

Sophie-Therese Trenka-Dalton

Dubai Gold and Diamonds: Tracing Dubai's Influence on the South Indian State of Kerala

With the Arabian Peninsula's oil boom, the United Arab Emirates became a key destination for labour migration from the South Indian state of Kerala from the 1970s onwards. Today, Keralites are one of the largest groups of expats living and working in the Emirates. This decades-long exchange shapes both the individual biographies and the economic structure of Kerala. Every family has members who have worked in the Gulf States. In return, the remittances form a substantial part of Kerala's gross national product. The income is invested primarily in the private living standard of families: houses, education, and dowries in the form of gold. The COVID-19 pandemic has severely decimated job opportunities on the Arabian Peninsula and it remains to be seen how this will affect Kerala's economy.

The selected photo series is based on the video work *Dubai Gold and Diamonds* (2018), which was shot in the cities of Kochi and Kozhikode and throughout Malappuram district. The photos show business and advertising signs in urban and rural surroundings with images and titles referring to the Emirates and other Gulf states. Travel agencies advertise with images of iconic buildings such as the *Burj Al Arab* (Fig. 4), and shops are named after UAE cities like the restaurant Sharjah Palace or the car repair shop Abu Dhabi Motors. The jewellery chain store Dubai Gold and Diamonds, which the project takes its title from, has several branches in Malappuram district (Fig. 2 and 3). Some of the Indian shops directly copy the name and font of Emirati companies. For example, the Emirates Residency guest-house in Kochi uses the typography of the airline Emirates (Fig. 1). References to the Gulf states often appear in connection with Western consumer electronics (Fig. 6). These were unavailable in India during the 1980s and '90s and were accordingly sought-after gifts expected from Gulf returnees. Today this still echoes in giving electronics markets in Kerala names like Gulf Bazar or Dubai Souk.

In the Indian context, Kerala is extraordinarily multireligious with large Christian and Muslim communities. Although members of all religions leave for work in the Gulf states equally, direct references in public space are visible especially in the predominantly Muslim Malappuram district. Gulf returnees establish small shops with reminiscent names or businesses designed for Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs) who visit home and bring, for example, new eating habits with them, which are catered to in restaurants like Arabian Hut (Fig. 5). The association of prosperity and modernity with the Gulf states is immediately visible in the numerous busi-

ness and advertising signs. Traveling to Dubai in particular has become a cultural motif in its own right (Fig. 4 and 8). All in all, this Kerala-specific phenomenon is not primarily the result of strategic business branding; instead, the self-made character and intricacy of the image and word combinations tell of individual longings and collective nostalgia through the medium of idealising advertisement.

The artistic research and video project *Dubai Gold and Diamonds* was realised in 2017 and 2018 with the support of the Goethe Institute/Max Mueller Bhavan Bangalore and the Kochi Biennale Foundation.

Dubai Bazar
Abu Dhabi Motors
Sharjah Food Palace
Al Ain Optics
Emirates Residency
UAE Exchange
Shawarma Expres
Dubai Diagnostic Center
Oodh Zone
Dubai Gold and Diamonds
Cafe Sahara
Dates City
Dubai Fashion World
Gulf Hotel
Gulfgate Hairfixing
Dubai Gold Souk
Hotel Arabian Hut
Hotel Gulf Hut
Grand Arabian Family Restaurant
Saudi Bakery
Hotel Babul Yemen
National Gulf Hyper Market
Gulf Bazar



Fig. 1: Emirates Residency
Guesthouse, Kochi



Fig. 2: Dubai Gold and Diamonds
Jewellery store sign, Chemmad, Malappuram district



Fig. 3: Dubai Gold and Diamonds
Jewellery store billboard, Malappuram district



Fig. 4: Airline Travels
 Travel agency advertisement, Othukkungal, Malappuram district



Fig. 5: Hotel Arabian Hut
Restaurant, Kakkanchery, Malappuram district

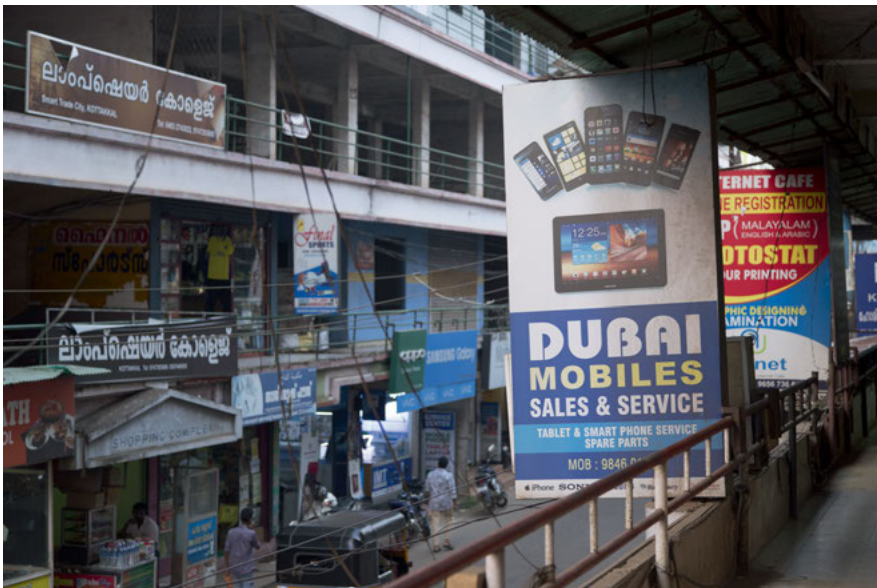


Fig. 6: Dubai Mobile
Store sign, Kottakkal, Malappuram district



Fig. 7: Hello Dubaikkaran
Movie billboard, Kochi

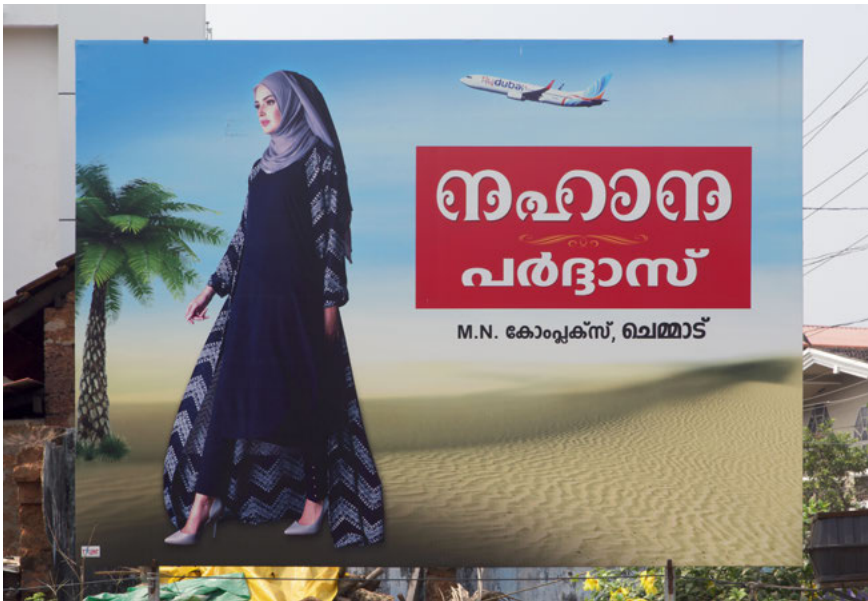


Fig. 8: Nahana Pardhas
Clothing store advertisement, Chemmad, Malappuram district

