

“Shokolat, min fadlak,” I told the ice cream vendor, while dusting the hot sand out of my slippers. Like a Cheshire cat, he made a grin that revealed his yellow, chipped teeth. “Excuse?” It seemed like he couldn’t speak Arabic. To be frank, neither could I. Enunciating in my American accent, I corrected myself. “Chocolate,” I said firmly. The man gave a stern look to his son, who seemed to be around my age at the time--nine. The boy reached inside the small rusty cart--which had squeaked as it first approached me--and handed me the ice cream. I rummaged through my pockets and gave him about ten Saudi riyal.

A slight miscommunication problem and a minute later, I had the ice cream in my hand, and less riyals in my wallet. Looking back, I probably paid more than I should have, based on my complete ignorance of a riyal’s monetary worth, and the way the man’s eyes lit up when I gave him the money. In any case, I had my ice cream and it tasted good. Success.

I’d been tense my entire stay in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, unarmed without any knowledge of the cultural differences. It was my first time out of the States. Thus, I was austere in avoiding any faux pas with anyone I could come across. Being there for Umrah, an Islamic pilgrimage that meant performing a set of rituals and paying a visit to Ka'bah, my parents had a strict worship itinerary. They were not there to answer any of the pestering questions I had.

Admittedly, my ignorance led me to a preconceived belief that Saudi Arabia would only be a land of deserts. The image I had anticipated for--turban-clad men with veiled women herding camels over sand dunes--was not fulfilled. Instead, I came to Mecca and found a metropolis. Mega architecture and city-wide construction casted a large shadow over the centripetal Ka’bah. Unknowingly to everyone else, I felt like an outsider in Mecca. All of us Umrah-goers were in the Ihram, two customary white un-hemmed sheets. I was one of many.

One of many men, men of all backgrounds who came here that day. I had anticipated this, as the Islamic world stretches across many continents. However, this is not what I am here to recall from this experience. I didn't sit in awe at the diversity; and this isn't a take on the unity of religion.

What I could not comprehend was the local people, specifically the working class. As I parted with the indigent ice cream duo, I could not help but understand why they did not know Arabic. Personally, it was not to my dismay as I only knew a handful of phrases. But how could this be so had they lived here their entire lives?

The reality slowly began to creep in during my visit, and a midnight trip around the city unveiled the mass dichotomy between the working class and everyone else. On a stroll from the Holy Mosque to my hotel, I saw a sight I could not evade. Six men, dressed in stained blue jumpsuits, were sharing a single meal. They were sitting on rubble, fatigued. They seemed to be South Asian and not Arabs. I immediately asked my dad if they were inmates. Sighing, he told they were construction workers.

I began to understand that much of the diversity I saw wasn't brought along from religious obligations, but rather from labor. The backbone of Saudi society evidently was migrant workers, coming from nations nearby such as Eritrea and nations afar like the Philippines.

Many years later, I researched the abolition of slavery for an English assignment. Upon doing my research, I found a slew of reports by humans rights organizations talking about a "second slavery". I then began to understand the plight of the large expatriate communities in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Dubbed the "bad dream," many men and women from elsewhere

in the Global South are enticed to come work in the Gulf. They are promised airfare, benefits, livable wages, and housing when they arrive. Quickly, the falsehood unravels. Subject to abuse, withheld paychecks, and a binding contract, these people are convicted--not to a prison but to a form of servitude. Unable to leave, they develop psychological and physical trauma in their menial, demanding, and dangerous labor. They are verbally abused by natives, being called dogs and slaves. Many cannot live their prolonged detention, and a significant amount of these expats commit suicide.

My questions about the poor foreigner expatriates I had come across many years were fulfilled. I began to understand a phenomenon that had deeply disappointed me. Today, I have reflected here to deliver a message. I am not lobbying for a call to action for worker's rights, nor am I doing an exposé on the respective nations that host expats in these conditions. I am crestfallen about how globalization had manifested itself. Naively, my international experience that would have taught me about the acceptance and respect of diversity was turned upside-down. When I returned to the Kingdom once again, I lost the sense of inspiration I had looking at the astonishingly high skyscrapers before. I knew the story behind their creation, and I knew the reality of urbanization and globalization brought on by exploitation. I hope that one nation at a time, we can achieve a harmonious world where we are free to cross borders as dignified human beings.