A Kafil dies, A Mu’azzib Never: Legal and Social Sponsorship among Hadrami Immigrants in Kuwait.

On March 11, 2013, the Anthropology Program and the Center for Gulf Studies at the American University of Kuwait hosted a lecture by Dr. Abdullah Alajmi entitled: “A Kafil dies, A Mu’azzib Never: Legal and Social Sponsorship among Hadrami Immigrants in Kuwait.” The presentation examined the relationship between Hadrami Yemeni migrant workers with their Kuwaiti sponsors in historical and ethnographic context. Dr. Alajmi moved beyond a generalized Kafil sponsorship between migrants and Kuwaitis to describe the socially established Mu’azzib construct, and the debt/peonage created through family-like personalized bonds as salient to understanding the Hadrami and Kuwaiti relationships.

Unlike the less personal more contractual nature of Kafil relationships, Dr. Alajmi described how Hadrami migration to Kuwait as early as the 1950s found their way as domestic workers in Kuwaiti households. The Mu’azzib or “social father” involved an accumulation of debt not mainly in monetary terms but rather moral debt which can only be repaid through an ongoing servitude and dependency, sometimes even passed on generationally. Through thick ethnographic description, Dr. Alajmi explained the nature of the servitude as Hadrami worked as cooks, houseboys, standing in line, and pouring coffee during events or simply being present as a symbol of prestige for the Mu’azzib. In light of current, more recent and cheaper labor migrants to Kuwait, what was stressed in the analysis is that the relationship between the Hadrami and Mu’azzib cannot be understood in economic terms but through social obligations that may also involve Hadrami being sustained via zakat or other forms of aid that appear as reciprocal but are unequal, hierarchical and entail open ended loyalty. If the Kafil sponsorship of most migrant labor to Kuwait is marginal to state regulation, the Mu’azzib relationship and the moral debt incurred forms a system that stands completely outside.

Dr. Alajmi concluded his presentation noting the Hadrami experience as one of abuse and exploitation on the part of Kuwaitis. He was not optimistic that much change was possible and did not attempt to offer solutions.

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