



Kuwait's military, like many of its state apparatuses, is a product of a colonial legacy. As Kuwait was a protectorate of the British Empire from 1899 until its independence in 1961, its military utilised British principles and organised and displayed them in fundamentally the same way. Eventually, these principles developed into a system of social norms, passed on from generation to generation. Heavily suffused with symbols and ideologies of nationalism, the military is one of the most important homosocial nationalist institutions within the confines of the nation-state.

When the lyrebird calls...

Post-colonial critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha has stressed that “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognisable Other, as a *subject of a difference* that is almost the *same but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must always produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.”¹ Colonial institutions are thus capable of imprinting on emerging nation-states that were under its influence. This process is evident in Kuwait's newly formed state institutions that combined recognisable traditional elements with British cultural products. This composite was then dressed up as traditional and modern at the same time to form a new national culture that doesn't implicate its identity in the modern Western project. Subsequently these melded elements were funnelled through multiple institutions to become not so much tradition but *traditionalised*.

The theory of imprinting is generally credited to ethologist Konrad Lorenz, who experimented with this phenomenon using the hatchlings of a mallard.² He found that a duckling learns to follow the first conspicuous moving object it sees within the early days after hatching. By taking over her place for half of the mallard's eggs, Lorenz discovered that he could serve as an adequate parent and substitute. To test his theory, he combined the adopted ducklings with their non-adopted siblings and placed them in a dark box. He then released them all in the presence of the mallard

to discover that *his* ducklings grouped towards him while the others huddled beside their mother. The adopted ducklings had transferred onto him through visual and auditory stimuli that, in turn, elicited a following response. He concluded that the early stages of a duckling's life are critical, and that the process of imprinting was sometimes permanent and irreversible.

If we conceptually analyse imprinting through a colonial lens, post-colonial processes seem to exhibit similar results where techniques of governance are concerned. In Kuwait there is almost a complete colonial-institutional continuity. Upon signing the protectorate agreement in 1899, Kuwait had commenced a critical moment in its history and possibly used environmental clues to both identify and attach itself to its protector. However, the protector replaced and even erased much of what existed that was in conflict with their imperial interests. For example, in the early 19th century, the traditional dress of the Arab warrior was changed into European clothing as it was *seen* as more appropriate for modern battle conditions. The dress was combined with what was perceived as beneficial local traditions, such as the traditional headgear now abandoned for a stiff, rounded visor. Such elements were then packaged and presented to the ruling elite as the real Kuwaiti culture and transmitted onto society through a variety of mechanisms such as media, official propaganda, conscription and music.³

In its imprinted state, the nation's behaviour remains perpetually dependent on its foster mother. As Bhabha and Lorenz assert, the side-effects of mimicry or imprinting may have long-lasting effects beyond recall. This raises a lot of questions around the function, purpose and survival value of Kuwait's military. However, such curious and conceptual thoughts may easily upset the military machine. For this reason, I attended the annual graduation at the Kuwait military academy to document the *non-sensuous similarities* still prevalent in martial performances.^{4, 5} Over half a century has passed since Kuwait's independence from the British, but the public manifestation of the military spectacle, albeit admittedly entertaining, still brims with many contradictions.

Upon entering the stadium, I was welcomed by the fanfare music of the martial band that favoured European musical instruments such as bagpipes and trumpets. Through the heads of women and children, I spotted an unoccupied area of silver covered chairs and, politely pushing through them, headed towards the top of the stalls. Across from me was the VIP area that exhibited, in Arabic calligraphy, a line from Kuwaiti poet Yusef AlShatti's song, “Oh my country”: “We are in war, a sword and a spear” (يا بلادي: إننا في الحرب سيوفاً وقللاً). I proceeded to remove the large box of locally produced snacks perched on my chair, a gift from the military to the audience, to stand even higher with my camera above the crowd. I must have looked conspicuous as all eyes were on me, soon diverted by the young soldiers who, dressed in gold-trimmed uniforms, marched in a coordinated formation towards the heart of the arena.

All at once, I witnessed the birth of a cloned species—of newly bred soldiers born out of a military machine—constructed as isolated, disciplined, receptive and industrious political subjects. Before me, the soldiers were but a faint simulacrum of originals that do not exist. They were a spectacle to themselves and others, but above all, they were national bodies. However, the soldiers performing were well aware that their own gestures were no longer their own but rather those of someone else who had come to represent them. Undoubtedly, they were also aware of the colonising process that had provided not only this new disciplinary power but also the ontology of their representation. Their pride, a dangerous human attribute, was the strong factor defending their self-esteem, but also controlling their sensibilities and perception. Pride was further conjured by the audience that consisted of family members, high-ranking officials, and members of the ruling family. Transcending its capacity to simply stir patriotic emotions, their pride, like magic or, rather, resembling magic in its effects, was a secret and overmastering influence capable of affecting behaviour and arousing excitement.

Meekness and pride are fruits of the same tree...

I turned towards the cheering women around me who seemed to be in some kind of operatic competition. As the military is a conservative institution, the men and women were segregated and put in different stalls on opposite ends of the stadium. This partition created a free and non-inhibiting environment for the women who danced, sang, whistled and ululated in the direction of their sons, grandsons and brothers. Their residual pride stemmed from the soldiers produced by the machine's coercion and discipline, which had given birth to a new species of citizen-national who imparted patriotism to the rest of society.

Pride has a fascinating evolutionary history, but it is unclear whether this emotion or subjective feeling is present in animals as, unlike humans, animals do not share cultural knowledge. But if they do experience pride as feeling, animals would likely be closer to the human and masculine hubris character associated with dominance and power. In most modern states, the structure and organisation of power produces a gendered set of nationalist agents that rely on conventional *masculine* characteristics; that banish from its rank *feminine* attributes of physical frailty, weakness and fragility. Kuwait's military ceremonies and rituals not only underscore qualities such as discipline, order, hierarchy, conformity, efficiency and solidarity, but also uphold this hubris facet by excluding women from its service.

Hierarchy in Kuwait is best illustrated in its national creed that contributes to the nation's idealistic philosophy. “God, the Nation, the Prince” (الله، الوطن، الأمير), is the decree of Kuwait's military, and this division appeals to the soldier's spiritual pride. God is the upper-most node by which the hierarchical tree branches downwards towards the nation, followed by the male leader-figure who is the descendant of the homeland. Interestingly, all three words are *linguistically* masculine in Arabic; however, God and the nation are symbolically ungendered. In the creed, we can distinguish two levels, one mythical and the other linguistic: on a higher level there is unity, and on a lower level there is a distinction. As the leader-figure in Kuwait is neither symbolically nor linguistically, but physically and naturally male, he posits a relationship of contrariety between the other two terms.

Nevertheless, this remarkably assertive hierarchy is central to Kuwait's social understandings of *good values*, subsequently dividing through the military into a rigid chain of command. It follows the British Army's ranking system and structures of organisation, which is akin to the ranking-order of social animals—whereby low-ranking individuals obey and copy only high-ranking members of their own species. Humans are status seekers, but this trait

can also be seen in many social animals. For example, jackdaws are very social birds, and their ranking-order leads directly to the weaker ones. The expressive movements of an adult male are paid much more attention to by the colony members than those of a lower-ranking, young bird. Even if a young bird shows fright towards an assumed predator or at some meaningless stimulus, the others, especially the older ones, will pay no attention to his expression of fear.

As animals have no culture, it is understandable how considerably important the opinions of the old, high-ranking and experienced jackdaws are. If the same sort of alarm had proceeded from an elder jackdaw, all the colony birds within sight and earshot would have taken flight. This is because knowledge in all animals, specifically the recognition of a predatory enemy, is not inherited but learnt from the behaviour of experienced elders. Human culture, on the other hand, is carefully constructed, calculated and produced through a phylogenetic selection. It is informed by human thought that is, admittedly, inherently discriminatory. If culture persists, it transforms into a habit, which is what still ties us to simple animal traditions. Even if we are aware of the origins of a particular habit, it is difficult to break from, as we are anxious and stubborn creatures. After a while, we no longer remember the reasons or the origins of a specific behavioural or hierarchical prescription. As a result, the habit transforms into an ingrained and rigid custom.

And many a man will melt in man, becoming one, not two...

At the military spectacle, I had become temporarily and unwittingly involved in a custom practised by a subcultural group. The elaborate, consciously performed and consciously symbolic norms of the military machine had united us all under one nation, one culture, one religion and one political ideology. Nevertheless, the show was an ironic amalgam of nation and empire, in which nostalgia was a clinging and defining condition. Kuwait's military spectacle exposed the historical contingency of nationhood, replaying embodied nationalisms, marking them as real over and over again, as proven in the process of this annual re-enactment. A considerable amount of time, effort and money had been invested in maintaining this yearly show to solidify the military into a theatrical institution. Through its visual and cultural dimensions, the evolutionary origin of Kuwait's military is inevitably veiled by the dramatic effect of the whole theatrical reaction to itself. The theatre of power expressed was so scripted to a protocol and so hierarchically arranged that it was obviously performed for its own sake.

When the ceremony was nearing its end, I caught the eyes of a proud mother whose face was beaming with happiness. I instinctively congratulated her, saying: “You must be so proud of your son who has now given his body to serve and protect the country.” She waved her hand dismissively and, in a matter-of-fact manner, exclaimed that Kuwait will always be here, that God would protect it, and that she was more reassured by the *economic*, rather than *national*, security provided by the military institution. Her blatant and honest statement bewildered me, for Kuwait's military is only *partly* a job—providing organisation that caters to the welfare state to which she had become so accustomed.

Unlike many nations that build their military to threaten or *save* other countries, Kuwait feels compelled to uphold one for the primary purpose of defence. Geopolitically, as was proven during the 1990 Gulf War, the small state remains subdued by its more powerful neighbours and dependent on foreign ally forces. Although it has acquired an impressive collection of air and land power such as fighter jets, helicopters, tanks, armoured vehicles and self-propelled artillery, only 0.5% of the population are active personnel in the military today. Thus, warrior virtues are imperative in preserving Kuwait's precarious sovereignty, lest it is devoured by foreseeable extraneous circumstances.

1) Homi K. Bhabha, *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*, in “October”, Vol. 28 (1984), pp. 125–133.

2) Imprinting was first studied by zoologist Douglas Spalding in the 19th century. However, Lorenz was the first to study its wider implications as well as to experiment on the phenomenon.

3) Joseph A. Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan*, Columbia University Press, New York City 2001, p. 8.

4) German philosopher Walter Benjamin discovered a non-sensuous mimetic relationship in all forms of social exchange, whereby mimesis is the paradigm of our social existence. For Benjamin, it was less in the sense of aesthetic representation but as a key to social behaviour. For example, the original mimetic function of language and writing is generally no longer visible as it has become unrecognizable through historical change.

5) Walter Benjamin, and Knut Tarnowski, *Doctrine of the Similar* (1933), in “New German Critique”, No. 17 (1979), pp. 65–69.



Rated 85th out of 135 countries on an online military statistical site,⁶ Kuwait's combative prowess is evidently not worthy of global recognition. However, a quote taken out of context by pacifist and anti-war philosopher Bertrand Russell on the homepage left me wondering why man, who has more or less mastered all hostile powers in his environment, still remarkably produces, in dangerous excess, these types of warrior virtues: "War does not determine who is right—only who is left."⁷ It is difficult to decipher what factors are influencing our human intra-specific aggression considering many of our previous dangers have ceased. It may be that, like animals, humans face the dangers of a dense population on any available area which leads to the exhaustion of all its sources of nutrition. This territorial instinct almost always results in a mutual repulsion on the animal of the same species, thus our unfortunate intra-specific aggression must have stemmed from wars waged between hostile neighbours.⁸

When you trap coral fish in an aquarium where there is no escape, the dominant fish will claim the whole container as their territory. The intimidated fish are continuously attacked, which stunts their growth, in turn making them easier to devour. Stuck in an aquarium, with nowhere to flee, Kuwait's military survival value is dependent on its self-preserving mechanism, which, under national conditions, is fulfilled through its weapon purchasing, foreign diplomacy and military indoctrination. This may be why it continues to exemplify the military with such high values and emotional conviction. Its military ceremonies and rituals have become essential components that ironically counter the deadly military machine by theatrically embodying the notion of power, and by generating a variety of warrior virtues.

Homo homini lupus, man is wolf to man...

As social bonds embracing a group or an 'imagined community'⁹ are closely connected and directed against an outsider or enemy, *manly* virtues such as heroism and courage, traditionally associated with waging war, will continue to justify the military as brave, righteous and honourable. Even if the survival values change, the military will continue to prevail in the service of a common cause that is greatly enhanced by the presence of a concrete or abstract enemy. The small state of Kuwait has experienced a few wars over the past century, and these war conditions create memories and wounds that outlive the wars themselves. The socio-psychological effects of the 1990 invasion may have impaired the Kuwaiti society's relationship with the nation's future. Like the nation, the people have also become reliant on foreign militaries rather than its own, which can be observed from the response of the proud mother I had congratulated. Thus, Kuwait's military exists because the nation needs to cling onto any paradigm that can ensure its survival and sovereignty, and to possibly hold its fort until its protectors arrive.

After the Gulf War, Kuwait gingerly moved away from its British protector towards an American saviour. Although many of its institutions still rely on British consultants, the presence of U.S. military bases and the introduction of their services are protrusively noticeable. In order to maintain their role as heroes,

protectors such as the U.S. need to reinstate continuous threats around the victims they liberate. This was proven after Saddam Hussein's execution in 2006, which left a vacuum that needed to be filled by a new villain. An old confrontation began to loom in the horizon over Iran as its defiance of the international community, combined with its strong military force and nuclear power, became cause for anxiety and concern. Like the weak and stunted coral fish in an aquarium, Kuwait constantly requires new strategies that can guarantee reliable foreign protection, maintain its hierarchical order and generate perpetual domestic pride.

Walking away from the military spectacle, I wondered what would happen if a soldier's enthusiasm dwindled as he matured? As there is a narrow window of time in which to mould men into soldiers, what would happen if one broke free from the loyal adherence of prescribed tradition? Would they search for a new object-fixation and imprint on something new? Would it be something of higher value for which to live and, if necessary, to die for? And what of the state itself? Can it rely on its military institution? Or will it continuously seek a new protector, introduce their customs and fuse them with existing traditionalised elements? Over the past century, many cultures were killed when brought in contact with another that is regarded as higher, as the culture of a conquering nation usually is. The subdued people might then look down on that which was previously held sacred, in turn, aping the customs regarded as superior.

In the case of Kuwait's military, these systems have been exerted under considerable pressure and with unquestioning acceptance of foreign institutional customs. Such adoptions almost invariably lead to maladaptation which subsequently hinders evolution. If the military continues to mimic, then it will remain mottled against the background of its colonial legacy like the camouflage it dons in warfare. The variance of traditions passed down will have little to no change and Kuwait's military will uncreatively continue to copy its protector in hopes of having access to that same power itself. Like the wild lyrebird that stores an uncreative repertoire of mimicry adopted from the sounds of other birds and animals, Kuwait's cultural identity, through its military, is intentionally suppressed.

Both institution and soldier will *repeat* rather than *re-present*—pretending to be real, to be learning, when in actuality they are mimic men. All too willingly, our species continues to perceive itself as the centre of the universe and separate from the rest of nature. It is not only fish that fight their own kind, it is the majority of all species, including humans. If post-colonial militaries can learn from history and nature by acting on the principles deduced from them, they may possibly evolve, not just in strength but in common sense. We may be able to finally escape the question of why our reasonable species continues to behave so unreasonably. However, considering the military model will persist as central to the structure and organization of power in all modern states, the weak ones are forced to tolerate it. If only we can do so without continuously administrating the same institutions that were used to control us; mistaking them for responsible principles worthy of loyalty and obedience.

6) 2021 *Kuwait Military Strength*, GFP Strength in Numbers,

https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=kuwait, last accessed January 20, 2021.

7) Although the saying is often attributed to the philosopher and social thinker Bertrand Russell, there is no substantive evidence that he wrote or spoke this adage. The earliest citation appeared without attribution in the Canadian newspaper The Saskatoon Star-Phoenix in August 1931. Interestingly, a book advocating a vegetarian diet titled *On the Conduct of Man to Inferior Animals* (1819) contained a precursor that partially matched this statement. Rather than using right/left wordplay, it emphasized the primacy of ferocity in military conflicts.

8) Konrad Zacharias Lorenz, *On Aggression (Das Sogenannte Böse)*, Methuen & Co, North Yorkshire 1967, p. 28.

9) An imagined community is a concept developed by Anglo-Irish political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson in his 1983 book *Imagined Communities*, where he analyses nationalism and the nation as construct.