

# Attitudes Toward Mixed Marriages in Bahrain: The Eroticization of Class

■ Sharon Nagy

Assistant Professor of Anthropology, DePaul University, Chicago

## Abstract

Drawn from two years of ethnographic research amongst foreign residents in Bahrain this paper discusses marriages between Bahraini men and non-Arab women.<sup>1</sup> The first half of the paper outlines the entry of non-Arab women into the migrant workforce in Bahrain and the obstacles to marriage between these women and Bahraini men. The second half of the paper discusses the cultural attitudes toward mixed marriages and compares Bahraini-European marriages to Bahraini-Filipina marriages in order to explore the intersections of race and class in shaping attitudes towards mixed marriages. Bahraini-Filipina marriages meet with greater criticism and resistance from the extended family of the groom and the participants are subject to greater stigmatization than are Bahraini-European marriages. This paper illustrates how the current economic and social hierarchies shaping migration to the Arab Gulf influence attitudes of race, class and sexual attractiveness.

## Migrants and Marriage in Bahrain

Societies in the Arab Gulf are examples of extensive transnational labor migration with foreign residents sometimes outnumbering citizens. Most foreign residents come from South Asia, Iran, and other Arab countries. Yet, as circumstances in the local and global labor markets have

changed, significant numbers of East and South East Asian workers have migrated to the Gulf, particularly to work in the fields of hospitality, retail, leisure and health services. With the addition of South East Asia as a source of labor, the number of unaccompanied women migrating to work in the Gulf has increased. Unlike the South Asian countries from which male laborers emigrate more often than women, women represent a large proportion of emigrants from the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia.

Despite this transnationalized population, inter-marriage between Gulf Arab men and non-Arab women has remained relatively low.<sup>2</sup> The endogamous traditions of Gulf societies remain strong. The preference is to marry someone from within a related lineage, similar social category, and religious sect, or at least an Arab. Some Gulf States, such as Qatar, formally discourage marriages to non-Arabs by requiring the prospective groom to apply for "permission" and banning him from employment in the civil service or security forces. Bahrain does not apply any such legal obstacles against marrying non-Bahrainis. In fact, unlike women in Bahrain who are the accompanying spouse of an employed non-Bahraini, who hold "housewife visas" and are prohibited from legally working in fields other than teaching or nursing, women married to

Bahrainis are allowed to work in any field. In addition, the female spouse of a Bahraini can apply for Bahraini citizenship. A wife's application for Bahraini citizenship takes a minimum of five years. In the meantime, she must maintain her residency visa, an often time-consuming and costly process. These visa regulations, however, are not really obstacles to mixed marriage. In fact, it's unlikely that many men and women learn about these legal requirements until after they are married. For them, it's a bureaucratic hassle and a periodic reminder that they've gone against social norms.

### Women in the Migrant Workforce

If the legal obstacles are not sufficient to deter marriages across boundaries of nationality, what then has kept the numbers of mixed marriages low? One factor has been the gender balance of the migrant population. Since migration to Bahrain is primarily a migration of unskilled and semi-skilled laborers, the migrants have until recently been overwhelmingly men unaccompanied by their families. Women were at first only a very small part of this labor migration. It was not until the 1980s, with the shift to South East Asian labor and the growth in the service industry, that Bahraini employers began recruiting women in increasing numbers.

Household work was one of the first jobs available to non-Bahraini women. This despite the fact that, until fairly recently, Gulf Arabs hired men to work as household laborers at least as often as they hired women. Like other occupations, both male and female household workers were originally recruited from other Arab or South Asian countries. The feminization of household labor in the Gulf States began roughly in the late 1970s and is still incomplete in some countries (Sabban 2002). The demand for female workers was actually greater in other occupations where women are recruited as groups to work in institutions and factories. In the 1950s and 1960s, Bahrain's schools recruited Egyptian and Palestinian women as teachers. In the 1970s, Indian women joined their Levantine and North African counterparts when Bahrain's hospitals recruited them to work as nurses. At this time, European women also entered Bahrain's workforce. In some cases, these were the spouses or dependents of skilled expatriate employees. However, single unaccompanied European, especially British, women also took jobs in Bahrain. Because of Bahrain's history as a under the United Kingdom's protection, British citizens have long been able to enter Bahrain without applying for a visa beforehand. During the economic boom of the 1970s, some young Britons took advantage of this to find work in Bahrain. The women amongst them often found office jobs in businesses where English was an asset. At the same time, companies serving an international clientele such as airlines and hotels recruited women from Europe.

As Bahrain's economy diversified in the 1980s, employers began to turn to South East Asia, particularly the Philippines, as a source of unskilled and semi-skilled labor. The entry of Filipinas into Bahrain's labor force brought a shift in the gender balance of the foreign population. The South Asian laboring population in Bahrain has always been overwhelmingly male. In contrast, the population of overseas contract workers from the Philippines tips in favor of women - many of whom are young, single, and unaccompanied. International media have drawn needed attention to the South East Asian household workers in the Middle East. However, household work is only one of the many occupations held by South East Asian women in the Gulf. Filipinas, for example, work in jobs of all skill levels from waitresses to doctors, from manicurists to investment bankers. They are particularly ubiquitous in hospital services, the service sector, and the entertainment and leisure industries.

Although women had been recruited as teachers and nurses much earlier than the 1980s, before this point, it would have been quite rare to be served by a woman in a restaurant or shop. The entry of women into the service sector, particularly as retail clerks, waitresses and entertainers represents several significant shifts in the culture of Bahrain's public sphere. First, it puts women into positions where they are in contact with large and diverse clientele. This is not the case with teachers, nurses and household workers. There are still many Bahraini women who would not feel comfortable working in public; such exposure contradicts conservative Bahraini values of gender separation and privacy.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the morality of the foreign women in these positions is subject to questioning based on these very same values.

Second, the recruitment of women in the retail and service sector was accompanied by a change in practices with respect to the housing and supervising of female workers. The teachers and nurses recruited between the 1950s and 1970s lived in dormitories subject to curfews and supervision. Dormitories are no longer the norm. More commonly, staff are either housed in employer provided apartments shared with co-workers or rent their own rooms or apartments. In either case, the level of supervision during their off time is much lower. Employees may be restricted from entertaining guests of the opposite sex in their apartments, but are only rarely subject to curfews.<sup>4</sup>

Third, the feminization of the service sector shapes criteria for assessing feminine attractiveness. Workers serving the public are recruited based on the perceived appeal they will have to prospective clientele. Employers regularly set height and weight standards; impose dress codes; and, screen applicants for personability, physical appearance

and personal hygiene. In general, Bahraini men and women perceive South East Asian and European women to be more consistently pleasing and attractive than they do South Asian or African women. Many of the cultural and physical features deemed typical of South East Asian and European women prove to be advantages in the labor market, and the continued placement of such women in positions associated with consumption and leisure reinforce the perception of their sexual attractiveness. However, as we will see in the following discussion, these same features and the nature of work in the public sphere contribute to a stigma associated with immorality and sexual promiscuity. It is important to emphasize here that cultural and class values can be a strong deterrent to inter-ethnic dating and mixed marriages.

### **Cultural Attitudes Discouraging Inter-ethnic Dating and Mixed Marriages**

Until the mid-1980s, marriages between Bahraini men and non-Arab women remained relatively rare. During the 1970s and 1980s, one would occasionally hear about Bahraini men who'd married European or American women. More often than not, these were upper and upper middle class Bahrainis who'd met their wives while travelling or studying abroad. At the other end of the spectrum, are the tales about Arabs traveling to India for "cheap brides"—young women taken from poverty to wed elderly or impotent grooms. While the later were often understood as representing the sexist and patriarchal horrors of polygyny, arranged marriages, bride wealth systems and poverty, the former were interpreted as inevitable signs of Bahrain's emerging cosmopolitanism

While this handful of brides were being brought back from the West or India in the 1960s and 1970s, the occasional marriage must have been taking place between Bahrainis and foreign women working in Bahrain. However, these marriages never became fodder for sustained public discourse. The occasional marriages to household workers would not have represented a significant shift in practice. Arabs had been intermarrying with their African and Arab servants for generations. With regard to the foreign teachers and nurses, these women were employed in respected professions, were carefully supervised during their off time, and came from cultures that prefer arranged marriages over love matches. So, even the few marriages that did take place were likely to have been deemed respectable due to the cultural and, in most cases, religious similarities. In this early phase of women's migration to Bahrain, it was the unaccompanied European, particularly British, women who were often negatively received. The flight attendants working with Gulf Air are an obvious example of non-Arab women working in Bahrain before the 1980s. Although housed together in employer provided apartments, by nature of their work the flight attendants had considerable

freedom to move about and socialize in mixed gender settings. Viewed from the perspective of Arab-Islamic norms, these unaccompanied European women raised some consternation and many eyebrows. What sort of families would "allow" their daughters to migrate unaccompanied and unsupervised? What kind of background encouraged them to work and socialize amongst men not related to them? Not only were these women without the social legitimacy and respectability of family, but they also worked in a public occupation and engaged in relatively open practices regarding mixed gender socializing. These factors stacked up to sully the reputations of many of these women and the men who dated or married them.

The "Gulf Air Girls", as they are commonly referred to in Bahrain, quickly came to be viewed as dating stock for upper class Bahrainis. Until today one hears derogatory comments about these women and about the men they dated or married. For example, I was recently introduced to an American woman married to a Bahraini. The Bahraini women who introduced us told me "She's a respectable one, not like those 'trolley dollies'". Referring to the in-flight drink trolley, the phrase "trolley dolly" encapsulates the perception of flight attendant as an occupation that displays one's feminine sexuality. An even more derogatory term expressing a similar stereotype is "screwwardess". Capitalizing on these stereotypes, some night-clubs in Bahrain offer promotions such as "Air Crew Night" - free drinks with employee ID - to encourage these women, and men interested in meeting them, to patronize their club. Men were also criticized for engaging in liaisons with foreign women. It can be assumed that many of them "use" the women for extra-marital affairs or as entertainment to pass the years as they wait for a respectable arranged marriage.

Inevitably, some of these social and sexual liaisons resulted in marriage. Despite the negative stereotypes, their association with the privileged class often protects them from direct criticism. Most of the Bahraini men involved in these relationships were of relatively privileged social and economic status. While the women, simply by virtue of being European, were perceived to be (rightly or wrongly) from, at the very least, educated middle class backgrounds. The real and perceived class status of these couples has the effect of tempering some of the criticism of their sexual behavior.

Since the influx of female workers from the Philippines began, the situation has changed. Like their European predecessors, the Filipina workers are subject to cultural censure for their unaccompanied family status, their public occupations and mixed gender socializing. But there are some differences. Mixed marriages are now taking place with greater frequency and unlike the earlier mixed marriages, many middle class Bahrainis are marrying Filipinas.

At the same time, cultural attitudes about mixed marriages have also become more critical. There are a number of reasons for this.

First, although Filipinas of all social backgrounds emigrate to work overseas, a large proportion of Filipinas migrating for work in Bahrain are young, single women of marriageable age. On the one hand, these women fit the profile of personable, attractive service workers sought by recruiters. On the other hand, such young women are prime candidates for labor emigration. It is common practice in the Philippines for an unmarried daughter to migrate for work in order to help support her parents and younger siblings. These unmarried women are not hindered from emigration by marriage or children and provide a potential income for their families of birth. Another common profile of a Filipina émigré is the single/deserted mother in need of income to support her children (cf. Constable 1997).

Second, contrary to Bahraini stereotypes of Filipinas, their culture discourages extra marital relations and prioritizes marriage and starting a family during ones twenties. Filipino culture also values exogamy and encourages love matches rather than arranged marriages. Out marriage is an acceptable practice and a strategy for emigration from the Philippines and children of mixed marriages are praised as physically attractive.<sup>5</sup> With few cultural deterrents to mixed marriages, the young, single Filipinas migrating to Bahrain often entertain hopes of finding a spouse while abroad. Bahrain's multinational population offers many options—fellow Filipinos, South Asians, Europeans, Americans (especially US Military personnel) and Bahrainis.

Because Filipinas select their own spouses rather than enter arranged marriages, their courtship practices involve mixed gender socializing and dating. Thus they now share the flight attendants' reputation as accessible and approachable dating options for Bahraini and foreign men. This perception is enhanced by an eroticization of "Asian-ness". South East Asian women and homosexual men have become eroticized in Bahraini formulations of gender and sexuality. The recruitment of South East Asian women to work in the leisure, entertainment and luxury consumption industries has had the effect of suggesting an association between pleasure and Asian women. Furthermore, the unfortunate overrepresentation of Asian's in the sex and entertainment industry, the vulnerability of Asian workers to sexual harassment and abuse, and the often misplaced blame for such incidents all serve to sexualize or eroticize the South East Asian body. These women are considered "hot" and "sexy" by Bahrain's new transnationalized standards. A young Bahraini woman told me that her mother preferred the Filipina housemaid didn't serve her husband. She said, "Admit it. They [Filipinas] are sexy, with those cute little bodies. How can my mom compete with that?"

In the same vein, a young Filipina who'd just moved in with her American boyfriend, told me she refused to hire a maid for fear that she'd "Steal my boyfriend".

Economic hierarchies and class issues contribute to the constructed attractiveness of Filipina women as being sexual and potential marriage partners, and may explain why lower middle class Bahraini men enter these marriages. Filipina wives are believed to be less economically demanding than a Bahraini wife might be. First of all, they do not demand a bride price. Second, many of the Filipina wives would willingly continue to work or are at least more likely than most Bahraini women to perform household and child rearing tasks without the assistance of household workers. The opinion that men like to date or marry Filipinas because "they get a housekeeper in the bargain" is widely held in Bahrain, of Arab, European and American men.

The economic aspirations can work both ways. Like many women around the world, the Filipinas I interviewed hoped for a husband and a marriage that would provide economic stability for themselves and their families. For many of these women who come from areas of high unemployment and economic hardship, the chance to marry a foreigner (or an overseas worker) offers greater economic possibilities than marrying at home. Since visa regulations allow the foreign wives of Bahrainis to work in Bahrain, marriage may relieve them of some of the uncertainties about employment continuity. For some of the women I interviewed marrying a Bahraini secured their residency and employment opportunities in Bahrain. In many cases, the boyfriend or husband not only provides for his wife but also provides economic assistance to the wife's kin in the Philippines. In this regard, they replace the woman as the overseas supporter of the family. It is quite common for the Bahraini spouse to find jobs in Bahrain for his wife's relatives or to invest in family businesses in the Philippines.

Grace and Walid, one of the couples I interviewed, have been married for 11 years. In many ways, this couple represents the ideals of many entering these marriages. Theirs is the transnational Cinderella story. Grace came to Bahrain as a singer at age 19. Walid fell in love the minute he saw her on stage and pursued her throughout her contract and after her return to the Philippines. Walid comes from a modest middle class background, but has moved up through the ranks to a management position with an international insurance company. Since their marriage, Grace has not worked. She manages the house, raises their two children, and has a supportive group of Filipina friends (most married to non-Filipinos). Although she does not work, with Walid's help she has purchased two Jeepneys for her family in Cebu, expanded and remodeled her mother's home, and arranged jobs in Bahrain for her older

sister, her niece and at least three family friends. Wistfully recalling her childhood fantasy Grace told me, "As a little girl, I always wanted to marry a man who went off to work each day wearing a suit. Someone who worked in an office, not like my father and the men around us." She achieved her dream and most of her friends see hers as a successful and happy marriage.

Not all the relationships between Bahraini men and Filipina women make such pleasant stories. Judith's situation, for example, illustrates another pattern all too common in Bahrain. Judith's Bahraini employer went to the Philippines to find a secretary for his small contracting office. According to Judith, he approached her in a Manila shopping mall, treated her and her friends to a few meals and outings, and then approached her mother and aunt to negotiate the job offer. The negotiations with the older women continued by telephone after he returned to Bahrain and was simultaneously "courting" the younger woman on the phone. Judith admits that the terms of employment were clear. The job description included sex. As Judith describes her relationship with this married man she expresses much gratitude for the financial support he provides for her and her family in Manila. In exchange for his "generosity", "I gave him my virginity" and "maybe I'll give him a child".

#### Conclusion:

The specific convergence of race and class represented in Bahraini-Filipina relationships open them to even greater criticism and stigmatization than the Bahraini-European

marriages that preceded them. The men are accused of hypocrisy and sexism, desiring nothing more than a "sex kitten" and "household slave", or of being too "cheap" to marry a Bahraini. While the Filipina women are viewed as "gold-diggers", willing to "do anything" for money or a visa. The clash of cultural values generates misunderstandings and the stigmatization of these marriages. Filipino culture values marital diversity and encourages marriages that are exogamous and choice based. In contrast, many Bahrainis are skeptical of mixed marriages, preferring endogamous and arranged marriages. Consequently, couples in unconventional marriages face a variety of potential objections, criticisms and stigma. In the earlier cases, of Bahraini men and European women, the perceived class status of the men and women involved tempered the criticisms. The more recent marriages between Bahraini men and Filipina women are subject to greater criticism due to the lower class status of both the men and women involved, by comparison, and the eroticization of Asian-ness in Bahraini culture.

Bahrain is host to many women such as Grace and Judith. It is in their relationships with Bahraini men that we see the inseparability of race and class as factors shaping attitudes about mixed liaisons and marriages in Bahrain. Their respective positions in the economic and social hierarchies, structuring labor migration, make these men and women attractive to each other. Each use different criteria for assessing attractiveness, but each are constructed within specific power relations that eroticize race and class.

## End Notes

1. This paper is a small portion of 20 months of fieldwork conducted in Bahrain between June 2000 and April 2003 with support from a Fulbright Research Grant and URC grant from DePaul University.
2. Marriages between Bahraini women and non-Arab men are even rarer. Those that do occur tend to be between western educated women of elite status and highly educated or wealthy European or North American men.
3. Interestingly, as the culture of retail sector has been feminized by the recruitment of Asian women, Bahraini women have more opportunities for jobs in this sector.
4. The Sri Lankan garment workers are the most notable exception to this, as they are housed in labor camps. Household workers generally live at their workplace and their movements are much more restricted than workers in the service and commercial sector
5. For a very interesting and honest first hand account of the mail order bride experience see Makow (2000).

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