

The slave trade and the Arabian Gulf

The historical trade routes, between Sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia, made Middle Eastern port cities important bridging points linking the two continents together. The Gulf Peninsula, and the Arabs who lived there, thus dominated the slave trade in the Indian Ocean from the 6th to the 15th centuries. Trade invariably led to the movement of people across the continents, and it is estimated that twenty million East Africans (Ethiopians, Somalis, and Sudanese etc.) crossed the Indian Ocean. They were sometimes free but mainly enslaved, and brought with them a wealth of culture and skills to the region. Men often worked as pearl divers, labourers, or as ship crew; women were mainly domestic staff, and in some cases, concubines to Arabian masters.

The generation of children born to concubines automatically became members of their Arab families, and were 'born free.' Under Shari3 law, their mothers continued to carry out domestic work as usual, but their children became full-fledged members of the slaveholders' households. Any trace of their mother's heritage became obliterated as they took on Arab identities (name and religion) from their fathers. Slaves' assimilation into the social dimensions of the Gulf was thus a result of their physical detachment from their home and indigenous identity.³

Tracing the migrations of Africans over the centuries—points to a lesser-known history around the African diaspora in the Indian Ocean. It provides a counter discourse to the well-documented plight of the African diaspora across the Atlantic, aka the Black Atlantic—North and South America and the Caribbean. It places the 'Black Arab' as an identifiable figure in the history of the Middle East. It provides a counter discourse to the well-documented plight of the African diaspora across the Atlantic, aka the Black Atlantic—North and South America and the Caribbean. It places the 'Black Arab' as an identifiable figure in the history of the Middle East

These men, women, and children—from Sudan in the north to Mozambique in the south—'Africanised' the Indian Ocean, and helped shape the societies they entered and made their own.

Indelible Marks: Africa's Traces on Dubai

Jareh Das

*You can never understand Dubai if you have not been there. But being there is no guarantee for comprehension either.*¹

—Svenja Lis

Svenja Lis's succinct quote gives an insight into the complexities of place, space, and time that are present as soon as one arrives into the spectacle that is Dubai. A modern urban utopia, it can be seen as a contender for one of the most impressive cities ever built. Glistening skyscrapers, grandiose racecourses, and synthetic islands present a scene from the future akin to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. Beneath the surface of Dubai's mutating architectural landscape, however, is a subverted history which links the United Arab Emirates to the African continent. These historical links are evident in two groups of people located at polar opposites of Dubai's racial demographics: the Afro-Emirati and the African immigrant.

This text serves as an investigative commentary into the history of African diaspora culture and its manifestations in the city. Its past and present accounts of African diaspora in Dubai focus on the establishment of Afro-Emirati identity and the impact of immigrant culture (using Nigerian immigrants² as case study) on the landscape of Deira. To understand the complex relationships between these two groups, let us first go back in time to the historical beginnings of Dubai. A period long before the discovery of oil, when slave trade accounted for the main influx of cultures and people into the Gulf Peninsula.

The strong presence of this group has left its own cultural markers in Deira. Off the radar, restaurants serving Nigerian cuisine and clubs playing traditional and contemporary music from the country are hidden away behind shops, and one only knows about these places by introduction and association. Music has always served as a means of embodying nostalgic memories of one's homeland as it triggers a sensory transportation back to one's cultural heritage. It can act as a way of identifying familiar cultural references in a soundscape dominated by Arab culture. Walking into a social space that serves food or plays popular music specific to a particular country, serves as a momentary reminder of one's 'homeland' in an otherwise 'alienating' landscape.

These spaces also act as gathering points for businesspeople who travel here to trade, as well as for workers who have settled in Dubai. They act as collective clusters of culture in a city that may not immediately present a prominent Nigerian diasporic presence. Popular clubs for Nigerians like Palm Beach and Rush Inn are not listed in your usual Dubai guidebooks. Their interiors are basic—a group of chairs and tables, nothing flash—but the crowd is predominantly Naija. Star and Stout (Guinness), popular beer brands back home are served by the dozen and groups sit, chatter, and laugh loudly till the club fills out and most hit the tiny floor dancing the night away. The music varies. Sometimes it transports you to the Afrobeat era made popular by iconic musicians such as Fela Kuti and Egypt 80. For a younger audience, a more contemporary sound that is a fusion of American rap and is embodied in chart-topping music by Psquare and Banky, to name a few. They also serve as indicators of a hidden hybridity in the multiethnicity of place which, over time, has established Dubai as a cosmopolitan commercial and tourist centre.

Dubai's vision of becoming 'the' tourist destination, with its favourable weather and flexible tourist visa laws means that a healthy amount of tourists from all over Africa visit Dubai, and contribute significantly to the tourist trade. For many, Dubai presents a utopic vision of what some African countries could have been or become. It is popularly admired for its vast development, security, and management of oil wealth which several African countries never quite got to grips with.

We observe the mimicry of these touristic ambitions in cities such as Casablanca, Morocco and Khartoum, Sudan. Introduced last December at a cost

What is in a place? The story of Deira

The story of Dubai begins with one of its oldest neighbourhoods: Deira. A small port-city, it was nestled between Sharjah to the north and the Creek to the south. Dubai was a small fishing village back then, with Deira forming its main commercial centre as its primary trading outpost. Its location, on the main waterways straddling the Arabian Gulf, Africa, and the Indian Ocean, facilitated the mobility of people as well as the exchange of goods and services. This proximity to the seas also enabled the Arabian slave trade, with diving for pearls being a dominant occupation. Some of these slaves settled in Dubai after the abolition of slavery in the Gulf 50 years ago. Fast-forward to the present; the predominant trade is now manufactured goods (import and export) from East Asia. There is a new African immigrant workforce—with a stronghold of Nigerians at its core—working in this commercial centre and once again facilitating trade between East Asia and West Africa.

Deira provides a melting point of trade and culture. Clusters of low-rise buildings dominate its centre, contrasting the shiny skyscrapers for which Dubai has become renowned. As you encounter the areas around Baniyas Square, Al Wahda, and Al Bahara, there is a highly charged sense of hustle, bustle, and chaos. In Deira, buildings are old and bear the scars of change on their facade. They tell a story, grounded in modest origins, of an unprecedented boom that began with precious jewels, textiles and spices, and has more recently been fuelled by industrial goods. Walking through the main streets of Deira, one encounters row after row of commercial shops, mainly selling wholesale goods. The relentless bartering never stops, and carries on through the night (albeit not during daily prayer times and Ramadan).

Nigerian nationals form one of the largest immigrant groups working in the trade industries. They cite Dubai's zero tolerance rules on product quality, and its efficiency in managing the processes involved in export and import as the reason why many people come to work in Dubai. This industry also provides semi-skilled work for people who have no jobs in their respective home countries, and the strict rules governing crime make it a stable working environment. Heavy regulation and inspection of products, meanwhile, means that you get the best value for your money.

Presently, the masses who pass through Dubai for business and other purposes highlight different identifiable racial and social groups. Nigerians, in particular, have made a significant impact on the social fabric of Deira. Beneath the surface of contemporary Naija influence, however, one begins to realise the significance of the African slave trade history in the Indian Ocean on Dubai's social fabric. Then as now, African immigrants were among the early forerunners of a capitalist trade boom fuelled by the unprecedented global migratory routes. As Dubai now makes its presence felt in Casablanca and Khartoum, what might the Africa of tomorrow look like?

Jareh Das is currently the Arts Catalyst's Postdoctoral Researcher: Curating and a young curator based in London. She has written for various publications in Europe and The Middle East which include, abc Art Berlin Contemporary/eyeout, Aesthetica, Arty, Contemporary Practices, FAD Art News, Harper's Bazaar Art Arabia, MOJEH, This is Tomorrow and Wonderland Magazine.

¹ Lis, S., 2010, Dubai from the Scratch Until Today – a New Vision of Tourism?, GRIN Verlag

² This text's description of Nigerian culture in Dubai is based on a personal account identifying cultural markers present during the time the author lived and worked in the city from 2011-2012. It is not a generalised view of all of the Nigerian populations living in the city but a fragmentary view of working culture through conversations she had with Nigerian immigrants. It provides an insight into a specific experience of Dubai which between September 2011 - June 2012.

³ See Bilkhair, A., Afro-Emirati: A Unique Historical Experience, The Slave Route, http://portal.unesco.org/pv_obj_cache/pv_obj_id_504C5494092DC0027E5A99DD782603A937190100/filename/5.AfroEmirati.pdf, viewed 19th February 2013, 9pm

of \$260 million, Morocco Mall—Casablanca's first, and Africa's largest mega mall—opened its doors to the public. Spread over twenty hectares, it is designed as an architectural extension to the Casablanca waterfront. Khartoum similarly models itself as 'the Dubai of Africa' despite ongoing sanctions from the West and vast poverty rates across its land. Investment from the East (primarily China), however, has seen Sudan's economy grow, with the sale of luxury goods on the increase. Business and residential districts located along the confluence of the Blue and White Niles—like the al Morgan project—look to radicalise the landscape of Khartoum.

Dubaitopia or Dubai as a utopia?

Like a modern fairy-tale, in Dubai anything is possible—from skiing in the desert and clubbing in an Islamic country, to the Palm Islands in the shape of an actual palm tree. Away from the monumental, shiny buildings, however, one observes that all that glitters isn't gold. Faced with a dwindling oil reserves, Dubai has taken on larger-than-life projects keeping in line with its ambition to become the region's main business and leisure hub; ostensibly, all dreams can come true.

Dubai has quickly transformed from a backwater town into a perfectly positioned global hub. The city now has more in common with Hong Kong, Singapore, and Bangalore than with Saudi Arabia next door. When you arrive at Dubai airport, you are likely to overhear conversations from Nigerian traders bound for Guangzhou, Chinese labourers heading to Khartoum, and Indian merchants travelling to Nairobi. Paul Virilio aptly describes this amalgamation of people, cultures, and migration with the term dromology: "speed-space." That despite long distances to other parts of the world, people interact and communicate, trade happens, and cultures influence each other.

Deira forms an interesting case study in embodying this amalgamation of cultural influences and is a physical manifestation of migratory effects. In Dubai's history it was an important commercial centre, which brought—and continues to bring—an influx of people despite a shift in industry over the centuries. Revisiting the histories of the African influence on Dubai raises important questions about subverted histories of then vs. now, past vs. present, and the implications of time-space compression on cultural exchanges.