

SCHIELKE, SAMULI 2020. *Migrant Dreams: Egyptian Workers in the Gulf States*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press. 137 p. ISBN: 9789774169564 (paperback)

This short ethnography on migration deals with both the everyday lives of migrants and the global currents of mobility. With its characteristic curiosity, the book skilfully shifts its focus from one sphere of life to another and provides a lively perspective on the current realities of the Gulf migration. It is also very much research-in-progress, drawing extensively on a three-week period of ethnographic research in Doha in 2009, concentrating on experiences of an Egyptian labour migrant here called Tawfiq, whom Schielke has known for over ten years. The book is a revised version of *Hatta yantabi al-naft: al-bijra wa-l-ablam fi darwabi al-Khalij* (Until the End of Oil: Migration Dreams in the Suburbs of the Gulf), published in Arabic in 2017, and includes sections describing the reception and feedback of the previous work.

The experiences of Tawfiq and other people in similar circumstances provide the reader a glimpse into a world that often remains hidden. While the material conditions and historical transformations are discussed briefly, the book takes, in the words of Schielke, an ‘existential mode of inquiry’, rather than a thorough study of the economic flows and social impacts of migration, as often happens in the dominant current of migration studies. At the same time, the grand aim of the book is to question simplistic oppositions between the existential and the political (as well as the financial and the legal), and a ‘romantic search for “agency” in the face of “structure”.’

Schielke has conducted ethnographic research in Egypt on a variety of themes for over 20 years—festive culture, social activism, poetry, and religious reform have all been his interests, but this is the first time his fieldwork is carried out in the Gulf. Migration has featured strongly in his earlier work but his ethnographic research has been situated in Egypt. At the same time, the new work takes imagination and dreams as its foundation, moving effortlessly between the concrete locations and imagined realities, covering multifaceted aspirations and anxieties of life in motion.

The structure of the book does not follow the convention of presenting the relevant research literature in the beginning but leaves it to its final chapter. The goal of Schielke (and the request of his informants) is rather to convey the reality of how and under what conditions the migrant workers live. The fifteen short chapters before a brief look into the theoretical issues in the final chapter follow a temporal line of Tawfiq’s trajectory and Schielke’s reflections of his own learning process.

The ethnography begins with a description of what Schielke calls *hyporeality*, the dismal, less than real conditions that the migrant workers live in. Despite the brevity of the ethnographic encounter, the ‘dim state of routine’, the pointlessness and boredom of most of the jobs, is illustrated vividly through balanced literary description. Schielke manages to convey the sense of the everyday by alternating between the often banal mundane, with inspiring

considerations of existential dimensions of aspiration, movement, and disappointment.

The following chapters deal with the daily realities of the migrants, from their relations with their supervisors and the restrictions imposed on them by the legal system, to the configurations of their housing arrangements and relationships with migrants from elsewhere. The analysis of migrants from other countries, especially Nepal, enriches the narrative and contributes to new perspectives of realities that are simultaneously shared and distinct. The material is drawn from discussions over coffee or during long walks, occurrences on minibuses and in office lobbies, and elaborated into analyses of the complex dynamics that define global interactions. Especially the vignettes about the rare moments of solidarity between migrants in a tense and competitive context show the power ethnography has to express cultural dynamics that would be difficult to access otherwise.

Taken together, the ethnographic vignettes illustrate what Schielke calls first and second powers of imagination, the first 'confirming, directing, and narrowing down the scope of action, and another questioning, confusing and widening it'. This framing helps us to understand the struggles of the labour migrants whose multinational villages are suburbs of the Gulf and whose dreams and aspirations are influenced by the global flows. The accelerating global change results in paradoxes that are at the core of Schielke's argument. The dream of conservative life with a house and a family in a setting characterised by trust can be a daunting and fantastic task for an Egyptian from a poor background. In the current conditions

'economy is not rational and fantasy is not free'. Throughout the book, Schielke avoids shallow conclusions and embraces the complexity of his topic matter with openness.

The book is a captivating read, written in a very fluent manner. It conveys a strong sense of ongoing work, full of observations, anecdotes and ideas, moving very freely between different registers and topics. This is its biggest strength but sometimes also its weakness. Schielke's curiosity is contagious: in the chapters there are brief discussions of Sufi poetry, white privilege, comparisons of romance and flirting in the Arab world, views on Nepalese conceptions of nature and numerous other topics. They are evocative and enjoyable but it often feels that Schielke has too many ideas. At the same time the unfinished qualities bring to mind the actual experience of conducting fieldwork: tracing connections between phenomena of different orders, noting down details that somehow feel significant, and testing one's observations against grand theories in an unprejudiced manner. The book radiates fresh perspectives to big questions of our times and is recommended reading for everyone who wishes to understand the world through an anthropologist's eyes.

## REFERENCES

**Schielke, Samuli** 2017. *Hatta yantabi al-naft: al-bijra wa-l-ahlam fi dawabi al-Khalij* (Until the End of Oil: Migration Dreams in the Suburbs of the Gulf). Translated by Amr Khairy. Cairo: al-Sefsafa.

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