> I say the »perceived« presence because this is a rather subjective issue.



other fellow migrants and the absence of a public debate on this topic in Pakistan, and probably in some other South Asian countries.<sup>6</sup>

Balti migration to Kuwait and its influence back home amounts to more than numbers; there are qualitative aspects connected to the visible outcomes of the migrants' work (building houses, buying land, opening businesses) and their approaches to life in terms of changing habits. Less visible are the relationships framed as a result of the migration process. This refers to ties established with other actors for purposes of support and protection, with religious leaders and religious students, Kuwaiti employers from the business class and charities, for example. In this respect, Kuwait's influence in Baltistan can be grasped by observing the migrants' activities, and also through the migrants' location as part of a larger network constituted by other actors, such as religious scholars and Kuwaiti philanthropists, and charities established in northeastern Baltistan and supported by those philanthropists.

These interactions occur over time in the fields of migration and development, although they involve a religious aspect and certainly have a political dimension. It is difficult to conclude, however, that one of these fields dominates the other in the network, even though migration plays the linking role. The interdependences that are created amount to distinct geographies of knowledge, in the sense that they cannot be properly understood through a state perspective or through focusing on a single social variable. However, they certainly become a figuration of relationships of solidarity between Kuwait and Baltistan, and international politics can be studied through this. Relations in this transnational space are power relations that are recognised by all the actors involved, and they serve to reinforce the position of the network's most powerful actors in their respective societies.

### **The Interplay of Migration, Development and Religion**

Different accounts circulate in Baltistan about how development arrived in the mountain village of Mehdiabad, subdistrict of Kharmang, in the border area with India. The two main versions centre on the interplay of migration, development and religion, while a third stresses the relationship of development and religion. The first version I

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, these issues are addressed in the works of Andrew M. Gardner, »Whey do they keep coming«; the forthcoming book by Samuli Schielke; »Dreaming of the inevitable: What being a migrant worker in the Gulf does to one's dreams«, and in the forthcoming PhD dissertation by Sebastian Sons, »Alltägliche Präsenz, mediale Absenz: Praktiken, Strategien und Inhalte bei pakistanischen Medienakteuren zu Arbeitsmigration nach Saudi-Arabien« [Daily presence, medial absence: Pakistani media actors' practices, strategies and content on labour migration to Saudi Arabia].

came across is provided in a report of the NGO Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) titled »The use of remittances & the life of returnees in local situation in village Mehdiabad« and authored by Kulsoom Farman, a former director of the AKRSP in Baltistan and a well-educated and leading woman entrepreneur in Baltistan whose family hails from Kharmang. Unlike the other versions, the author connects »the beginning of the out migration« to the Gulf in the years 1965–70, when Shaykh Ḥasan of Mehdiabad »had established many religious schools, orphanage centre, mosque and library in Mehdiabad« with the financial assistance of some philanthropists from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (Farman 2000, 7). She mentions the visit of »Sheikh Abdullah Almatrud a leading business magnate of Saudi Arabia«, as a landmark at the beginning of this relationship. Owing to the limited economic opportunities in the area, this businessman facilitated visas for a limited group of men on a regular basis, so that locals could work in the Gulf state (Farman 2000, 7). This account could explain why migration from Kharmang has been almost exclusively channelled to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Moreover, although further research needs to be carried out to sustain the argument, it hints at a context in which Baltistan, rather than a remote location, could be inserted in a broader pattern of circulation between South Asia and the Gulf, in which men from the Gulf, operating as businessmen or contractors, would usually recruit workers by visiting the home areas of potential migrants.

The second version of events, less precise in detail, was provided by a person employed in the local administration whom I met during my visit to Mehdiabad in March 2010. My interest at this time was the collection of data about migration. I heard variations of this story from other Kharmang residents so I assume it is widespread. The account points out that the religious leader from the village, Sheikh Ḥasan of Mehdiabad, travelled to Kuwait in the early 1980s and engaged in a fundraising campaign there. Through this he met an influential Kuwaiti merchant, and he told him about the poor conditions in which the people of Baltistan lived, and his intention to build a school and a hospital. This merchant decided to pay a visit to Baltistan to observe the situation for himself. Realising that what the Shaykh had told him was true, he made a financial donation towards the building of an orphanage and later he became involved in supporting the construction of a hospital. When he returned to Kuwait, the merchant took along several local men with him, thus initiating a migration channel that still continues in 2018. The religious leader was Shaykh Ḥasan of Mehdiabad and the Kuwaiti merchant's name was Muḥammad Rafī' Ḥusayn Ma'rafī (Mohammad Rafie Husain Marafie).

The third account was narrated to me by various members of the Marafie family during an interview in Kuwait City in February 2018. There was no reference made to migration, but certain details added a broader dimension to the relationship. This version is also known in Baltistan, mainly by workers within the NGO sector, but I refer here to the version recounted to me by the Marafies. They mentioned that Shaykh Ḥasan Baltistani (the later surname indicates his origin, so it is the same person as in the other two versions) reached the Marafie family in Kuwait through an imam from the local mosque while looking for economic support for his people. Previously, he had been in Kuwaiti mosques speaking about the poor condition of Baltistan for purposes of fundraising, in order to build a school and a mosque. In this account, according to the Marafies, Shaykh Ḥasan described Baltistan as an »azad territory«, a liberated area during Partition that was not integrated into Pakistan and whose uncertain political status had a negative impact on people's lives as they wanted to join Pakistan.<sup>7</sup> The Marafies visited Baltistan in 1986 and then returned one or two years later. During the interview, they underscored the differences with Shaykh Ḥasan on the question of development. While they supported economically the building of the mosque, differences emerged concerning the school. Shaykh Ḥasan and other local religious men wanted to build a school that was just for boys, but the Marafies argued that girls should also be included. At some point, tension grew, and the potential sponsors even remembered that they were called *kuffār* (infidels). Because the money was needed, the people from Mehdiabad eventually gave in and agreed to sign the document.

These three accounts emphasise two different aspects of the relationship between migration, development and religion. While in the first two narrations a clear link is stressed between migration and development, with the involvement of a religious leader who acted as a mediator, in the third account migration is omitted and development is problematised in terms of conservative and modernist attitudes, which are connected to religious views. Furthermore, all these accounts portray a relationship of interdependence between the two territories, in which Kuwait provides the opportunities – work, sponsorship, funding – and Baltistan becomes the recipient or the beneficiary of them. At the same time, in these accounts migration is depicted as the result of a negotiation process between patrons and religious leaders, an act of charity rather than an economic activity, when it is

<sup>7</sup> This version is similar to the one narrated to Andreas Rieck by Shaykh Ḥasan's son-in-law. See Rieck 2002, 396. It also confirms that this religious scholar became the first to obtain funds from the Gulf, although there is a gap when it comes to dates.

not directly omitted as it is in the third narration. Migration is, to some extent, rendered invisible in these narratives of charity and development. I maintain, however, that it plays a central role in shaping and reinforcing ties between these two regions. For purposes of explanation, it is necessary then to disaggregate migration, development and religion in this transnational relationship in order to grasp the motivations of the network's participating actors.

### *Migration*

Baltistan's migration to the Gulf consists of poorly qualified and mainly unskilled and semi-skilled workers, who migrate on a temporary basis. The discriminatory system of citizenship in force in the Gulf states discourages settlement or permanent residence for those with a meagre income. However, there is evidence that some migrants manage to stay for longer periods, either because of the support provided by host families or by navigating through margins that allow the exercise of alternative forms of citizenship rather than state membership (Vora 2013, 20–21). In my interviews with migrants in Baltistan and Kuwait about their lives' trajectories, the Gulf often appeared as a place to earn money and support the family in the homeland. Yet this temporariness often contrasts with the fact that a number of the migrants might spend up to four decades of their lives going back and forth, and might only return to their homeland when they are old and unable to work.<sup>8</sup> Apart from religious services and meetings with other co-nationals, these migrants often have limited interaction with native populations beyond their employees, and those are mainly hierarchical in nature.

The Gulf, and specifically in this case Kuwait, is often described as a place of work, but not as one where one's own experiences can be developed, with the only exception being, perhaps, in the religious sphere. This situation is very different from that of migrants in Europe, either during the decades of inner migration in the second half of the twentieth century or involving migrants from third countries in Europe, who were obliged, owing to the characteristics of the legal systems, to enter into a more dialogical relationship with the receiving country (Massey et al. 1998, 134).<sup>9</sup> The anthro-

<sup>8</sup> The most senior migrant I met in Kuwait migrated there in 1977 and he was still working in the country at the time of the interview in February 2018. He was probably in his sixties and he said he had no definite plan to return.

<sup>9</sup> In general the migrant in Europe has a major and direct engagement with the state administration, while family reunion is permitted in many cases and access to the welfare system acts as a mode of socialisation which favours inclusion. This engagement continues beyond the migrant's working life through the pension system. In the Gulf, on the contrary, relations with the state administration tend to be

pologist Attiya Ahmad elaborates on this dialogical relationship in the religious field by referring to the case of migrant women from South Asian origin in Kuwait who converted to Islam. She points out to a gender dimension, by which women from South Asia become malleable (*naram*) because of their experience as domestic servants in Kuwait while men tend to be unaffected by their working life in the Gulf (Admad 2017, 122-23). In the case of Muslim men from South Asia in the Gulf, and therefore non-converts, some may credit a moral religious superiority to the Gulf by being in the land of the Prophet, and therefore can modify their religious practices accordingly once they return to their homelands. However, in the interviews conducted so far and focusing on the labour issue, the Gulf is just for »work, work, work«, as a Balti driver put it, and trying to foresee a better life because of the potential earnings.

This sense of temporariness, which can be similar to a commuter regularly travelling a distance to work but failing to establish a significant relationship with the workplace, is nonetheless challenged by the biographies of some migrants. A man from a village in the centre of Baltistan invited me to visit his humble servant's room in the district of Salmiya.<sup>10</sup> In his mid-sixties, he travelled in the mid-1980s to Kuwait to work as a cook, a job he continued to do for a wealthy local family. Owing to his limited educational skills, he explained, he was unable to strive for a better position. His weekly holiday was on Fridays, between 6 am and 3 pm, and although he said the family was treating him well, he was not comfortable. His only entertainment was a small garden and a mango tree he grew in front of the house. He claimed not to know the city, except for the nearest *husayniyya* (a meeting hall for the Shia) that he rarely attended, and a nearby square where migrants from his region usually met. However, most of his free time he spent indoors with his relative. His family in Baltistan was depending on his income, he said, and after the recent death of one of his brothers-in-law, he was also helping his widowed sister and her children. He visited his home once every two years for a couple of months but could not return definitely because, he claimed, there were no jobs suitable for him there – besides the difficulty of his old age. In Kuwait he could work, but he could not prosper. In this account, which shared similarities with other cases, Kuwait appears as only a place to work and earn a living to support the wider family. Home in Baltistan is a place to rest during the hol-

minimal and often mediated, family reunion is only permitted under certain circumstances and is limited to the better off, who face restrictions in accessing state public services such as universities. Migrants normally receive a lump sum payment after they finish their working life but not a pension. **10** We agreed during our interview to preserve his anonymity.

iday period. Despite this, the work and rest cycle appears initially to be a temporary state of affairs for these migrants, but ends by becoming a permanent form of living, at least for those who are less skilled. Others manage to return home after a number of years, and the Gulf remains as the location for a specific period in their lives, whose sacrifice was for a certain purpose.

Migration is perceived in Baltistan, mostly among the educated people with whom I have discussed this topic over the years, as an individual act that concerns family strategies and therefore does »not contribute to society«. People from liberal professions, such as doctors, teachers, journalists, development workers and tour operators, tend to see migrants as less educated, even when in some cases these migrants are their own relatives and their experiences cannot solely be explained by »ignorance«. Other more ordinary people in Baltistan, such as shop owners, taxi drivers and farmers, tend to reflect on migration in terms of the visible outcomes for the migrants, which as mentioned earlier are the building of new houses, the purchase of property and the education of their children, for example. This stresses that migration is assessed by some residents in terms of material success, but that those in liberal professions expect migrants to have the potential to induce positive transformations in society at large. The latter aspect is of interest because it links migration with the question of development in Baltistan and the role of migrants in it.

Migrants contribute to the welfare of society, but surprisingly their activities go almost unnoticed. During fieldwork, I came across instances in which migrants support various development projects in villages, even though through minor interventions. For example, a member of the AKRSP recalled that migrants abroad collected money to replace a generator that had been installed by the NGO and was damaged by the floods of 2010. During meetings with migrants in Kuwait, I also noticed that those coming from a particular or nearby village participated in initiatives through donations, such as avoiding the closing of the local dispensary. Their actions were motivated by a sense of responsibility toward their home areas, they claimed, but also by the sense of being a group that characterises the Balti migrant community. However, when the question of development is addressed in Baltistan, it is normally related to the role played by NGOs and remarkable individuals, such as local religious leaders and foreigners with a relationship to the area.

### *Development*

Baltistan's road to modernity came in the form of an offshoot of the Karakoram highway linking the town of Gilgit in the north with Skardu in the early 1980s. Previously, this territory had been al-



most landlocked owing to the closing of the border with India in 1949 and limited connections to the rest of Pakistan. The completion of the Karakoram highway in 1982 became a landmark in the history of the area until then known as Northern Areas. The road ended the region's relative isolation and provoked a dramatic change in living conditions in this area of high-altitude mountains and deep valleys (Kreutzmann 1991). Old people in Baltistan still refer to this transition as the »revolution«, to indicate the radical change that it implied in everyday life, with examples being the replacement of kitchen utensils such as stone pots with modern cookware, the introduction of modern tools and seeds to cultivate the land and the increasing use of ready-made clothes.

The opening of the road facilitated the work of the state administration, but also the arrival of development organisations to provide aid to a population whose living standards were until then very low. The first NGO to be established in Gilgit-Hunza area was the AKRSP in 1982, through the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF). AKRSP later opened a branch in Skardu to work throughout the district of Baltistan. AKRSP has a strong presence in Baltistan's rural areas, supporting as it does farming activities and related infrastructures, bringing new seeds and marketing agricultural products to be sold elsewhere in Pakistan. Its arrival in Baltistan paved the way for other initiatives in the non-profit sector but as of 2018 this NGO remains the most important in terms of infrastructure, outreach and socio-economic impact in the area. AKRSP's perception by ordinary people in Baltistan is that of an organisation connected to the Ismailis, a branch of Shia Islam (also known as the Seveners because they maintain that the seventh was the last Imam). However, critics acknowledge that their activities benefit society as a whole and its mission statement is that of a non-faith NGO. The majority of Baltistan's population are from the main Twelver Shia, and the tiny Ismaili community residing in Skardu that is originally from Hunza moved there for job opportunities. Thus it is assumed that, in general, Shias and others benefit from AKRSP activities.

Other NGOs and charities were established in Baltistan during the 1980s and 1990s, but because their presence is not that widespread or they work in specific villages they have received less attention. One of them is the Marafie Foundation, of the Marafie family, which has a specific focus on Baltistan and provides infrastructure and logistics in the fields of health and education, also giving some financial support to students and orphans. The NGO is now run by the second generation of the family, and before its involvement abroad it had a reputation for educational charity work in Kuwait: in 1938 it established a school for needy children (Marafie Foundation 2016, 7). Apart from

this organisation, there are other charities such as the Muhammadiya Trust, founded by the aforementioned Shaykh Ḥasan of Mehdiabad, and the Jabir Bin Hayyan Trust, responsible for the Uswa education system as well as for the running of the Madinat-ul-Ahlibait Colony (also known as Madina Colony) and Hussaini Colony ([www.jbht.org](http://www.jbht.org)). These charities operate in the field of education and the support of the needy, such as widows, orphans and the disabled. They receive funds from affluent Kuwaiti families, among other sources, either through sponsorship by single donors or through money collected at special gatherings (mainly on the occasion of *Muḥarram*) in the *ḥusayniyya*.

Unlike AKRSP, which is associated with the Aga Khan, these other organisations are usually referred to as Kuwaiti by ordinary people, or they are known by being administered by influential local clerics, such as in the earlier case of Shaykh Ḥasan or at present Shaykh Muḥsin 'Alī Najafī (Mohsin Ali Najafi). During fieldwork in Kharmang in March 2010, I noticed a strong migration to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and became acquainted with the two narratives linking migration and development that I mentioned above. My initial impression of the context was framed within the theories of migration and development, by which the existence of migrants from a specific location attracts the attention of the recipient society, which is willing to alleviate the roots of poverty on the ground. However, Gulf migration presents characteristics that strongly differ from other migrations such as, for example, migration to Europe.

Gulf migration is framed by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states strictly as temporary. Migrants are offered an opportunity through a work contract and sponsorship, through the *kafāla* system, to earn an income which is exceptionally high compared with the standards of their own societies. This temporariness also framed the regulation of migration policies to Europe in the mid-twentieth century because it revolved around the same idea of invitation. This logic of the earlier guest workers to Germany is still somehow present in the European Union (EU) directives to attract highly qualified workers from third countries through mobility partnerships and bilateral agreements, although the legal systems of the member states offer possibilities of permanence through citizenship. Yet European border regulatory policies, and those of the Gulf countries as well, rest on the premise that there cannot be opportunities for all. Using this logic, European cooperation programmes have served to promote development in the migrants' home societies with the aim, among others, to tackle the root causes of »irregular« migration (e.g. the EU External Investment Plan 2017). Such cooperation programmes, even if carried out by independent NGOs, are significantly supported by state and European agencies for developmental cooperation,

and this is reflected in the aims of the developmental activity. Contrary to this, Gulf cooperation in migrant sending countries seems to be the result of the engagement of individual entrepreneurs or eminent personalities and is motivated in principle by aims unrelated to the regulation of migration. Migration draws the attention of these Kuwaiti to the existence of societies that are in need.

Cooperation, in this context, is not taking place to bar migrants from arriving, because migration is necessary for the receiving societies. On the contrary, cooperation is essentially an instrument of foreign policy that develops ties with the migrant societies; it is framed by donors and organisation members on the grounds of solidarity and religious Islamic values. During my interview with the Marafies, they underlined the obligation to give charity, *zakā* and *khums*, because »to share with others will make you richer«. In the interviews held with donors in Kuwait and also with the charities' management staff in Skardu, it was clearly stated that the act of giving and the orientation of the organisations did not follow the tenets of a specific faith. This aspect will be further developed in the next section, but the question posed concerns what developmental cooperation does for migration.

At the time of writing in late 2018, it is not yet possible to establish a relationship between these two phenomena, but there are several instances that link migration and development. On the one hand, as previously stated, migrants make contributions to welfare activities in their home areas, thereby becoming actors in the developmental process. On the other hand, donors from the receiving migrant societies reinforce their presence in the sending areas through welfare activities, and create an element of trust that strengthens the continuation of the migration channel. The accounts concerning the origin of the migration channel to Kuwait underscore how a local religious leader who was engaged in fundraising for charity purposes found that some men in the villages were willing to migrate and work for the donor back in his home country. This formula, although it may not be the main channel used by migrants who go to the Gulf, it is certainly one that is still functioning in the informal context of migration processes. During an interview with the staff of one of these charities, I asked if the organisation was supporting the sending of migrants to the Gulf. He immediately denied this, saying that they only focused on developmental activities. However, he later confessed that during visits by personnel from the Gulf, it is not rare to ask if there are any locals who are willing to work there as cooks and drivers, and to take a few of them along. This is normally seen as an opportunity in Baltistan society, and it relies on a relationship of trust between the potential employees and the Balti intermediaries.

In Kuwait, some of these donors who are known for belonging to specific families with a business reputation usually recruit through local middlemen for their companies, and they arrange the documentation regarding visa and work permit through a delegate or *mandūb*. A Balti resident in the Gulf for three decades showed me by using his mobile phone how the process worked when he entered a government website stating the labour force required by specific companies. He identified two companies whose owners I knew as supporting developmental and charity activities in Baltistan, and he said he would call some people in his home area in order to find potential candidates for these companies. Certainly this man was receiving some benefits for his mediating role, which he did not disclose during our meeting, but the interesting point was observing how migrants from this specific area were recruited by specific companies through the mediating role of local individuals. Hence, there is a nexus between migration and development; but there is also a third aspect that helps us to understand this relationship. This is the role of religion.

### *Religion*

At the beginning of my fieldwork in Kuwait, I searched for companies that employed Baltis, whose names I had collected during interviews in Baltistan. Some of these companies were engaged in the food sector. Baltis have a reputation for being good cooks and they are proud to tell about their fellows who are employed in the best restaurants in Pakistan. Besides, it is believed that many migrants work in restaurants and hotels in the Gulf. Some of my Balti interviewees in Kuwait referred to the fact that these companies were owned by Shias, and some of them are involved in charity activities in Baltistan. Migrants saw this relationship as a sign of gratefulness and protection, since they felt that »Shias were helping the poor Shias of Baltistan« by employing them. This religious aspect appears in the accounts concerning the beginnings of this migration channel, outlined above and relating the role of local clerics in Baltistan as mediators. The religious element adds some insights to our understanding of this cooperation. Specifically, it connects the transnational dimension of migration and development with the transnational networks of Shia Islam, and at the same time it highlights the non-territorialised element of religious belonging. It builds a transnational space whose meaning goes beyond the religious sphere.

Migration from Baltistan to Kuwait and development from Kuwait in Baltistan is not organised along religious lines, although religion plays a role as a cultural identity marker in terms of shared affinities. The decisions that migrants from Baltistan made in going to work in a specific Gulf coun-

try, as they made clear in interviews, depended very much on practical issues that concerned networks of support (relatives or neighbours already there) and knowledge about salaries. However, migrants also expressed their own views about those countries. While being »Shia« was never mentioned in these meetings in Baltistan (but was addressed in two interviews in Kuwait) as a reason for orientating their preferences, a certain caution was expressed concerning Saudi Arabia. This was narrated in terms of the apparent contradiction in Saudi Arabia's role as the home to Islam and the harsh way in which migrants (meaning Muslim migrants) are treated there; it was also expressed through objections about Saudis not behaving as proper Muslims.

Development in Baltistan funded by Kuwaiti donors theoretically does not follow religious lines. The Marafie Foundation supports activities in various parts of the world and addresses non-Muslim groups, although it also makes contributions to the building of mosques. Other charities, operating in the form of trusts, show a more explicit religious orientation. During my visit to Madina Colony in 2010, a closed compound for the needy, widows and orphans, I observed that the organisation followed strict segregation of sexes, and on the walls there were information signs in Urdu (in this case for women) about how to behave following the tenets of Shia Islam.<sup>11</sup> Shaykh Muhsin 'Alī Najafī is among the members of the trust ruling the charity, which supports a network of schools across the region of Gilgit-Baltistan. The anthropologist Tim Mostowlansky calls the work of these organisations »Shia aid«, that is a form of solidarity on the grounds of belonging to the same sect of Islam. These charities are certainly active in spreading Islamic values pertaining to Shia tradition that can sometimes enter into conflict with the local multi-religious context, of which Sunnis are also part, and with pre-Islamic local traditions. Studying these groups from a religious and sectarian perspective, however, underestimates the more geostrategic dimension that needs to be taken into account and involves other more pressing issues.

The use of the Shia and Sunni label in the context of Gilgit-Baltistan is often framed in relation to the sectarian rivalry that from time to time ends in episodes of violence, mainly in Gilgit. Sectarian divisions are endemic in this city and religious actors are blamed for instigating violence (Ali 2008; Stöber 2007; Sökefeld and Grieser 2015). In this context, the reference of something being specifically Sunni or Shia implies drawing a border, and therefore »Shia aid« does not only mean that the aid is to target Shias but that it is also understood in terms of instigating intersectarian rivalries. Ex-

ternal support for these activities, whether from the Gulf states or from Iran, is often viewed locally with suspicion and is perceived in relation to the export of the Shia-Sunni problem to other areas. Hence, this implies a territorialisation of sectarianisation owing to its transnational nature, and considers the actions of the actors involved as directed towards a missionary orientation that is devoted to the help of their co-religionists. It is also framed in a genealogical conception of Islam, in which actors (individuals and groups) belonging to a particular organisation or sect are characterised by uncritical attitudes and adherence to certain tenets. This perspective, although certainly a transnational one, undermines the importance of diversity of places, which have been historically formed in relation to other territories at various scales and constitute their own social and cultural ethos. At the same time, it confirms religious membership (certainly encompassing a political view) as the ultimate aim of actors' orientations.

In the study of migration and development networks between Kuwait and Baltistan, religion works as a form of solidarity that serves other economic and political interests. For this reason, I agree with Mona Sheikh Kanwal that it is necessary to incorporate into social analysis the insider-orientated endeavour to understand the reality of a particular world view (2015, 136). Through existing religious networks in Shia Islam, a number of men from Baltistan travel to work in Kuwait in Shia owned companies, or at least find support in Shia networks concerning their own communities and the ties of some of their members to local religious leaders. Religious Shia leaders from Baltistan, who are part of a longer pattern of circulation in the region, also travel to Kuwait seeking funding for their charity activities and receive support from Kuwaiti Shia in general, through collective donations in the mosques and *husayniyya*, or individually, through Kuwaiti philanthropists from the Shia merchant class. Migration sustains this relationship in the sense that migrants are offered an opportunity to work, owing to the existing networks, and their presence in the Gulf state also acts as a reminder of the poor condition of their region, thereby incentivising further donations from Kuwaiti philanthropists. Development and religious activities in Baltistan cannot be understood without the role of migrants. However, in order to understand this transnational space it is important to look beyond the framework of the state and to explore the ties of these places.

### **Beyond solidarity: transnationalism as a motivation of an individual and group's empowerment**

The Balti musicians near the Iraqi border I mentioned at the beginning were not just ordinary migrants whose aim is only to work and save money.

**11** Similar views are stated by Till Mostowlanski 2016, 236.

They were active in promoting communication across the closed Baltistan-Ladakh border between Pakistan and India from Kuwait. One of them had a programme on YouTube containing videos of Baltistan already circulating on the internet (songs, reports on traditions, views of the landscape), making interviews and sharing information he received through WhatsApp groups. The latter were comments from listeners living on the other side of the border, from villages which are currently part of Ladakh, in India. Being in Kuwait allowed him the possibility to engage in these activities freely, as compared with the controlled context of Baltistan, in which any sign of cross-border activity raises suspicions. With some specialised training in Islamabad, he was working in a photography studio in Kuwait City, and during his free time he prepared his programmes, in which there were no references to Kuwait.

Kuwait has been mentioned as a meeting place during interviews with divided families in the Baltistan and Ladakh region on several occasions (Mato Bouzas 2014). Owing to the bureaucratic obstacles to reuniting whether in India and Pakistan, divided families make use of extended families' migrant networks to meet in Kuwait, usually in connection with the religious duty to perform pilgrimages to the holy places in Iraq, Iran and even Saudi Arabia. Migrants, either direct relatives or members of the extended family across the border, bear part of the cost of these trips. At the same time, migrants from the Kargil district of Ladakh and Baltistan work in Kuwait and often meet for various occasions, including religious celebrations. Unlike Baltis, those from Kargil tend to have more specialised skills and are consequently employed in better positions, normally in companies dealing with building and maintenance of public infrastructures. Young Kargilis in Kuwait tend to see Baltis as »the same« because of the language and the shared history told through their families. Through these migrant networks in Kuwait, it is possible to observe a certain degree of reconfiguration in the relations between Baltistan and Ladakh that were disrupted in the period 1947-49. Migrants can limit their lives abroad to work, as examples have shown, but they can also involve themselves in activities that have the potential to induce changes in their own regions. Having direct information about their relatives across the border, either in Baltistan or in Kargil, confers upon migrants a knowledge that is potentially different from what they would have received in their home areas.

Interestingly, Kuwait as a meeting place, and the Gulf in general, connects to existing patterns of circulation in the religious sphere which were hinted at previously. In the early twentieth century religious scholars from Baltistan and Kargil travelled to places in today's Iraq (and Iran to a

lesser extent) for religious educational purposes (Rieck 2002, 388-94; see Gupta for Kargil 2017, 195-215). These scholars usually spent long periods in the main learning centres for Shia Islam in cities such as Najaf, Kerbala and later also Qom. Shaykh Ḥasan of Mehdiabad moved to Kerbala in the mid-1950s, but ended up in Kuwait. He was one of the large number of Shias who were expelled in the late 1960s and early 1970s by the Baathist regime, who considered Shias to be a fifth column of Iranian irredentism (Löuer 2008 86-88; Azoulay 2013, 78). Later, other students from Baltistan, such as the present imam of Skardu Jama Masjid, Shaykh Ja'fari, travelled to Kuwait for educational purposes, since some leading scholars were residing in the port city. These experiences gave them knowledge and access to networks in these countries on the basis of the ties of solidarity that characterises Shia Islam.

Some religious leaders from Baltistan, such as Shaykh Ḥasan of Mehdiabad and the present Shaykh Muḥsin 'Alī Najafī made use of these networks in order to draw attention to the marginalised condition of people in their homeland. By doing so, they engaged in transnational activities that were determined by their own faith orientations, but fundraising was informed by the dramatic political and economic transformations that were affecting their own region. As a member of the Marafie family recalled, Shaykh Ḥasan of Mehdiabad pointed out as part of his plea that Baltistan was an »azad« (liberated) territory not integrated into Pakistan. Being part of the Kashmir dispute was a determinant of that condition. This means that these leaders were using political arguments to explain the economic and social situation of Baltistan, and certainly they saw themselves as intermediaries between the population and political power. Religious networks in Kuwait provided support on the basis of religious solidarity, which is not territorially bound. Through their fundraising activities, these religious networks contribute to the welfare and social activities of clerics in Baltistan who, in turn, enhance their social prestige and influence, and protect the population living in an uncertain political context (Mato Bouzas 2012). At the same time, these transnational links challenge the peripheral position of Baltistan in the sense that outside attention and support are given to the region.

The latter brings attention to the benefactors, the Kuwaiti individuals who, on the one hand, hire migrants from Baltistan and, on the other, support charity activities there. It seems, although it is not yet conclusive, that most of them belong to the traditional Shia merchant class. Philanthropists from the Kuwaiti traditional merchant class such as the Marafies had a history of involvement in welfare activities in their own country before they decided to participate in development work in



Baluchistan, and they shared a long tradition of engagement in the Indian Ocean through trading activities. There is a story of successful adaptation to the changes experienced in Kuwait during the pre-oil period, where the Shia merchant class enjoyed a pre-eminent position of access to the ruler, and also during the expansion of the state bureaucracy, in which part of this class was co-opted by the ruler through the acquisition of important positions in the administration (Crystal 1995; Azoulay 2013). Their involvement in international cooperation, however, may also be located within the fierce competition among the Kuwaiti merchant groups, and their need for legitimacy. In her study of the Kuwaiti Shia merchant class, Rivka Azoulay concludes that the old Shia merchant families, who traditionally acted as »political notables« owing to their wealth and access to the ruler, have experienced a gradual marginalisation in terms of political power, in favour of a new class of merchants who are actively participating in Islamist Shia movements and are becoming intermediaries between the ruler and the Shia masses (Azoulay 2013, 88–90). Interestingly, she observes that this old merchant class was made up of nationalists who saw religion within the confines of religious practice and therefore contrary to its extension into the political field beyond the state (Azoulay 2013, 88). These views, I argue, help to understand their involvement in transnational development and charity activities. Through this involvement, this traditional Shia merchant class is reinforcing its position as a benefactor of the community in Kuwait, but is also playing a role in reshaping Kuwait's national identity in which an idea of religious pluralism is contained. By downplaying religion, in the sense of lacking an open faith-based orientation, in favour of development activities, families such as the Marafie and other Kuwaiti individual sponsors become relevant actors in the field of foreign aid, and hence foreign policy. This activity provides them with recognition, an example being 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Ma'rafī (Abd-ul-Fatah Marafie) receiving an award (*Tamghah-e-Imtiaz*) for his services to the nation from the Pakistani president Asif Ali Zardari in 2010. In a way, this developmental activity offers members of this merchant class an opportunity to regain their political pre-eminence in the context of Kuwait.

### Conclusions

This analysis of the interplay between migration, development and religion in Kuwait and Pakistan unfolds a set of transnational relations whose meaning has to be understood beyond the migrant, religious or even developmental sphere. This transnational space can be described by what Norbert Elias defined as figuration, in the sense that what links the participating actors is not being tied together in specific ways but their social posi-

tion as part of a certain context, be it the disputed political context of Baluchistan or business-political relations in Kuwait. Transnationalism in this respect is not only about establishing ties beyond the nation-state but also about actively reframing state borders by engaging in forms of multiple belonging. In so doing, the most powerful participating actors, namely philanthropist merchants and religious leaders, and some migrants to a lesser extent, through transnational engagement reinforce their position as power brokers in their respective societies. The transnational approach underscores the production and existence of spaces with a meaning of their own which cannot be analysed through the lens of the nation-state, but also shows how locality – in terms of specific social and political characteristics attached to a place – or being in a specific relation with the state is a determining factor in fostering a particular transnational activity.

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