

## Gulf Nationalism and the Geopolitics of Constructing Falconry as a 'Heritage Sport'

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### Abstract

This paper illustrates how Gulf nationals' claims to their homelands are affirmed and enacted through the ostensibly banal, but highly political, effort to construct falconry as a 'heritage sport'. Taking the case of the United Arab Emirates, I argue that local elites have harnessed the global discourse of 'heritage' to construct an ethnicized and gendered vision of a primordial Arab homeland. Heritage discourses surrounding falconry play an important role in legitimating prevailing structural inequalities in Gulf societies, reaffirming the minority citizen-nationals' claims to 'ownership' of the state, as well as naturalizing the masculinist imaginings of desert landscapes. Also considering the transnational dimensions of a geopolitics of falconry, I show how these nationalist narratives relate to cross-regional networks between the Arabian Peninsula and Central Asia. I argue that Gulf Arab falconry practices are not essentially 'primordial', but are made possible by and reinforce political economic inequalities institutionalized by contemporary territorial regimes.

### I. Introduction

Falconry is a prominent nationalist symbol in various countries around the world, including the Gulf Arab states, where it is also an important status sport. Partaking in falconry in a 'meaningful' fashion is very costly, given the expense of the birds and their care, as well as the costs incurred for hunting trips abroad (hunting being now banned in the Gulf). In this respect, falconry is similar to other sports where only the 'crème-de-la-crème' can actually own the means of performing it, such as yachting or equestrian sport. Through a wide range of initiatives, states across the Arabian Peninsula have recently been promoting elite sport, falconry included. Examples range from Abu Dhabi's impressive new Formula One track on Yas Island, where spectators can watch the races from their yachts, to the many new facilities underway for Qatar's hosting of the FIFA World Cup 2022 (Amara 2012; Amara and Theodoraki 2010; Bromber 2014; Bromber and Krawietz 2013; Scharfenort 2014).

The region-wide promotion of elite sport has rapidly become an important dimension of the Gulf states' nationalist discourses, which aim to develop a modern, 'cosmopolitan' image of the countries for international consumption. Sport is thus usefully approached as *geopolitical* in that it helps to reproduce certain territorial imaginaries and spatial hierarchies, whereby certain countries are imagined to be superior to others, either for the prowess of their athletes or for the quality of their stadiums. When Gulf elites locally promote *globalized* elite sports, like football, car-racing, or sailing, they are both reproducing the global dominance of the sports themselves, and working to cultivate the prestige that is accorded to them.

However, the nationalist effort to conjure an image of Gulf states as cosmopolitan through promoting global sport differs significantly from the nationalist discourses that circulate around falconry – which is framed as a 'heritage sport'. The difference, I suggest, is that as the Gulf states have undergone rapid social and economic change and increasingly engaging with globalized cultural institutions, such as sport, a persistent nationalist anxiety of local cultural loss lingers among many Gulf nationals. Although many openly embrace the demographic diversity of their countries and see the globalization of their societies as the way of the future, many do also consistently look to the past and valorise cultural preservation: this is the famous 'Janus-faced' character of nationalism. In this paper, I

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take the case of falconry as exemplary of how these contemporary anxieties about culture and power get narrated through nationalist imaginings of 'heritage'. As noted above, the very elite nature of the sport marks it off as the domain of those with means. However, as I argue, the promotion of falconry reflects – and helps constitute – other regional divides.

First, falconry in the Gulf is also *ethnicized* – being framed locally as a 'heritage sport' and sometimes termed 'Arab falconry', it is understood to be an undertaking for Gulf nationals alone. So too is it gendered: these are not just any Gulf nationals, but *male* citizens. As I argue here, falconry is narrated as a marker of masculinist Gulf ethno-national identity and affinity with their homeland, territorializing the sport in a way that other international sports are not. In this analysis, I take heed of Ernest Gellner's (2006:119) warning against analysing the precise doctrines of 'prophets of nationalism', which he sees as a futile exercise: 'If one of them had fallen, others would have stepped into his place.' So while I examine how falconry operates as a nationalist trope in a range of media and practices, I am primarily concerned with asking what sort of territorial imaginaries it calls upon and conjures, as well as who is erased from these landscapes and what narratives are *silenced* in nationalist constructions of falconry as a 'heritage sport'. In particular, I show how Gulf nationals' political claims to their homelands are constructed and affirmed through the ostensibly 'apolitical' language of heritage and sport.

In addition to being a nationalist icon or trope, falconry also functions as a set of concrete practices that link falconers, birds, and resources to places and transnational networks. So while the recent rise of falconry among elites in the Gulf is rightfully situated as part of a broader trend of promoting elite sport region-wide, another key difference with more globalized sports lies in the very specific political economic networks in which Gulf falconry circulates. In both cases, international elite sport and 'heritage sports' are embedded in a diffuse range of political and financial networks – and hierarchies of prestige – that span the globe. As I demonstrate here, however, the specificity of these networks defies any attempt to grasp a broader 'geopolitics of sport', but demands a more nuanced 'geopolitics of falconry'.

In critically reworking the field in the 1990s and 2000s, geographers have been analysing geopolitics in domains beyond the classical realms of Great Power politics, focusing instead on how it operates as a form of 'geo-power'. As outlined by Gearóid Ó Tuathail (1996:7) in his foundational book, *Critical Geopolitics*, 'geo-power' can be understood as 'the functioning of geographical knowledge not as an innocent body of knowledge and learning but an ensemble of technologies of power concerned with the governmental production and management of territorial space'. A geopolitics of falconry, then, would attend to how practicing the sport revolves around the production of national difference, as well as the differential management of territorial space (e.g. through wildlife and hunting regulations, state and supra-state conservation programmes) and how situated actors draw on and circumvent political geographic structures to reproduce positions of power. Approached as such, falconry emerges not as an 'innocent body of knowledge', but as a highly political set of practices at the interface of territorial regimes of power and how humans imagine and interact with the natural world.

The empirical discussion is drawn from research in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2012–2015, and primarily consists of semiotic analysis of official publications and artefacts collected during my fieldwork. It is supplemented by participant observation at various festivals and celebrations, largely related to the celebration of National Day in both countries, but also including the Third International Falconry Festival (IFF) held in Abu Dhabi in December 2014. Together, these discursive practices figure centrally in how structural inequalities – at various scales – are perpetuated and legitimated in the Gulf, specifically around gendered and ethnicized imaginaries of the 'homeland', and with respect to state-based governance of wildlife management that shapes cross-regional hunting practices and link Gulf elites to distant – and differently governed – landscapes in Central Asia.

## **II. Whose Heritage? Gulf Nationalism and Homeland Narratives**

'Heritage' is a global discourse, centrally promoted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) through its World Heritage programs, but also adopted and advanced by a variety of actors at multiple scales around the world. As an increasingly common catchphrase in the Gulf, heritage both taps into the international legitimacy accorded to preserving cultural sites and practices, but it also indexes *ethnic*

nationalist identity in the Gulf. As various scholars have shown, this takes a particularly top-down approach in the region, with a particular focus on built structures, such as heritage ‘villages’, museums, and architectural monuments – and even *dhow* boats associated with the region’s old pearling economy (Gierlich 2014; Gilbert 2011; Khalaf 1999, 2000, 2008; Krawietz 2014; Mitchell 2014; Vora 2013). Khalaf (2008:64) elaborates:

The Gulf countries offer numerous comparative examples about the importance of this newly constructed heritage culture in their rapidly changing societies, where the state is the patron and the organiser of this newly constructed heritage culture in their rapidly changing societies, where the state is the patron and the organiser of this new/old culture. Camel racing, dhow racing, popular poetry (*nabati*), television programmes, heritage clubs, heritage research centres and heritage villages are among the most media-promoted heritage activities and sites.

While the state is often cast as the primary ‘actor’ in this literature, it is important to note that situated *individuals* are mobilizing the resources and name of the state to promote their political agenda. Rogers Brubaker (2004:10) refers to these individuals as ‘ethnopolitical entrepreneurs’, who he notes ‘may live “off” as well as “for” ethnicity’. That is, rather than assuming an inherent cohesion of any ethnic or national group, Brubaker shows how these actors engage in ‘group-making’ as a social, cultural, and political *project*, which is ‘aimed at transforming categories into groups or increasing levels of groupness’ (ibid.:13). Notably, some group-making projects may succeed, while others will fail. This begs the question of why some ethno-cultural icons have been so much more pervasive in the Gulf states compared to others.

The discursive writing of the Gulf states’ postcolonial repertoire of nationalist iconography, I suggest, is not just a matter of ethnopolitical entrepreneurs highlighting ‘apolitical’ historical facts. Rather, it represents one such a ‘group-making’ project that requires audiences to forget that nationalism involves performing and revering a set of ‘invented traditions’ (Hobsbawm 1983). It is important to note, however, that these are also discourses of power insofar as discussions of heritage in the Gulf privilege citizen-nationals, and are almost never understood to reference the cultural practices and sites of the region’s long-time South Asian residents, for example, eliding the region’s colonial and pre-colonial histories of cosmopolitanism and migration (Vora 2013). ‘Heritage’ narratives thus reinforce the idea that Gulf nationals are the only population truly ‘at home’ on the Arabian Peninsula – that this is rightfully their land – *their* homeland.

Although the seeds of ethnically-defined nationalism were planted in Qatar and the UAE before 1971, this process was advanced with full force in the era of independence. As Sheila Carapico (2002:10) explains, the ‘official myths’ told by the Gulf monarchies have highlighted ethnic nationals’ claims to the land through various references to their unique Bedouin or tribal heritage through an iconography centred on desert lifestyles, ranging from cuisine and clothing to sport and the arts – but this is centrally constructed vis-à-vis the ‘internal other’ (Johnson and Coleman 2011) of non-citizens. Carapico (2002:10) elaborates:

Each [Gulf] administration defines its own people and national character in impeccably tailored ways to verify the privileges via patrimonial lineage to ruling families and male citizens. So the people of the Gulf are the descendants of the Arabian founders of the modern Saudi and Kuwaiti and emirate states . . . to be clearly distinguished from the ‘others,’ the outsiders or ‘immigrants’ and stateless persons whose numbers would otherwise overwhelm the ‘indigenous’ population.

As I have shown elsewhere (Koch 2015), although governments in Qatar and the UAE are increasingly deploying civic nationalist scripts, ethnic nationalist identity narratives continue to be vigorously promoted as well. Like many other contexts around the world, this coexistence of civic and ethnic nationalism is perhaps best understood as a co-constitution, since inclusivist scripts rarely break down ethnic or national boundaries, but instead tend to reinforce and reify divisions amongst the population. Such is the case in Qatar and the UAE: nationalist imaginaries that narrate a place for the large expatriate population (i.e. rather than ‘othering’ them as outsiders) always hinge on their secondary status vis-à-vis ethnic nationals. Set up in stark contrast to the Gulf nationals, expats do not ‘belong’ as Gulf nationals do: they are always narrated as ‘transplants’, even if they are fourth-generation residents. The deserts of the Arabian Peninsula are not their ‘primordial homeland’, nor is the desert ‘heritage’

their own. In this respect, both ethnic and civic nationalist scripts are important bounding practices, whereby citizen-nationals' privileged status and claims to the land and state resources are naturalized (Koch 2015).

### III. 'Arab' Falconry: The Geopolitics of Constructing Falconry as a Heritage Sport

*Arabian Destiny* (Henderson 1988) is the autobiography of a British oil company worker based in the Trucial States, before the Eastern Arabian Peninsula was divided into sovereign states in 1971. Published by an Emirati print, the book presents a lively, if sanitized, picture of the people and places that went into making today's UAE. In one chapter, he tells the story of a falcon hunting expedition he took in the 1950s with Sheikh Shakhbut, who was the ruler of Abu Dhabi from 1928–1966. On this particular excursion, the sheikh had four pick-up trucks at his disposal and was accompanied by about two dozen followers, ten of whom were each individually in charge of falcon. Also in attendance was a lead tracker, who would guide the entire party in search of the prey: a large bird, the houbara bustard. Henderson's book is full of colourful adventures driving trucks through the desert dunes, and this story was no different. He recounts a high-speed chase, with the tracker in the truck's bed shouting directions, and Henderson himself in front jostling between the driver and the sheikh – until the prey is sighted:

Suddenly, another bang on the roof and we stopped. All the men were quiet; we jumped down and, at a sign from the shaikh, one of the birds had its hood removed. The falconer stood up in the back of the truck and held it as high as he could. There in the distance I could see two bustards in a hollow grubbing amongst the grasses. These were the birds whose tracks we had been following. The falcon was released, swooped and with a lovely curving, infinitely graceful flight, went right to its prey and, in a great fluttering of wings, seized one of the bustards and dug its beak into the breast again and again. Meanwhile another falcon was released to attack the second bustard which had half flown, half scampered to some larger bushes nearby in hope of finding cover. The shaikh and his followers, now all on foot, ran to the scene, and the falconers started to entice their falcons back to the lures with pieces of goat's meat which they had ready as the reward. Trained falcons will hold and wound a bustard without killing provided they can be enticed off the prey in time. It was essential to cut the bustard's throat and draw blood while it was still alive in order to make it lawful to eat its flesh. The trucks had come up behind us and while the falconers were fussing over the successful falcons and stroking their breasts, coffee was served from a small thermos flask, followed by tea. The bustard was duly dispatched with a knife and put in the back of the truck. . . . After a short break, we climbed aboard again, and the whole process was repeated.

(Henderson 1988:89–90)

This section of Henderson's narrative of the falcon hunt itself represents only a small piece of the entire excursion, much of which actually revolves around the space of the desert camp, where men came together in circles to drink coffee, pray, eat, consult, laugh, and even fire guns randomly into the dark of the night. These stories come from a time long past and in a dramatically different geopolitical environment. Yet they illustrate some of the general dynamics that are still remembered and selectively rehearsed among contemporary falconers and their followers. Falcons in the Gulf today, for example, are no longer caught every year and released again into the wild, but legally required to be bred in captivity and kept in large, climate-controlled facilities. And the houbara bustard, the Gulf falconers' cherished prey, can no longer be hunted locally – not only is it illegal, it is extinct from the Peninsula beyond recent reintroduction efforts (Seddon and Launay 2007:202).

Falconry, in short, has changed dramatically since Henderson's forays, so in the remainder of this paper, I consider what is at stake in the recent efforts of ethnopolitical entrepreneurs in the Gulf to construct falconry as a 'heritage sport', through a closer look at the case of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). As Sarina Wakefield (2012:284) has noted, falconry in the UAE 'has played a distinctive role within national identity'. Although the UAE may be somewhat unusual in the scope and intensity of its promotion of falconry as a nationalist trope, it is an instructive exemplar of broader regional trends. Everywhere from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait – falconry figures centrally in the contemporary constructions of ethnic nationalism, imagined to symbolize Gulf nationals' Bedouin

heritage and connection to their homeland on the Arabian Peninsula. But rather than adopt at face value the Gulf nationalist discourse about falconry as a heritage sport, as in Wakefield's (2012) framing, this analysis asks how falconry has been *constructed* as an icon of local 'heritage', and what sort of power relations the resulting discourse upholds or challenges. Accordingly, I am less concerned with the historical and biological 'facts' of falconry (but see Krawietz 2014), and more with how these materialities are made *political* – that is, how situated actors interpret and narrate them as significant.

Approached as an example of ethno-political entrepreneurs engaged in group-making, falconry is an especially productive case for exploring how national modes of identification are understood and performed in the contemporary Gulf. As such, this paper builds on the existing studies that adopt a constructivist approach to the nationalist production of ethnic 'heritage' markers across the region. The remainder of this paper will consider how the birds and the sport fit into the semiotic landscapes of Gulf nationalism, which simultaneously naturalize and reinscribe unequal, variably-scaled 'power-geometries' (Massey 1993) around three sets of divides: (a) class, ethnicity, and citizenship; (b) gender; and (c) regional political geographies and political economy. In considering the political construction of 'falconry as heritage', I aim to show how it is not just a discursive construct, but also a set of concrete practices that link falconers, birds, and resources to specific places and transnational networks.

### ***A. Falconry as Homeland Narrative: Constructing 'Heritage' and Belonging in the Emirates***

Indexed as a heritage sport, and thus part of the ethnic nationalist iconography, falconry must also be understood as a luxury sport – akin to fox hunting in Britain, for example. Not only are the birds themselves extremely expensive – some costing upwards of U.S. \$80,000 (Krawietz 2014:133) – but their care and maintenance is also so labour-intensive and nuanced that many falconers in the Gulf employ a full-time caretaker for each bird they own. Furthermore, because of local bans on hunting and the houbara bustard's local extinction, Gulf falconers generally travel abroad – primarily to Pakistan, Central Asia, and parts of Africa – to hunt for sport (Wakefield 2012:283). The result is that falconry has become highly elitist since 'it is only the very wealthy who can afford to travel abroad to hawk with their birds' (ibid.). As the UAE-based Etihad Airways policies indicate, birds can be accommodated on board their flights, but for a hefty fee. While the wealthiest falconers tend to have their own planes to fly directly to their hunting destinations, many individuals do in fact travel with their birds on commercial flights, and doing so is largely a public performance of elite status. Just as fashionistas or owners of expensive cars seek to show off their luxury items, falconers in the Gulf can often be seen in public with their luxury birds. Indeed, Khalaf (2009:311) contends that it is precisely this 'popularity of falconry among members of the Emirate's ruling elite' that has contributed significantly to its regional promotion.

Falconry has long had regal associations, but more than just a status marker, the construction of falconry as a heritage sport in the Gulf is ultimately a homeland narrative that harkens back to an imagined primordial Arab way of life. This common theme in the official Emirati rhetoric around falconry is illustrated, for example, in a 2014 speech of the late Mohamed Khalaf Al Mazrouei, former Chairman of the Cultural Programs and Heritage Festivals Committee of Abu Dhabi about the IFF:

The International Festival of Falconry connects us all to the story of our ancestors and their way of life, it serves as a valuable platform to enlighten generations on the heritage of our predecessors and their long journey to build a beloved and proud nation. We take pride that the cultural heritage presented at this festival embodies our ancestors' past, with sincere respect to our noble leaders who have made history in this beloved Emirate. The success of the International Festival of Falconry, in its first and second editions, echoes the feelings of belonging, dignity, and pride in our national identity and heritage that is characterised by diversity, authenticity, and deeprootedness.

(IFF 2014:9)

While Al Mazrouei never specifies who 'we' are, the implication is that 'our predecessors' and 'ancestors' are the Emiratis 'who have made history in this beloved Emirate'. This is further reinforced in the vision statement of the

Cultural Programs and Heritage Festivals Committee, which is to promote ‘the sustainability of the Emirati national identity and heritage, and the encouragement of the whole community to practice and preserve the various forms of customs and traditions’ (ibid.:17). These narratives, while never naming the large population of non-national residents in the UAE, produce the overall sense that ‘Emirati national identity and heritage’ is the object of preservation, silently writing out any other claims to belonging in the region.

Homeland narratives are important in most nationalist imaginaries, and uniquely so in the contemporary Gulf, since the benefits of juridical citizenship are substantial and ethnic nationalist scripts are essential to validating these privileges. Although variable across the region, Gulf citizens enjoy wide access to ‘welfare state goods’, such as free or subsidized education, housing, healthcare, as well as high-paying state-sector jobs. In administering these benefits, various state institutional arrangements work to entrench citizens’ privilege, but ethnic nationalist discourses play an important role in rhetorically and ideologically validating this entitlement to the benefits afforded by the state, its territory, and resources. By naturalizing the Emirates as the homeland of Gulf nationals, tropes about falconry as ethnic heritage and ancestry – of ‘deeprootedness’ – also pre-empt or rebuff any claims of belonging by non-citizen residents. Robert Kaiser (2002:230) explains that such imaginaries about primordial homelands ‘reinforce the depiction of the nation as an ancient community of belonging; an organic singularity “rooted” to a particular place’, which ‘naturalizes the linkage between blood and soil, and so strengthens the legitimacy of nationalist claims to the land itself, at least among in-group members’.

But non-citizen residents of the Emirates are not the only consumers of this heritage discourse. As Krawietz (2014:141) has argued, falconry discourses operate as do other symbols of ethnic nationalism in the Gulf – to assuage the anxiety of citizen-nationals’ about their minority status: ‘Falcon iconicity can be perceived as a forceful statement of Gulf Arab hegemony that, at least symbolically, outweighs the threatening degree of foreign influences and that reassures that hegemony’s imprint on the land.’ That is, the discourse advertises Emirati *primary* claims to the state and its territory, assuring citizens on ‘a more or less subconscious level, that they will not be sacrificed to the dynamics of modernization and foreign infiltration’ (ibid.:142). Again, this discourse never directly names the foreign residents as ‘other’, but the simple act of according falconry a special place as a symbol of ‘the’ nation, the state is quietly ethnicized in an exclusive fashion. Far more than a semantic game, these territorial imaginaries are significant insofar as they naturalize hegemonic power-geometries in the Gulf through something seemingly banal and uncontested as a cute icon or a beautiful bird on display. But these little acts have long-lasting effects, as Kaiser (2002:232) has emphasized: ‘[T]he primary purpose of nationalism – to construct and maintain the past, present and future images of nation and homeland within a set of mutually understood and accepted parameters over time, so that members of the nation and homeland being made perceive both as “natural” and “eternal.”’

As a trope, falconry should not be read only as excluding non-citizen residents wholesale, but might be more productively understood as a way of narrating what *kind* of belonging is permitted for non-citizens: they are guests or visitors, who should be in awe of or respect local heritage. Common to heritage narratives more generally, the ‘local’ is put up on a pedestal to be revered by ostensible ‘outsiders’. This is especially clear in one *Gulf News* story titled, ‘A Woman Falconer’s Love for the Sport’, which tells the story of German citizen and Emirates resident, Dr. Mariam Hampel, who is a personal veterinarian and falcon trainer for Dubai’s Sheikh Mohammad. While the article implies that it is somehow bizarre that a woman could love falconry, the theme of gender (discussed further below) is less significant here than Dr. Hampel’s expat positionality, as the story quickly lapses into a performance of the staid script about falconry as an emblem of national heritage:

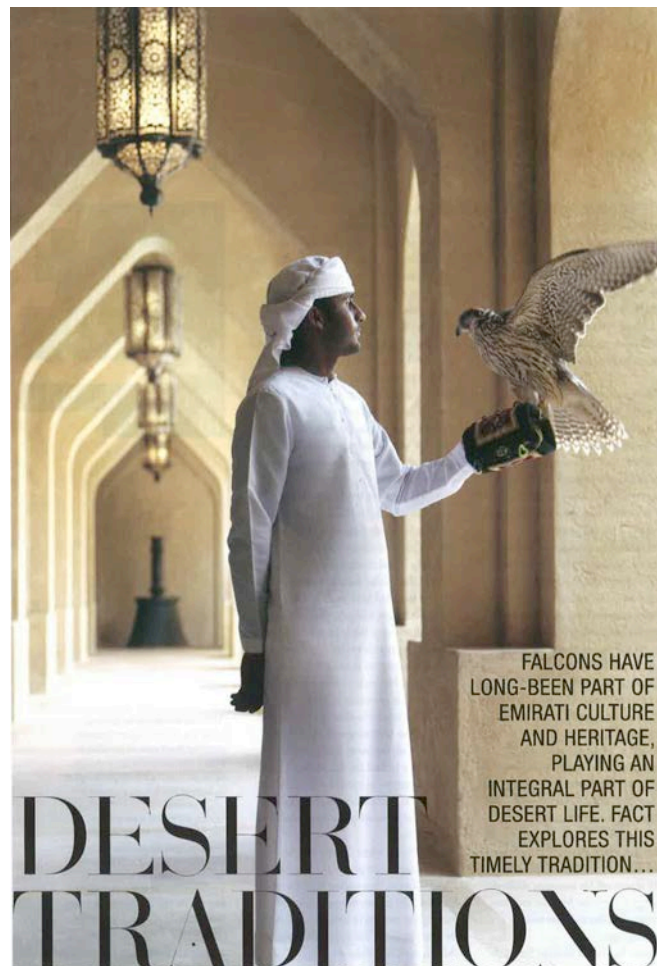
She looks forward to continued participation in the championships and feels this is a fantastic platform to encourage young Emiratis to take to a sport that was practised by their forefathers. ‘I feel at home among these birds and it is such a privilege to be able to tend to them. I look forward to growing my knowledge and skill about falconry. Falconry is part of Emirati national heritage and it is great that it is being revived.’ . . . She urges all Emiratis to be a part of this sport wholeheartedly. ‘It is a part of their cultural heritage.’

(Chaudhary 2014)

There is a great deal at work in this excerpt, but it is important to note here (a) how laudatory Dr. Hampel is about falconry preservation efforts (presumably by the state, but no actors are specified), and (b) how she acknowledges her 'privilege' of working with the birds in the UAE. While such heritage narratives are common to tourist narratives all over the world, the Gulf case is unique in that these formulaic statements are simultaneously for tourist consumption and for expats: as I have discussed at length elsewhere, such stories in mainstream Gulf newspapers are an important way of disciplining expat discourse about Emiratis and local 'heritage' (Koch 2015). So rather than destabilizing any gender norms or practices surrounding falconry, the overarching effect of this article is to reinforce prevailing nationalist narratives about the importance of heritage preservation, as well as the benevolence and forward-thinking of the Emirati people. In so doing, it simultaneously affirms Dr. Hampel's 'outsider' status – falconry is imagined here as a particularly Emirati tradition practiced by 'their' forefathers: 'It is a part of their cultural heritage.' Seemingly banal, these readings and writings of falconry as a heritage sport reinforce the overall image of an ethnic homeland, where only Emirati culture is to be preserved and where others are but guests.

The territorial imaginary of non-citizens as 'guests' raises questions about how Emiratis themselves envision their role as 'hosts'. As I have argued elsewhere (Koch 2015), the theme of benevolence is central to Emirati nationalist identity narratives – with the effect of reaffirming nationals' status as the rightful 'owners' of the state's ethnicized territory, but as welcoming to outsiders, kind, and cosmopolitan – in short, 'modern'. So rather than representing only a set of exclusions, it is important to consider the ways that falconry as a trope defines in a more positive fashion the ideals, affinities, and norms that Emirati ethnopolitical entrepreneurs seek to ascribe to the nation as a community. Emirati identity narratives are deeply fused with the reverence of Sheikh Zayed as the 'father of the nation' – so much so that Gulf scholars have termed the official state ideology 'Zayedism' (Koury 1980). As Krawietz (2014) explains, falconry figures prominently in the Zayedist rhetoric to reference certain social values, including patience, endurance, and stealth: 'In times of peace, the genuine Bedouin passion or the law of the desert can mean endless patience, modesty and self-restriction, as well as utter solidarity with the weaker members of society' (ibid.:143). So while the falcons are also prized for their battle-readiness and sheer power, Arab Gulf leaders are often pictured with the animals as a way to showcase their benevolence or 'naturalize their qualities as considerate leaders' and 'to present themselves publicly in animated scenes not only of dominance, but of true affection' (ibid.:137–38; see also Koch forthcoming; Tuan 1984). Notably, in all such public representations of falconry, it is uniformly Gulf nationals who are depicted with the birds and on hunts (e.g. Figure 1). But, moving to the second divide naturalized in and through narratives about falconry, it is also only ever *men* who are depicted with the birds and on hunts.

**Figure 1.** Gulf national man in an advertisement about Gulf falconry. Source: Fair use.



### ***B. The Gendered Landscapes of Falconry: Desert Spaces and Male Bodies***

Just like non-citizen residents, women are not associated with falconry in the Emirates, nor in the Gulf more generally. The sport is coded as male, not just through visual depictions of it, but also rhetorically – it is said that ‘falconers regard themselves as a fraternity’, and that a ‘bond of brotherhood (partner ethics) governs the behaviour of falconers while hunting’ (Khalaf 2009:310). So while much feminist research on nationalism tends to focus on how women and female bodies often become central to knowledge construction about national identity (Mayer 2000; Yuval-Davis 1997), nationalist identity narratives are also produced by the systematic exclusion of women from certain nationalist landscapes. This has been expertly considered in Sara McDowell’s (2008) study of commemorative landscapes in Northern Ireland, which systematically erase the role of female fighters in the Troubles – a phenomenon also seen in the erasure of women from images of the U.S. 9/11 rescue efforts (Dowler 2002). Hegemonic gender norms thus get written into landscapes and not just in memorial practices: the ephemeral landscapes associated with the camp of the falcon hunt are imagined as unequivocally male.

Region-wide the desert camp of a hunting expedition is considered a masculine space and, in effect, normalizing the male dominance in and over these landscapes. So if, as Kaiser (2002:231) argues, nationalism is fundamentally ‘designed to convert land into national territory’, highlighting falconry as a quintessential example of Emirati ‘heritage’ simultaneously calls upon and produces an image of the Gulf ‘homeland’ as a male-dominated space. That is, not only is the narrative about falconers’ ‘bond of brotherhood’ significant in that it institutionalizes a particular image of how ‘true’ Emirati men socialize, but also in how they relate to particular landscapes. As with the silent erasure of expats noted above, the image of the desert camp and the Arabian deserts more generally as male spaces naturalizes the exclusion of women from these landscapes. So rather than being put up on a pedestal, their absence is telling of the patriarchal structures and cultures of masculinity that are normalized through the valorisation of falconry as an Emirati heritage sport and pastime. Falconry thus provides an exceptional insight into contemporary performances of nationalism in the Gulf insofar as it seems ‘innocent’ – just a hobby, sport, pastime – but in their quiet absence from these narratives and performances, women are clearly less at home in this homeland.

All these semiotic trends notwithstanding, there are actual women in the Emirates who engage in falconry, albeit exceptionally few. One article for *Middle East Online*, for example, tells the story of one Emirati female falconer taking part in the 2011 IFF, and asks the unusual question in its title, ‘What Prevents Female Falconers from Joining Clubs in Gulf Arab countries?’ In response, Abdullah Al Qubaisi, Director of the Festival, is quoted as saying that there are in fact many female falconers in the Gulf, but that ‘our traditions in the region prevent women from practicing falconry in male-dominated clubs’ (Guerraoui 2011). Director of Al Ain Centre of the Emirates Heritage Club, Ali Mohamed Alnuaimi, was also interviewed and puts forward a similar argument about ‘traditions’, but further posits that women’s physical abilities are constrained as compared to their male counterparts:

Besides the constraining traditional factor, there is also the toughness of the sport which makes it very hard for women to hunt in the desert because this sport is physically demanding. . . . The roughness of the terrains in the desert made it impossible for women to go on hunting trips with falcons in ancient times. That is why this sport has been dominated by men for centuries in the Gulf Arab region.

(Quoted in Guerraoui 2011)

Although the journalist rejected these essentialist readings of women’s ability with their top finishes in recent competitions, the masculinist dismissal of female competence reinforces the idea that falconry is a male sport. Despite these club leaders’ suggestion that they personally are open to having more female falconers involved, Maitha bint Kulaib’s participation in the 2011 IFF is quickly reduced to a tokenistic illustration of Emirati openness to more progressive or liberal gender roles. Similarly, in attending the 2014 IFF and numerous other heritage events surrounding the UAE’s National Day, most of which tended to have falconry displays, I only encountered one Emirati woman – an artist at the festival (Figure 2). As a painter specializing in falcon portraits, her engagement was falconry exceptional in that she did not actually participate in the sport *per se* – her body was not



subjected to the rugged terrain, nor did she transgress the male space of the camp. Her engagement was passive, aesthetic, and, again, tokenistic.

**Figure 2.** Emirati woman posing with her falcon paintings at the IFF 2014. Source: Natalie Koch.



### ***C. The Geopolitics of falconry: Inter-Asian Connections beyond the Gulf***

The third vector of structural inequalities I consider in this paper shifts scales somewhat to consider the linkages between these nationalist imaginaries of the homeland and belonging to how the sport operates as a set of concrete practices that link falconers, birds, and resources to specific places and transnational networks. Like the homeland imaginaries produced in and through constructions of falconry as an ethno-national ‘heritage sport,’ the wider transnational networks that are materialized around Gulf falconry are themselves strategic sites of ‘geo-power.’ In fact, the two work together.

In the UAE, this is especially apparent in the way that the state’s international initiatives are framed through the language of nationalism and especially in the formulaic praise of Sheikh Zayed. He is also frequently touted as a conservation-minded environmentalist who ‘recognized early the challenge that rapid development and urbanization posed to the country’s fragile resources and the traditions at the heart of the Emirati cultural identity’, and his ‘passionate love for falconry and heritage preservation in general’ is said to be the reason behind the success of falconry in the Emirates (Khalaf 2009:311–12). A 2004 article reprinted in the IFF brochure elaborates further:

Dubbed as the forerunner of contemporary falconers and conservationists across the world, the late Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan (may God bless his soul) was born a [sic] environmentalist. Although he was born into a harshly inhospitable environment of the Arabian Desert where the Bedouins made a living through hunting, young Zayed foresaw the need to strike a balance between preservation and the ancestral heritage of falconry and hunting on the one hand, and ensuring the long-term survival of falcons and their prey on the other. This view, by any stretch of the imagination, was a transcendental and far-sighted vision that modern

conservationists today know as ‘sustainable hunting.’ Clearly, Sheikh Zayed was not only ahead of his own generation but also far ahead of the entire international conservationist movement.

(IFF 2014:2728)

Forward-thinking, environmentally-conscious, and a global leader – Sheikh Zayed comes to personify the values and ideals that are the hallmark of Emirati nationalist mythology. His personal story is itself appropriated at multiple levels to define and promote the contemporary government’s heavy investment in falconry-related initiatives, including the UAE-led initiative to have falconry recognized by UNESCO, under its Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity Program, the much-touted Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital, and its related breeding programs and the Sheikh Zayed Falcon Release Program. As the above quote suggests, these programmes are almost uniformly tied back to Sheikh Zayed’s love of the sport.

Zayedism and Emirati nationalism thus serve as the foundation of how the UAE leadership positions the state’s and its citizens’ interactions with the outside world. This is important, it turns out, because these interactions have come under intense scrutiny in recent years. International criticism has focused on two issues in particular: (a) the illegal capture and trafficking of wild falcons; and (b) the illegal hunting and trafficking of the endangered houbara bustard in the wider Middle East and North Africa region. Pakistan has historically been the most popular destination for wealthy Gulf falconers, and it is seen locally as ‘an opportunity to earn money and engage in a form of soft diplomacy’, and where Arab hunters have sought to ‘curry favor’ (i.e. hunting rights) by building ‘roads, schools, madrassas and mosques, as well as several international-standard airstrips in unlikely places’ (Walsh 2015). The result of these patronage practices and other less-than-licit hunting arrangements is the ongoing decimation of the bustard populations region-wide.

Putting a number on the impact of Arab falcon hunting is a difficult task because of the illicit nature of these expeditions, which are kept secret by Gulf governments and their inviting colleagues. Across Northern Africa and Central Asia, official records are unavailable and more frequently, hunts are not even publicly acknowledged (Union for the Conservation of Raptors 2015). Even where official permitting is conducted, the limits most likely grossly underestimate the actual wildlife impact of these expeditions. Houbara hunting has been banned in most countries and is subject to various international treaties, but Pakistan, for example, continues to grant licenses to the most elite applicants, who are allowed to hunt up to one hundred birds each. In the 2013–14 hunting season, thirty-three permits were granted to foreigner hunters and twenty-nine in 2014–15 – a veritable ‘who’s who of Gulf potentates, including the emirs of Kuwait and Qatar, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia and the president of the UAE’ (Boone 2014). Again the following year’s guests included the kings of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, the emir of Kuwait and Sheikh Mohammed of Dubai (Walsh 2015). Unofficial estimates suggest that each such hunt costs around U.S. \$10–20 million, including an entourage numbering in the hundreds (Seddon and Launay 2007:205).

Together with international wildlife conservation and other advocacy groups, Pakistani politicians have recently launched a series of efforts to draw attention to official corruption and illegal hunting in the region – as evidenced by numerous exposé articles in mainstream news outlets (e.g. Boone 2014; Walsh 2015). But these elite falconers are not only traveling to Pakistan, and indeed in response to growing international scrutiny, Gulf nationals are increasingly expanding beyond the traditional favourite destinations of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Morocco – most recently into the post-socialist states of Central Asia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (Union for the Conservation of Raptors 2015). Newly independent governments there are keen for the political and financial patronage that Gulf elites can offer, while domestic corruption and nondemocratic political systems ensure that these practices go largely unheeded, and certainly uncriticized by ordinary citizens. What the future holds for these countries is uncertain, but as long as the extraordinary flows of patronage continue to flow from elite Gulf falconers, the future of the local wildlife looks bleak.

From this perspective, then, the Emirati government’s Zayed-inspired initiatives promoting falconry, conservation, and other ‘techno-fixes’ to wildlife trafficking and overhunting (e.g. falcon passports, micro-chipping, and robotic houbara) start to look like a sort of public relations campaign to broadcast a more positive image of the UAE and ‘green-wash’ the heavy ecological footprint of its top leaders. But rather than stop at this easy critique and shame

Gulf elites for their behaviour, it is important to note that the very conditions of possibility for these inequalities rests with the broader statist system and differential regimes of territorial control and wildlife management. Elites are, in short, working with and strategically exploiting the power of borders, cross-regional inequalities, and, of course, the falcon's ability to delight.

#### IV. Conclusions

The falcon's majesty and its ability to delight are precisely what makes falconry such a powerful trope in nationalist and geopolitical discourses alike. As this paper has shown, rather than being an innocent body of knowledge or mere heritage sport, falconry cannot be dissociated from the power and domination that Yi-Fu Tuan (1984) famously traces to play. I have thus illustrated how the discourses and practices surrounding falconry actively buttress a number of uneven 'power-geometries' between people of varying political statuses. The heritage discourse that links falconry to primordial Arab traditions produces the image of an ethnically-imbued national homeland, strategically affirming and naturalizing Gulf nationals' 'deeprootedness', while quietly writing non-citizen residents with long histories in the region, as well as women, out of the landscape. Seemingly banal, the tropes and practices surrounding falconry play an important role in legitimating prevailing structural inequalities in the Gulf, but also farther afield in South and Central Asia, as well as Northern Africa.

As an exploration of the 'geopolitics of falconry', this study has shown that, in the case of the UAE, elites are actively mobilizing the heritage discourse to craft a particular image of the state for international consumption – but one that is strategically designed to elide the illicit hunting and patronage practices that presently link Gulf Arab leaders and various regimes abroad. Altogether, the ethno-nationalist, masculinist, and elitist practices surrounding Gulf falconry today suggest that it is certainly not a fixed ancestral pastime, but firmly embedded in very contemporary power structures. By coding falconry as a 'heritage sport', nationalist narratives not only elide the recentness of its invention, as they so frequently do (Hobsbawm 1983), but they also blur and sanitize these highly political questions of socio-political inequalities and erase them from the landscape. Falconry approached through the lens of political geography thus emerges not as a mere 'heritage sport' to be hailed and revered, but as a form of geo-power, operationalizing, institutionalizing, and constituting territorial regimes of power.

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