

DISORIENTATIONS: PART FOUR

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(Edited with an introduction by Ahmed Al-Shahi)

Introduction

THIS final part of 'Disorientations' introduces two themes: the traditional economic system of Kuwait and the institution of government. Before the discovery of oil, trade, seafaring and pearl-fishing were the main economic activities, necessitating moral responsibility and mutual obligations among the people engaged in them. Risks, profits and losses were shared. With the invention of cultured pearls, pearl-fishing declined, but the associated mercantile values of confidence and reputation continued to operate in Kuwait's business sector. Business is conducted on the strength of family relations, and a family's honour depends on its members' adherence to the financial and moral responsibilities discussed here by Peter Lienhardt. While the shaikhs maintained law and order, the merchants made the wealth of Kuwait, some of the latter even becoming richer and more generous than the shaikhs. The alliance between the shaikhs and the merchants has been the bedrock of Kuwait's stability and prosperity.

This is the fourth and final part of Peter Lienhardt's 'Disorientations', the manuscript of which he was working on at the time of his death in 1986. It is prefaced here with an introduction by Ahmed Al-Shahi who has edited the typescript for publication. The text of 'Part Four' follows on directly from 'Part Three' which appeared in an earlier issue of *JASO* (Vol. XXII, no. 1, pp. 3-18), as did 'Part Two' (Vol. XXI, no. 3, pp. 251-67). The first part was published in Ahmed Al-Shahi (ed.), *The Diversity of the Muslim Community: Anthropological Essays in Memory of Peter Lienhardt* (London: Ithaca Press, for the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, 1987). For further information concerning the background to the publication of 'Disorientations' see Ahmed Al-Shahi's introduction to 'Part Two' (*JASO*, Vol. XXI, no. 3, pp. 251-3).

As the merchants played their role in running the economy, the shaikhs maintained the political structure, based on the bedouin model of tribal leadership. Kuwaitis obeyed the shaikhs and participated in government through the institution of the *majlis*, a daily public audience with the shaikhs, who dealt with local affairs, legal cases, requests and grievances. Through this system the shaikhs remained accessible and acceptable to their subjects. This is in marked contrast to many other Middle Eastern countries where rulers were (and are) hardly accessible or accountable to their subjects.

As Peter Lienhardt explains, just before the Second World War the power of the shaikhs came to be questioned by a group of Kuwaitis. This group advocated the establishment of a regular court of justice, a measure of control over state revenues, and some popular representation in the government. Subsequently, demands for such measures led to the shaikhs consenting to the establishment of a parliament. Relationships between the shaikhs and parliament were not easy, resulting in the suspension and later reopening of parliament on a number of occasions. The demands for reform (which later came to be known as the movement for democracy) were not intended to remove the shaikhs, but rather to reform the system of government and to modify the power and authority of the shaikhs.

A more serious threat to Kuwait's political institution, wealth and stability came from its northern neighbour, Iraq. On a number of occasions, Iraq claimed sovereignty over Kuwait and threatened to occupy the country. Peter Lienhardt was not to know that this would become a reality on 2 August 1990 when Iraqi forces occupied Kuwait. The horrors of this occupation—destruction of the infrastructure, executions, torture, rape and looting—are well known. The international community reacted with outrage to this aggression as the violation of the sovereignty of an independent state. In March 1991, with the support of a number of United Nations resolutions, the Allied Forces recaptured Kuwait. The final act of destruction committed by the retreating Iraqi forces was to set ablaze the oil wells that constituted the country's main economic resource. Iraq also suffered considerable losses to its army, economic infrastructure, communications and financial assets, and it has become isolated internationally. Peter Lienhardt would have been saddened to see the destruction and turmoil that has followed the invasion and recapture of Kuwait. Once a peaceful and wealthy country, Kuwait now has to rebuild its infrastructure and oil production at considerable cost and over many years to come.

While Kuwait is likely to regenerate its economy, given its large financial reserves, the social and political consequences will be far-reaching. New alliances among Arab and Western countries have developed, and enmities between formerly friendly countries developed. The immigrant population in Kuwait, which Peter Lienhardt discusses in 'Disorientations', has become subject to scrutiny and recrimination, and Kuwait has been criticized for its treatment of some of the immigrant groups after the re-occupation. In particular, the Palestinians, who were accused of supporting the Iraqi invasion, have been the first immigrant group to encounter hostility and maltreatment. It will be very difficult to recreate the

working relationships between the Kuwaitis and the immigrant groups and between the Kuwaitis and the shaikhs that existed prior to the invasion.

The state of emergency declared by the Kuwaiti government after the liberation was seen by some Kuwaitis as an attempt to consolidate the power of the shaikhs. Moreover, those Kuwaitis who were advocating a more democratic and liberal form of government have been strengthened in their demands since the recapture. It remains to be seen whether the ruling family will come to terms with these demands.

In 'Disorientations' Peter Lienhardt provided a valuable source of information and analysis about Kuwait as he saw it in the early 1950s. His knowledge and understanding of the complexity of Kuwaiti society and his command of the Arabic language have resulted in a rare and novel piece of anthropological research. The imagination and depth of understanding shown in 'Disorientations' have been paralleled only rarely in anthropological writings. Researchers on the Gulf States in general and Kuwait in particular will find 'Disorientations' vital reading and a valuable work of reference.

Peter Lienhardt would have been pleased to see 'Disorientations' published in its entirety, as, with the appearance of this fourth and final part, it now has. I have made only minor editorial changes to the text and should like to thank Godfrey Lienhardt for his help and suggestions concerning them. I should also like to thank the editors of *JASO* for making possible the publication in full of 'Disorientations'.

AHMED AL-SHAHI

Like so many of the polite, friendly Palestinians who thronged the cafés of Kuwait in the evenings, playing dominoes or chatting to the background of Arabic love songs on the radio, the schoolteachers in Failaka carried within them the savage embitterment of the 1948 war, in which they had lost their home. In Kuwait, Palestinians had taken a little time to become outspoken, but, perhaps because of their isolation in the village, the schoolteachers in Failaka showed less self-restraint. Their good humour was no more than a meniscus, and once it gave way there was no pleasing them short of a total commitment, not only to their cause but to their own representation of its world context. Understandably but uncomfortably, a foreigner's 'dispassionateness' was for them, at best, culpable prejudice and, at worst, a callous insult. When the teachers invited me home, I soon found that to them I represented the nation which had taken their country, by an act of imperialism cloaked in an international mandate, and had then abandoned it to the Israelis. As an Englishman, I was not allowed to absolve myself of personal

responsibility for the Balfour Declaration. I might well deplore it personally, but for the teachers it remained part of my national guilt, entirely consistent with what my country was still doing. The Palestinians blamed the Americans, as supporters of Israel, as much as the British. One of the schoolteachers said that America did not rightly belong to the Americans and that they ought to give it back to the 'blacks' who were the indigenous inhabitants. The tragedy of losing his homeland, blamed on 'colonialism' (or 'imperialism', for they are the same word in Arabic), thus extended itself into consonant interpretations of the rights and wrongs of the rest of the world, and to self-identification with causes that he saw as similar to his own. As the discussion became excited, one of the teachers took out a knife, passed his thumb along the blade and said, 'I am keeping this sharp for when we get back home.'

Though they visited the governor, the schoolteachers did not mix much with other people in the village. They could scarcely have been expected to absorb themselves in local life, talking seriously to people who were uninformed about what were, for them, elementary things. I myself was asked quite frequently, 'Is London an island; how far is it away from England?' and, once, 'How many donkeys are there in London?' (A Kuwaiti said I should have replied, 'About six million.')

Those who asked such questions were no more knowledgeable about Palestine. If, through education, the teachers had risen up from being peasants at home, how could they be expected to go down again so quickly and join fishermen abroad? It was not that they seemed vain or lacked good intentions. But in Failaka they were not local boys made good, and the gaps in knowledge of the uneducated were not the same as those they might have taken for granted at home—had they had a home. Here, all they had was their education.

Though no scholars, many of the men of Failaka had, in fact, seen a lot of the world as sailors; but, as such, their travels had naturally taken them in a quite different direction from the great Arab centres of the Levant. They had travelled down the Gulf and out into the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. They had manned local boats carrying Basra dates to Bombay and bringing mangrove poles from Tanzania. A few had joined the pearl-fishing in Ceylon. In this working life, the Arabs of Basra, Bahrain and Dubai were familiar neighbours, whereas even Baghdad was strange and vastly more foreign.

In their trading voyages, the sailors of the Gulf had followed a trade route of even greater antiquity than anyone knew at the time. Not long after I left Failaka, archaeologists came to excavate the tumuli locally known as the 'graves' of the holy men Sa'd and Sa'id and other sites on the island. Their contents proved to date to about 2300 BC and, linking up with what was found on other archaeological sites down the Gulf, provided conclusive evidence of a trade route connecting the Indus Valley civilization of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa with the Mesopotamian civilization of Ur, half a millennium before King Hammurabi of Babylon.

The Egyptian schoolmasters were in Kuwait to earn a living and they were performing an essential service for the country. The few Kuwaitis who were qualified to teach had plenty of more important, or more profitable, work. If the

Egyptians' attitudes to Kuwaiti life were biased, that was simply the effect of differences of upbringing and environment, an encapsulation that was obviously nothing to blame them for personally. After doing an honest daily job of teaching, they could scarcely be expected to spend their spare time in self-questioning. Such self-questioning was, however, an essential part of anthropology. Before trying anything more ambitious, an anthropologist had to do his best to appreciate local situations in local terms, and the unconscious assumptions that the fieldworker had brought with him from home were recognized to be the most subtle obstacle that stood in the way.

One thing that an Egyptian and an English background had in common, however remotely, was an idea of status and power that referred back to land ownership—whether in Egypt or England, what would the aristocracies and the royal families have been during the course of history without vast land holdings? The most natural way for anyone with an English background to envisage the shaikhs of the Gulf states was as little royal families practising a pre-constitutional form of government; and yet the essential lever of power and status, the agricultural land, was a thing that Kuwait did not have. Admittedly, by now the ruler of Kuwait had a lever even stronger than land ownership, since he, or he and his family between them, had the total disposal of the country's oil revenues, but this was a recent situation, far too new to have formed the Kuwaiti people's idea of the shaikhs, or the shaikhs' idea of themselves. To have the whole income of the country centralized in the hands of the government—one socialist ideal achieved by other than socialist means—was at least an economic revolution. The government now distributed the wealth, but what of the times when the government's income had had to be extracted from the people, the time when the Kuwaitis' ideas of political proportions had developed?

The schoolteacher who had taken me out in a bus with his pupils was an Egyptian. Afterwards, we went home and met some of his colleagues. These Egyptians were all happy that theirs was the first Arab country to overthrow a corrupt monarchy and privileged class and to reform the distribution of wealth. None of them was uninterested in politics. They did not talk in front of me about the distribution of wealth in Kuwait, but one, who had been a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo, had fled to Kuwait to avoid arrest after a political assassination in the days of King Farouq. The Egyptians were not unhappy in Kuwait, but they still missed Egypt and the Egyptian way of life. They joked about their troubles with Kuwaiti Arabic, as when one of them had used the colloquial Egyptian word when asking for bread in a shop and had been given rice instead. 'Rice' was what the word meant in what he regarded as the somewhat barbarous Arabic of the Gulf.

Like all the educated Arab immigrants I met, from whatever country, the Egyptians claimed that the Arabic of their own country was purer than that of any other. Had they tried, they could have found an obvious case of linguistic relativism in the joke about rice. The word that caused the trouble, '*aish*', basically means 'life'. In Egypt, the staple food has always been bread, whereas the Gulf

imports rice as its staple cereal; which would seem to explain why 'the staff of life' is bread in one country and rice in the other.

There was a further situation to which, ideally, the joke about rice and bread should have drawn attention, but which I perceived only after giving a good deal more thought to the bearing of ecology on the traditional politics of the Gulf. The fact that corn grew plentifully in Egypt, whereas rice, even though it held a comparable position as a staple food, had to be imported into Kuwait from far outside the Gulf, marked a deep contrast in background between the Kuwaitis and almost all of their Arab immigrants, though it was a contrast of which neither party seemed to be fully aware. All the countries from which the non-Gulf immigrants came had large peasant populations, whereas Kuwait had none—a little oasis like Jahra was not enough to produce a peasantry. Throughout history, the life of Middle Eastern peasants had been dominated by landlords, aristocracies and political bosses, and there had been no escape. Short of abandoning what assets they had and becoming landless labourers elsewhere—no happy fate—the peasants had to put up with their lot. This peasant experience still influenced the political assumptions of the Arab immigrants, but Kuwaitis had no peasant experience in their background. No Kuwaiti, of whatever class, had ever been completely tied down to Kuwait, and the traditional way of life there had left people much more scope for resisting tyranny and exploitation. When they could not fight oppression they could move away from it, taking their means of livelihood, their boats, with them. Thus, what the Egyptian schoolteachers were proud their people had overthrown by overthrowing Farouq was a system involving inequalities that Kuwaitis had never experienced to anything like that degree. And this was not just a thing of the past. There were not many Middle Eastern countries, whether right-wing or left-wing, which, like Kuwait, had no secret police.

Even the question of jokes themselves may be relevant here. In my experience, the two most jocular countries of the Middle East are Iran and Egypt. These are also the two countries with the most consistent history of peasant oppression. Jokes are safer than straight criticism. In Kuwait, where people were not particularly jocular, anyone would quite readily and frankly criticize anyone else to his face. So long as the expressions used were not downright insulting, honest criticism was not classed with aggression.

There is no doubt that many of the Egyptians and other immigrant Arabs at that time did regard themselves as metropolitan and the Kuwaitis as provincial. At home, the Kuwaitis could easily shrug off such attitudes—the immigrants were only their employees.¹ But when Kuwaitis visited Cairo, as many did now that

1. Nor were all the English expatriates beyond criticism. An elderly Kuwaiti took me out in his car, calling on an English doctor to pick up some medicine, and the doctor detained his patient with a long account of some personal arrangement that he found unsatisfactory. When we were back in the car, the Kuwaiti, stammering with indignation, said, 'You see what it's like here. We pay them high salaries, charge them no tax, supply them with free houses and free furniture and everything, right down to the toilet-paper, and still they complain.'

they were rich, or went to study there, it was not so easy. Travelling abroad, educated Kuwaitis tended to adopt a style of speech more like the Arabic of the newspapers and the radio, and some even copied the local colloquial, to avoid being misunderstood in a social as well as a linguistic sense.

Another joke, which I do not think the Egyptians would have told to a Kuwaiti on first acquaintance, needs a little more explaining. When a Kuwaiti schoolboy asked to leave the room, one of the teachers had heard him say, 'My father is pissing.' The colloquial word meaning 'to piss' is the same, and regarded as coarse, in both dialects, but the word meaning 'to want' is different. 'I want', in Kuwaiti Arabic, was a word which appeared in the dictionary as *abghī*, but was pronounced locally *abī*. Even the unelided form *abghī* would, however, have been an unusual word to use for 'I want' in Egypt, whereas *abī* was the literary form of the word for 'my father'—hence the joke. It may sound to a Western person to have been a joke based on the idea that differences of colloquial language between one place and another can produce absurd misunderstandings, but if one bears in mind that a free and easy—even casual—relation between fathers and sons, however widely taken for granted in the West, is not regarded as acceptable in Arab countries, the joke assumes a different tone. As I saw it, the point of the joke, though made good-humouredly, was that Kuwaiti Arabic was funny and inferior, with the implication that if Kuwaitis wanted to be 'civilized' (like Egyptians) they ought to change their Arabic. Otherwise, any reasonable person might even wonder whether they were so bucolic as to allow children to speak of their fathers without proper respect.

Foreign agencies and partnerships were some of the obvious respects in which business and the acquisition of wealth had changed, but for all the abrupt economic change that Kuwait was experiencing, business had not made a fresh start. The old families of magnates were still there, thriving on such imponderables as reputation, confidence, opportunity, influence and privilege, all of which had had their present local forms and proportions determined in circumstances that prevailed before oil was ever thought of. So too had the position of the family, and of families morally associated by intermarriage, in business organization. Business in Kuwait was still family business, not companies owned by Kuwaiti or foreign share-holders who bought their control on the stock market, nor purely foreign companies whose moral stake in the country was limited to business morality. If a sociological conspectus confined to the local present could not even explain the new oil camp at Al-Ahmadi with its grid system and its 'Indian Village', it could scarcely be the key to understanding Kuwait.

It was from the old seafaring industries that modern Kuwait had inherited the mercantile values of confidence and reputation. These values underpinned Kuwait business transactions, as they underpinned the transactions of the London Stock

Exchange, with its motto, 'My word is my bond.' The parallel was remarkably close. Like the stockbrokers of the City of London, the Kuwaiti merchant community expected its members to stand by promises made by word of mouth, even on the telephone (an obligation which members of the general public commented on with pride and respect), and the man who lost his reputation could not expect a second chance, or a helping hand when he came to need it. In the times when Kuwait lived on pearl-fishing and the trading voyage, the Kuwaiti merchants' co-operation as a community had been notable in the Gulf. According to the customary sea law of Kuwait, when goods had to be jettisoned to lighten a merchant dhow in a storm, the loss was averaged out *pro rata* among all those who were shipping goods in the dhow. (The English word 'average' derives philologically from the Nordic word *havaria*, which denoted a similar custom.) And when a merchant or boat owner—and many of them were both—found himself in serious financial difficulties, perhaps through several shipwrecks happening at the same time, the convention (not the law) was that the other merchants would club together and alleviate his debts. From an external point of view, such mutual aid could be regarded as a form of insurance, but in Kuwait it was always spoken of as a matter of honour (*sharaf*). The first occasion when the merchants had allowed one of their number to go bankrupt was said to have occurred only a few years before. With the speculation that was already gaining momentum as a result of oil developments, it had become more difficult to maintain the custom of financial rescue, which in earlier insecure times had protected everyone by protecting each, and, in any case, losses that occurred through speculation scarcely came into the same category as disasters at sea.

It was in Dubai, a few months later, that a Kuwaiti merchant said to me, 'Business does not depend on a few rich people, it depends on a lot of poor people who have some money to spend.' Most poor, or relatively poor people earned their living by manual labour, and manual labour in Kuwait was now largely, though by no means entirely, performed by immigrants. Here the change from the formative past was more obviously abrupt than the change in business, not only because immigrant labour was replacing local labour, but because of the organization of employment and the method of payment for work. When such wealth as Kuwait used to earn had been produced by seafaring manual labour (with its finance and management) and the most profitable and prestigious businesses had been labour intensive on a large scale, payment for work had not been in wages but in profit-sharing, bailed out and extended by loans. Hence, the economic relation between rich and poor, or even between rich and rich, had been utterly different. New relations of employment were wage relations, a set amount of money paid at regular and frequent intervals for work that continued all the year round. The old relations were based on an uncertain amount of money, often paid out only once a year for seasonal work. In the old system, within which capital and labour had appeared as profit-sharing partners rather than employees and employed, the continuity of working relations often embraced whole families for generations. Financial insecurity and uncertainty were combined with long-term

stability. In this sense, the economic relations between capital and labour in Kuwait had been to some extent similar to the relations between landlord and peasant in the more fertile parts of the Middle East before land reform, the uncertainty, in the latter case, arising from the uncertainty of the harvests, though as the land is different from the sea, the relations of seafarers with owners of the boats had been significantly different in quality from the relations of peasants with the owners of the land.

With no agriculture, the old economy had been created entirely out of trade and seafaring. Kuwait had presumably begun as a simple fishing village, but with fishing alone, a village it would have remained. As a town, Kuwait had lived by fishing for pearls and by trade based upon merchant voyaging. Both the pearling and the voyaging were seasonal activities, the one depending on the monsoon winds that bore Kuwaiti dhows to India and East Africa and back, and the other depending on the heat of the Gulf in the summer months, when the depths of the sea were warm enough to allow pearl-divers to stay in the water all day long.

Although I had read various good accounts of the seafaring industries, I only learnt how uncertain their profits were during discussions in the Gulf, and this uncertainty suggested why the economic organization of seafaring industries had taken the form of profit-sharing. In both industries, the profits made by any particular boat were highly variable. Merchant dhows depended on buying and selling and on what cargoes they found to carry between intermediate stages of the voyage; while in pearl-fishing, finding a few really valuable pearls, among the small pearls that could always be relied on, made all the difference between success and near failure. Instead of receiving wages, the sailors and the pearl-fishers had shared the profits, the risks and the losses.

Recurrent debt had been a formal part of maritime economic organization. Before embarking, the pearl-fishers and the dhow crews had received from the boat owners fixed advances, in order to maintain their dependants while they were away. The advances were deducted from their shares at the end of the voyage. The uncertainty of profits and unemployment between seasons had, however, produced another situation in which debt was perennial and endemic, to a point where it became part of the economic system. For everyone, sooner or later, there would come a bad year and, in between seasons, when work was hard to find, the seafarer would have to request a further loan from the boat owner to tide him over until the next season. The boat owner, in his turn, might himself have to run into debt in order to provide loans for his crew. If the following season was as disappointing as the last, the debts would have to be carried over and increased, and thus some debts lasted for years and some for lifetimes. Men who had lived by pearl-diving said that all that had kept them going was hope. On the other hand, during my whole time in the Gulf, I came across no one who complained of exploitation.

Of the old seafaring activities of the Gulf, pearl-fishing had almost entirely ceased and deep-sea trading voyages were now few. Only fishing continued to flourish in the old way. Even that had changed a little with the addition of diesel

engines to convert the old sailing boats into launches. On a launch, for example, the man who looked after the engine (who was called *dreiwel*—presumably from ‘driver’) was a wage employee. The rest of the fishermen on the launch continued, however, to be paid by profit-sharing, which was the traditional system of payment for labour in all the seafaring industries of the Gulf. In profit-sharing, the basic principle was that the sailors took four-fifths of the profit while the boat and equipment took one-fifth. Then, from this fifth, various deductions were made leaving the share of ‘capital’, which was also ‘management’, at something below ten per cent or, as it was put, ‘half-a-fifth’. Illiterate they might be, but most men were still very good at doing mental arithmetic in terms of these fractions.

I soon realized that the implications of this economic system were very different from what is implied by ‘profit-sharing’ in modern Europe. Whereas in Europe such shares as a company may distribute to its employees out of its profits are a supplement to regular wages, in the Gulf a share in profits constituted the entire income of the labourer. Such sharing readily converted itself into a system of debt binding the labourer to his employer. The experience of the *zār* practitioner whom I have already mentioned proved to exemplify the wider implications of the profit-sharing system, since he himself had once gone on a voyage which produced no profits to share.²

At that time, when so much of the sea carrying trade had been taken over by European shipping, the main chance of making a worthwhile profit from a trading voyage lay in smuggling. Gold could be imported and exported freely in the Gulf shaikhdoms, but in India such transfers were strictly controlled. It was there that the gamble lay. In Kuwait, I had been shown over an ocean-going launch under construction. The boat builder pointed out the various places where types of cargo, such as dates, were to be stowed. Then, at the end of the tour, he opened some concealed chambers hollowed out in the fabric of the boat and said, ‘And this is where we put the gold.’ The *zār* practitioner had gambled with gold and lost. When a youth, he had gone for the first time on a trading voyage to Bombay in the hope of earning enough money to get married. Following the regular practice, he had accepted a loan from the boat owner to help support his family while he was away. Then, since the boat was carrying gold, he had borrowed a further sum to acquire a share in the expected smuggling profits. He had hated the voyage, with its discomfort and its poor food. Moreover, this had been his first real experience of the dangers of the sea, and though he did not say so he had obviously been afraid. As, with relief after a stormy voyage, they approached Bombay, the first boat they sighted was an Indian customs launch heading straight towards them. Threatened with discovery and arrest, there was no alternative for the dhow but to jettison the gold. It was hoped that some of the crew, who were experienced pearl-divers, would be able to retrieve it later, but the water turned out to be too deep even for them and the gold was lost. Thus, when the dhow returned to Kuwait and the final accounts were drawn up, the whole voyage proved

2. See ‘Disorientations: Part Three’, *JASO*, Vol. XXII, no. 1, p. 11.

to have made a net loss, and instead of the handsome profit he had been hoping for, the youth found himself saddled with a substantial debt in respect of the loans he had received before the voyage. His debt was too great for him or his family to repay—had they had the money, he would never have gone on the voyage in the first place. He spent two or three years in constant fear that the boat owner, his creditor, would insist that he embarked on a second voyage to earn the money. The loan was a loan like any other, and if the offer of a second voyage had been refused, a harsher creditor could have sold up what property the family had so as to get his money back. Hence, it appeared, the nervous crisis that led the young man to suffer from the *zār* spirits and introduced him to the cult. I do not think he made much profit from being an occasional *zār* practitioner, but fortunately he was able to obtain other employment, which solved his problem. Had he made the same initial mistake in former times, however, when seafaring was the only work available, he would probably have been caught up for years, if not for life, in work for which he was by temperament exceptionally unsuited. Debt could have carried over, even increased, from year to year. At his death, it might also have committed his sons to the same work, since again the alternative could have been total destitution, with the family house sold over their heads.

Such indebtedness, binding seafarers to the owners of the boats they sailed in, was now almost a thing of the past, since the two major industries, pearl-fishing and merchant voyaging, in which it had prevailed and which had formerly dominated the economy, were now of only peripheral significance, and there was plenty of other work available. Debt had never played such an important part in the still-flourishing fishing industry, because fishing did not require long absences at sea during which the fisherman's family had to be provided for by borrowing from the boat owner. Moreover, though in Failaka and Kuwait the really profitable fishing season had been the summer, when shoals of *zubaidī* fish (the favourite fish of Kuwait) teemed in local waters, fishing was an all-year-round activity and so provided fishermen with an all-the-year-round income. Pearl-fishing, on the other hand, had only been possible during the summer months when the water of the Gulf was warm enough for a diver to work all day. The share in profits that a pearl-fisher received at the end of the summer season had had to last him for the whole year, and in the days when little other work was available, pearl-fishers had needed loans to tide them over the winter.

The fishing launch captains were, however, under a moral obligation to supply occasional loans to members of the crew who needed extra money for some personal reason, such as a wedding. I only knew one launch captain well enough for him to volunteer information about confidential matters, but when, in conversation with other captains, I referred to this information as if it were something taken for granted, no one denied it. This particular captain said that when a fisherman was an exceptionally good worker, his captain would be anxious to lend him money, because then the fisherman would have to go on working in his boat. If a good fisherman were not in the captain's debt, the captain might have to agree secretly to give him an extra fraction of a share at each distribution

of the profits, and this fraction would have to be deducted from the 'boat's' share. Otherwise, the fisherman might be attracted to another boat by a similar secret offer. In fishing, being a good worker not only meant being good at the work, but good at turning up for it. Fishermen had good reason not to love the sea, and few of them wanted to work all the time, away from their beds and their families. After the sale of a good catch, many would stay at home until they had spent the money. For facing the hardships of the sea, fishermen gained neither honour nor prosperity, and the more go-ahead ones would find something more profitable.

A debt obligation, similar to that which might bind a fisherman to his captain, could also bind the fishing captain to a fishmonger in Kuwait. If the captain was indebted to the fishmonger, the fishmonger had first refusal of the catch. This meant that, by providing the loan, the fishmonger was assuring his own fish supply, much as the captain was assuring his labour supply by means of the loans he made to his fishermen. In the days of pearl-fishing, a similar indebtedness had bound the captains of the pearling boats to the pearl merchants.

Before leaving England, I had read a good deal both about profit-sharing and about the prevalence of debt in the seafaring industries, in old, well-informed accounts of the Gulf, published when pearl-fishing and merchant voyaging both flourished. These accounts made it apparent that debt and profit-sharing were closely connected, and that, together, they lay at the centre of the traditional economic system. I had, however, thought of profit-sharing and debt only in the context of economic relations. In Kuwait and Failaka, speaking to men who well remembered the circumstances in which they had once worked at sea, I had it made very clear to me that they also belonged within moral relations. It was not because, strictly speaking, loans had to be interest free, the taking of interest being forbidden (*ḥarām*), and thus gravely sinful, in Islam. According to the law, it was perfectly legitimate to provide a loan in the form of goods to be paid for well in arrears of delivery, and these goods were then supplied at a higher price than they would have commanded if paid for immediately. Such a procedure, described in English writings as taking 'concealed interest', did not seem very different in economic terms from taking a loan of money from a bank. The moral situation lay in the relation between the owner of a boat and the sailors who worked in the boat. This was a relation of patron and client, and the client had a moral expectation of being helped and looked after by his patron, who was also, usually, his creditor. Because of profit-sharing, the sailors were not, strictly speaking, the 'employees' of the boat owner. They were his 'company of followers' (*jamā'a*). And there was, in Failaka, just such a company.

I have mentioned that the religious teacher whose instructions I attended did not live off his religion.³ In the humble terms of Failaka, he was a prosperous man, because he was one of three brothers who between them owned two ocean-going dhows, which were now drawn up on the beach. The brothers had stuck together all their lives, and Failaka was their third place of residence. They had

3. 'Disorientations: Part Three', *JASO*, Vol. XXII, no. 1, p. 14.

grown up in a coastal village in southern Iran. Dissatisfied with the state of affairs there, they had moved to another village on the opposite coast of the Gulf, in Muscat territory. After some years, they had moved again and come to Kuwait, in the hope of better opportunities, and the shaikhs had given them permission to settle in Failaka. Moving from one home to another in their dhows, the brothers had not only brought all their seamen with them, but all their seamen's families too—a total of about forty small families. These made up the boat owners' 'company of followers'. The two dhows made only occasional voyages, and in the meantime the followers took alternative work, but whatever the work, they remained morally, and even administratively, bound up with their patrons. Any one of them who was in trouble, or had to deal with the shaikhs, or even needed advice, would expect and be expected to apply to the brothers for help. This company was a community within a community.

For the little group of Kuwaiti friends with whom I sat out of doors in the evenings, the past was over and done with—'what was past was past', and reminiscing about it was a waste of time. They did answer a few questions about the seafaring industries, a tedious task in any case, because of my ignorance of the local terms for 'diver', 'puller', 'share', 'the half-of-the-fifth'—even 'pearls', which the people of the Gulf called *gumash*, a word translated in my dictionary, published in Egypt, as, 'trash; rubbish. Stuff; woven material....Furniture'. The friends became much more interested, indeed mildly indignant, when I asked about debt. This was where a misinterpretation of the past distorted the proportions of the present. Having read that the pearl-fishing days were times when, as it was put by an English mission doctor, 'everyone bought goods for more than they were worth and sold them for less, because everyone was in debt', and having no knowledge of finance, I had not envisaged debt as a necessary corollary to investment, but thought of it as a sort of economic disease, which gave the rich an opportunity to exploit the poor. I asked whether the rulers of Kuwait had, in patriarchal fashion, shielded the poor against such exploitation. This question was not well-received. I had misunderstood the old Kuwaiti relationships: I was attaching too much importance to the shaikhs, as Englishmen always did. Moreover, when the British Government did so, and acted upon it, with all its power over Kuwait behind the scenes, what started as an exaggeration became a reality. And yet we prided ourselves on democratic government.

The Kuwaitis said there had been plenty of noble and important people in Kuwait besides the shaikhs. The shaikhs had been there to maintain law and order and look after the country's defence, and that was what they had been paid for: the people of Kuwait had allowed them to tax pearl-fishing and levy customs duties so as to provide them with an income. Why should I suppose that the shaikhs were necessarily more just than anyone else? And had they been all-powerful,

how could they have contented themselves with customs duties of only four per cent? The great men who made the wealth of Kuwait had been the merchants and the boat owners—especially the pearl merchants, some of whom had been richer than the shaikhs. When the shaikhs were entertaining, they used to send round to the merchants and ask to borrow carpets from their houses. To be a pearl merchant had been the height of honour, and no one had been second to the great pearl merchants in generosity and integrity. They had not just been business men obsessed with making money, and even when they lost their fortunes they had not lost their pride. During the decline of the pearl industry, when everyone was in difficulties, the pearl merchants and the boat owners had thought it dishonourable to seize the small assets of debtors poorer than themselves and had preferred to forgive the debts. Even now, when the poor men were making money, the debts had never been repaid.

On one of my return visits to Kuwait from Failaka, I was shown some of the business correspondence preserved by one former pearl merchant family, dating from the time when the industry first began its abrupt decline. The letters, addressed to importers in London and Paris, were increasingly urgent, and eventually desperate, asking what had happened to the market, and begging the importers to buy, if only a little, to keep the business going. The merchants had not forgiven local debts because they could afford to, but because their debtors were already on the verge of destitution. In those hard times, I heard, shaikhs had not always been as generous as merchants.

Pearls, like Persian carpets, were luxuries and investments for the rich of the world, produced, out of their necessity, by men who, in world terms, were the poor and the but modestly prosperous. In the years around 1930, the pearl industry had been assailed from two sides at once by situations arising out of the inadequacies of Western economic policies on the one hand and out of the efficiency of one branch of Eastern technology on the other. The people of the Gulf were in no good position to appreciate either cause of the disaster to their livelihood, and were thus even more vulnerable than they might otherwise have been. Two quite separate factors combined to ruin the market: the industrial depression in the United States and Europe, and the development of cultured pearls in Japan. Even the business men of the West, part of a modern-educated public with information about world affairs readily available to them through newspapers and the radio, had rushed unwittingly into the Wall Street crash. In the Gulf, world communications were sparse, and even the merchants knew little about the wider implications of banking or limited liability. They lived in a very different system of family business and loans that were largely in the form of goods. Nevertheless, in respect of the depression, the problem, however serious, was only one of degree: the pearl market, like all others, was known to fluctuate, and the merchants' difficulty lay in foreseeing how deep and protracted the world depression was going to be, in order to reduce investment in production before their capital was exhausted.

The technology which produced the cultured pearl was a more insidious matter. To grasp its significance, to realize that once cultured pearls were

produced the market for natural pearls could never be the same again, would have required a step of imagination that, however small in an ultimate sense, infringed the border of customary epistemology. The traditional, pious view was that pearls were natural things produced for man by providence—how could man make them for himself? Even in the 1950s, when plenty of individual people in the Gulf knew and accepted the scientific fact that cultured pearls were produced by what was intrinsically the same ‘natural’ process as natural pearls, the scientific explanation of how pearls came into being was not a part of widely accepted general knowledge. The pious explanation was still dominant among the general public, and even some of those who were aware of the scientific fact would still insist that cultured pearls were no substitute for the real thing. And yet a quarter of a century had passed since the market had decided otherwise.⁴

But for the dominance of the pious explanation, one supposes that cultured pearls could just as well have been produced in the Gulf as in Japan and could have done something towards alleviating some of the poverty which would still exist there now [1986] but for the greater blessing of oil. This is the sort of problem that many people in the Gulf were well aware of in the 1950s, and is one of the reasons why they placed such a high priority on education once the money was available. Kuwait generously offered schools to the shaikhs of the Trucial Coast, and some, though not all, accepted. There was still an opposition to be overcome. When, from Kuwait, I travelled to Dubai, a merchant there told me that he had put a child’s toy globe in the front of his shop. Various people had asked him what it was, and he had told them that it was a model of the shape of the world. Some religious old men, insisting that the world was flat, had criticized him so much behind his back for lack of piety that he had thought it better to take the globe back to the privacy of his home.

4. Traditionally, if there was any more elaborate explanation than the pious one that pearls were created by providence, it did no more than introduce an intervening act of providence: an oyster first caught a raindrop and then converted it into a pearl. At first sight, this may seem in principle to be the same type of explanation (though obviously not confirmed by experiment) as that the oyster makes the pearl as the result of an infection caused by a grain of sand. This, I think, would be a misinterpretation, because the raindrop was explained in the same pious way as the pearl, it was created by providence. True, the raindrop came from a cloud, but a cloud was not thought of in terms of water vapour, nor the raindrop in terms of condensation. The rain was ‘a blessing’.

In epistemological terms, the problem of the pious and the scientific explanations is not, it seems to me, a problem of scientific explanations as an alternative to religious explanations. Rather, it relates to the point at which the idea of contingency enters into the explanation. In the pious explanation, associated with customary epistemology, the pearl and the raindrop are directly contingent on providence. An equally religious, but more scientific, explanation, is that they come into being in accordance with natural laws that are themselves contingent upon providence, and that there is no impiety in seeking for these natural laws, any more than there is in seeking for natural pearls.

The privileged, busy men who in Kuwait bore the title of 'shaikh' were members of the ruling family, but there was one Shaikh of Kuwait, referred to in official English as 'the Ruler'. Published accounts of the Gulf in earlier days gave the impression that the function of the shaikhly family in each state was simply to produce a hereditary ruler to govern the state in a patriarchal fashion, electing him from among themselves in a process of consultation with the leading men of the community. In the anthropology of the 1950s, however, the idea of 'patriarchal' government was regarded with some scepticism, as being a European invention derived from the pieties of the Old Testament by people who, whether Christians, Jews or rationalists, had never lived within a system that was anything like it. Was it possible that real people in real situations would be content to recognize one wise old man as father of the community and do as he told them? The fact that some rulers had come to power by force, while others had been deposed and more often than not killed, suggested a less benevolent system. On the other hand, the idea of any indigenous political system functioning by brute force was also regarded sceptically at that time: most anthropological research had been carried out in colonies where such force as was used in the course of government was used against, and not by, the people anthropologists were studying. It was widely assumed that government could not be conducted successfully without the tacit assent of the majority of the population. The political implications of fear, physical danger and casual violence had not yet become so familiar in the history of so many new states as to undermine the optimistic notion that government has to be, in some reasonable sense, representative.

As ideas, patriarchy and autocracy are not opposites: both assume that the ruler is obeyed by those he rules. The difference lies in the reason for obedience. The subject is supposed to obey the patriarch because he wants to, and to obey the autocrat because he has to. In the Gulf states there was, however, one institution that suggested an alternative to simple obedience and seemed to imply a system within which the people participated in the government. (One definition of political structure current at that time was that it was the necessary relation between political institutions.) In the Gulf, the rulers of all the various shaikhdoms were said to make themselves readily accessible to their people by holding a daily, public audience in which they presided over an open discussion of local affairs and dealt with requests, complaints and legal cases as they arose. I had envisaged the ruler's public audience as a popular assembly lying at the heart of the political system and maintaining government by consent in each state. As I saw it, the institution derived from the assemblies of bedouin shaikhs and their tribal followers, where the shaikhs had no power of coercion and the system was simply one of leadership. In the settled circumstances of the Gulf towns and villages an element of coercion had been introduced, but English accounts suggested that the system had continued to be one of public consultation and open government, and that even the great Ibn Sa'ud, at the centre of his vast Arabian kingdom, did not hold himself aloof from ordinary people or disregard the popular will. These accounts were not entirely wrong, but neither were they very accurate.

Confronted with even more work and more applications than the other senior members of his family, the Ruler, Shaikh Abdullah al-Salim, was not holding public audiences during the time I spent in Kuwait and Failaka, but he was not therefore inaccessible. As time went on, having become embarrassed by people's surprise at my never having met him, I thought it best to try to arrange to pay my respects. There seemed to be little prospect of making an arrangement through the Political Agency: I had no special business with the Ruler, and no doubt all too many visitors hoped to see him. It seemed best to ask the director of the customs, the father of my Oxford friend.⁵ He took me down to the office of the head of the customs on the floor below. The head of customs, to whom the director explained the situation, was a very suitable person to ask since he was the Ruler's younger son. He spoke to his father briefly on the telephone, and said to me, 'My father is terribly sorry, but he is busy today. Would tomorrow morning be all right for you?' Kuwait remained a very personal place.

This private accessibility, however, was a rather different matter from holding a regular public audience. In descriptions of the Gulf states in earlier times, it was reported that each ruler held a *majlis* (public audience) daily. In the *majlis*, rulers were said to make themselves available to all members of the public and visitors, to deal with requests, complaints and legal cases as they arose, and to preside over an open discussion of public affairs. Before arriving in Kuwait I had imagined this *majlis* as a sort of informal parliament, the heart of some traditional Arab democracy that derived originally from the bedouin shaikhs and their tribesmen and extended both to the rulers of the Gulf states and to the great Ibn Saud in the centre of his huge kingdom. For a hopeful anthropologist, it was disconcerting to find that the central political institution of the society seemed to have disappeared from under his nose, and that people seemed to be getting on quite well without it.

At that time, the heads of all government departments were members of the ruling family. Shaikhs also presided over the law court, though they had an Islamic legal expert to consult over technical difficulties. The most extreme penalties of Islamic law were not, in practice, imposed in Kuwait in respect of adultery or theft, and, as in the rest of the shaikhdoms, capital punishment for murder was most uncommon. Corporal punishment was not unusual. When passing the court, one would sometimes see a man brought out, thrown down in the gutter by the guards and beaten with their camel sticks.

It was a relatively new thing in Kuwait to have a law court at all. Just before the Second World War, about the time when oil was first discovered, a party had formed in Kuwait that advocated some modernization of the form of government. One of its main proposals had been the establishment of a regular court of justice. (Another had been the introduction of some measure of public control over state revenues.) The proposals had led to political conflict ending in some violence. In spite of all the changes that had occurred between 1938-9 and 1954, the history

5. See 'Disorientations: Part Two', *JASO*, Vol. XXI, no. 3, p. 260.

of this conflict was still a living issue, regarded by many as too sensitive to talk about, and indeed it remains a rather sensitive issue even now [1986]. It should be remembered that Kuwait was quite a small community where all public figures were also private friends and acquaintances, or sometimes private enemies. At that time, most of those who had been directly involved were still alive and active. The late ruler, Shaikh Ahmed al-Jabir, had of course been involved in a most important way, but so too had his successor, the then ruler Shaikh Abdullah al-Salim, and on the opposite side. A number of very important merchants had been on the side of modernization, and there had been divisions within the merchant families, as among the shaikhs. The former state secretary, whom I met occasionally, never spoke about the constitutional movement. I was told that he had been obliged to resign when it was suppressed, but the present state secretary was his son. The shaikh who headed the department of education had been one of those who suppressed it, when the shaikhs took their rifles and drove out with carloads of bedouin men-at-arms to arrest their leading opponents and there were some deaths. And afterwards, when Shaikh Ahmed al-Jabir died, many other bedouin had gathered at Jahra, determined to give their support if necessary to the succession of Shaikh Abdullah al-Salim, or maybe to join in the fighting if the succession was not settled peacefully. These were things it was possible to learn about only very slowly, particularly since the question of popular representation in the government of the state had still not been in any way solved.

But what did the people of Failaka make of the collective representation which demoted them to being no more than Arabized foreigners—did they think they were 'really' Persians? I could have asked the director of the customs. Both his son and he had told me that their family came from Failaka, and the director was quite proud that his grandfather had rebuilt the mosque there. But it would have been brash to ask an older friend, who was an important man in Kuwait whether he was really a Persian. Perhaps he would just have been amused, but nevertheless, in Kuwait, a Persian was not the very best thing to be. In fact, I waited until I could ask the question in Failaka, in the form, 'Who are the people of Failaka descended from?' The answer turned out to contradict what the former political agent had said, but still to remain consistent with it. If the fact was different, the principle was the same. The people of Failaka had come from the Persian coast; nevertheless, they were Arabs. The reason was quite simple: much of the Persian coast was populated by Arabs whose early ancestors were the Muslim heroes who had conquered Persia in the early days of Islam.