

Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf

This volume presents a study of transnational cultural flows in the Gulf region and beyond. It combines an understanding of the region's historical connections with the outside world and an assessment of contemporary consequences of these connections.

In the context of current theoretical debates, empirical case studies are presented to demonstrate that the Gulf is not only an exporter of oil and capital, but also of culture and religion. As these travel to distant locations, they are transformed in ways not intended by those who initiated the process – at the same time, the Gulf remains an importer of labour, the latest technology, economic skills and ideas, whose roots are no longer possible to locate. *Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf* challenges both the definition of globalisation and transnationalism as one way processes generated mainly by the Western World and the view that transnationalism is solely a twentieth century phenomenon.

The authors collected here analyse and map historical and contemporary manifestations of transnational networks within this region, linking them to wider debates on society, identity and political culture. This volume will interest students and researchers of politics, the Middle East, anthropology and transnationalism.

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**Edited by
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3 Transnational merchants in the nineteenth-century Gulf

The case of the Safar family¹

James Onley

Mixed with the indigenous population [of Manamah] are numerous strangers and settlers, some of whom have been established here for many generations back, attracted from other lands by the profits of either commerce or the pearl fishery, and still retaining more or less the physiognomy and garb of their native countries. Thus the gay-coloured dress of the southern Persian, the saffron-stained vest of 'Oman, the white robe of Nejed, and the striped gown of Bagdad, are often to be seen mingling with the light garments of Bahreyn, its blue and red turban, its white silk-fringed cloth worn Banian fashion round the waist, and its frock-like overall; while a small but unmistakable colony of Indians, merchants by profession, and mainly from Guzerat, Cutch, and their vicinity, keep up here all their peculiarities of costume and manner, and live among the motley crowd, 'among them, but not of them'.

W. G. Palgrave, *Narrative of a Year's Journey through Central and Eastern Arabia* (1865)²

In taking leave of the Persian Gulf, let me describe the last recollection that is imprinted upon the retina of the traveller's memory. The fore deck of a Gulf steamer presents one of the most curious spectacles that can be imagined. I have seen many quaint conglomerations of colour, race, language, and religion, but rarely any more diversified than this. Arabs in their soiled silk *kefihs* and camel's-hair head-bands...; a Persian dealer carrying horses to Bombay, and awaking bubbles from his eternal *kalian*; Mussulman pilgrims from the holy places of Sunni or Shiah, saying their prayers...; orthodox Hindus conducting their ablutions in a corner, or cooking the food which no one else may defile by contact; a fat Turk sipping his gritty coffee; ... Parsi merchants decked in Bombay-made clothes of doubtful English cut; Indian Buniah in preternaturally tight white cotton pants, and with daintily-embroidered caps, stuck sideways on their heads; bearded Beluchis; an Afghan with unkempt black locks curling upon his shoulders, ... a *poshtin* (sheepskin) waistcoat, ... and voluminous white pantaloons; Portuguese half-castes...; one or two negroes, with shining contrast of skin and teeth; men black, copper-coloured, slate-coloured, dust-coloured, and white; men with silver rings round their big toes and pearl buckles in their ears; men wholly dressed, half dressed, and almost naked... – surely a more curious study in polyglot or polychrome could not well be conceived.

George Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question* (1892)³

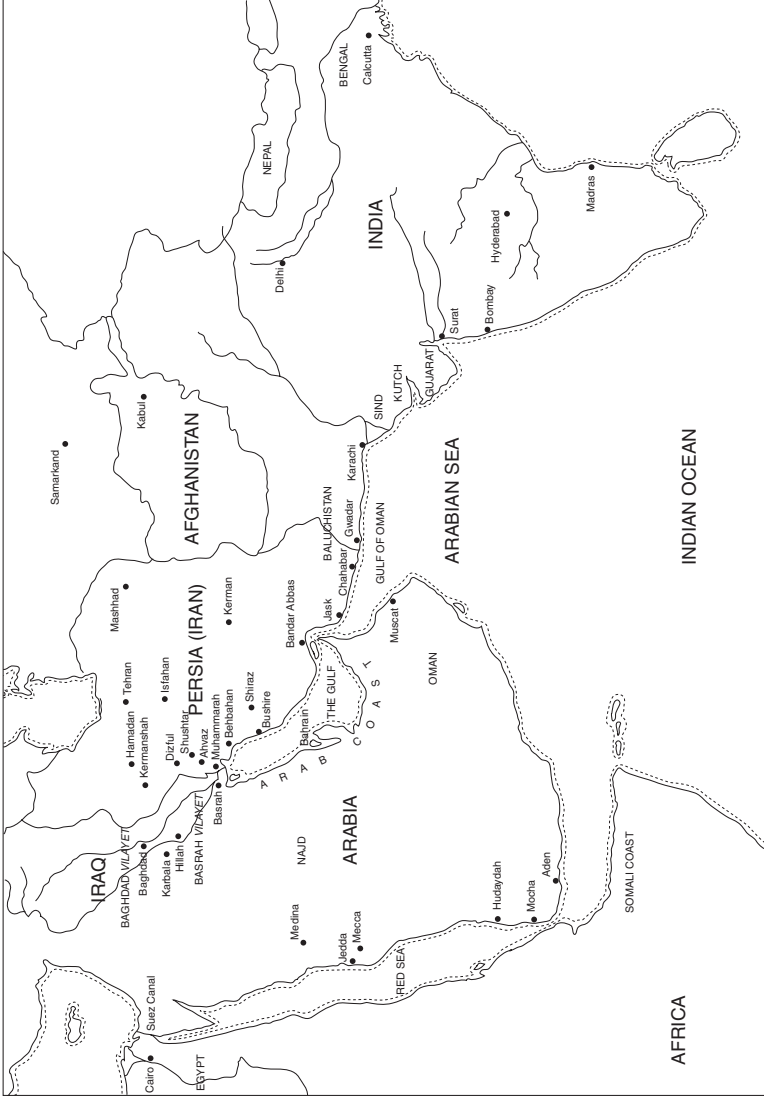
Introduction

The nineteenth-century Gulf was a remarkably transnational space, as the quotations above vividly illustrate. Foremost among the Gulf's transnationals were the merchants who, more than any other group, connected eastern Arabia to the wider world. They lived dual lives, speaking two or more languages and keeping homes in two or more countries. They dominated the import–export sector of the region. Some managed the customs administrations in a number of Gulf ports. Some came to play a central role in regional politics by acting as intermediaries between foreign governments or companies and local rulers and their subjects. This chapter examines the transnational connections, culture and activities of one Gulf merchant family in the nineteenth century: the Safar family of Hillah, Basrah, Bushehr (Bushire), Shiraz, Manamah, Muscat, Mocha (al-Mukha), Hodaydah and Bombay.

Transnational merchant studies and the Gulf

Transnational merchant studies is an emerging sub-field within Middle Eastern and South Asian studies. Exciting new works by Patricia Risso (1995), Ulrike Freitag and William Clarence-Smith (1997), Denys Lombard and Jean Aubin (2000), Claude Markovits (2000) and others – building on the pioneering works of Ashin Das Gupta (1960–92), Calvin Allen (1981) and Philip Curtin (1984) – have greatly expanded our understanding of the historical transnational connections between the Middle East and Asia.⁴ The closest we have to a study of transnational merchant families in the Gulf is Hala Fattah's 1997 book on regional trade in Arabia and Iraq, in which she discusses nine families in the space of seven pages, but without the use of local archives.⁵ There have also been some recent articles exploring the transnational connections of Gulf Arab ports and their merchant communities, but merchant families per se are not their focus.⁶ Those studies of Gulf merchant families that do exist give little or no attention to the transnational aspects of these families.⁷ One of the reasons for this is the desire of Gulf Arab families today to downplay or deny their transnational heritage in response to the Arabization policies of the Gulf Arab governments. This desire is well illustrated by an introductory passage from the autobiography of the present Emirati Ambassador to Britain, Easa Saleh al-Gurg:

Where do I begin? Before I was born, certainly, because much of my early life was influenced by the fact that in my grandfather's time my family crossed the waters of the Gulf from the coastal plains of Iran, from the region known as Fars, and returned to our ancestral Arabia At the time, the decision to return to Arabia must have represented a considerable surrender of much of what made life pleasant. Thus, for my own family, life in Lingah, the town on the Iranian coast in which my forefathers had settled, was evidently good. Though it was located on the Persian coast, Lingah was an Arab town, occupied and governed by Arabs, whose language and culture determined its



Map 3.1 The Gulf in its wider geographical context.

character . . . My immediate forebears were pearl merchants and landowners and enjoyed the products of that life abundantly; I still retain the title deeds to the lands which we owned in Dishgaan and Lingah. The distinctly Arab character of Lingah and of my own background is evidenced by the fact that every one of these deeds is in Arabic, not Persian.⁸

Al-Gurg goes on to emphasize his Arab heritage and to downplay the fact that his family name is not Arab at all, but Persian.⁹ Gulf Arabs with a transnational heritage such as al-Gurg are sensitive about their genealogy because identity is a political issue. The Gulf Arab states have become preoccupied with cultural autonomy and the maintenance of a purely Arabian, Islamic national character, as their national constitutions make clear:

Kuwait is an Arab State, independent and fully sovereign . . . The people of Kuwait are a part of the Arab Nation.¹⁰

The Kingdom of Bahrain is a fully sovereign independent Islamic Arab State whose population is part of the Arab nation and whose territory is part of the Arab homeland.¹¹

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a sovereign Arab Islamic state with Islam as its religion.¹²

Qatar is a sovereign and independent Arab state, Islam is the official religion of the country and the *Shariah* is the principal source of legislation . . . The official language is Arabic and the Qatari people are part of the Arab nation.¹³

The Federation [of the UAE] is a part of the wider Arab homeland, to which it is connected by a shared religion, language, and destiny. The people of the Federation are one and are a part of the Arab nation.¹⁴

The Sultanate of Oman is an independent, Arab, Islamic, fully sovereign state with Muscat as its capital.¹⁵

The ruling families themselves have set an example by erasing all evidence of their transnational connections from their national histories. In the Gulf today, public discussion about the Persian, Indian and African mothers of past shaykhs and shaykhas is strongly discouraged. Gulf nationals unable to claim Arabian ancestry and tribal affiliation are normally barred from senior positions in government, while Gulf nationals with no Arab ancestry whatsoever are barred from all but the most junior positions. The only exceptions appear to be Oman and, since 2000, Bahrain.¹⁶ Shi'i Arabs are also discriminated against, but to varying degrees from state to state.¹⁷ A historian relying on accounts of a Gulf Arab family provided by the family itself is, therefore, likely to be presented with a tailored past serving present-day interests.

Another reason why there have been so few studies of Gulf merchant families, let alone those with transnational connections, is the scarcity of sources. Historical records of families such as the Kanoos, al-Zarbs and Safars are few and far

between. Countless collections have been discarded since the 1950s by uninterested family members. Khalid Kanoo – the Group Managing Director of the Kanoo Group of Companies, Chairman of the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and caretaker of the Kanoo family archive in Bahrain – tells a dramatic story of how he rescued his family’s historical records from destruction. In 1989, the family decided to replace its historical home in Manamah with a modern building. The day before the building’s scheduled demolition, the contractor who had been hired to demolish the building casually mentioned to Khalid that some old papers had been left in the house. Khalid raced to the house, which he found locked and boarded up. He broke in and found 46 boxes of company and family records dating from 1899 to 1955. These records had been long neglected: they were covered in dust and cobwebs, and infested with insects. Khalid carted the records home and had them cleaned and treated with insecticide. They now form the bulk of the Kanoo Archive at Khalid’s private residence in Bahrain.¹⁸ ‘Ali Akbar Bushehri, the caretaker of the Safar family records in Bahrain, tells yet another rescue story. Unfortunately, he can tell you far more about the destruction of historical collections, including the loss of his own family records in 1973 while he was away from Bahrain reading for a degree in history.¹⁹ The government of Bahrain’s destruction in the early 1980s of the tens of thousands of Dilmun burial mounds, which contained a treasure-trove of ancient artefacts dating from 2000–600 BCE, is symbolic of this widespread and ongoing destruction of historical documents, artefacts and buildings in the Gulf Arab states. Had it not been for Akbar’s preservation of the Safar family records, the Safar family might well have discarded them and I would not be writing about the Safar family today.

The Safar family

The Safars were prosperous general merchants in the nineteenth century, importing, exporting and shipping goods of every description throughout the Gulf region and beyond.²⁰ They maintained an extensive business network with merchant houses in Bushehr, Manamah, Muscat, Mocha, Hudaydah and Bombay, and possibly Hillah and Basrah.²¹ These merchant houses operated as a loose conglomerate – sometimes engaged in joint ventures with each other, sometimes operating on their own. Members of the Safar family typically moved from one house to another as their careers progressed, initially working with their fathers, later working on their own or with an uncle. In the nineteenth century at least three members of the Safar family ranked as Grade I merchants – the wealthiest and the most influential men in the Gulf after the local ruling elite.²² The family’s prosperity is reflected in their substantial property holdings: date plantations near Basrah and Manamah, and houses and property in Bushehr, Shiraz, Manamah, Muscat, Mocha, Hudaydah and Bombay’s prestigious Fort district.²³ Land-owning was, and still is, a considerable status symbol in the Gulf. Although the family was dispersed throughout Arabia, Iraq, Persia and India, Bushehr was at the centre of the family’s activities in the nineteenth century. The family’s

principal Bushehr residence was a large, impressive building located on the waterfront in the Kutī district of town next to the residences of the Governor of Bushehr and Britain's Political Resident in the Gulf.²⁴ The size and prestigious location of the house, known as Bayt Safar (Safar House), symbolized the family's great affluence – see Figure 3.1.

The ethnic identity of the Safar family in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is difficult to establish because the Iranian and Bahraini branches of the family do not agree on this aspect of their history. The Safars of Bushehr believe that the family originates from Hamadan in western Iran and is, therefore, Persian – possibly Bakhtiyari (a tribal group from western Persia that speaks a dialect of Farsi).²⁵ This belief is supported by a detailed genealogical account of the family written by a traveller who visited the Safars in Bushehr in 1896.²⁶ Many of the Safars were Persian subjects, and a photograph taken in the late 1890s of the head of the family, Agha Muhammad Rahim Safar, clearly shows him wearing a Persian-style turban – see Figure 3.2. Further evidence of a Persian origin is the fact that virtually all members of the family spoke Farsi as a mother tongue and that most had Persian titles such as *agha* (which they pronounced 'au' as only the Bakhtiyari do), *mirza* and *khan*.²⁷

The Safars of Bahrain, however, believe that their male ancestors were Shi'i Arabs from southern Iraq.²⁸ This claim is supported by none other than Agha Muhammad Rahim Safar himself, who once explained, 'I am of Arab descent, but my family has been many years resident in Persia.'²⁹ The family tree drawn by him shows him to be the great-grandson of Hajji Safar, a Shi'i Arab born in Hillah, 35 miles south of the Ottoman provincial capital of Baghdad.³⁰ Although Hajji Safar later moved to Persia, his nineteenth-century descendants maintained



Figure 3.1 Bayt Safar (left), the Governor of Bushehr's residence (centre), and the Gulf Residency headquarters (right), Bushehr, c.1970 (Bushehri Archive, Bahrain).



Figure 3.2 Agha Muhammad Rahim Safar (centre) and his Arab staff, Bahrain, c.1898–9 (Bushehri Archive, Bahrain).

Table 3.1 Known Safar spouses, 1778–1900

Persian	21 (10 from the Sharif family)
Arab	10 (6 from the Safar family)
African	4 (all Abyssinian slaves)
Indian	1

a strong connection with Iraq and Arabia: many were born there, many lived there, many owned property there, many were buried there, and many spoke Arabic. A closer inspection of the photograph of Muhammad Rahim reveals that, although he is wearing a Persian-style turban, he is also wearing an Arab *‘abah* or *bisht* (cloak).³¹ All things considered, it seems that the best description of many of the nineteenth-century Safars is that some of them were Persianized Arabs or Persians of Arab descent (similar to the *hawalah*³²) and some of them were Arabized Persians. In this study, ‘Persian’ refers to the indigenous inhabitants of Persia who speak Persian (Farsi) as their mother tongue, rather than to all the peoples of Persia (pre-modern Iran) such as the Persians, Arabs, Kurds, Shahsevans, Turkomans, Azeris, Qashqa’is and Baluchis.³³

The Arab–Persian hybridity of the Safar family is evident from their marriage patterns, summarized in Table 3.1. In the twentieth century this hybridity gradually disappeared. The Safars of Bahrain today have an Arab identity – they were born in Bahrain to a Shi’i Arab mother from Karbala in southern Iraq; speak Arabic as their mother tongue; and think of themselves as Arabs.³⁴ The Safars of Bushehr today have an Iranian identity – they claim Persian roots; speak Farsi as

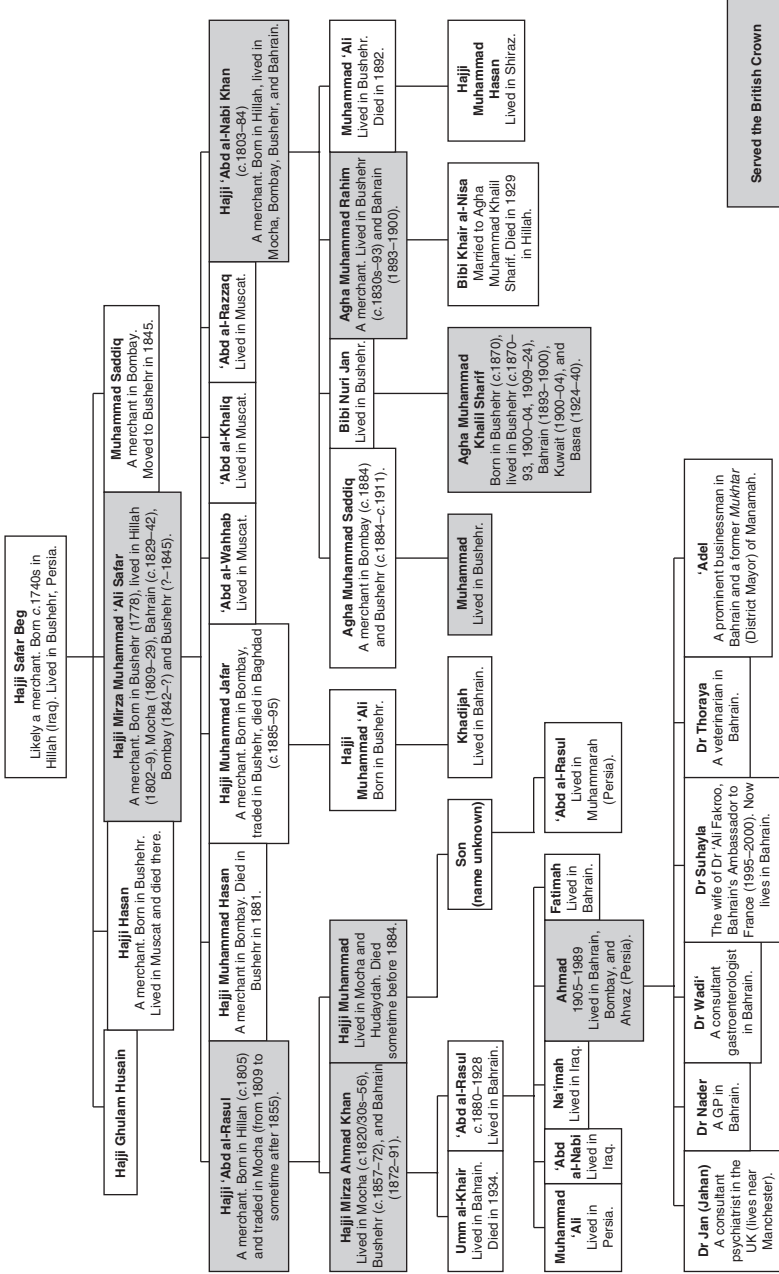
a mother tongue; and think of themselves as Iranians.³⁵ The Iraqi, Yemeni, Omani and Indian branches of the family, which are no longer in touch with the Bahraini and Iranian branches, may similarly define their identity in relation to their locale.³⁶

Hajji Safar was probably born in the 1740s and appears to have been a man of considerable status and wealth. On the Safar family tree drawn in the 1960s, he is given the title of *beg* (chief), a title used both by the Ottomans and the Bakhtiyari. He was married to the sister of Shaykh Hajji Jabir Khan al-Muhaisin, who was the Shaykh of Muhammarah in south-western Persia (r. 1819–81) and a Shi'i Arab.³⁷ At some point before 1778, he moved to Bushehr, Persia's principal port in the Gulf, which suggests that he was a merchant. He had four sons, Hajji Mirza Muhammad 'Ali Safar, Muhammad Saddiq, Hajji Hasan and Hajji Ghulam Husain, three of whom became merchants – see the family tree in Table 3.2.

The eldest son, Hajji Mirza Muhammad 'Ali Safar, was born in Bushehr in 1778. In 1802, at the age of 24, Muhammad 'Ali moved to his father's hometown of Hillah. He lived there for six or seven years, during which time he purchased two large date plantations near Basrah. These estates remained in family hands for over a hundred years and were worth nearly a quarter of a million rupees by the late nineteenth century.³⁸ In 1809, Muhammad 'Ali moved to Mocha, where he established a merchant house, known locally as Bayt al-'Ajami (the Persian's House).³⁹ After trading for 20 years in Yemen, he handed the business over to his second eldest son, Hajji 'Abd al-Rasul (b. c.1805), who remained there for the rest of his life. From Mocha, Muhammad 'Ali moved to Bahrain where he established another merchant house, Bayt Safar. One can estimate the degree of his affluence during this time from a loan he made to the East India Company for Rs 7,000,⁴⁰ which was about three times the monthly salary of Britain's highly paid Political Resident in the Gulf.⁴¹ At some point between 1835 and 1839, Muhammad 'Ali took leave of his post to go on *hajj* to Mecca. He continued to live in Bahrain until 1842, when he moved to Bombay where his brother Muhammad Saddiq lived. He may have purchased his substantial properties in Bombay's Fort district at this time.⁴² In the last year or two of his life, Muhammad 'Ali moved back to his hometown of Bushehr, having established an extensive family business network with sons in Bushehr, Mocha, Bahrain and Bombay. Hillah and Basrah may have also been included in this network, as was Muscat, where another merchant house was managed by Muhammad 'Ali's brother Hajji Hasan.⁴³

After Muhammad 'Ali's death in 1845, his son in Mocha, Hajji 'Abd al-Rasul, carried on as before; his two sons in Bombay, Hajji Muhammad Jafar and Hajji Muhammad Hasan, looked after the family's business interests in India; and his eldest son, Hajji 'Abd al-Nabi Khan, took over the family business in Bushehr. Hajji 'Abd al-Nabi Khan had been born in Hillah around 1803 and had worked under his father in Mocha, Bahrain, Bombay and Bushehr. By the 1850s, 'Abd al-Nabi had become one of the principal merchants of Bushehr.⁴⁴ One can estimate the degree of his affluence from a loan he made in 1863 to the Commander of HMS *Clyde* for Ks 8,000 (Rs 3,200), a loan which enabled the *Clyde* to return

Table 3.2 The Safar family tree (abridged)



Note
The family changed its name to al-Safar in the 1960s.

to India after the British Political Resident in the Gulf (headquartered at Bushehr) had refused to pay any funds out of the Residency treasury.⁴⁵ This sum was about one-and-a-half times the Resident's large monthly salary.⁴⁶ 'Abd al-Nabi maintained substantial business interests in Bushehr, Bahrain and Bombay.⁴⁷ He resided mainly in Bushehr in the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s, but in the 1870s and 1880s he also lived in Bahrain for a large part of every year. In Bushehr he was assisted by his son, Agha Muhammad Rahim, and in Bahrain he was helped by his nephew, Hajji Ahmad Khan (son of Hajji 'Abd al-Rasul in Mocha), who had moved to the Gulf from Mocha many years before.

When 'Abd al-Nabi died in 1884, Ahmad continued to run things in Bahrain while Muhammad Rahim took over the family business in Bushehr. When Ahmad himself died in 1891, Bushehr's economy had begun to decline while that of Manamah was prospering. In 1893, therefore, Muhammad Rahim decided to move to Bahrain and make the island the new centre of the family's business operations in the Gulf. He left affairs in Bushehr in the hands of his Christian business partner, John Zaytun,⁴⁸ and moved into Bayt Safar in Manamah, where his cousin, father and grandfather had lived before him. Bayt Safar commanded a prominent position on the waterfront and was reputedly large enough to have accommodated a thousand safety-seekers during the battle of Manamah (1842) in the first Bahraini civil war.⁴⁹ As with any building of note in Manamah at the time, it was most probably constructed in what William Palgrave called 'the Persian style of architecture', which he described as 'elegant and spacious, with ogival arches, balconies, terraces, porticoes, and latticed windows'.⁵⁰ These buildings, in which dwelt 'the nobler and wealthier inhabitants, merchants, proprietors, and men of government', were typically two storeys high, with a large inner courtyard and deep verandas, onto which opened many slim double doors surmounted by semicircular stained-glass windows.⁵¹ They stood in sharp contrast to the 'mere palm-leaf cottages', known as *barasti* huts, which accounted for the majority of dwellings in Manamah until the 1920s.⁵² When Muhammad Rahim died in 1900, the family returned to Bushehr and later sold Bayt Safar for Rs 22,000 (£1,466-13-3) – eight times the Gulf Resident's monthly salary of Rs 2,750 – a vast sum considering the now dilapidated condition of the house.⁵³ Muhammad Rahim's nephew 'Abd al-Rasul bin Ahmad remained in Bahrain. His descendants still live there, but they have long since lost touch with their cousins in Bushehr, Shiraz, Basrah, Hillah, Muscat, Mocha, Hodaydah and Bombay.⁵⁴

The Safar family's great mobility in the nineteenth century had a demonstrable influence on its members. Hajji Mirza Muhammad 'Ali Safar (1778–1845) was born in Bushehr; lived in Hillah, Mocha, Bahrain, Bushehr and Bombay; was a Persian, Ottoman, and possibly British Indian subject; wrote his letters in Farsi and Arabic; and spoke Arabic and Farsi. His title, *mirza* (a Shi'i title indicating that one is descended from the Prophet through one's mother), is a common one in Persia, suggesting that his mother or maternal grandmother was Persian. His eldest son, Hajji 'Abd al-Nabi Khan Safar (c.1803–84), was born in Hillah to a Persian mother from Bushehr; lived in Mocha, Bushehr, Bahrain and Bombay;

was a Persian subject; used the Persian title of *khan* (esquire, gentleman);⁵⁵ kept his business records in Farsi; and spoke Farsi, Arabic, English and possibly Hindi. His brother, Hajji Muhammad Jafar, was born in Bombay to a Persian mother from Shiraz; lived in Bombay and Bushehr; was a British Indian subject; dressed in the style of an Indian merchant in Bombay; and most likely spoke Farsi, Arabic and Hindi – see Figure 3.3. ‘Abd al-Nabi’s son Agha Muhammad Rahim (c.1830s–1900) was born in Bushehr to a Persian mother; lived in Bushehr and Bahrain; was a Persian and Ottoman subject; used the Persian title *agha* (commander, gentleman); dressed in a hybrid Persian–Arab style (see Figure 3.2); wrote in Farsi and Arabic; and spoke Farsi, Arabic, English and possibly Hindi.

Hajji Mirza Muhammad ‘Ali Safar’s second eldest son, Hajji ‘Abd al-Rasul (b. c.1805), was born in Iraq to a Persian mother from Bushehr; grew up in Hillah; lived in Mocha; wrote his letters in Farsi and Arabic; was described by the British as ‘Persian’;⁵⁶ and was most probably a British Indian subject. Hajji ‘Abd al-Rasul’s eldest son, Hajji Mirza Ahmad Khan (c.1820/30s–91), was born in Mocha to a Persian mother from Bushehr; lived in Bushehr and Bahrain; was a Persian and British Indian subject; wrote his letters in Arabic; spoke Arabic and Farsi; and used the Persian titles *mirza* and *khan*.⁵⁷ Ahmad’s eldest son, ‘Abd al-Rasul (c.1880–1928), was born in Bushehr to a Persian mother; lived in Bahrain; wrote his letters in Arabic and Farsi; and dressed in the style of a Yemeni



Figure 3.3 Hajji Muhammad Jafar Safar, Bombay, c.1865 (Bushehri Archive, Bahrain).

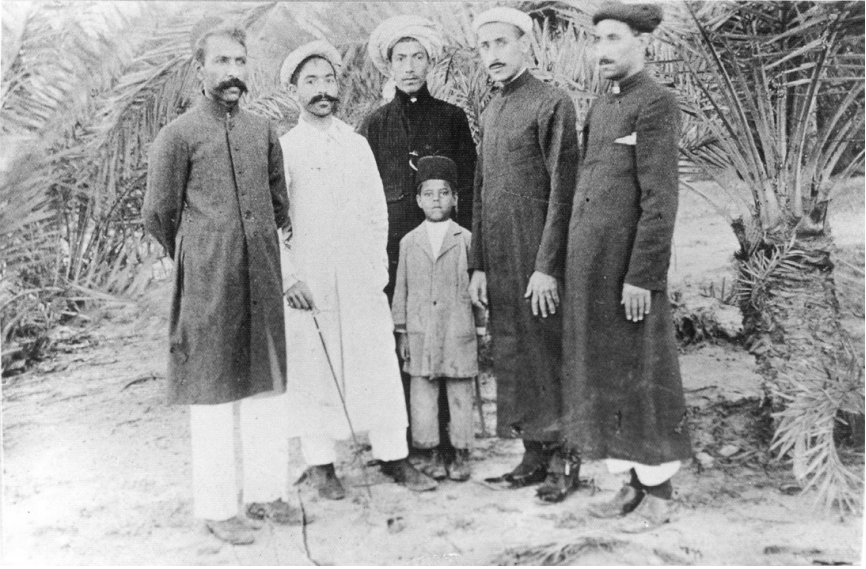


Figure 3.4 ‘Abd al-Rasul Safar (centre) and his son, Ahmad, Bahrain, c.1910 (Bushehri Archive, Bahrain).



Figure 3.5 Agha Muhammad Khalil Sharif (centre) – the nephew and son-in-law of Agha Muhammad Rahim Saraf – seated with Major Francis Prideaux (Political Agent at Bahrain 1904–9), Bushehr, c.1909 (Bushehri Archive, Bahrain).

merchant (possibly in the fashion of his father) – see Figure 3.4. ‘Abd al-Rasul’s son Ahmad (1905–89) was born in Bahrain to a Persian mother from Behbahan in south-western Persia; spoke Farsi as a mother tongue; dressed in a Persian style in his youth; was educated in Bombay; lived in Iran and Bahrain; and was a Bahraini citizen – see Figure 3.4. Ahmad’s children were all born in Bahrain to an Iraqi Arab mother from Karbala; speak Arabic as a mother tongue; and are Bahraini citizens. Ahmad’s eldest son, Jan (Jahan), now lives near Manchester. Jan’s four children were born to British mothers; speak English as a mother tongue; live in Britain; and have a British–Arab identity.⁵⁸

One of the natural results of the Safars’ close connections with Iraq, Persia, Bahrain, Oman, Yemen, India and Britain was their intermarriage with local families. The most notable connection through marriage was with the Sharif family of Bushehr.⁵⁹ The Safars intermarried with the Sharifs at least ten times between the 1770s and 1890s, creating a close bond between the two families – see Table 3.1.⁶⁰ Sharif family history explains how the Safars and Sharifs are really branches of the same family. Members of the two families in Bahrain today still regard themselves as distant cousins, although they no longer behave as a single family – see Figure 3.5.⁶¹

The Safars’ relations with the rulers of Bahrain and Kuwait

The Safars exercised considerable influence with Shaykh ‘Isa al-Khalifah (ruler of Bahrain 1869–1923) and Shaykh Mubarak al-Sabah (ruler of Kuwait 1896–1915), but this was not unusual. Before oil, most affluent merchants enjoyed some degree of influence with local rulers. Jill Crystal and Fatma al-Sayegh have studied this sphere of influence in Kuwait, Qatar and Dubai, but the patterns they identify can be seen in other Gulf shaykhdoms as well.⁶² Crystal argues that merchant influence stemmed from the Gulf rulers’ economic dependence on the merchants. A substantial portion of the rulers’ revenues came from the merchants through the customs duties and other taxes that flowed from a prosperous entrepôt economy. Gulf rulers also depended upon occasional loans from the wealthiest merchants. Beyond this, pearl merchants also had economic control over large portions of the local population through employment and indebtedness. All this gave the wealthiest merchants considerable political influence with the rulers. The rulers could not afford to ignore the opinions of powerful merchants within their shaykhdoms. A wealthy merchant’s status ensured him regular, predictable access to his ruler’s *majlis* (court) and gave him input into decision making. The merchants’ access to decision making, Crystal notes, ‘was primarily informal. Their influence on the policies of the ruler was casual and left no written record. The most common kind of informal influence was proximity: the influence of those with everyday access to the ruling family through marriage, friendship and court presence.’⁶³ The political dynamics of a given issue could see a merchant united with his ruler against other merchants, or united with other merchants against his ruler. Politically, the power relationship between the rulers and the merchants

was one of counterbalance; economically, it was one of interdependence.⁶⁴ The result, says Crystal, was a political structure consisting of ‘a ruling Shaikh, whose pre-eminence was secure, but constrained by the merchant élite, tied to the economy of pearling and trade’.⁶⁵

The Safars’ close relations with the al-Khalifah date from 1869, when Hajji ‘Abd al-Nabi Safar and his son Agha Muhammad Rahim helped Shaykh ‘Isa assume the rulership of Bahrain in the wake of the shaykhdom’s second civil war.⁶⁶ One account states that when Shaykh ‘Isa returned to Bahrain in early December 1869, he found his late father’s house in Muharraq in ruins and the government treasury empty. Muhammad Rahim, acting on his father’s orders, handed over the use of Bayt Safar in Manamah and presented the Shaykh ‘with a gift of about 100,000 Muhammed Shahi Riels [Rs 40,000] for the purpose of providing the preliminary requirements of the Emirate’.⁶⁷ In appreciation for this support, Shaykh ‘Isa granted the Safars a concession on customs duty in perpetuity and gave them some control over the island’s pearling fleet.⁶⁸ Relations between Shaykh ‘Isa and the Safars were very close for the next 25 years, although the al-Khalifah never intermarried with them – possibly for political reasons (to limit the Safars’ influence with the ruling family) and possibly for religious reasons (because the Safars were not Sunni). Shaykh ‘Isa was especially good friends with Hajji Ahmad Khan Safar (c.1820/30s–91); in the 1880s the Shaykh presented him with a horse and two date plantations south-west of Manamah. One of the plantations remains in the Safar family to this day.⁶⁹ When Shaykh ‘Isa’s son Shaykh Hamad visited the British Resident in Bushehr in November 1897, he stayed at Bayt Safar, next to the British Residency – see Figure 3.1.⁷⁰

Muhammad Rahim Safar also enjoyed a close friendship with Shaykh Mubarak of Kuwait.⁷¹ During the winter of 1898–9, Britain’s Gulf Resident, Lieutenant-Colonel Malcolm Meade (1897–1900), took advantage of this by asking Muhammad Rahim to assist him in the negotiation of the Anglo-Kuwaiti Exclusive Agreement of 1899.⁷² The Exclusive Agreement, though kept secret at the time, brought Kuwait into the British fold by placing the shaykhdom’s foreign relations under British control – at least in theory. The Agreement was the shaykhdom’s first step in its transformation into a British-protected state like the coastal shaykhdoms of the lower Gulf. The Resident reported to India that Muhammad Rahim had been ‘of considerable assistance’ to him during these negotiations.⁷³ Muhammad Rahim was even made a signatory to the Agreement, his name appearing just below Shaykh Mubarak’s.⁷⁴

The Safars’ collaboration with the British

Protection was one of the greatest concerns of Gulf merchants before the twentieth century. Transnational merchants trading in the Gulf had to be constantly on guard against pirates and bedouin raiders. If they fell out of favour with the local ruler, their property might be confiscated by members of the local ruling family. To gain protection for themselves, their businesses and their families, therefore, members of merchant families such as the Safars frequently allied

themselves with European governments or companies. Membership on the staff of an American, Belgian, British, French, German or Russian consulate or company in the Gulf usually carried with it the much-sought-after status of 'protected person'. All non-Britons in the employ of the British government or British companies, for example, were known as 'British-protected persons' and were entitled to the protection and 'good offices' (diplomatic representation and mediation) of British civil and military officers around the world. If an injustice occurred against a British-protected person or his family in the Gulf, the Gulf Resident was obligated to intervene on his behalf. This practice discouraged harassment of British employees and protected their private businesses as well. Their ships, goods, families and staff were all protected, giving them the same advantages British merchants enjoyed in the Gulf. They had a right to the Resident's good offices if their goods were seized and were entitled to the protection of the Indian Navy and Royal Navy in times of trouble. In Bahrain, they were also entitled by treaty to receive 'the treatment and consideration of the subjects and dependants of the most favoured people', including the right to pay no more than 5 per cent *ad valorem* on imported goods.⁷⁵

Agha Muhammad Rahim Safar once explained how his family 'originally took up the work to get British protection'.⁷⁶ As shown in Table 3.3, six members of the Safar family served the British Government of India as Political Agents between 1829 and 1900. Five of the men had held the posts of Political Assistant (*munshi*), Confidential News Agent or Deputy Agent prior to their appointment as Political Agent. A seventh member of the family, Muhammad Safar (the grandson of Hajji 'Abd al-Nabi Khan), served as a *munshi* at the Gulf Residency headquarters in Bushehr in the 1900s, while an eighth member of the family, Ahmad Safar (the grandson of Hajji Mirza Ahmad Khan), served as a translator with the Royal Navy's Gulf Squadron in the 1930s. Two patterns emerge from this list. Four members of the family served as British Agents in Bahrain; in effect, they ran the British Agency as a family business for 34 years between 1834 and 1900. Five of the Agents were themselves the sons of British Agents – a reflection of the practice by some Gulf families of closely associating themselves with a particular European government or company, generation after generation. This echoes the tradition of family service with the East India Company and British Government of India found in many British families.

Unlike the Safars, however, the closely related Sharif family tended to stay out of the political limelight. As Table 3.4 shows, four members of the family worked for the British Government of India as *munshis* and one served as Deputy Agent, but none ever held the post of Political Agent. A fifth member of the family, Agha Muhammad Tahir al-Sharif, served as the Shipping Agent for Gray, Mackenzie & Co. (the Gulf Agent of the British India Steam Navigation Company) from the 1920s to the 1950s. Sharif family history tells how they were Grade I or II merchants in the nineteenth century.⁷⁷ By the twentieth century, however, their fortunes had declined significantly. Even Agha Muhammad Khalil, who inherited half of Agha Muhammad Rahim Safar's fortune in 1900 – including Bayt Safar in Manamah and the two Safar family estates near Basrah – lost everything by the

Table 3.3 Britain's agents in Arabia and Persia from the Safar family

<i>Name</i>	<i>Post</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Period</i>
1. Hajji Mirza Muhammad 'Ali Safar	<i>munshi</i> (Political Assistant) Political Agent	Bahrain Bahrain	c.1829–1834 1834–1842
2. Hajji 'Abd al-Rasul Safar	Broker/Political Agent	Mocha	c.1829–?
3. Hajji Muhammad Safar	Deputy Political Agent Political Agent	Mocha Hudaydah	c.1829–? c.1875
4. Hajji 'Abd al-Nabi Khan Safar	Deputy Political Agent <i>munshi</i> and Confidential News Agent	Bahrain Bushehr Bahrain	c.1834–1842 c.1842–1871 1872–1884
5. Hajji Mirza Ahmad Khan Safar	Political Agent <i>munshi</i> ? <i>munshi</i>	Mocha Bushehr	c.1829–1856 1857–1872
6. Agha Muhammad Rahim Safar	Deputy Political Agent Political Agent <i>munshi</i> and Confidential News Agent Political Agent	Bahrain Bahrain Bahrain Bushehr Bahrain	1872–1884 1884–1891 c.1860s–1893 1893–1900

Note

The family changed its name to al-Safar in the 1960s.

Table 3.4 Britain's *munshis* in Arabia and Persia from the Sharif family

<i>Name</i>	<i>Post</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Period</i>
1. Agha Muhammad Karim Sharif	<i>munshi</i>	Bushehr	c.1890s
2. Agha Muhammad Khalil Sharif	Deputy Political Agent Dragoman (chief <i>munshi</i>) <i>munshi</i> /Deputy Political Agent Dragoman	Bahrain Bushehr Kuwait Bushehr	1893–1900 1900–1904 1904–1909 1909–1924
3. Agha Muhammad Muhsin Sharif	<i>munshi</i> <i>munshi</i>	Bahrain Bushehr	1893–1896 1896–1924
4. Agha Muhammad al-Sharif	<i>munshi</i>	Bahrain	c.1920s–1940

Note

The family changed its name to al-Sharif in the early twentieth century.

1930s. This might explain in part why the British never appointed the Sharifs as Political Agents. By the time they entered Crown service in the 1890s, they were no longer the sort of extremely affluent and influential men the British were looking to recruit as agents. It would also explain why Safar–Sharif intermarriage did not continue past the 1890s. Safar family history records how Zainab Behbahani, the status-conscious daughter-in-law of Hajji Ahmad Safar (Agent 1884–91), forbade her children to marry into the Sharif family, despite the fact that the two families were related.⁷⁸

The Safars' and Sharifs' local knowledge, networks of merchant houses and extensive social contacts throughout the region were of tremendous value to the British, as indicated by this letter of commendation from a British political officer in Bushehr:

As I am shortly proceeding to India, I take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to Agha Mahomed Rahim ibn Hajee Abdun Nabee [Safar], who has repeatedly proved of great use in obtaining correct information, the securing of which required much tact, delicacy of management, and personal influence. I have found him trustworthy, sincere, zealous and ever willing to carry out any work entrusted to him to the best of his ability. He is well informed about local matters and, having a large circle of friends at Bushire, Busreh, & other ports in [the] Persian Gulf, correct information can always be obtained through him, & I feel quite certain that as a Confidential Agent his services are indispensable to the Bushire Residency. The influence which he has acquired locally makes him a very useful person in certain negotiations of delicate nature. I do, therefore, with pleasure bear this testimony to his worth, expressing my sense of esteem and sincere regard for him.⁷⁹

The Safar and Sharif family manuscripts in the Bushehri Archive in Bahrain include many statements and letters of this nature from British political officers attesting to the high social status, transnational connections and political influence

of many members of the two families. Just as the Safar family's affluence was evident from the size of Bayt Safar in Bushehr, their close connection with Britain and the Gulf Residency was symbolized by the house's location beside the Residency headquarters – see Figure 3.1.

While the Safars already enjoyed status, influence and wealth, association with the dominant power in the region offered prospects for further improvement. A Safar's privileged status was symbolized by the Union Jack, which flew outside his house to proclaim that he was the local representative of the British Government of India. The Union Jack stood for imperial power, and its presence would have reinforced the impression that the British Agent was the most influential man in a ruler's domain outside the ruler's family. He represented the dominant power in the region, Britain, and had regular, direct access to the most powerful men in Arabia, the local rulers and shaykhs. If Britain's Resident in Bushehr was 'the Uncrowned King of the Persian Gulf', as Lord Curzon dubbed him,⁸⁰ then his locally recruited agents were the Gulf's uncrowned princes. This would explain why the Safars were willing to run the British agencies at what at first appears to be a financial loss to themselves. The Agency-related expenses of Hajji 'Abd al-Nabi Khan Safar (Bahrain Agent 1872–84), for example, were over four-and-a-half times what he received from the British Government of India.⁸¹ But this loss was a small price to pay for the protection and enhanced status, influence and contacts he enjoyed as a British agent. These benefits profited his business, enabling him to recoup the Agency operating expenses as part of his larger business profits.

Transnational merchants such as the Safars were highly effective as British agents in the Gulf. Britain's Resident in Bushehr was responsible for maintaining contact with the dozens of rulers, chiefs and governors in Arabia and Persia, enforcing Britain's treaties with the local rulers, staying informed about events throughout the region, and protecting British interests. Transnational merchants were not only willing to work for small salaries, totally incommensurate with the value of their services, they were also well suited to help the Gulf Resident with these duties. They generally had extensive social and business contacts throughout the Gulf and beyond. Most had relatives, with whom they were in regular touch, handling the family business in many of the region's ports and market towns: Baghdad, Basrah, Muhammarah, Bushehr, Shiraz, Isfahan, Lingah, Bandar 'Abbas, Manamah, Muscat, Aden, Mocha, Hudaydah and Bombay. The Safar family had members in eight of these towns in the nineteenth century. The top transnational merchant families in the Gulf still operate in this way.⁸² Merchants such as the Safars were well placed to be the eyes and ears of the Gulf Resident. They knew the region better than the British, spoke the languages of the Gulf better, and had better local and regional intelligence networks. They also enjoyed a high status within Gulf society and a resulting influence with the Gulf rulers that was independent of their association with the British Government of India. It was only by tapping into the transnational mercantile networks of the Gulf that successive Gulf Residents were able to maintain political contacts, stay informed and protect British interests as well as they did in the nineteenth

century. By employing wealthy transnational merchants such as the Safars as political agents, Gulf Residents were also able to take advantage of the political relationship between the merchants and the rulers. Today, such locally recruited agents are known as honorary consuls, but their role is now confined, for the most part, to non-political duties.⁸³

There were a number of disadvantages to employing merchants as agents instead of British political officers. The most obvious was the possibility of a conflict of interest between their official duties and their private business pursuits. But there would have been little incentive for the merchants to continue working for the Resident if their association with the British Government of India did not benefit their business interests. The British admitted that the salaries they paid these merchants did not reflect the true value of their services.⁸⁴ One Resident, writing about Agha Muhammad Rahim Safar (Bahrain Agent 1893–1900), explained how

He has the reputation of being a well-to-do merchant, and it would, I may say at once, be difficult to get a man of his position to carry on the duties he performs on the pay of the post, Rs 100 per mensem, if he were not allowed to trade. Mohamed Rahim and his predecessors no doubt have only held it because it gave them prestige and assisted them in their private commercial undertakings.⁸⁵

Because the Gulf Residency was always run on a tight budget, Residents could not afford to pay these merchants the same salaries as British officers. By both permitting them to engage in trade and allowing their businesses to benefit from their association with the Residency, the Resident compensated them for their inadequate salaries. Whatever conflicts of interest there were in mixing trade with politics, most of the Residents and their superiors in India seem to have considered this a price that had to be paid for the services of such well-connected and influential men as the Safars.

Transnational connections in the Gulf, then and now

Nineteenth-century eastern Arabia was closely linked to Persia and India through trade. Gulf Arab merchants such as the Safars resided in Persian and Indian ports, and Persian and Indian merchants resided in Arabian ports. This commercial connection naturally resulted in a strong Persian and Indian cultural influence on eastern Arabia's ports and people – clearly evident in the styles of architecture, clothing and cuisine. Persian- and Indian-style buildings, often built by Persians and Indians, dominated eastern Arabian ports. Arabian dhows were built with wood imported from India. Kashmiri shawls adorned the heads of the ruling families of Bahrain, Abu Dhabi and Dubai; white Persian-style turbans, such as those in Figure 3.2, were worn by Shi'i Arab elites such as the Safars throughout the Gulf region; and colourful Indian-style turbans were favoured by Omanis, northern Emiratis, Qataris and Bahrainis – especially the *hawalah*

(see the man standing in Figure 3.2).⁸⁶ Many in the Gulf Arab elites had Persian or Indian wives, whose children spoke Farsi, Urdu, Baluchi or Hindi, in addition to Arabic. Many were graduates of Bombay schools, as was Ahmad Safar (1905–89). Gulf Arabs ate their lamb and fish with curry and rice from India. In these and countless other ways, eastern Arabia's ports and people were as much a part of the Indian Ocean world as they were a part of the Arab world. Gulf historians have much to learn, therefore, from the work of Indian Ocean historians such as K. N. Chaudhuri.⁸⁷

Twenty-first-century eastern Arabia remains a transnational space, but the nature of that transnationalism has changed. Iranians and Indians still live in Gulf Arab ports, but few Gulf Arabs have connections with Iran or India today. The predominant foreign influence is now British and American. Most Gulf Arab elites have strong ties with Britain or America, or both: they spend their summers there and have degrees from British and American universities. Many in the small Gulf states became Westernized in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s or 1970s – speaking English, adopting some Western ways and wearing Western attire (from the popular blazer-and-*thob* combination to the full suit and tie). Buildings constructed during this time were often designed by Western architects and built along Western lines. This process of Westernization was reinforced by the presence of large Western expatriate communities in the Gulf.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Gulf Arab states underwent a further cultural reorientation. During this time most Gulf Arab elites abandoned Western attire and adopted Gulf Arab national dress in an assertion of regional Arab identity. One of the reasons for this was the perception that Westernization had begun to threaten their cultural identity.⁸⁸ Another reason was the growing need to distinguish between themselves and the ever-expanding number of expatriates in the Gulf, especially the Arab expatriates.⁸⁹ National dress became the hallmark of citizenship in the Gulf. The oil wealth of the 1950s and 1960s (and, in the case of Bahrain, of the 1930s and 1940s) had released the ruling families from their dependence on the merchants and enabled them to build a modern state infrastructure. To consolidate their new power base, the rulers granted the vast majority of government positions to members of their own families or to other Sunni Arabs (and Ibadi Arabs in Oman) of similar Najdi descent and tribal affiliation – often from elite merchant families. They also promoted a Gulf Arab national identity as a necessary prerequisite for participation in government and a desirable identity for all citizens, especially the elites. With the sole exception of Oman, Persian- and Indian-style headdress was replaced with a purely Arabian headdress: the Najdi '*agal*' (head rope), worn with either the Nadji *shimagh* (the red-and-white chequered headscarf of central Arabia) or the white *ghutra* indigenous to eastern Arabia.⁹⁰ Since the 1980s, the ruling families have strongly emphasized the importance of Gulf Arab culture, tribal lineage and Sunni Islam (Ibadi Islam in Oman). The results of this can be seen everywhere: in the wearing of 'traditional' Arabian bedouin clothing for all but the most junior members of government, in the creation of national museums celebrating the heritage of Sunni Gulf Arabs (Ibadi Arabs in Oman), in the construction of vast Sunni

mosques (Ibadi mosques in Oman) and in the Arabesque design of new buildings. Persian- and Indian-style buildings continue to dominate the historical districts of the port cities, but their architecture is now described as 'Arabian'. At the Portuguese fort in Bahrain, one finds a large sign greeting visitors to 'Bahrain Fort' with an explanation of how the fort is not Portuguese, but Arab. Multi-culturalism among Gulf citizens is everywhere downplayed and intermarriage between Gulf Arabs and non-Arabs is discouraged. One now rarely sees the Arab-Persian or Arab-Indian hybridity and blending of cultures that once characterized transnational Arab merchant families in the Gulf. This explains why Gulf Arabs with historical transnational connections, such as Easa Saleh al-Gurg whose story began this chapter, have begun to downplay their non-Arab heritage, and why, in an ironic reversal of the transnationalism of the past, some Gulf citizens of Indian and Sunni Persian descent have begun to Arabize – speaking Arabic, adopting Arab ways and wearing Gulf Arab national dress – although still speaking Baluchi, Gujarati, Hindi, Urdu or Farsi at home.⁹¹

The case of the Safar family thus offers us a rare glimpse into nineteenth-century Gulf society, long before the politicization of Gulf Arab identity, revealing a far more transnational elite culture than that now promoted in the Gulf Arab states. In contrast to Gulf merchant families today, a nineteenth-century transnational family did not have to Arabize to gain acceptance and become influential. Family members did not merely reside in the ports of Arabia, Iraq, Persia and India; they were connected to these places through culture, language, marriage and birth. The result was a blending of cultures into a complex transnational family identity. The case of the Safar family also illustrates the ways in which transnational merchant families operated in the Gulf before oil. These families had an intimate knowledge of local languages and politics, as well as extensive social and business contacts, throughout the Gulf and beyond. Many had considerable influence with local rulers. Because they could provide both intelligence and influence, senior members of these families made the best possible intermediaries between foreign powers and local rulers. By employing the Safars and others like them as representatives, the British were able to operate within the indigenous political systems and intelligence networks of the Gulf. Men like the Safars, who constituted the vast majority of British agents in the nineteenth-century Gulf, connected the region to that most transnational entity of all, the British empire.

Abbreviations

Asst.	Assistant
EIC	East India Company
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
For.	Foreign
Gov.	Governor
Govt	Government
HMG	Her/His Majesty's Government

HMS	Her/His Majesty's Ship
Ks	Krans (principal unit of currency of Persia)
n.	footnote
OIOC	Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library, London
PRPG	Political Resident in the Persian Gulf
reg.	register
Rs	Rupees
Sec.	Secretary
SNOPG	Senior Naval Officer in the Persian Gulf

Notes

- 1 This chapter could not have been written without the invaluable assistance of 'Ali Akbar Bushehri, caretaker of the Safar family manuscript collection and Bahrain's foremost historian of its national history. Research for this chapter and several other works was generously funded by the Bahrain–British Foundation, which paid for a year of fieldwork in Bahrain, and partially funded by the Society for Arabian Studies, which covered some of the expenses of a year of archival work at the British Library in London. I would also like to thank Gloria Onley, 'Ali Akbar Bushehri, Jan al-Safar, James Piscatori, Nelida Fuccaro, Mandana Limbert and Gabriele vom Bruck for their helpful comments on this chapter.
- 2 W. G. Palgrave, *Narrative of a Year's Journey through Central and Eastern Arabia (1862–63)*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1865), vol. II, pp. 211–12.
- 3 G. N. Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1892), pp. 467–8.
- 4 P. Rizzo, *Merchants and Faith: Muslim Commerce and Culture in the Indian Ocean* (Boulder: Westview, 1995); U. Freitag and W. G. Clarence-Smith (eds), *Hadhrami Traders, Scholars, and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s–1960s* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997); D. Lombard and J. Aubin (eds), *Asian Merchants and Businessmen in the Indian Ocean and the China Sea* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000); and C. Markovits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750–1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). These authors are building on the pioneering works of Ashin Das Gupta, Calvin Allen and Philip Curtin. See Das Gupta's collected essays 1960–92 in *Merchants of Maritime India, 1500–1800* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994); Allen's much-quoted article 'The Indian Merchant Community of Masqat', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 44/1 (1981): 39–53; and Curtin's famous book, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Also see J. E. Wills, 'Maritime Asia 1500–1800: The Interactive Emergence of European Domination', *American Historical Review* 98/1 (February 1993): 83–105.
- 5 H. Fattah, *The Politics of Regional Trade in Iraq, Arabia and the Gulf, 1745–1900* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 77–83.
- 6 F. Broeze, 'Kuwait before Oil: The Dynamics of Morphology of an Arab Port City', in F. Broeze (ed.), *Gateways of Asia: Port Cities of Asia in the 13th–20th Centuries* (London: Kegan Paul, 1997), pp. 149–90; N. Fuccaro, 'Islam and Urban Space: Ma'tams in Bahrain before Oil', *Newsletter of the Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM)* 3 (July 1999): 12; N. Fuccaro, 'Understanding the Urban History of Bahrain', *Critique: Journal of Critical Studies of the Middle East* 17/2 (2000): 49–81; N. Fuccaro, 'Visions of the City: Urban Studies on the Gulf', *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 35/2 (2001): 175–87; F. al-Sayegh, 'Merchants' Role in a Changing Society: The Case of Dubai, 1900–90', *Middle Eastern Studies* 34/1 (1998): 87–102; and K. McPherson, 'Port Cities as Nodal Points of Change: The Indian Ocean, 1890s–1920s', in L. T. Fawaz and

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- 7 J. R. L. Carter, *Leading Merchant Families of Saudi Arabia* (London: Scorpion, 1979); J. R. L. Carter, *Merchant Families of Kuwait* (London: Scorpion, 1984); M. Field, *The Merchants: The Big Business Families of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1984); K. M. Kanoo, *The House of Kanoo: A Century of Arabian Family Business* (London: London Centre for Arab Studies, 1997); S. Mahdavi, *For God, Mammon, and Country: A Nineteenth-Century Persian Merchant, Haj Muhammad Hassan Amin al-Zarb* (Boulder: Westview, 1999); and G. Naulleau, 'Islam and Trade: The Case of Some Merchant Families from the Gulf', in Lombard and Aubin (eds), *Asian Merchants and Businessmen*, pp. 297–309.
 - 8 E. S. al-Gurg, *The Wells of Memory: An Autobiography* (London: John Murray, 1998), pp. 2–3.
 - 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.
 - 10 Article 1, Constitution of the State of Kuwait, 1962.
 - 11 Article 1(a), Constitution of the Kingdom of Bahrain, 2002.
 - 12 Article 1, Basic Law of Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 1992.
 - 13 Article 1, Provisional Basic Statute of Rule of the State of Qatar, 1972.
 - 14 Article 6, Constitution of the UAE, 1972.
 - 15 Article 1, Basic Law of the Sultanate of Oman, 1996.
 - 16 In 2000, the Prime Minister of Bahrain appointed three Persian Bahrainis and one Indian Bahraini to the country's *majlis al-shurah* (Consultative Council), followed by another three Persian Bahrainis in 2002. In 2001–3, the King of Bahrain appointed three Persian Bahrainis to senior positions in government, including the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dr Muhammad 'Abdul Ghafar. This inclusion of non-Arabs in government has a recent constitutional basis: 'There shall be no discrimination among them [the citizens of Bahrain] on the basis of sex, origin, language, religion, or creed' (Article 18, Constitution of the Kingdom of Bahrain, 2002).
 - 17 G. E. Fuller and R. R. Francke, *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims* (New York: Palgrave, 1999), pp. 54, 136, 167, 185–6.
 - 18 Interview with Khalid Kanoo, 23 July 1999, Bahrain; correspondence, 12 Apr. 2003.
 - 19 Interviews with 'Ali Akbar Bushehri, Oct.–Nov. 1998, Bahrain.
 - 20 For an explanation of how general merchants in the Gulf operate, see Field, *The Merchants*, pp. 292–310.
 - 21 Interviews with 'Ali Akbar Bushehri, Mar.–Aug. 1999, Bahrain.
 - 22 A Grade I merchant was an international wholesale trader who maintained a large fleet of cargo ships, employed an international network of commercial agents and had a minimum annual income of Ks500,000. For more details, see J. Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth Century Gulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2004), appendix c.
 - 23 Declaration by Agha Muhammad Rahim Safar (will of 'Abd al-Nabi Safar), 20 Apr. 1886; voucher by Muhammad Rahim Safar to N. D. Fracis, 3 Aug. 1892; Muhammad Rahim Safar to Meade (PRPG), 13 Oct. 1898; note by Muhammad Khalil Sharif, 26 Dec. 1918; and Sir P. Cox, London, to Muhammad Khalil Sharif, Basrah, 10 Sept. 1934 (all documents in the Bushehri Archive, Bahrain). Interviews with Nader al-Safar, June–Aug. 1999 and 'Ali Akbar Bushehri, Mar.–Aug. 1999, Bahrain.
 - 24 Interviews with 'Ali Akbar Bushehri, Mar.–Aug. 1999, Bahrain.
 - 25 *Ibid.* For more about the Bakhtiyari, see G. R. Garthwaite, *Khans and Shahs: A Documentary Analysis of the Bakhtiyari in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
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 - 27 Also written as 'aqa'. See Garthwaite, *Khans and Shahs*, p. 39 and interviews with 'Ali Akbar Bushehri, Mar.–Aug. 1999, Bahrain.

- 28 Interviews with Nader al-Safar, June–Aug. 1999, Bahrain; Jan al-Safar, 7–10 Apr. 2000, Altrincham, Cheshire.
- 29 Statement by Agha Muhammad Rahim Safar, 11 Nov. 1898, reg. no. 364/1899, L/P&S/7/112 (OIOC), p. 21.
- 30 Safar family tree by Agha Muhammad Rahim Safar, *ibid.*, and Safar family tree by Ahmad Safar (Jan al-Safar collection, Altrincham, Cheshire).
- 31 For details, see B. Ingham, ‘Men’s Dress in the Arabian Peninsula: Historical and Present Perspectives’, in N. Lindisfarne-Tapper and B. Ingham (eds), *Languages of Dress in the Middle East* (London: Curzon, 1997), pp. 47–8 and p. 6 (Figure 3.1).
- 32 The *hawalah* (sg. *holi*) are Sunni Arabs from southern Persia who link themselves genealogically to one of the tribes of Arabia. Many could be described as ‘Persianized Arabs’ in the nineteenth century. See J. G. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman, and Central Arabia*, vol. II: *Geographical and Statistical* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1908), pp. 754–5; F. I. Khuri, *Tribe and State in Bahrain: The Transformation of Social and Political Authority in an Arab State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 2, 4.
- 33 For the complexities of the term ‘Persian’, see M. Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation: The Construction of National Identity* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), pp. 67–70.
- 34 Interviews with Nader al-Safar, June–Aug. 1999, Bahrain; ‘Adel al-Safar, 23 July 1999, Bahrain; and Jan al-Safar, 7–10 Apr. 2000, 20 July 2000, 26 Aug. 2000, 14 Apr. 2001, 18 Apr. 2001, 9 Apr. 2003, 16 Apr. 2003, Altrincham, Cheshire.
- 35 Interviews with ‘Ali Akbar Bushehri, Mar.–Aug. 1999, Bahrain.
- 36 Gabriele vom Bruck has made the same observation of big Sunni merchant families in Yemen. See ‘Kinship and the Embodiment of History’, *History and Anthropology* 10/4 (1998): 263, 287–8.
- 37 Safar family tree by Ahmad Safar (Jan al-Safar collection, Altrincham, Cheshire).
- 38 Voucher by Muhammad Rahim Safar to N. D. Fracis, 3 Aug. 1892; Muhammad Rahim Safar to Meade (PRPG), 13 Oct. 1898; power of attorney by Louisa Fracis (widow of N. D. Fracis) to Percy James Fracis, 14 Oct. 1909; note by Muhammad Khalil Sharif, 26 Dec. 1918; and Sir P. Cox, London, to Muhammad Khalil Sharif, Basrah, 10 Sept. 1934 (all documents in the Bushehri Archive, Bahrain). Interviews with Nader al-Safar, June–Aug. 1999 and ‘Ali Akbar Bushehri, Mar.–Aug. 1999, Bahrain.
- 39 Telephone interview with Jan al-Safar, 26 Aug. 2000.
- 40 EIC bill of exchange for Rs 7,000 in favour of Hajji Muhammad ‘Ali Safar for 30 days at 1.5 per cent interest, 15 Oct. 1839 (Bushehri Archive, Bahrain).
- 41 J. A. Saldanha, *Précis of the Affairs of the Persian Coast and Islands, 1854–1905* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1906), p. 69. The Resident’s monthly salary in the 1830s was Rs 2,400.
- 42 Declaration by Agha Muhammad Rahim Safar (will of ‘Abd al-Nabi Safar), 20 Apr. 1886 (Bushehri Archive, Bahrain).
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