

Friendship for Sale

'We have not forgotten our poverty. Now we shall share our wealth.'

Motto of the Abu Dhabi Fund for Arab Development

'The Swiss are very dull. They do not enjoy themselves. They go to bed early, and they think only of money. These are the people we should deal with.'

SHAIKH ZAYED

to a friend on a visit to Lausanne in 1971

Shaikh Zayed has come to his home town Al Ain, formerly called Buraimi, for an agricultural show. He sits under an awning on a faded orange settee whose style is western suburbia circa 1930. Behind him are members of his family and local shaikhs who have the ascetic look of desert dwellers rather than the prematurely debauched countenance of the Saudi princes. In front, as always, is a plastic table laden with two unopened boxes of coloured tissues.

These gatherings always seem strange to a Westerner because of the lack of female spectators. Shaikh Zayed is never accompanied by any of his wives. He has had about twelve (four at a time), who have provided him with nine sons. His favourite wife, the fecund Shaikha Fatima, who gave birth to six sons and two daughters in nine years, lives in Abu Dhabi. He has two in Al Ain whose dim stirrings of emancipation once became so shrill that he was obliged, allegedly, to cancel a meeting with David Rockefeller, chairman of the Chase Manhattan Bank, who has appropriately superseded Lord Curzon as the maker of regal progressions round the Gulf.

Today, though, at the back of the viewing stand, is an exquisitely dressed woman with a fresh complexion bred only in the best British shire families, whom I will meet in unexpected circumstances an hour or so later.

Meanwhile, a group of local musicians plays a traditional Arab tune adapted to discothèque beat, and schoolgirls carrying plastic flowers attempt a Westernized Arab dance. Shaikh Zayed looks up occasionally and claps, but is more preoccupied with his newspaper. He gazes at it intently during a number of short, fervently patriotic speeches given by several of the show's organizers. Eventually he joins them and other male guests waving camel sticks in a simple tribal jog. All the while he is photographed by a spectacularly agile middle-aged man, John Cowan, one of the leading fashion photographers of the sixties, who has now equipped himself with a Range Rover as a travelling home-cum-studio and spends much of the year producing glossy and lucrative reportage of the Arabian peninsula. Competition is tough because photographers are quick to realize when any area is crammed with aspirant world leaders who have money to commission acceptable pictorial records of themselves and their good works.

Shaikh Zayed ignores Cowan's contortions. He has developed a film star's insouciance since his country became the Sutter's Mill of the money rush in October 1973. He is the man who blew the starting whistle when he – not Saudi Arabia's King Faisal – operated the first ban on oil exports, a grave decision with immediate consequences as the UAE, which few people had heard of, supplies more oil to the United States than Iran. The embargo worked more effectively than anyone imagined and, even though outsiders still believe it was Saudi Arabia's initiative, Shaikh Zayed's status within the Arab world increased as rapidly as his income – £2.5 billion in 1978, ten times the amount of pre-money-rush days.

He has tried to encourage his people to join the bonanza by providing them with free housing, medical care, electricity and up to £50 a month for sending their children to school. He also gives out bits of land on which they can build gimcrack apartments and thus join the entrepreneurial élite by renting at exorbitant prices.

As a result his capital Abu Dhabi, an island about the size of Manhattan, has a per capita income of £18000, a bank branch for every two thousand people, inflation of 166 per cent over three years, and is the most expensive city in the world for visiting businessmen.¹ That is significant to economists and to American diplomats whose embassy is crammed into the only reasonable accommodation they could find: four single-room apartments on the top floor of a decaying octagonal building identified only by the words *Oriental Sun Flower*, and costing \$60000 a year rent. The British, whose embassy has 400000 square feet of overgrown garden in the most expensive area, are building their ambassador a £550000 residence, modest apparently as it 'falls somewhat short of the normal standards for an ambassador of his rank', explains the Foreign Office.

'It would save everyone a lot of trouble and expense if all the locals went to live in the south of France or Switzerland and left the place to a few technocrats in air-conditioned offices,' says one diplomat. 'The trouble is, they actually like the place. They are devoted to this basically uninhabitable land.'

That being so, the civilized world is quick to bestow all its glittering credentials, and the UAE has been admitted to membership of the UN, WB, IRC, AL, UNESCO, UNICEF, IMF, ILO, ICAO, FAO, OPEC, OPAEC, and so on. Everyone rushes to pay obeisance. John Butter, a Scotsman who became the ruler's financial adviser in 1970 after twenty years in Kenya (he spoke no Arabic when he arrived), rationed himself to a maximum of four bankers a day, and saw 437 in two years. 'It is educative,' he says. 'I realized then that if I did the opposite to what the experts said I would probably be right.'

But experts provide prestige and the President now has at least 35000 of them, bureaucrats who announce numerous enlightened projects oblivious to the inconvenient fact that only one in three is carried out, and have devised a constitution with grand-sounding institutions – supreme and consultative councils – regardless of continuing shaikhly rule. Why, he even has a British-style honours system, with six classifications.

The pressures on tradition have been resisted less in the UAE than in Saudi Arabia, partly because the 5-1 ratio of expatriates to locals is overwhelming and also because the Gulf

Arabs have a less majestic view of their own infallibility. Nevertheless, the tug towards Westernization is sometimes rebuffed with surprising severity. The Saudi-born Chief Judge, opposed with implacable enthusiasm to public enjoyment, had a youth flogged in 1977 for kissing a girl on the beach. There is a mandatory forty lashes for any Muslim caught drinking alcohol and an attempt is being made to apply Sharia law to Westerners and locals alike for seven Koranic sins: murder, theft, highway robbery, adultery, slander, promiscuity, and the use of alcohol.

These Canute-like intentions are supported by a security system which provides the normal vigorous checks on entry into the country. Only those who can prove their prime motive is money-making (bankers, businessmen, lawyers, football managers) are given easy access. Temporary visitors must leave passports with airport immigration to prevent them departing from any of the country's other proliferating airports. The motive is to hamper illegal immigration, the bureaucratic mind being unable to conceive of anyone not living by forms and regulations, but the result is a pile of 16000 unclaimed passports, and frustration for genuine travellers whose only transport within the 'united' country is by private plane or taxi. 'We shall learn by our mistakes,' says Zayed, whose emirate contributes ninety per cent of the whole country's budget and who refused to be re-elected president in 1976 unless there was more co-operation from the others. 'How can we build a union when we cannot agree on a new hospital without first determining if the site is on the soil of Dubai, Sharjah, or any other emirate?'

It is the bloody-minded attitude which worries him. Although he resents subsidizing his old enemy Shaikh Rashid, now seen publicly as his fraternal good friend the vice-president, money is not so important. He has plenty left.

His particular vision, apart from unity, is to turn the desert green, and he spends millions on agricultural schemes. Tree planting alone has cost \$5 million, equivalent to his total income fifteen years ago, and he hopes that soon the hundred-kilometre dual carriageway between Abu Dhabi and Al Ain will be a luxuriant leafy boulevard instead of its present vista of decomposing camels and rusting wrecks of cars.

A third of his income has been given away to a wide collection

'I said, "Before I come down I have to see if we can get licensed approval from the British or the United States for delivery to you." I did check him out with the British and the Americans. They said, "No. Forget about General Amin."

'He sent his plane up anyway, and I said "I'll leave you a big envelope of catalogues at Nice airport and you can pick it up." He did. Afterwards he sent a small mission to see me, but I knew nothing was possible. In the meantime he has received ample supplies from the Soviet Union largely funded by Colonel Gaddafi.

'I would not sell to any government I thought would use the material against our own country – but in the world we live in that is hard to estimate. We only do what governments allow, and we do it for economic gain. Governments imagine they do it for political long-range gain, or that someone will love them. We have our illusions but that is not one of them.'

He chuckled loudly. It is difficult not to like him and easy to forget that his job in the money rush is to provide guns for people to kill each other. He does not see it that way.

'Will it aggravate war? It is impossible to answer that. I would turn the question round and ask you, "Has the tremendous effort of the East and West in rearming since World War Two aggravated the chance for world peace, or not?" Logically you would say that the more weapons you buy the more chance there is to use them. But the history of our civilization, if one can call it that, since the war indicates the opposite. The easiest way to explain it is to say that it is bound to lead to a holocaust – but it has not. It is paradoxical and defies all logic.'

It does not defy logic at all. It just requires time. The arguments of Mr Cummings are those of arms suppliers and some politicians – before war happens. Afterwards it is different. 'It was the arms race between the great powers which made 1914 inevitable,' said the British foreign secretary, Lord Grey, in retrospect.

A few weeks after I met Mr Cummings I had a drink in London with Colonel Khalifa Nabooda, the UAE's deputy minister of defence. He was in a pensive mood over the brandy, articulate and far less military than when I had met him

previously in Dubai. I asked how he was managing with all his brand-new weapons.

'Who are we going to fight?' he said. 'Why do we need all these things?'

'Well, why?'

He ordered another drink. 'If people knew the answer to that they wouldn't buy them. It is all a game, and we are caught up in it.'

Some game. But it delights the arms suppliers who have sold Shaikh Zayed two early warning systems – Rapier and Crotale – as well as numerous tanks, rifles and jet fighters camouflaged in green and brown in anticipation presumably of some mysterious jungle war. He says he would lend them to front-line Arab states in a war against Israel. But there are few skilled pilots, and not much of a co-ordinated army has developed from the rag-tag of private troops conscripted by the various shaikhs in self-defence.

'It must be hell,' I suggested to General Awad al Khaldi, a genial and efficient Jordanian who was seconded as chief of staff in 1976. (King Hussein has offered to help the UAE military because he is so worried about the country's future.)

'It has been very difficult to amalgamate the different armies,' admitted the general. 'They had so many teachers – British and Jordanians – but they have the calibre and I think they will be able to take over from foreign officers in five years, and have full technical capability in about ten.'

'The trouble is that sudden wealth spoils people, especially the military. No one wants to join the army because they can make more money outside. They are not motivated. I try to give it to them by telling them that to preserve their money they must prepare for war. Although we have very friendly neighbours and feel we live in a peaceful spot, I tell them about Lebanon. There was a country with more money than the UAE but look what happened when radical elements got in. It will be the same here if there is not a strong force to preserve the wealth. It could be another Beirut if we don't deal very sharply with radical elements which come from outside.'

So far the headlong rush into the twentieth century has been more stable than most people predicted. 'Everyone is so busy

making money that they don't have time to think of revolution,' says Dr Adnan Pachachi, former Iraqi foreign minister who is Shaikh Zayed's personal representative. 'But we can't be choosy about adjusting to a different style of life. We have to take the good with the bad.'

'There is nothing fundamentally contradictory about the Arabs practising democracy. It is not just for Western countries and we will probably learn in a shorter time than it took the West. At the moment we are under pressure from local fanatics – not from Saudi Arabia – but it is clear you cannot really run a modern state on shaikhly lines.'

Shaikh Zayed knows that. He realizes that when he and his contemporaries have gone the social changes could be as vast as the economic ones have been but less comfortable. He just hopes that nothing happens before that. He reads in the newspaper, for instance, about the Shah's 'help' to Oman. He prays that such 'help' will not be needed here, that he can keep his country free for the pure, unpolitical gathering of money.

Like other Arabs, he suspects the Shah's intentions in spite of protestations of brotherly love. The UAE has already been flicked like a pin-ball when it became a hindrance to British domestic policy or Iranian military aggression. Now that the Shah has taken over Britain's nanny role, it must be tempting for him to covet this diamond necklace of a country, shaped like a *khanja* along the west bank of the 'Arabian' Gulf.

What, wonders Zayed, does the Shah really think?

'A patch of sand,' said His Imperial Majesty, the Shahanshah etc., casually in a way that would have given His Highness Shaikh Zayed palpitations. 'In twenty years' time the oil will be finished and then what? They must see it that way and some of them do.'

We were discussing his attitude to the Arabs, and I mentioned I had been told that his lips actually curled into a sneer when they are mentioned. Was he contemptuous of the Arabs? 'That is a misinterpretation. But I have to say that we always help them and never receive anything in return. We help them morally on the international scene, in the United Nations, in our

declarations, and in everything behind the scenes. The only thing we receive back is they declare the Persian Gulf is the Arabian Gulf and many other unfairnesses.'

So they have no need to be frightened? 'Of course not. It's ridiculous. I had the occasion of taking back Bahrain, which we claimed for 150 years, but what would I want with that patch of sand?'

They, the UAE, and all other Arab money-rush countries are convinced they are more than patches of sand. They are being told so by the West and are building new societies, developing industries. Just like Iran.

'How can they? They have not the climate nor the population. History will be the proof - in twenty-five years' time.'

In that case, it seems strange that His Imperial Majesty was willing to risk international condemnation, with particularly strong ripples from Tripoli and Dallas, by grabbing a small 'patch of sand' from Britain on the eve of the UAE's birth.

But some of the ironies of today's money rush cannot be appreciated fully without a brief understanding of why the British were there in the first place, keeping everyone else out, their chaste khaki shorts flapping knee-length in the breeze, their gung-ho enthusiasm and pink-cheeked integrity bringing a touch of godliness and authority to barren parts.