

DISORIENTATIONS: PART TWO

P. A. LIENHARDT

(Edited with an introduction by Ahmed Al-Shahi)

Introduction

THE following is the second extract from Peter Lienhardt's 'Disorientations' to be published. 'Disorientations' was written by Peter as an introduction to a book on the Gulf Shaikhdoms which was near completion at the time of his death in 1986. It relates his journey to Kuwait and the beginnings of his fieldwork during the early 1950s. Many of the themes represented in 'Disorientations' were taken up in more ethnographic and analytic detail in the rest of the unpublished manuscript. Despite the increase in the scale, diversity and material affluence of Kuwaiti society, many of Peter's observations and generalizations remain applicable to present-day social and political conditions in the Gulf states. The richness of Peter's material and his incisive perception are evident to the reader in his observations and analysis. However, I should like to take this opportunity to elaborate briefly on some of Peter's generalizations.

At the time of his death in 1986, P. A. Lienhardt was working on a substantial unpublished manuscript entitled 'Disorientations'. The text of the present article, 'Disorientations: Part Two', is the second part of the manuscript. It is prefaced here with an introduction by Ahmed Al-Shahi, who edited the manuscript for publication and prepared the footnotes. The first part of 'Disorientations' was published as Lienhardt 1987. The remainder of the text will appear in future issues of *JASO*. Both 'Disorientations: Part Two' and Dr Al-Shahi's introduction were prepared before Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on 2nd August 1990.

Peter witnessed the beginnings of the consequences of the arrival in Kuwait of immigrant workers from other Arab countries and elsewhere. As a result of the boom in the construction and service sectors, there has been a massive influx of immigrants, to the extent that Kuwaiti nationals today constitute a minority.¹ Immigrants are indispensable to the Kuwaitis, but their presence in large numbers is still a sensitive political issue. It is extremely difficult for them to acquire Kuwaiti nationality as this would confer on them privileges and status similar to those enjoyed by the Kuwaitis. Moreover, some immigrants may be more educated or professionally qualified than Kuwaitis, yet they are socially unequal to their hosts—a point raised by Peter. Had they been accepted as social equals, Kuwaiti society would have been very different now from what it was during Peter's time in the Gulf. The Kuwaiti state has the right to attempt a mass phase-out of immigrants if and when it is deemed necessary. In reality this is unlikely to happen, particularly in the case of immigrants from Arab countries. It would not have been difficult in the past as the scale of immigration was small, but in the present circumstances it would be economically and politically detrimental to Kuwait.

Trade has always played an important part in the Kuwaiti economy, and the influx of oil wealth has increased the scale of commercial activities greatly as Kuwaitis have become involved in national and international trade. Business ventures, such as the acquisition of agencies for the import of manufactured goods or partnership with foreign companies (observed by Peter), became the objective and prerogative of Kuwaiti nationals. But nowadays rich Kuwaitis, as well as the State of Kuwait, have widened their financial networks: they are investing in international financial markets and in commercial and industrial concerns outside the country. Although educational attainments are valued among the younger generation their inclination is to have their own businesses. To work in the professions, or as skilled or semi-skilled labourers, is neither financially lucrative nor socially desirable. The immigrants fill this vacuum, and their contribution in these professions is invaluable.

Since the time of Peter's fieldwork increased wealth has brought many advantages, and Kuwait has developed a bureaucratic infrastructure. However, power and authority have continued to be invested in the ruling family, which has the prerogative of appointing shaikhs to ministerial and other important positions in the state. Shaikhs have had to adapt themselves to modern circumstances, yet they must retain their power and authority through the control of revenue and the state machinery. The experiment of establishing a parliament in 1963 (a decade after Peter's fieldwork), where different political opinions and criticism of policies could be expressed, was not successful. Parliament was seen as an institution challenging the authority of the shaikhs. Thus it was twice suspended in recent

1. For a recent detailed study of immigrant workers see Abdulrasool Al-Mosa and Keith McLachlan 1985.

times.² While the shaikhs exercise political authority and have business interests in the country, the Kuwaiti merchants control the markets. This is also the case in other Gulf states. The interdependence of the shaikhs and the merchants on the one hand, and the dependence of the immigrants on the merchants and the shaikhs on the other, has resulted in political stability. Their mutual interests are significant for the economy and society of Kuwait. Like the rest of the Gulf states, Kuwait has not experienced the political upheavals or revolutions common in other Arab countries. A challenge to the political system was unlikely when Peter was conducting his fieldwork. But changing political circumstances, nationally and internationally, inevitably have repercussions on Kuwait's stability. Disagreement with the political authority was recently reported, following the arrest of eight politicians from the Pro-Democracy Movement who sought to reconvene the dissolved parliament.³ There is tension between them and the Emir of Kuwait who wants an interim parliament to be elected to advise him on the future of democracy. Politicians who opposed an interim parliament threatened to boycott the election in June 1989.

In editing 'Disorientations' I have made only minor changes to the text. These relate first to the transliteration of Arabic words, and secondly to the inclusion of additional data that Peter himself provided in the form of separate notes. Peter wrote each paragraph of 'Disorientations' on one or more separate pages. Though these pages were not numbered, the way in which they were written and arranged meant that they could be read consecutively in the order given to them here. I consulted Peter Lienhardt's brother, Godfrey Lienhardt, about editorial changes and additions to the text, and he has kindly read and approved the final draft. I am grateful for his help and suggestions.

AHMED AL-SHAHI

THE style of dress was one of the things which marked the difference and separation between the Kuwaitis and men who came from the more 'modern' countries of the Middle East (to use the terminology of that time). Clothes were more than a matter of fashion or convenience. Had convenience been the criterion, Kuwaiti dress was much more appropriate to the climate. The people of the

2. It was reported recently by Reuter that 'the Emir of Kuwait has restarted a national assembly in response to demands for a return of parliament, dissolved in 1986' (*The Times*, 24 April 1990, p.13).

3. See *The Times* 10 May 1990, p. 11.

'modern' countries, however, associated European-style clothes with progress and education. (The change to trousers for men had even been a matter of public policy in the modernization of Turkey and Iran.) For immigrants from the greater Arab countries traditional eastern dress was, at best, conservative and more often the mark of backward peasants and illiterate urban labourers. It was not surprising, therefore, that Arab immigrants, whether 'educated' or not, who arrived in Kuwait wearing trousers did not discard them for the Kuwaiti *dishdāsha* (long smock) and *bisht* (cloak). Had they wished to take the first step towards being incorporated into the Kuwaiti community, they might have been wiser to do so, but the decision would have implied a change of outlook and a surrender of part of their identity.⁴

Those who had come to Kuwait already dressed, more or less, like the Kuwaitis were the sort of people who had been readily assimilated in the past, people from the other shaikhdoms of the Gulf and from Saudi Arabia. They also spoke, more or less, like Kuwaitis, and, moreover, their experience of life and politics was not much different from that of the people of Kuwait. For them, as for the Kuwaitis, European clothes were equal with Arab clothes and, simply, foreign. These people had never experienced any period of European rule or overt control to complicate a foreign style of dress with ideas of prestige or dignity.

In the next few years, far from being eroded by the give and take of social life, distinctions of dress were to become sharpened for reasons peculiar to the local situation. At first, there were a few Kuwaitis who wore suits and ties. (They also wore Arab head-dress since it was undignified to appear bareheaded in public, and European hats would have been incongruous indoors.) The European fashion seemed to be spreading, because students returning for holidays would often continue to wear the suits they had been wearing abroad. Within a few years, the trend reversed. Students put their suits away and changed back into local dress. Kuwaiti dress had now become a mark of identity, a signal announcing that the wearer was Kuwaiti, one of *the people who belonged there* in Kuwait (*ahl al-bilād*) and, even more important, that the wearer was *not* an immigrant. A few senior Kuwaitis continued to wear suits, but they were well-known men whom no one was likely to mistake. It was different for the students: being away most of the time, and young in any case, they risked having office porters mistake them for immigrant schoolmasters or clerks and raise difficulties about their walking straight into offices to visit their friends, in the Kuwaiti way.⁵ Immigrants would be told to wait their turn outside.

4. The implication of changing their style of dress would be, as Peter wrote at the bottom of the page, 'going down in their world'.

5. In a footnote Peter states that 'a Kuwaiti friend tells me—thirty years later—that some Palestinians are now wearing Kuwait dress. On the other hand, the friend himself had encountered difficulties when wearing a European suit. Returning from abroad, he naturally joined the queue for Kuwaiti and Gulf citizens at immigration. An aggressive bedouin behind him told him that he ought to be in the foreign immigrants' queue and became so annoyed when he refused to move that he called a policeman.'

The maxim which advises how one should behave as a stranger has a counterpart about how to behave to strangers: 'give the stranger something better than everyday treatment: he will soon be on his way' (*Lā ta'tī 'l-gharīb al-'āda: huwa rā'ih*). Most Kuwaitis I talked to about the immigrants certainly supposed that they would soon be on their way. The labourers would have to return home once the construction work was finished, while young Kuwaitis now at school or in universities abroad would soon be able to take over the work of the better-educated immigrants. Some immigrants would no doubt remain and would be welcome, but it would not be many years before most of the population would again consist of Kuwaitis. This is not, of course, what happened. But it was widely assumed at the time, and hence there seemed to be no need to worry about immigration storing up political difficulties for the future, no need to consider problems of social assimilation, let alone the question of the extension of Kuwaiti citizenship. On a visit from Failaka, I argued with one well-educated and liberal-minded young Kuwaiti about what was going to happen as time went on. He dismissed the problem by saying, 'When their work is finished, we shall simply take the immigrants to the Iraqi border and say, "Thank you very much. Goodbye."'

What happened as the years went by is well known: far from going away, more and more immigrants arrived, until they, and not the citizens of Kuwait, formed the majority of the population. Moreover, neither time nor policy produced any narrowing of the social gap between them and the Kuwaitis—indeed, Kuwaitis mixed with immigrants less and less. Earlier on, some of the immigrants had at least been interesting people to meet because of what they had to say about new ideas and the life of other Arab countries, but that novelty soon wore off. So, too, did the initial euphoria of sudden wealth, which had inspired the Kuwaitis to share some of it with needy outsiders. The dissatisfaction of foreign employees of whatever nationality, never content with their condition, became irksome. When the Kuwaiti Director of Customs called upon a European hospital consultant while taking me for an afternoon drive, the consultant made some dissatisfied comments on the comfortable government house he was living in. As we got back into the car, the Director, stammering with indignation, said, 'There you are! We pay them high salaries and provide them with free houses, free furniture, free water, free everything right down to the toilet paper, and all they do is complain.' (Although he was speaking English, he must have been so annoyed that he had forgotten for the moment that I was on the wrong side of the water/toilet-paper divide between Muslims and Christians.)

Even in those days of oil, immigrants found it almost impossible to obtain Kuwaiti citizenship, nor did their children acquire it by virtue of birth on Kuwaiti soil. Citizenship would have conferred on strangers equal rights and equal opportunities, including, for example, the right to buy and speculate in land. This went beyond charity and was scarcely to be expected. Indeed, in the course of a few years, there was to be a development in the opposite direction: the privileges of free medical treatment and education initially accorded to immigrants and their

children were reduced. And then, one heard some dissatisfied immigrants describe themselves not merely as 'second-class citizens', but as 'the modern slaves'. This, of course, is unjust but it was significant rhetoric which changes 'ideas' about 'justice'.

One reason why the immigrant problem never solved itself as expected was that construction work never ceased. Kuwaitis naturally had no wish to take the place of immigrants as manual labourers. Commercial expansion, however, went hand in hand with material development, and thus the educated immigrants also proved indispensable: educated young Kuwaitis could not fill all the vacancies. Moreover, they would not. Many able young men returning from education abroad were unwilling to take the jobs they were trained to do. They found clerical or junior professional salaries, however generous as compared with those paid in poorer countries, too low to support the standard of living required of young men who wanted to get married, when the standard was set by business. They too turned to business if they could. Some of those who could not, because they lacked any sort of capital, were rewarded for government service by early promotion to senior positions—perhaps, in some cases, too senior for their experience of the world.

Business was already setting very high standards of success. Figures about profits were not easy to discover, but the following is a case which no one would have found surprising. A Kuwaiti had become the local manufacturer and distributor of one of the several kinds of soft drinks available in the city. The manufacturing process consisted of no more than adding soda water to a concentrate supplied by the European maker and bottling the product. The equipment required was a small bottling plant and two motor lorries, and the business employed eight men. The net profit was £60,000 a year (at 1954 values). Since there was no income tax or company tax to make the annual profit into a notional figure, this sum of money was part of the business man's real income—only part of it, because he had other interests too. At that time, out of his income from this little soft-drinks business, the owner could have afforded to pay the salaries of eight permanent secretaries in Whitehall, or seven British High Court judges, or twenty-five headmasters of major British grammar schools. Generous as the Kuwaiti government was with its salaries, it could scarcely inflate them into such a scale: in local terms, the civil servant, the doctor and the teacher would never even be well-to-do, let alone rich. Nor, in Kuwait, could they console themselves with the English idea that the public service and the professions were in some way superior to trade—to being a merchant. Kuwait lacked any tradition of that kind. The wealthy merchant families were unambiguously the upper class of the city; their status was reflected even in the local names for playing-cards, where the king was the 'merchant' (*tājir*), to be 'eaten' (taken) only by the ace, who was the 'shaikh'.

On the whole, it seemed that the merchant families who had been richest in old Kuwait had become richest again, in spite of radical commercial changes—changes not only in the quantity, but also in the quality, of business. The ways

of getting rich and some of the strategies of commercial competition had undergone a metamorphosis as a result of manufactured imports. With no crops and no trees, Kuwait had never been self-sufficient—commodities such as rice, flour, sugar, cotton cloth, timber and mangrove poles had always had to be imported. Commodity imports, of course, continued; but in commercial importance they had been overtaken by an ever-increasing volume of manufactured goods, of which Kuwait had been able to afford little hitherto—goods ranging from cars, air-conditioners and refrigerators to tinned milk, soft-drinks and cigarettes. In the commodity market, competition was a straightforward matter of price in relation to quality and, sometimes, terms of credit. Any number of merchants could be importing the same kind of rice, or even the same kind of woven cotton, buying, say, in Bombay and selling in Kuwait, in direct market competition with each other. Manufactured goods, on the other hand, were of distinct makes and brands. Here arose competition of a quite different kind, competition between Kuwaiti merchants to acquire agencies from overseas manufacturers, thereby gaining exclusive wholesale access (exclusive for retail too, in the case of more expensive things) to particular makes of product. In the Gulf at that time, there was so much talk of agencies that I find I can still remember the Arabic word for them (*wikālāt*) more readily than its English equivalent. The soft drinks business I have just mentioned is an example of what was at stake in acquiring an agency or losing one. This particular agency, however, involved distribution and a minor manufacturing process, whereas the merchant who had obtained the agency for a popular make of car had pretty well made a fortune when he signed the agreement with the manufacturer. Sole agencies had a faint flavour of monopoly, in that they restricted the choice of the retailer and the consumer; but it is difficult to think of any alternative arrangement that would not have produced chaos from the manufacturer's point of view.

Many of the most valuable agencies had been acquired by the leading families who had been prominent in the pearl industry. They started with various advantages over others: an established position, experience of large-scale business, a reputation for reliability and financial integrity, and wide connections and influence. Whether any of the shaikhs had suggested who would make suitable agents for any of the foreign companies I was in no position to discover, but members of the leading families were certainly the sort of people whom foreign representatives would meet in the shaikhs' company. After all, theirs were the sort of families that some of the shaikhs' mothers had come from.

For foreign companies actually working in Kuwait—construction companies, for example—a local agent was not enough. Such companies needed a local branch. Government policy required company branches to be run in conjunction with a Kuwait partner. This policy provided some guarantee against trouble arising through insensitivity to local circumstances. It also blocked the establishment of international business, with all its advantages in the way of organization, experience and resources, on terms of 'equal competition' with Kuwaiti business.

Partnerships with foreign companies were 'gold-mines', and here it certainly looked as if the ruling family had some influence in deciding who the local partners would be. The State Secretary, whose advice the shaikhs so much relied on that (according to his private secretary) he had to make himself available at any hour of the day or night when they felt energetic, was also the local partner of an international construction company. This partnership could scarcely be an accident, and if it was a reward it seemed well justified. Poor man, he did not enjoy it long. Overwork induced a heart attack the next year.

Though partnerships solved some problems, they were far from providing a perfect solution: there were too few partnerships available, and the system offered too many possibilities for arbitrary privilege. In Abu Dhabi, a few years later, when I suggested introducing partnerships on the Kuwait model, given that the country would soon be exporting oil and some wider distribution of wealth seemed desirable, the Ruler asked with some asperity, 'Am I to make a few men rich and leave the rest poor?' But the only alternative seemed to be that the state should tax foreign companies as if they were partners, and thus get its clutches on even more of the national income, when it had the lion's share already in the form of oil revenues. And what was the state, if it was something more than the political 'family business' of the shaikhs?

In terms of political economy, the position of Kuwait was unprecedented. The overwhelming part of the entire national income, the oil revenues, came directly to the government, which then decided how to spend the money. Thus, in relation to the national income, the Kuwait government's position went far beyond the nationalization envisaged in clause 4 of the British Labour Party's manifesto, but had come into being in a country where the assumptions of the most hidebound British Conservative concerning the extent to which government should exercise economic control would have been unacceptable. In a situation which had made itself, the problem was how to distribute money rather than how to acquire it. National income did not depend on national labour, and revenues from the citizens could have been dispensed with altogether without making much difference to anyone except the customs officers. The Ruler of Kuwait had said as a joke to some Englishman that it would save a lot of trouble if everyone just went and lived in London, where the weather was not so hot either. It was literally true that all the citizens of Kuwait could have lived in reasonable comfort off the oil revenues without working at all.

Or could they? The people whose ancestral lands lay above the copper ore of what was then Rhodesia had not managed it, let alone the impoverished and degraded Africans whose territory had once encompassed the South African diamond mines. Had Kuwait not been an independent state in the first place, the oil would obviously have been someone else's oil, Kuwait oil perhaps, but not Kuwaiti oil; and, in a predatory world, the Kuwaitis would not risk delegating the control of their interests, or the practical management of their day-to-day affairs, to others. Having always had powerful neighbours (not excluding the British navy), they were in a position to perceive that one logical sequence of this

predatory world is delegation of control leading to surrender of rights, and surrender of rights leading to expropriation. Mohammerah (now Khorramshahr) had once been a powerful shaikhdom on the neighbouring Iranian coast, and the sons of its shaikh had been living as refugees in Kuwait since the time when their father had been enticed home under a safe conduct and eliminated by Reza Shah. The British government had a better reputation, but nevertheless, what would happen to Kuwait's autonomy if the treaty of protection were extended and the British managed to appoint an overall adviser with the powers of Sir Charles Belgrave, adviser to the Shaikh of Bahrain? What would happen if the British managed to manoeuvre themselves into a position where they could nominate the next ruler of Kuwait? If the people of Kuwait were to retain the autonomy and self-respect they had enjoyed when there was less for others to covet, it was inevitable that they should have to work harder and worry more than before. The Kuwaitis not only wished, but needed to build a modern state, with all its apparatus of administration—an education service, a finance department and, on the other side of the coin, a police force, a security force and an army. Like the Treasury and the Home Office in Britain, the Finance Department and Public Security were the most important departments of government. As yet, because of the British treaty, there was no Foreign Ministry to make a third.

It was the apparatus of the state which had a strongly familial character—hence my use of the expression 'political family business'. There was a member of the ruling family—a shaikh—at the head of every department of government: finance, education, health, police and so on, including power, in the form of the electricity department. How far the scope of individual shaikhs in reaching final decisions extended, or whether they considered their authority to be delegated, and, if so, delegated by what superior authority—these were questions which could not be answered without an intimate knowledge of the ruling family. Indeed, they were questions it was impossible even to ask. Only one thing was clear: Kuwait could not simply be 'ruled' by the Ruler in absolutist terms, because the ruling family also conspicuously participated in the government of the country.

Here, because of its very imprecision, colloquial Arabic was a more authentic guide than the idiom of the Foreign Office and the British press—at least, it did not interpret the problem in the terms of a monarchy or a paternalistic despotism. The official title 'Ruler' appeared in written Arabic as *al-hākim*. The Arabic word seemed, however, to be a translation from the English, because the title *al-hākim* was not used colloquially, and many people would even misunderstand it, thinking of 'judge', another meaning of the word. 'The Shaikh', the more common English term, standing alone in Arabic as *al-shaikh*, was a term of reference for any member of the ruling family, and even if one said 'the Shaikh of Kuwait' (*shaikh al-Kuwait*), most people would ask, 'Which shaikh of Kuwait do you mean?' Nevertheless, since one of the shaikhs of Kuwait was *the* Shaikh of Kuwait, in the English sense, it seemed logical that there must be a local term which drew a distinction between him and the rest of his family, a term defining him by office. Logic was not disappointed. After much inquiry, I was told that one *could*

distinguish the Ruler by calling him 'the big shaikh' (*al-shaikh al-'od*)—but this conversation turned out to be the only time I heard the expression used. In practice, when speaking between themselves, people usually referred to any shaikh, including the Ruler, simply by his name and his father's name, just as they would when referring to any other man. Sometimes, and particularly if the shaikh in question or any other member of the ruling family were present, they would prefix the personal name with the title 'Shaikh'. This was explained as a matter of politeness.

The great shaikhs in their department offices were not directly accessible to people like me. Much later on, I thought I would try to see what one of them was like in person—more particularly because it was widely feared in Kuwait that the British were trying to groom him behind the scenes to become the next Ruler. His style of government was described as 'hot' (*hukm harr*)—a style newspapers usually call 'firm' when supporting it and 'ruthless' when they disapprove. It seemed appropriate to thank the shaikh for letting me live on Failaka Island. In the passage outside his office in the Public Security Headquarters, my way was blocked by the crossed rifles of bedouin guards, who stayed seated as they asked my business and roughly told me to wait. It became increasingly obvious that I was being treated more as a client than a guest, and, eventually, I excused myself and left. One had to recognize that without a friendly intermediary one counted for nothing; moreover, by that time Shaikh Zayid of Abu Dhabi had told me: 'If you want to know what the parents think, listen to what the children say.'

There were, however, other government offices where the ambience was less exclusive. As well as having a shaikh as its head (*ra'īs*), each department had a chief administrator, a civil servant entitled the director (*mudīr*). These civil servants were middle-class Kuwaitis who thus, after the shaikhs, formed a further layer in the management of affairs. No armed bedouin guarded their office doors: ingress was controlled by Kuwaiti office messengers, ordinary people of the city, very different in style from the bedouin guards, the ordinary people of the desert. They were also, on a whole, older, and therefore less impressionable. They brought in the tea and answered the director's bell; and they dressed in very ordinary clothes. To one or two of these offices, I had the good fortune to have immediate entrée.

The director of the Sea Customs was the father of my first Kuwaiti friend at Oxford. He treated his son's friend as a friend of the family, encouraged me to visit him in his office at any time, introduced me to visitors, and generally looked after me in the most kindly way. The director of Customs introduced me to the director of Education—his son-in-law—who was equally friendly, frank and welcoming.

The director's offices were arranged much like rooms for public audiences. One wall was taken up with the director's desk, and the others were entirely lined with a succession of three-piece suites. In the Customs, one would sometimes find the director alone, going over his papers, but often there were visitors, Kuwaiti and foreign, business men dealing with their own affairs. Though he had learned it

entirely in Kuwait and Iraq, where he had worked as a young man for a British asphalt company, the director spoke good English, thus greatly easing the business of British company representatives. Some of the latter knew a little Arabic, but it was rare for a British business man to know the language well enough to discuss a problem or take part in general conversation. This may have been the reason why they only called when they had business to transact, and did not linger. On the other hand, not only the director, but many of his Kuwaiti visitors, could manage a conversation in English, so it seemed more likely that the British were just behaving according to the conventions of British offices, and not wasting anyone's time making a business meeting into a social occasion. I doubt whether it did them any good. An atmosphere of worry would descend as soon as they came in through the door, as if the director were asking himself, 'What does he want this time? What has gone wrong now?' The Kuwaitis were different. Whether they had business or not, they would call on the director for ten or fifteen minutes every once in a while and chat with him or anyone else who happened to be there. A lot of information and opinion passed around in that way, and the director cannot have found these socio-commercial visits a burden because, much of the time, he went on going through his papers, lending half an ear to the conversation.

In its sociable character, a civil service office thus resembled the office of a merchant in the bazaar—including, of course, the hospitality of constant refreshments. This was not surprising, seeing that during the day offices were the only places to talk and oil the wheels of commerce and administration. There were no 'business lunches', because Kuwaitis lunched in domestic seclusion, there were no pubs and clubs for casual meetings, and cafés were not respectable. But there was a further reason why the bazaar should be a model for the office: some civil servants were also merchants. The civil service working day started very early in the morning and ended at lunch-time, and there was no objection, either official or in public opinion, to civil servants taking part in running their own family businesses outside office hours.

The director of Customs himself had a private business in one of the main bazaars. Considering the scope of his particular job, such a situation might seem almost to have invited what, in long-established administrative systems, has come to be called official corruption, but in the context we might call confusion between private and public interest. The director himself once wryly remarked to me how odd it was that in spite of being director of Customs he was not notably successful as a businessman. By that time, he could assume that I was familiar with his reputation. Fortunately for Kuwait, he was a man of considerable moral courage, well known for his integrity—indeed, from another point of view, notorious for it, since, whether dealing with subordinates or superiors, he was completely uncompromising about maintaining regular procedures. Though a kindly and understanding man, he had, for the sake of efficiency, introduced an inflexible rule whereby employees who turned up late for work had increasingly large sums docked from their wages. (At first, I privately thought the rule rather harsh, but

realized later that to accept some excuses and reject others would inevitably have given rise to jealousy and resentment—conventions of appropriate punctuality, conventions of appropriate truth in making excuses, not too false but not too literal, conventions indeed of wage labour according to set working hours, had yet to be established.) As for superiors, a few years earlier the director's intransigence had led to a confrontation with one of the principal shaikhs, a brother of the Ruler, who was head of the Finance Department, in which the director was then working. That was why he had obtained a transfer to the customs. Since such appointments were made by the personal decision of the Ruler, the transfer expressed considerable confidence in the director and demonstrated to all concerned that the shaikhs were not the only people who mattered in Kuwait. And perhaps there was more to the appointment than that. The head of the Customs was the son of the Ruler, an inexperienced young man who was exceptionally affable and good natured, but who lacked the force of character of his elder brother (now⁶ heir apparent) and needed someone to help him.

For all his determination to make and uphold dispassionate rules, to play a creative part in establishing the impersonal procedures necessary for the modern administration of his country, even the director could not invariably get his own way. It was not always possible to insist on the public, official aspect of relations which others claimed to be personal and private: the convention of a strict dichotomy between the two was still insecure, an ideal that still needed to be struggled for. One of the clerks told me that the shaikh, the director's old opponent, had come to have a look round the customs shed one morning and had noticed a fine suite of furniture.

'What a handsome suite,' said the shaikh. 'I haven't seen one like that before. I'll take it.'

'I'm very sorry, sir,' said the director. 'That suite has not been imported for sale. X (a merchant) has ordered it specially for his own house.'

'Don't worry about that,' replied the director's old opponent. 'I know X well. I'll talk to him about it when I see him. He won't mind, he's a friend of mine. I'll send a lorry round later in the morning.'

The lorry driver and removal men were, of course, the armed bedouin guards, who used to look after their shaikhs like worker bees, and no doubt do so still.

What could anyone have done about it? To speculate long after the event, the director would have had to bear in mind that it was just possible that the merchant had already given the shaikh permission to take the suite, and that the shaikh was amusing himself by setting a little trap to test his official probity. Setting that suspicion aside, the director could have complained to the head of the Customs. But the head of the Customs was a nephew of the shaikh who wanted the furniture, in a family system where a paternal uncle was an authoritarian figure, almost like a father. How could the head of the Customs have separated his official past from his position in the ruling family when, after all, he held that post

6. 'Now' refers to the time of writing, 1985-6.

because of that position? How could he have forbidden his own uncle to do what he chose to do? The only thing possible would have been for the young shaikh, as head of Customs, to complain to his father, the Ruler—but to complain about one's uncle, even to one's father, would have been to risk a serious rebuke. And say the complaint *had* been made, and listened to patiently, would the matter have been important enough to justify the Ruler's making it into an occasion for overruling, reproving, or otherwise humiliating his own brother? The Ruler had many powerful and determined cousins, and in the internal relations of the huge ruling family of Kuwait there must have been much more serious problems preying on his mind. Furthermore, was the situation really clear, was it an open and shut case? The Ruler was both experienced and subtle, otherwise he would never have become Ruler. It would immediately have been obvious to him that if he made an issue of the matter in order to defend the procedures of the civil service on grounds of principle, all his brother had to do was to ring up the merchant, ask him, as a favour, to say that the suite had come up in conversation earlier on and that the merchant had (generously, of course) told the brother he could have it. In a court of law, a crucial question could then have been addressed to the brother: if he had been given the furniture, why had he not told the director so, instead of saying what he did? But in a family confrontation that question might easily have been answered: 'Did the family have to explain everything to everyone? Did the shaikhs now have to justify themselves to the clerks (*kuttāb*)? In any case, the director had got too excited to listen. That was what was wrong with him, it was the reason why he had found him impossible in the Finance Department. Hadn't he said so before, when the Ruler took no notice and made him director of Customs? And now he seemed to have got so much above himself that he thought he could question the honour (*sharaf*) of the shaikhs.'

The only way of closing that bolt-hole would have been for the Ruler to encourage *the merchant* to complain. But had he done so, the principle in support of which the original complaint had been raised would have been pushed into the background. The main issue would have been a complaint by an owner of goods about alleged misappropriation, not a complaint made by a civil service department trying to establish consistent, impersonal procedures. Moreover, and much worse, the merchant's complaint would inevitably have become public knowledge, and if the Ruler had allowed it to appear that he was encouraging the public to bring petty cases against individual shaikhs, he would manifestly have been opening a can of worms, undermining the position of the whole family. And all for a suite of furniture and an indignant employee?

But such incidents add up. To return now to reality, the story of the furniture introduced a grain of content into the bare facts of a report I heard some years later, when it was said that the shaikh in question had been told by the Ruler to go on a long holiday outside Kuwait. I think he died in Saudi Arabia.

It was true, then, that the shaikhs were not the only people who mattered, that sooner or later public opinion had to be taken seriously. Kuwait's first modern school, where the director of Customs had been educated, turned out itself to be

an example of compromise. It was called the Mubarakiya School, after Shaikh Mubarak, the Ruler who took Kuwait out of the orbit of the Turks and into that of the British, and whose direct descendants all subsequent rulers have been. The fact that the school carried Mubarak's name suggested that it was his foundation, either established in his lifetime or set up as a charitable trust (*waqf*) in the provisions of his will. The founding of a modern school so early on, extending the idea of learning beyond the confines of traditional religious scholarship with all that that implied, suggested remarkable foresight and disinterestedness. Shaikh Mubarak was remembered in Kuwait as a despot, but could enlightened despotism be one of the possibilities of the shaikhly political system? Alas, not in Mubarak's case at least. People said he had had nothing to do with founding the school. The initiative had come from a group of merchants whose aim was to help adapt Kuwait to the practical needs of the modern world. Mubarak had been dead for some years before the idea was mooted, and his family had not been enthusiastic. Even though the merchants had offered to finance the project, the shaikhs had still been reluctant to permit such an innovation, with its dubious implications for the future, until the merchants had suggested the name Mubarakiya as a calculated gesture of flattery.

Unlike the Koran schools, which taught religion and the reading of the sacred text but did not equip an average pupil to read an ordinary book or a newspaper with any fluency, the Mubarakiya School taught its pupils something about the secular world and, perhaps even more important, enabled them to read what they liked. Here, the school fulfilled the educational hopes of its founders, but it also contributed to a chain of political events which justified the suspicions of its early opponents. It was not that there was any ostensible political teaching in the school, but rather that a more modern type of education could not fail to have political implications. Secular knowledge and secular reading helped to disseminate more 'modern' attitudes to government responsibility and the right of the public to be consulted about government decisions.

In retrospect some of the improvements advocated look very modest, but perhaps deceptively so, when one considers that each simple improvement on the past can be the thin end of a wedge for the future. Take, for example, a situation where there is no municipal organization or government responsibility for cleaning the streets or collecting domestic refuse. Then if roads are to be swept, there should be some department to manage the sweeping, but who is to manage the department and who is to pay? And if roads are to be swept, should not they also be real, metalled roads like those in Basra⁷ and Bahrain, and not just the old dust paths? Does one not, then, need a highways department and then, if only for buildings that might encroach on the road, does one not need an official register of land holdings? And should a conflict arise over which land belonged to whom, should there not be a formal, public court where the case can be decided?

7. Basra is the only port in Iraq, and is located in the southern part of the country.

During the 1930s, ideas of progress and reform coalesced in a constitutional movement in which some of the early pupils of the Mubarakiya School, by that time mature men, played a significant part. The demand was for a popular assembly, in the form of a consultative council to advise the Ruler. At first, the Ruler and his family compromised with the constitutionalists, some of the shaikhs actually supporting the idea of a consultative council. The council came into being with one of the shaikhs as chairman, but as time went on relations between the council and the Ruler became exacerbated. The council's demands, coupled with the discovered involvement of some of its members with Iraq, reached a point of crisis where the shaikhs who had supported the council withdrew. One day in 1938, the shaikhs took up their rifles and brought out their men-at-arms in their cars and lorries and suppressed Kuwait's first attempt to introduce constitutional democracy. The shaikh who had been chairman of the council was taking a holiday outside Kuwait.

For generations afterwards, the consultative council remained a bitter memory, a subject about which many Kuwaitis preferred not to speak. It was an intimate, family matter among the distinguished families of the city, many of whose members had been involved, some humiliated and worse, and in some of which there had been desperate conflicts of opinion. It seemed tactless to make persistent inquiries, more particularly because one of the few things I learnt about the council early on was that its chairman had been Shaikh Abdullah al-Salim who, by the time I reached Kuwait, had become Ruler. His accession, however, had not brought any new consultative council into being.

I heard very little about the Kuwait constitutional movement for a long time, and it was not until I went to the south of the Gulf that I learnt that there had been a similar movement in Dubai, a movement encouraged from Kuwait, making similar demands, and similarly, but much more violently, suppressed. I could have been told, because it had been arranged for me to meet another old pupil of the Mubarakiya School who was said to know all about the Trucial Coast (now United Arab Emirates) having been at one time the British government representative there. The time had in fact been that of the constitutional movement in Dubai—but, unfortunately, the Kuwaiti was accused in Dubai of having betrayed it. It was only in Dubai that I learnt what an extreme change in the traditional system was implied by the demands of the constitutional party. The demands were as follows: that Dubai was to have a consultative council which was to control three-quarters of the state revenue; that there was to be a formal lawcourt; that there was to be a municipality department, *baladiya*, dealing with public works and services; and that severe restrictions were to be put on the trading activities of immigrant Iranians. (The explanation of the last of these demands is that when pearl fishing declined many of the Arabs who had been successful in that industry tried to move into more humble sorts of trade, only to find that they were not so good at it as the Iranians.) In Dubai, the conflict between progress and tradition boiled up into a civil war in which members of the ruling family fought on opposite sides.

Instead of telling me about Dubai, the Kuwaiti ex-British representative decided to advise me about what I ought to be studying. He evidently cast himself in the role of an educated Arab explaining basic facts to a non-Arab student. His ethnic interpretation of the fundamentals of human character, society and history—a kind of generalized argument *ad hominem*—was, in fact, a familiar theme. He said that anyone who wanted to study Arab culture should first consider the question, ‘What is an Arab?’ In order to study the Arabs, I must study the real Arabs. The ‘real’ (‘pure’, ‘true’, ‘authentic’ etc.) Arabs were those whose ancient roots were in Arabia, Arabs descended from the ancient tribes divided between south and north. These Arabs were no longer all in Arabia, let alone bedouin tribesmen. In the Islamic conquests, the Arabs had spread through the Middle East, producing the civilization of its great cities, and in adapting themselves to foreign circumstances they had developed variety. The thing to study was this variety, as it related to an essence that remained persistently the same. The character and ideals of the true Arabs, their virtues and faults, even their customs, were not basically different from those first celebrated in the pre-Islamic poems of Arabia. I should get totally confused if I did not start by distinguishing these real Arabs from people who had sprung from different roots, even if they had fallen under Arab influence to a point where they spoke no language but Arabic. He could see that I had started making this mistake already by arranging to go to live in Failaka, because all the people there were really Iranians. And then I was planning to go to Dubai where things were much the same. Admittedly there were some true Arabs in Dubai, but most of the Dubai people who called themselves Arabs were originally Iranians.

This was a way of thinking which has a long history, as attested by the associative connections of the Arabic language itself. The word *asl* starts by meaning ‘root’, as in the root of a tree or plant. The following are some of its other meanings: origin, source; cause, reason; descent, lineage, stock (esp. one of a noble character); foundation, fundament, basis;—and, in the plural: principles, fundamentals, elements (e.g. of a science); rules; basic rules, principles, axioms. The way of thinking represented here, as compared with what one finds culturally or linguistically in England or France, lays more stress on ultimate common descent than on common territory as a reason for shared characteristics and moral association. More similar is the German idea of the *Volk* (‘people, folk’), one huge family with a common culture which transcends the boundaries of states. In German, all these ‘folk’ make up the *Nation*, which similarly transcends the boundaries which in English would be called ‘national’, the boundaries of the state (*Staat*). A very similar concept exists in the Arabic language, where the expression *al-umma al-‘Arabīya*, which one has to translate into English as ‘the Arab people’ or ‘the Arab nation’, means the Arab Nation in the German sense— all the Arabs together, irrespective of which countries they belong to. As among the Arabs, this way of thinking has a long history in German thought, partly in the liberal tradition; and, as in German countries in the nineteenth century, so in Arab countries in the twentieth, the old idea gained a new impetus and focus from

education. No Arabic political speech for most of the present century has been complete without some reference to *al-umma al-'Arabīya*, for, in the last analysis, the matter is not 'purely' cultural.

There was little chance of anyone making a political speech in Kuwait for the time being, but there were plenty of excellent speeches to be listened to on the radio, particularly from Cairo, which under the Nuguib-Nasser Government called its overseas broadcasts 'the Voice of the Arabs' *Ṣawt al-'Arab*. The dominant theme of these broadcasts was that all Arabs should stand together to confront and defeat imperialism/colonialism (in Arabic, the two are represented, quite logically, by the same word, *isti'mār*). There was every encouragement here for Kuwaitis to identify themselves politically with the other Arabs of the world. However little personal interest many of them took in the individual Egyptians working in Kuwait, the Kuwaiti public overwhelmingly supported Egypt when the British attacked the Egyptians in the Suez War a couple of years later. Women cast off their purdah, like the heroic bedouin women of old urging their men to battle, and joined the crowds demonstrating against the aggression of Britain, France and Israel. The members of the British Political Agency in Kuwait, unenthusiastic as they were about their government's behaviour, found themselves boycotted, which at least saved them from finding an answer to the painful question, 'You are bombing the Egyptians for nationalizing the Suez Canal. Would you not also bomb us in similar circumstances? What if we nationalized the Kuwait Oil Company?'

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