

Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf. Manama since 1800

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Author:

Nelida Fuccaro

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Leila Vignal

If one looks today at a satellite image of Manama [\(1\)](#), the capital city of Bahrain, the picture of the extended urban conurbation which covers both the north of the main island and the little island which faces it (Muharraq, the former capital of the emirate in the 19th century) is rather different from the 'Islands of Paradise' featured in the Sumerian Gilgamesh epic tradition or, more recently, from the 18th and 19th centuries descriptions of lush vegetation, rich agricultural landscapes and abundance of springs, quoted in the first chapters of Nelida Fuccaro's recent and fascinating book.

In the global information age which frames most of our perceptions of the world, the small archipelago of Bahrain, located in the Persian Gulf just north of its more famous neighbours of the United Arab Emirates (including Dubai), is more likely to be associated with some of the massive wealth derived from the exploitation of oil (discovered in Bahrain in 1932), which, especially since its independence from the British Empire (1971) and the first oil shock in the 1970s, has provided a steady income in spite of the fluctuations in the oil markets. Since the 1980s, oil revenues have fuelled a rapid urban growth and, from the 2000s onward, a massive real-estate boom. This boom has given rise to urban landscapes of hypermodernity: the reshaping and extension of the original coastline through reclaimed land projects, or hubristic developments, as exemplified by Durrat al Bahrain, an immense residential project built in the south of the main island on flower-like artificial islands. To a large extent, this model of development can be accrued to the massive movement of migrant workers, which form 40 percent of a total population of three-quarters of a million inhabitants.[\(2\)](#)

However, Bahrain is also associated with more complex and specific features. Since the 1980s, the emirate has gained credit in the Middle East as a financial and banking place – even through the current stormy

weather of global financial and economic crisis – and as one of the birthplaces of Islamic banking, a formula which encounters increasing success throughout the Muslim world. If not a democracy – the domination of the Al Khalifah family remains unchallenged – its relative political liberalism, which includes an elected Parliament, singles out Bahrain, especially when compared to the authoritarian rule which characterises many of its neighbours.

This set of economic and socio-political features has fuelled the idea of an ‘exceptionalism’ of Persian Gulf societies: economic exceptionalism (oil rent) combined with political exceptionalism (authoritarian rule). One could add geopolitical exceptionalism, due both to the city-state character of the small Gulf States and to their location on the dividing lines between different political, cultural and sectarian competing spheres (Arab/Iranian, Sunni/Shi’i). As Nelida Fuccaro explains, oil has played a major role in the construction of this bias of ‘exceptionalism’: it is as if Gulf societies had only risen from darkness and entered modernity since its discovery in the 1930s. In this perspective, one of the most important contributions of her book might be precisely the convincing deconstruction she operates, through a detailed account of Manama’s social urban matrix over more than two centuries, of the ‘exceptionalism paradigm’ which often blurs studies of the region – in the media as well as in academia. She reminds us that the discovery of oil is neither a starting point for Bahrain’s history nor the unique key element to understand Bahrain’s contemporary society – and by extension the Gulf region. Rather, in focusing on the making of the history of the place since the end of the 18th century, the author points out the rich legacy of the pre-oil period in contemporary politics and patiently weaves the threads of continuities from the past to the present.

Some of the main threads of this history could be tied up in a series of themes at the heart of the making of the urban social and material fabric. A first thread could be the rural/urban duality: from the 19th century, the progressive take-over of the tribal system brought in Bahrain by the Al Khalifah shifts the previous social organisation from agricultural hamlets to urban settlements. This shift is accompanied by a sectarian recomposition: the tribal newcomers are Sunni, to be contrasted with the Shi’i allegiance of rural Bahrain. It is also linked to a social revamping, as the former rural religious Shi’i elites and Shi’i populations had to adapt to the new urban order which unfolded progressively in the course of the 19th century. The sectarian clashes that took place at the beginning of the 1990s or, more recently, in February 2009 over the question of nationality rules, should therefore be replaced in this historical context – although the long-term geopolitical rivalry between Arab and Iranian influence in this frontier area cannot be brushed away.

The second thread is a history of local entrepreneurship. The different booms that sustained the urban development of Bahrain are deeply rooted in the agency of a diverse society. In the 19th century, the pearl-boom created a multi-layered organisation of divers, pearl merchants, and bankers. Then, the trade boom created a class of merchants whose power was based on their domination of local and regional trade; this led to the development of a closely-knit network of trade emporia in the Gulf, among which Manama played an increasingly dominant role. From the end of the 19th century, the rapid rise of Manama, in terms of demographic growth and urban changes, progressively eclipsed al Muharraq, the administrative centre and siege of the Al Khalifah family. The municipality status granted to the city in 1919 confirmed its centrality in the economy and politics of the emirate. Although the British rule acted as a stabilizing element favouring the political domination of the ruling tribe, this shift in favour of Manama over al Muharraq reflects the complexity of the relationship between the ‘merchants’ and the ‘rulers’, and exposes the numerous stakeholders of the political life of the place. The rising fate of Manama paves the way to a better understanding of the politics of the ‘after-oil’, characterised by contestation of the ‘old order’ of sectarian divisions and patronage politics and by the rise of Arab nationalism. Arabism in this context can be understood, suggests Fuccaro, as much as a reaction to the more formal inclusion into the British Empire that had taken place after the First World War [\(3\)](#) as a challenge to the Al Khalifah rule.

Political contestation stems out indeed from the very diverse social patterns that characterise Bahrain’s society from the 19th century onwards. Social urban diversity could therefore constitute the third historical long-term narrative of the book. Manama history is shaped by the different groups that coexist, compete and shape the urban social order: the rulers, the merchants, the traders, the bankers and so on. It is also the case with the less affluent and influent groups, the ‘invisibles’ that are also part of the urban fabric: the divers, the

slaves, the poor workers, living in the *barasti* (shanty towns), and the large communities of migrants from the Gulf region (Arabs and Iranians) or further away (Indian communities for instance). The 'city of foreigners', to take up Fuccaro's phrase, is not an invention of the post-oil era. However, both the pluralistic local society and the migrants should not be analysed in terms of a paradigm of integration. The cosmopolitanism of the place and the variety of its social groups do not tell a story of a mixed society, nor of a quiet one. The urban fabric has been shaped by strong spatial, social, legal, economical and political divisions between migrants and Bahraini, as well as within the different Bahraini social groups.

It is the patient weaving of these long-term threads which allows the reader to achieve a very different understanding of modern Manama, to which the last chapters are dedicated. Indeed, in the post-oil era, a new political urban order is taking place, organising centralisation and formalising the Khalifah political domination in the form of the first 'modern' state of the Gulf region. However, this transformative process cannot be understood without reference to the historical negotiation and competition between the different stakeholders of the urban order. Since the Second World War, this negotiation and competition have informed much of the deep spatial, social and legal inequalities among urban residents and sometimes found its expression through political unrest, ranging from Arabism and anti colonial contestation to recent Shi'i opposition to the Al Khalifah's rule.

The detailed and convincing historical work developed by Nelida Fuccaro is based on a sound methodology. Three elements might be highlighted.

Firstly, Nelida Fuccaro chooses to give voice to a history of the *longue durée*. Her account of Manama and Bahrain's history goes back to the end of the 18th century: long after the departure of the Portuguese which had established a fortification, and as the new spatial and political tribal order imported on the islands from the mainland is about to start.

This long term approach allows the author to make full use of a second remarkable choice, which is to have focused her analysis on the transformations of the urban fabric and its institutions. As such, these transformations are looked at as an indicator of relations between social groups, community institutions, and state formation, without any teleological connotations. In this sense, the book more than lives up to the promises of its title. Firstly, many histories of Manama are indeed unfolded here rather than a univocal narrative, thus reflecting the richness of its different patterns and agents. Secondly, the study never loses its focus on the local social and urban history of Manama. In doing so, the author relates of course Manama's history to regional or more global historical contexts, like the expansion of the British Empire in the Persian Gulf (from India). But she demonstrates convincingly that the development of Gulf cities cannot be only read as the mere reflection of the world-system expansion, as has too often been suggested.

Finally, the third compelling element brought forward by Nelida Fuccaro is her use of sources. Indeed, the scarcity of sources has probably prevented many historians from taking a closer look at the history of the societies of the Persian Gulf. Looking into this history requires developing an impressive mix of imagination and linguistic skills to assemble the primary documentation. The author's search for information led her to make the most of many different documentary sources: official or private documents, registers and correspondences, archaeological findings, historical maps, images, or even folk traditions. In addition to British Empire sources, she has been digging extensively into public and private archives of Bahrain, in Arabic as well as in Persian. This work is in many ways a demonstration that a proper local history could be done, taking into account, but not relying only on, 'external factors' or sources for an explanation.

Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf. Manama since 1800 is therefore an important historical work in many respects.

As mentioned, this work is a decisive stepping stone in a rising trend of re-evaluation of the 'exceptionalism' paradigm too often used when dealing with Gulf societies. This new trend is still nascent, but can be observed in other social sciences, such as migrations studies. Migration studies of the Gulf countries are quite developed, as the Gulf region is the third most important migration destination after North America

and Europe. However, it is only recently that social scientists have started to shift away from an analysis of the 'exceptionalism' of migration patterns in the Gulf countries to replace them in the wider analytical framework developed to observe migrations elsewhere in the world. One can see how Nelida Fuccaro's work will fit into this new understanding of Gulf societies in the social sciences and humanities.

More generally, this remarkable history of Manama sheds new light on the history of one of the most interesting city-states of the Gulf region and provides therefore a more profound and nuanced understanding of its recent path of development. As such, it is a very valuable addition to a poorly developed field – history and urban history of the Gulf region. It demonstrates that historical work can be carried out in this region. It should therefore inspire new generations of historians.

Notes

1. As can be seen on Google Earth.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. In 2005 there were 727 000 inhabitants of Bahrain, according to the UN sources. UN Population Division <<http://esa.un.org/unpp/>>[\[accessed 19 February 2010\]](#).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. The growing importance of Manama is testified by the choice made of the city as the new siege of the British Political Residency after the independence of India.[Back to \(3\)](#)

I do not wish to respond but would like to pass on my sincerest thanks to the reviewer for such a detailed and thoughtful piece.

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