

# Britain's Native Agents in Arabia and Persia in the Nineteenth Century<sup>1</sup>

JAMES ONLEY

This paper examines British imperial involvement in the Gulf region. It analyzes the infrastructure that enabled Britain's Political Resident in the Gulf and his small cadre of British officers to manage political relations with dozens of rulers and governors in Eastern Arabia and Southern Persia, to maintain the Pax Britannica on the waters of the Gulf, and to protect British interests throughout the region. This analysis reveals a significant difference between the traditional view of Britain's informal empire in the Gulf and the reality of how it actually functioned during the nineteenth century.

The secret to the Gulf Residency's effectiveness was the extent to which its infrastructure worked *within* the indigenous political systems of the Gulf. Arab rulers in need of protection collaborated with the Resident to maintain the Pax Britannica, while influential men from affluent Arab, Persian, and Indian merchant families served as the Resident's "native agents" in over half of the political posts within the Gulf Residency. The result was a collaborative power triangle between the Resident, his native agents, and the rulers that sustained Britain's informal empire in the Gulf during the nineteenth century. This paper employs a neutral definition of collaboration: either 'working with another' in the case of ruler-Resident and ruler-agent relations, or 'working for another' in the case of agent-Resident relations.<sup>2</sup>

Examining two of the three sets of relations within this collaborative triangle — those of agent-Resident and agent-ruler — the paper shows how the Resident was able to effectively employ affluent Gulf merchants as his political agents throughout the region. Table 1 illustrates how extensive Britain's employment of native agents was:

**Table 1: Britain's native agents in Arabia and Persia**

LOCATION / OFFICE	IDENTITY	DATES
<b>Kirman (Persia):</b>		
Native Agent	Persian, Arab	c.1720s, 1840s?–94
<b>Muscat (Arabia):</b>		
Native Broker	Indian	c.1758–1800

Native Agent	Indian	1810–40
Native Agent	Arab, Persian	1843–61, 1866–7
<b>Bushire, Gulf Residency HQ (Persia):</b>		
Native Resident	Persian	1798–1803
<i>Munsbis</i> (1–2)	Arab, Persian	1822–1946
Native Assistant	Indian	1882–99
<b>Shiraz (Persia):</b>		
Native Agent	Indian	1800?–1903
<b>Bahrain (Arabia):</b>		
Native Agent	Indian	1816?–34
Native Agent	Persian, Arab	1834–1900
<b>Qatif (Arabia):</b>		
Native Agent	Arab	1820?–3
<b>Mughu (Persia):</b>		
Native Agent	Arab	1823–30
<b>Sharjah (Arabia):</b>		
Native Agent	Arab, Persian	1823–1949
<b>Lingah (Persia):</b>		
Native Agent	Arab, Persian	1830–1910
<b>Kirmanshah (Persia):</b>		
Native Agent	Arab	1840s?–1903
<b>Basidu (Persia):</b>		
Slave Agent	Arab	1860–74
Native Agent	Indian	1872–82
Coal Agent	Arab	1872?–1911
<b>Gwadar (an Omani enclave in Pakistan):</b>		
Native Agent	Indian	1879–1951
Consular Agent	Indian	1952–8
<b>Kuwait (Arabia):</b>		
Native Agent	Arab	1899–1904
Native Agent	Indian	1905

Until now, these agents have gone largely unnoticed in the history of the Gulf.<sup>3</sup> To correct this imbalance in the historiography, this paper draws upon the private papers of four native agents and interviews with the descendants of three native agents:

**Table 2: Private paper collections in Bahrain<sup>4</sup>**

PRIVATE PAPERS OF /	POSTS HELD
<b>Hajji Mirza Muhammad 'Ali Safar (1778–1845):</b>	
	British Agent in Bahrain, 1834–42
<b>Hajji 'Abd al-Nabi Khan Safar (c.1803–84):</b>	

British *Munshi* (Political Assistant) in Bushire, 1850s–71

British Agent in Bahrain, 1872–84

**Agha Muhammad Rahim Safar (c.1830s–1900):**

British *Munshi* in Bushire, 1860s–93

British Agent in Bahrain, 1893–1900

**Agha Muhammad Khalil Sharif (c.1870–1940):**

Deputy British Agent in Bahrain, 1893–1900

British *Munshi* in Bushire, 1900–4

British *Munshi* in Kuwait, 1904–9

British *Dragoman* (Head *Munshi*) in Bushire, 1909–24

**Table 3: Oral histories in Bahrain**

ORAL HISTORIES OF / POSTS HELD

**Hajji Ibrahim bin Rajab (c.1820s/30s–?):**

Bahrain Agent in Bahrain, 1862–4

**Hajji Mirza Ahmad Khan Safar (c.1820s/30s–91):**

British *Munshi* (Political Assistant) in Bushire, 1857–72

Deputy British Agent in Bahrain, 1872–84

British Agent in Bahrain, 1884–91

**Agha Muhammad Khalil Sharif (c.1870–1940):**

Deputy British Agent in Bahrain, 1893–1900

British *Munshi* in Bushire, 1900–4

British *Munshi* in Kuwait, 1904–9

British *Dragoman* (Head *Munshi*) in Bushire, 1909–24

Native agents not only had an extensive knowledge of local cultures, languages, and politics, which anyone recruited from outside the Gulf could not possibly possess, but also could obtain, through their family, social, and business networks, the intelligence the British needed to operate their informal empire in the Gulf. As wealthy merchants, these agents also enjoyed considerable influence with local rulers and governors. The contacts and influence of the agents enabled the Gulf Resident to tap into local political systems to an extent that would have been otherwise impossible, while at the same time the British connection allowed the agents to increase their wealth and their political influence. These native agents played a crucial role in Arabia and Persia: without them, the British would have been unable to maintain the Pax Britannica in the Gulf in the nineteenth century.

**Robinson's theory of collaboration**

Britain's employment of native agents is best explained by Ronald Robinson's theory of indigenous collaboration.<sup>5</sup> More than thirty years after its first publication in 1972, this ground-breaking theory is still the most comprehensive explanation of how European imperialism worked on the ground. Robinson uses the word 'collaboration' in its original, neutral meaning of 'working jointly with another', as it is used in this paper. His intention is to explain the non-European foundations of European imperialism, not to imply a value judgement.

Robinson explains how Europeans in imperial bureaucracies and supporting institutions overseas were expensive for the European imperial powers to employ.

In order for empire to be affordable and sustainable for the imperial metropolises, costs had to be either reduced or passed on to the colonized. Most European powers maintained a policy that, "if empire could not be had on the cheap, it was not worth having at all."<sup>6</sup> Because imperial governments were reluctant to commit metropolitan resources to their empires, European proconsuls such as the Gulf Resident had fairly limited means with which to operate.<sup>7</sup> They had relatively small military forces at their disposal and imperial governments were reluctant to send reinforcements, the need for which was regarded as a sign of administrative incompetence. Coercion was expensive and regarded as counter-productive, except in case of emergencies.<sup>8</sup> The less proconsuls interfered with traditional authority and institutions, therefore, the safer they were.<sup>9</sup> The scarcer the imperial resources and the less formal the imperial arrangements, the more the proconsuls had to work within indigenous political systems to achieve imperial ends, and the more they depended upon local intermediaries.

Robinson argues that the form and extent of imperialism was determined as much by non-European collaboration and resistance as it was by European activity and Europe's political economy. He sees it as a "political reflex action" between two European and one non-European components: (1) the economic drive to integrate newly colonized regions into the industrial economy as markets and investments; (2) "the strategic imperative to secure them against rivals in world power politics"; and (3) "indigenous collaboration and resistance."<sup>10</sup> Much of imperial historiography is unbalanced, he believes, because it has traditionally focused on only the first two components. By giving full recognition to the non-European elements of imperialism, Robinson aims to replace the traditional Euro-centric (metropole) view with an ex-centric (peripheral, non-metropole) approach. Imperialism's controlling mechanism, he explains, was made up of relationships between the European agents of external expansion on the one hand, and indigenous agents of internal collaboration on the other.<sup>11</sup> Without the voluntary or enforced collaboration of the élites within a local indigenous society, "economic resources could not be transferred, strategic interests protected, or xenophobic reaction and resistance contained."<sup>12</sup> It was the collaboration and mediation of indigenous élites in the invaded countries themselves that provided the imperial administrations with their military and administrative muscle. Imperialism's central mechanism was the system of collaboration established locally to integrate imperial interests with indigenous politics, achieving a balance between the two.<sup>13</sup>

Imperial actors and historians have downplayed the extent to which imperialism depended upon the work of

local collaborators. In the case of South Asia, for example, British India has been portrayed as an empire run by Britons, rather than an empire run by Indians for Britons<sup>14</sup> — a type of misportrayal Robinson calls the “grand illusion.”<sup>15</sup> The more limited an imperial power’s resources, the more extensive its dependence on indigenous collaboration and mediation. In the Gulf region, the British were so light on the ground that they had no alternative but to rely heavily on native political agents. Yet this reliance is not reflected in Gulf historiography. The reason for such omissions, Robinson believes, is that historians have placed too much emphasis on the formal European aspects of imperial activity. For example, most historians writing on imperial administrations, such as the Gulf Residency or the Government of India, tend to take a top-down approach. They examine how imperial administrations imposed themselves on regional politics, ignoring the important role regional politics played in assisting them. The result is a tendency to focus only on Europeans, ignoring the majority of the people within the imperial administrations.

What determined how imperialism worked in a given location was not the metropole, Robinson asserts, but “the indigenous collaborative systems connecting its European and Afro-Asian components.”<sup>16</sup> All systems of mediation consisted of two sets of relationships: the relationship between the Europeans and the indigenous élites, and the relationship between these élites and local interests and institutions.<sup>17</sup> This is why Robinson believes “the choice of indigenous collaborators, more than anything else, determined the organization and character of colonial rule.”<sup>18</sup> Without collaborators to mediate locally, imperialism was unsustainable.

From the perspective of the collaborators, the imperial powers were an alternative source of wealth and power. Association with an imperial power enabled the collaborators, especially those who acted as imperial agents, to increase their personal wealth, prestige, and influence.<sup>19</sup> In unstable and insecure environments, such as the Gulf, association with an imperial power could also secure much-needed protection and assistance.<sup>20</sup> These were key factors in attracting indigenous collaborators.<sup>21</sup> Systems of collaboration and mediation were normally ones of interdependence and mutual interests. The rest of this paper examines Britain’s employment of native political agents in the light of Robinson’s theory.

### Merchants as native agents

Arab, Persian, and Indian merchants trading in the nineteenth century Gulf had to be constantly on guard against pirates and bedouin raiders. If they fell out of favor 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, members of merchant families frequently allied themselves with European governments or companies by working as “native agents” or “native assistants” (*munshis*). When referring to these agents, the Europeans used “native” to indicate that they were indigenous to the general region and were, therefore, non-European.<sup>22</sup> Today, native agents are known as honorary consuls, but their role is now confined, for the most part, to non-political duties.<sup>23</sup> The British employed native agents extensively throughout the Gulf in the nineteenth century, as detailed in Table 1. The earliest known British native agent in Southern Persia was an unnamed man posted to Kirman in the 1720s. In Eastern Arabia, the earliest known agent was an Indian merchant named Narottam Ramachandar Joshi, the East India Company’s Broker at Muscat during c.1758–98.<sup>24</sup> Britain’s last native agent in the Gulf region retired two hundred years later: he was Khan Bahadur ‘Abd al-Qaiyum, Britain’s Consular Agent at Gwadar during 1952–8.<sup>25</sup>

### Advantages and disadvantages for the merchants

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 staffs 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 five per cent *ad valorem* on imported goods.<sup>26</sup>

The merchants chosen to be native agents had extensive regional networks of business associates, relatives, and friends. The information that could be obtained from these networks was of great value to the British, as indicated by this letter of commendation from a British political officer in Bushire (the Gulf Residency HQ):

As I am shortly proceeding to India, I take this op-

portunity 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.<sup>27</sup>

While merchants like Agha Muhammad Rahim Safar (British *Munshi* in Bushire c.1860s–93, British Agent in Bahrain 1893–1900) already enjoyed status, influence, and wealth, association with the dominant power in the region offered prospects for further improvement, as Robinson's theory explains. A native agent's privileged status was symbolized by the Union Jack which flew outside his house to proclaim that he was the local representative of the East India Company (1600–1858) or British Government of India (1858–1947). The powerful symbolism of the Union Jack would have reinforced the impression that he was the most influential man in a ruler's domain outside of the ruler's family. He represented the dominant power in the region and had regular, direct access to the most powerful men on the Arab and Persian coasts: the local rulers and governors. If Britain's Resident in Bushire was "the Uncrowned King of the Persian Gulf", as Lord Curzon dubbed him,<sup>28</sup> then his locally-recruited agents were the Gulf's uncrowned princes. This would explain why native agents were willing to run the British agencies at what appears to be a financial loss to themselves. The Agency-related expenses of Hajji 'Abd al-Nabi Safar (British Agent in Bahrain 1872–84), for example, were over four and a half times what he received from the British Government of India.<sup>29</sup> But this loss was a small price to pay for the protection he received and the 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.

There were only two disadvantages to being a native agent. First was the risk of being scapegoated by an unsupportive Resident and removed from the post. In such a situation, a native agent stood to suffer both socially and financially. He would likely have to leave the

shikhdom in which he had been posted. Second was the risk of personal attack by those who resented British power and authority. As both of these occurrences were rare, the advantages of being a native agent far outweighed any possible disadvantages.

### Advantages for the British

Gulf merchants were highly effective as British agents in the Gulf. Britain's Resident in Bushire was responsible for maintaining contact with the dozens of rulers and governors in Arabia and Persia, enforcing the treaties, staying informed about events throughout the region, and protecting British interests. Local 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 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 communication handling the family business in many of the region's ports and market towns: Baghdad, Basrah, Muhammarah, Bushire, Shiraz, Isfahan, Lingah, Bandar 'Abbas, Manamah, Muscat, Aden, Mocha, Hudaydah, and Bombay. The Safar family, for instance, had family members in eight of these towns in the nineteenth century, as Table 4 shows:

**Table 4: Safar family locations**

MEMBER	DATES
<b>Baghdad (Iraq):</b>	
Hajji Muhammad Jafar	1870s–1885 or 1895
<b>Bushire (Persia):</b>	
Hajji Hasan	late 1700s
Hajji Mirza Muh'd 'Ali (Br.)	1778–1802, c.1844–5
Bibi Nuri Jan	early 1800s–early 1900s
Hajji Muhammad Hasan	?–1881
Hajji Muhammad Jafar	mid 1800s
Hajji Muhammad 'Ali (Br.)	c.1830s–?
Agha Muhammad Rahim (Br.)	c.1830s–1893
Muhammad 'Ali	c.1830s–92
Hajji 'Abd al-Nabi Khan (Br.)	c.1844–71
Muhammad Saddiq	1845–?
Hajji Mirza Ahmad Khan (Br.)	1857–71
Agha Muhammad Khalil (Br.)	c.1870s–93, 1900–4, 1909–24
Bibi Khair al-Nisa	c.1870s–93, 1900–4, 1909–24
Agha Muhammad Saddiq	c.1884–c.1911
Muhammad	late 1800s–?
<b>Shiraz (Persia):</b>	
Hajji Muhammad Hasan	late 1800s–mid 1900s
<b>Manamah (Bahrain):</b>	
Hajji Mirza Muh'd 'Ali (Br.)	1829–42
Umm al-Khair	mid/late 1800s–1934
Hajji 'Abd al-Nabi Khan (Br.)	1872–84
Hajji Mirza Ahmad Khan (Br.)	1872–91
'Abd al-Rasul	c.1880–1928
Khadajah	late 1800s–?
<b>Muscat (Oman):</b>	
'Abd al-Wahhab	early–late 1800s
'Abd al-Khalil	early–late 1800s
'Abd al-Razzaq	early–late 1800s

**Mocha (Yemen):**

Hajji Mirza Muh'd 'Ali (Br.)	1809–29
Hajji 'Abd al-Nabi Khan (Br.)	1809–29
Hajji 'Abd al-Rasul (Br.)	1809–c.1856
Hajji Mirza Ahmad Khan (Br.)	c.1820s/30s–56
Hajji Muhammad (Br.)	c.1820s–mid 1800s

**Hudaydah (Yemen):**

Hajji Muhammad (Br.)	?–c.1883
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**Bombay (India):**

Muhammad Saddiq	late 1700s–1845
Hajji Muhammad Hasan	early–mid 1800s
Hajji Muhammad Jafar	early–mid 1800s
Agha Muhammad Saddiq	c.1820s–c.1884
Hajji Mirza Muh'd 'Ali (Br.)	c.1842–4

**Key:** (Br.) = served as a British agent or *munsbi*

The top merchant families in the Gulf still operate in this way.<sup>30</sup> Gulf merchants 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. It was only by tapping into the 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.

Wealthy Gulf merchants enjoyed a high status within Gulf society and a resulting influence with the Gulf rulers that was independent of their association with the East India Company or British Government of India. By employing men of this caliber, the Resident was able to take advantage of their influence with the 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 parts of the Gulf as well, including the Arab-ruled ports of Southern Persia.<sup>31</sup> 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 dues and 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, which meant that the rulers could not afford to ignore their opinions. A wealthy merchant's status ensured him regular, predictable access to his ruler's *majlis* (court) and gave him input to 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."<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> 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."<sup>34</sup> By employing wealthy merchants as local agents, successive Gulf Residents were able to take advantage of the political relationship between the merchants and the rulers. The result was overlapping traditional and utilitarian relationships in a dynamic power triangle between Resident, agent, and ruler that formed the core of the infrastructure of informal empire in the Gulf.

The financial advantage for the British of employing native agents on small salaries was tremendous. The Gulf Residency was forever being run on a tight budget because of Britain's unwillingness to spend much on political representation there. With very limited financial resources at his disposal, the Resident somehow had to maintain contact with dozens of rulers and governors and stay informed about events throughout the region. Native agents were a cost-effective solution to his problem. For the salary of just one junior British political officer, the Resident could employ five or six locally recruited agents to do more or less the same job, as Table 5 makes clear:

**Table 5: The Gulf Resident's monthly political staff budget for 1834 and 1860–1<sup>35</sup>**

OFFICER	IDENTITY	SALARY (RUPEES)	
		1834	1860–1
Resident, Bushire	British	2,400	2,400
Assistant, Bushire	British	<u>500</u>	<u>500</u>
		2,900	2,900
<i>Munsbi</i> , Bushire	Persian	122	122
<i>Munsbi</i> , Bushire	Arab	122	122
Agent, Shiraz	Indian	...	122
Agent, Sharjah	Arab	120	120
Agent, Bahrain	Arab	80	80
Agent, Lingah	Arab	<u>50</u>	<u>50</u>
		494	616

This table reveals that Arabs, Persians, and Indians accounted for around three-quarters of the Gulf Residency's political staff, yet their salaries consumed just 14.5% of the political staff budget in 1834 and 17.5% in 1860–1.

Another reason for the use of native agents was the political flexibility it gave the Resident. Native agents were informal appointments from Bushire rather than officially gazetted appointments from Calcutta. They were rarely, if ever, invested with official power, that is to say, the authority to make undertakings binding on

the British Crown,<sup>36</sup> but they were usually allowed to use their discretion as to how they mediated, as long as they achieved the results desired by the Resident. This informality enabled the Gulf Resident to disavow the actions of a native agent if it was politically expedient to do so, giving the Resident a measure of flexibility in the conduct of political relations without appearing dishonest. In other words, the Resident had deniability because he could use his native agents as convenient scapegoats.

### Disadvantages for the British

There were a number of disadvantages, however, to employing local merchants as native agents in the place of British political officers. The most obvious was the possibility of a conflict of interest between an agent's official duties and his private business pursuits. In 1773, the British Parliament passed the Regulating Act, which forbade the East India Company's administrative and political officers to engage in private trade — an indication of how the Company's involvement in South and Southwest Asia had become more political and less commercial. In 1822, at the outset of the Gulf Residency, the Company issued an order forbidding private trade by Company officers in the Gulf.<sup>37</sup> British policy generally was that trade and politics were not to be mixed. Indeed, the Governor of Bombay removed one Gulf Resident, Captain Felix Jones (1855–62), when he discovered that the Resident had, among other things, engaged in private trade at Bushire.<sup>38</sup> However, native agents were permitted to trade because their high status and influence depended upon a personal wealth derived from trade. A ban on private trade would have undermined the very qualities that made these men useful to the Resident. Furthermore, there would have been little incentive for Gulf merchants to work as native agents if their association with the East India Company or British Government of India did not benefit their business interests. The British admitted that the salaries they paid native agents did not reflect the true value of their services. Lieutenant-Colonel Lewis Pelly (Gulf Resident 1862–72), for example, considered Rs.80 (rupees) per month “a small salary” for the Bahrain Agent in 1871.<sup>39</sup> Certainly, Rs.80 was a pittance compared to the Rs.1,000 per month a British political officer received for doing the same job.<sup>40</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Meade (Gulf Resident 1897–1900), writing about Agha Muhammad Rahim Safar (British Agent in Bahrain 1893–1900), admitted that

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 be-

cause it gave them prestige and assisted them in their private commercial undertakings.<sup>41</sup>

Because the Gulf Residency was always run on a tight budget, the Resident could not afford to pay native agents the same salaries as British political officers. By both permitting native agents to engage in trade and allowing their businesses to benefit from their association with the Gulf Residency, the Resident compensated them for their inadequate salaries. This was an acknowledged aspect of native agent employment throughout South and Southwest Asia.<sup>42</sup> 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 these well-connected and influential men.

Another disadvantage of employing native agents was that the agents' intelligence reports were not consistently accurate. Their reports to the Resident were colored by their personal interests from time to time. They occasionally reported rumors as facts and, in rare instances, even suppressed, distorted, or falsified information if it benefited them to do so. For example, Britain's first Native Agent in Bahrain, Sadah Anandadas (c.1816–19), made a number of false and contradictory reports in February 1819 that led the Senior Naval Officer in the Gulf, Captain Francis Loch, on a wild goose chase and caused him to destroy an innocent dhow that Sadah had claimed was a pirate ship.<sup>43</sup> In his report to Bombay about the Agent, Loch bitterly remarked,

I can only say it is much to be regretted that men [accustomed] to falsehood ... [are] trusted with situations where they have so much in their power and may do so much mischief. Bahrein is an Island where an English Agent ought to reside, particularly after what has happened .... [Many more] lives might have been lost and much [more] damage done in consequence of the false information of that individual .... [W]e must admit ourselves to have been duped by a man without character, truth, or respectability.<sup>44</sup>

Experiences like this taught the British to be cautious. Residents had to be on guard against misleading information and did not always accept their agents' reports at face value. If a report were serious enough, a Resident might despatch one of his British political assistants to investigate — assuming, of course, that he could spare him. Take, for example, Meade's comments to his (British) First Political Assistant about a report from Muhammad Rahim in 1899:

The Agent's information is not of course as yet more than hearsay news, but when you go to Bahrein I think you will not have any difficulty in making the Bunnies [Indian Hindu merchants] admit if it is true .... If the Agent's report is true, the Sheikh has grossly broken his word to us.<sup>45</sup>

Considering the number of native agents stationed throughout the Gulf Residency, the small number of British political officers on the Residency staff, and the slowness of travel in the nineteenth century, the Resident's ability to confirm reports was fairly limited. Nevertheless, the Resident depended heavily on the information provided by his native agents and he could not have operated the Residency effectively without it.

A third disadvantage of employing native agents was that they were not professionally-trained men bound by a British civil service code of conduct. But as long as the ends justified the means, the British authorities seem to have made allowances for this. On rare occasions, however, they felt compelled to dismiss a native agent for misconduct.

A fourth disadvantage was, ironically, the informality of the native agents' political presence. While this was an advantage for much of the nineteenth century, as discussed above, it later became a liability when the British felt a need for a more formal presence in the Gulf. For example, the Ottoman Government, which claimed Bahrain as an Ottoman dependency, refused to acknowledge Britain's Native Agent in Bahrain as an official British political representative. Furthermore, because the native agents were not invested with official power, they sometimes lacked the necessary authority to carry out certain duties and had to refer matters to the Gulf Resident, which caused delays.

### **Conclusion: the replacement of native agents in the twentieth century**

This paper has placed the Pax Britannica in the Gulf within the context of indigenous collaboration by examining Britain's extensive employment of native political agents and assistants. It has shown how, contrary to popular belief, British political representation and the protection of British interests in the Gulf relied heavily on native agents before the twentieth century. These indigenous collaborators were attracted to British service because of the benefits involved: British protection, a higher social status, increased power over others, and enhanced business prospects. The British recruited non-Europeans to serve as agents in the Gulf because of the lack of British officers, because of the agents' local knowledge, and because of the agents' willingness to work for nominal salaries. They recruited wealthy merchants from the Arab, Persian, and Indian merchant communities in, or with connections to, Bushire, where the Gulf Resident resided. These merchants had extensive social and business contacts throughout the region, and an intimate knowledge of the region's languages, cultures, and politics. Many of them enjoyed political influence in Arabia and Persia because of their financial relationships with the local rulers and governors. By employing such men as agents, the Gulf Residents were

able to operate *within* the local political systems of the Gulf to obtain the intelligence and mediation necessary for the maintenance of British hegemony in the region. The disadvantages inherent in the employment of native agents — mainly the possibility of a conflict of interest between trade and politics and the occasional inaccurate intelligence report — were tolerated as long as these men remained influential with the local rulers and governors and protected British interests.

Native agents were an effective form of informal political representation in the Gulf until the mid 1890s, when international rivalry in the region began to threaten Britain's Indian Empire. In the face of this threat, the informal status of Britain's native agents became counter-productive, a development that prompted the British Government of India in the 1900s to replace most of its native agents with a stronger political presence in the form of British political officers. However, the replacement of the agents did not entail the abolition of the entire system of collaboration. Members of the same merchant families continued to be employed in political roles under the direct supervision of British officers in the Gulf Residency and political agencies, as they always had been. British political agents in the Gulf continued to rely heavily on the intelligence and mediation provided by their native political assistants, and on the various other services provided by large native staffs, until the end of the Gulf Residency in 1971. The crucial importance of indigenous support is abundantly clear from the Residency and agencies' annual staff photographs. Take, for instance, the staff photograph of the Political Agency in Bahrain from 1929, which still hangs in the British Embassy in Manamah: it shows twenty-three men, only one of whom, the Political Agent, is British. When the political agencies were converted into embassies upon the independence of the Gulf shajhdoms, the British Government kept these men on. Some continue to serve the British Government in the Gulf to this very day.<sup>46</sup> In other parts of the Middle East and Asia, native agents continue to represent Western governments, but as honorary consuls not political agents, their role now confined to commercial relations and administrative duties.

Robinson's analysis of imperialism finds that the greater the informality of an empire, the greater the level of local collaboration and mediation needed to sustain it, and the greater the need to work within indigenous political systems. His theory of collaboration holds that it was the breakdown of indigenous systems of collaboration that led to more direct forms of imperial involvement. In the case of the Gulf Residency, the indigenous system clearly did not break down. Men from Gulf merchant families were no longer employed as agents, except at Sharjah and Gwadar, but they continued to work in subordinate political roles. Britain's

informal empire in the twentieth century Gulf continued to rely heavily on indigenous collaboration for its existence, just as it had during the nineteenth century. Thus, the history of Britain's native agents in Arabia and Persia not only illustrates Robinson's theory of collaboration but also modifies it by showing that an indigenous system of mediation does not have to break down to lead to more direct forms of imperial control.

## NOTES

### ABBREVIATIONS

Asst.	Assistant
H.M. Govt.	Her/His Majesty's Government (the British Government)
IOR	India Office Records, British Library, London
Ks.	Krans (principal unit of currency of Persia)
PRPG	Political Resident in the Persian Gulf
reg.	register
Rs.	Rupees
SNOPG	Senior Naval Officer in the Persian Gulf (the Commander of the Gulf Squadron)

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<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of the word 'collaboration', see A. E. Atmore, "The Extra-European Foundations of British Imperialism: Towards a Reassessment", in C. C. Eldridge (ed.), *British Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 124–5; J. Osterhammel, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1997), 64.

<sup>3</sup>I discuss Britain's native agents in the Gulf in *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth Century Gulf* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming), the book version of my D.Phil. dissertation, "The Infrastructure of Informal Empire: A Study of Britain's Native Agency in Bahrain, c.1816–1900" (University of Oxford, 2001). This paper is a summary of one part of that book.

<sup>4</sup>These papers are held in the Bushiri Archive (owned by 'Ali Akbar Bushiri) in Bahrain.

<sup>5</sup>See R. Robinson, "Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration", in R. Owen and B. Sutcliffe (eds.), *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism* (London: Longman, 1972), 117–42 reprinted in Wm.

Roger Louis (ed.), *The Robinson and Gallagher Controversy* (London: New Viewpoints, 1976), 128–51; Robinson, "European Imperialism and Indigenous Reactions in British West Africa, 1880–1914", in H. L. Wesseling (ed.), *Expansion and Reaction* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 1978), 141–63; Robinson, "Imperial Theory and the Question of Imperialism after Empire", *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 12 (Jan. 1984), 42–54; Robinson, "The Excentric Idea of Imperialism, with or without Empire", in W. J. Mommsen and J. Osterhammel (eds.), *Imperialism and After: Continuities and Discontinuities* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 267–89. For two case studies, see G. R. Warbury, "British Rule in the Nile Valley, 1882–1956, and Robinson's Theory of Collaboration", *Asian and African Studies*, 15 (1981), 287–322; Atmore, "The Extra-European Foundations of British Imperialism: Towards a Reassessment", 106–25.

<sup>6</sup>Robinson, "Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism", in Louis (ed.), *The Robinson and Gallagher Controversy*, 131.

<sup>7</sup>Robinson, "Non-European Foundations", 142.

<sup>8</sup>Robinson, "Non-European Foundations", 142.

<sup>9</sup>Robinson, "Non-European Foundations", 143.

<sup>10</sup>Robinson, "Non-European Foundations", 130.

<sup>11</sup>Robinson, "Non-European Foundations", 130.

<sup>12</sup>Robinson, "Non-European Foundations", 130.

<sup>13</sup>Robinson, "Non-European Foundations", 131.

<sup>14</sup>For a discussion of this point, see B. S. Cohn, "Political Systems in Eighteenth Century India: The Banaras Region", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 82/3. (1962), 312–20; S. Bose and A. Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 1998), 57–66; Marshall, "Britain and the World in the Eighteenth Century: Part III, Britain and India", 1–16.

<sup>15</sup>Robinson, "Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism", 129.

<sup>16</sup>Robinson, "Non-European Foundations", 147.

<sup>17</sup>Robinson, "Non-European Foundations", 132.

<sup>18</sup>Robinson, "Non-European Foundations", 147.

<sup>19</sup>Robinson, "Non-European Foundations", 143.

<sup>20</sup>Robinson, "Non-European Foundations", 131.

<sup>21</sup>Robinson, "Non-European Foundations", 131.

<sup>22</sup>For a history of the word 'native', see R. Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 215–16.

<sup>23</sup>Foreign and Commonwealth Office, H. M. Govt., *Consular Work Annual Review, 2001* (London: Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2001), 13.

<sup>24</sup>Bombay Public Dept. diary no. 31 (1758), entry for 28 Feb. 1758, in J. A. Saldanha, *Selections from State Papers, Bombay, regarding the East India Company's Connections with the Persian Gulf, with a Summary of Events, 1600–1800*. (Calcutta: Superintendent of Govt. Printing, 1908), 124. The diary refers to "the Broker at Muscat", who, in subsequent pages (pp. 164, 335), is identified by name.

<sup>25</sup>Gwadar was an Omani enclave on Makran Coast, which the Sultan of Oman sold to Pakistan in 1958.

<sup>26</sup>Article 4, Convention of 1861, in C. U. Aitchison, *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sanads Relating to India and Neighbouring Countries*, 11: *The Treaties, Etc., Relating to Aden and the South Western Coast of Arabia, the Arab Principalities in the*

*Persian Gulf, Muscat (Oman), Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province* (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1933), 235–6.

<sup>27</sup>Statement by R. Halier (Uncovenanted Asst. Resident), 2 Mar. 1889 (Bushiri Archive, Bahrain).

<sup>28</sup>G. N. Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, 2 (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1892), 451.

<sup>29</sup>Between June 1872 and June 1875, ‘Abd al-Nabi received Rs.1,039-0-2 (Ks.2,597.6) in salary — Rs.346-5-2 p.a. — yet his Agency-related expenses were Rs.4,772-3-1 (Ks.11,930.5) — an average of Rs.1,590-11-2 p.a.. ‘Abd al-Nabi Safar, “Account of Personal Expenses, 1872–75” (Bushiri Archive, Bahrain). The amounts are recorded in krans. The exchange rate at the time was roughly 1 kran = 0.4 rupee (26 Pice), 1 rupee = 2 \_ krans. L. Pelly, *Report on a Journey to Riyadh in Central Arabia (1865)*, reprint edn. (Cambridge: Oleander Press, n.d.), appendix viii: “Riyadh Currency”, 84.

<sup>30</sup>M. Field, *The Merchants: The Big Business Families of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States* (New York: Overlook Press, 1984), 16–18, 126, 162, 218, 248, 280; J. Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, rev. edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 38.

<sup>31</sup>Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf*, 4, 9, 13, 21, 26, 56–7; F. Al-Sayegh, “Merchants’ Role in a Changing Society: The Case of Dubai, 1900–90”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 34/1 (1998), 90–1.

<sup>32</sup>Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf*, 56.

<sup>33</sup>Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf*, 57.

<sup>34</sup>Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf*, 26.

<sup>35</sup>J. A. Saldanha, *Précis of the Affairs of the Persian Coast and Islands, 1854–1905* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Govt. Printing, 1906), 69. The Muscat Agency is not listed because it maintained a separate budget.

<sup>36</sup>E. Satow, *Satow’s Guide to Diplomatic Practice*, 5th edn., ed. Lord Gore-Booth (London: Longman, 1977), chap. 8, sec. 8, 58.

<sup>37</sup>J. G. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman, and Central Arabia*, 1: *Historical* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Govt. Printing, 1915), 213; A. T. Wilson, *The Persian Gulf: An Historical Sketch from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), 260–1.

<sup>38</sup>For details, see J. B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1795–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 566–75.

<sup>39</sup>Pelly to Bombay Govt., 28 Jan. 1871, P/759 (IOR), 290. Pelly wrote this at a time when he was considering re-establishing the Native Agency in Bahrain, abolished six years previously.

<sup>40</sup>Rs.1,000 was the monthly salary of the First Assistant Resident during 1866–79. First Assistant Residents were sent to Bahrain as Residency Agents on at least five occasions: 1871, 1872, 1873, 1874, and 1879. Note entitled “Resident” by Prideaux (Asst. PRPG), 14 Aug. 1899, R/15/1/330 (IOR), 19–20.

<sup>41</sup>“Report on the arms trade at Bahrein” by M. Meade, 18 Nov. 1898, reg. no. 364/1899, L/P&S/7/112 (IOR).

<sup>42</sup>For Bahrain, see Field, *The Merchants*, 265–6. For Sharjah, see R. S. Zahlan, *The Origins of the United Arab Emirates: A Political and Social History* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 167–9. For Persia, see D. Wright, *The English Amongst the Persians during the Qajar Period, 1787–1921* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 78; J. Calmard, “The Iranian Merchants: Formation and Rise of a Pressure Group between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Cen-

tures”, in D. Lombard and J. Aubin (eds.), *Asian Merchants and Businessmen in the Indian Ocean and the China Sea* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 97. For India, see D. L. White, *Competition and Collaboration: Parsi Merchants and the English East India Company in 18th Century India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1995), 44–5, 47–8, 54, 59, 128–9, 141, 148; S. Arasaratnam, *Merchants, Companies and Commerce on the Coromandel Coast, 1650–1740*. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 227–8, 234, 258–64; P. J. Marshall, “Masters and Banians in Eighteenth-Century Calcutta”, in B. B. King and M. N. Pearson (eds.), *The Age of Partnership: Europeans in Asia before Dominion* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1979), 193.

<sup>43</sup>For a full account of this incident, see Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, 1: *Historical*, 845–6; C. E. Davies, *The Blood-Red Arab Flag: An Investigation into Qasimi Piracy, 1797–1820* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 85–7.

<sup>44</sup>Loch (SNOGP) to Bombay, 28 Feb. 1819, P/384/43 (IOR), 2655–6.

<sup>45</sup>Meade (PRPG) to Prideaux (Asst. PRPG), 17 Oct. 1899, R/15/1/315 (IOR).

<sup>46</sup>Interviews with Yusif Al-‘Ali (Consul 1958–98), 24 Aug. 1999 (British Embassy, Bahrain) and Rui Falco (Accountant, Gulf Residency 1966–1972 and British Council 1972–present), 20 July 1999 (British Council, Manamah, Bahrain).

