

EMIRATI NATIONALISM IN GLOBAL AGE: PURIFYING THE SOCIETY AND CREATION OF EMIRATI IDENTITY

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Abstract

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) gained independence in 1971 through the unity of several sheikhdoms. This unification was initially more of a formality, undertaken to ensure the political independence and recognition of the state. However, once the UAE's federal structure became a reality, the state needed to increase loyalty to the federal state. This study examines why the UAE needed to construct a common "Emirati" identity and how it went about building it. It argues that, like other nation-states, the UAE attempted to create an identity encompassing its citizens by excluding other historical and geographic identities; it aimed to purify its population via an attempt to show that UAE "expats" and "citizens" are completely distinct from each other. Therefore, this study examines both the UAE's pre-independence cosmopolitanism and its post-independence national law and state targets in purifying the nation, a process exacerbated by high-level tension between the federal state and the emirates. Furthermore, this study deals with using symbols in identity construction via state-sponsored initiatives. In the case of the UAE, these symbols include the myth of founding fathers, ethnic symbols, and other heritage matters, all of which are examined with reference to major theoretical works on modern nationalism such as *Imagined Communities*, *Invention of Tradition*, *Banal Nationalism*, and *Ethno-Symbolism*.

Keywords

Emirati identity; UAE nation-building project; UAE nation; symbols in the UAE; UAE founding father

Resumo

Os Emirados Árabes Unidos (EAU) ganharam independência em 1971 através da unidade de vários *sheikhdoms*. Esta unificação foi inicialmente uma formalidade, empreendida para assegurar a independência política e o reconhecimento do Estado. Contudo, uma vez que a estrutura federal dos EAU se tornou uma realidade, o Estado precisava de aumentar a lealdade para com o Estado Federal. Este estudo analisa porque é que os EAU precisavam de construir uma identidade comum "Emirati" e como é que a construíram. Argumenta que, tal como outros Estados-Nação, os EAU tentaram criar uma identidade que englobasse os seus cidadãos, excluindo outras identidades históricas e geográficas; o seu objectivo era purificar a sua população através de uma tentativa de mostrar que os "expatriados" e os "cidadãos" dos EAU são completamente distintos uns dos outros. Assim, o estudo analisa tanto o cosmopolitismo pré-independência dos EAU como a sua lei nacional pós-independência e os objectivos estatais na purificação da nação, um processo exacerbado pela tensão de alto nível entre o Estado Federal e os emirados. Além disso, são estudada a utilização de símbolos na construção da identidade através de iniciativas patrocinadas pelo Estado. No caso dos EAU, estes símbolos incluem o mito dos pais fundadores, símbolos étnicos e outras questões patrimoniais, todos eles estudados com referência a grandes obras teóricas sobre o nacionalismo moderno, tais como *Comunidades Imaginadas*, *Invenção da Tradição*, *Nacionalismo Banal*, e *Simbolismo Etnográfico*.

Palavras-chave

Identidade dos Emirados; projecto de construção da nação dos EAU; nação dos EAU; símbolos nos EAU; pai fundador dos EAU



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Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) was founded as the union of seven emirates in 1971: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Fujairah, Umm Al Quwain, and Ras al Khaimah (Ras al Khaimah joined several months later in 1972). The UAE was established after the British withdrew from the Gulf, ending the protectorate role it had held in various capacities since 1820 (Onley, 2005, 2009; Peterson, 2009). The UAE was designed as a loose federal state, with populations tending to affiliate closely with their individual emirate of residence (Al Abed, 1997; Heard-Bey, 2005). Over time, however, the UAE's federal state gained increasing power at the cost of individual emirates; the strengthening of the federal state created tension between those who supported the centralisation process, led by Abu Dhabi, and those who opposed centralisation, led by Dubai. The issue was partially resolved when the cabinet published a memorandum in 1979 demanding more centralisation (Herb, 2014; MacLean, 2021). Yet the recent citizenship policy led by Abu Dhabi, which has practically seized the right of the individual emirate to grant citizenship according to its will, is proof that the federal/emirate tension is ongoing. Indeed, Lori (2019) argues that this issue of the *bidoon* or *bidoon jinsiyyah*, refers to stateless people in the UAE and other Gulf states who have limited access to basic public services (Beaugrand, 2018), and their limbo status is a manifestation of Abu Dhabi's overtaking of individual emirates' rights in deciding who their citizens are.

The nation-building project of any individual state promotes a sense of togetherness and shared values among its members. Some of these projects require a degree of assimilation, whereas others require the invention of traditions or even fabricated histories. This study explores several theories of nationalism via the question, "how did the UAE as a young state attempt to produce a distinct, non-overlapping, identity that excises its historical and currently multicultural nature"? In addition to documenting the contingency of the UAE, the construction of the current categories of national and expat as two categories are examined (Lori, 2019). This study examines how the UAE created and continues to maintain a national identity which encompasses the citizens of all seven emirates but excludes many inhabitants by refusing them citizenship or keeping them in limbo status. It analyses the logic behind this project since the very foundation of the state, along with all the paradoxes and challenges the UAE has experienced on account of the diverse background of its population.



The creation of a unique national identity involves several paradoxes. The first and most prominent of these lies in the structure of the state, which has both a federal government and emirate authorities. Despite how it was imagined and practised in the first years of the UAE's federation, the federal system is no longer a mere legal and administrative structure but now claims to represent the whole society and its identities (Hightower, 2014). Due to federal policy, some of the UAE's locals who were meant to have a place in the country's national identity have been excluded. Furthermore, the history and status of each emirate have been homogenised, as if they have always shared the same history and characteristic features. Another paradox lies in the different narratives of history and heritage. While some tribes or emirates have nomadic (Bedouin) roots, other peoples in the UAE trace their roots to settler traditions; accordingly, this variation in the actual history sometimes raises contradictions in the UAE's national narrative (Partrick, 2009; AlMutawa, 2016), as the state has promoted the Emirati identity as if it has a homogenously Bedouin legacy. The historical relationships between the tribes and the emirates constitute an additional paradox; the history of their mutual hostilities or rivalries has all but been eliminated in today's national discourse (Freer, 2021).

The UAE qualifies as a good case for such a study. The state and political elites still emphasise citizenship, migration, tolerance, and multiculturalism in installing their national identity. In the UAE, a state where the citizens are in the minority and which is one of the most affluent countries in the world, it could be argued (at first glance) that the state can easily gain its citizens' loyalty. This is, however, not as easy as thought, and it requires intense legitimisation projects, as it would in any other state in the world. The project, again not being an exception, is never-ending, evolving through time to such a degree that it contradicts itself. By examining the UAE case, it will be possible to explain or test many previously created theories and conceptions, which will help future theoretical study and knowledge of the UAE situation.

I conducted this research during my doctoral study that began in 2017 at the University of Exeter. I have conducted three rounds of fieldwork in the UAE, each about one month in duration, between 2018-2019. In doing so, I collected data regarding the UAE's national symbols, including the state's coins, name, flag, and founding fathers. In addition to these sources, I use the memoirs and monographs of Sharjah's (Sultan bin Mahmud al-Qasimi) and Dubai's (Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum) rulers as primary sources, as they present key insights into the evolution of the union. Shedding new light on the paradoxes explained above, this paper is divided into two main parts. The first part explains how, before the union and even in the first years after its introduction, the people of the UAE were not a nation or union at all. Instead, its diverse people's held different loyalties – some to their tribe, some to the land, and some to race. To overcome these obstacles, the union was founded on the motto "Unity through Diversity". Though this initially referred to the diversity between the UAE's constitutive emirates, it is now generally understood as referring to the diverse nationalities and languages in the UAE. Koch (2016a) studies this shift by examining the transformation in how the UAE's motto is understood: while the *words* of the motto remain the same, the *meaning* of diversity is no longer that of diversity among the emirates. Instead, it refers to the diversity in nationalities, languages, and races that have migrated to the UAE (Koch, 2016a).

The second part of this paper explores the methods and processes by which the UAE has constructed a unified national identity, which like any other nation-state, aims to purify



the nation. Different theories of modern nationalism, such as *Imagined Communities*, *Invented Tradition*, *Banal nationalism*, and *Ethno-Symbolism*, are applied to the case in this part. Some significant ways of fostering a UAE identity include symbols (such as an emphasis on the founding father, celebrations and national days), and the visualisation of national symbols (via flags, coins, banknotes, and even the state's name). Even though these symbols have, per Hobsbawm, been "invented" and, per Billig and Anderson, "banalise" the "invented" nation, they nevertheless have been implemented through the exercise of legal power, such as the UAE's nationality law, which passed in 1972 and defines the Emirati citizen as "an Arab who was residing in a member Emirate in 1925 or before and who continued to reside therein up to the effective date of this law" (Lori, 2022: 1087).

1. Deconstructing the Myth of Unity: Contingency of the UAE and Subsequent Legal Mechanism of Creating "Citizen"

Founded by international and domestic negotiators in 1971, the United Arab Emirates was established on practical grounds in a deeply pessimistic vein (Al Abed, 2001; Smith, 2004). The process began after the British announced their intention to withdraw from the Gulf, thereby ending their formal protection of the region. Seeking to maintain the benefits accrued to them under British protection, the rulers of the emirates moved to form a federation, aiming to preclude any possible foreign intervention and annexation (William Luce Special Collection, EUL MS 146/1/3/16). The negotiating parties were all more inclusive than today's federation members, including the states of Bahrain and Qatar (William Luce Special Collection, MS EUL 146/1/1/5). Furthermore, even though the British played a role in this unification process, pessimism greeted everyone on all sides (Peck, 1986; Heard-Bey, 2005: 357). Multifaceted security consideration was high on the agenda, as political unity was considered necessary to protect the sheikhdoms against their neighbours, i.e., Saudi Arabia and Iran (Smith, 2004: 78). The UK government encouraged this unification process, providing assistance and maintaining political and material connections to the new state (UK Parliament, HC Deb March 1, 1971, vol 812 cc1227-32). For the sheikhs, a secondary benefit to political unification was the ease of access to UN membership, which required the establishment of a stable and cohesive state (William Luce Special Collection, EUL/MS/ 146/1/3/16; William Luce Special Collections EUL MS 146/1/3/1).

These regional and international considerations were not, however, the sheikhs' only concern. Inter-emirates borders were not as clear-cut as they are today (William Luce Special Collection, EUL/MS/ 146/1/3/16; William Luce Special Collections EUL MS 146/1/3/1). The emirs of each sheikhdom were not negotiating unification as nationalist theorists or anti-colonialist leaders but as representatives of their own (and their respective tribe's) perceived interest (Owen, 1972). For this reason, the sheikhs' preference was for a federal umbrella that would not unduly impair the UAE's individual emirates and their rulers (Taryam, 1987: 197–199). Unity was thus a top-down idea proposed by the leaders of prominent families in the emirates, along with Britain.

Both parties fought for this union for different reasons. On the one hand, Britain aimed to ensure that the region remained stable, hoping to protect its oil interests and create a system that would serve its political and economic interests even after formal



withdrawal (Bin-Abood, 1992: 264). On the other hand, tribes and their rulers aimed to keep their autonomy over their respective lands, even as some of the tribes and rulers gained power over others (Schofield, 2016). By the time unification occurred in 1971, the current leaders of the UAE and their tribes had already accumulated a significant degree of power and influence. Their push for unification aimed to keep this power in their hands (Peterson, 1977).

However, the unification process was not a top-down (ruler/elite) project in every respect. Though the people's voice at the time did not have the same political weight as it does today, still, one should remember their frustration and dissatisfaction, not only with Britain but also with their own rulers. Take, for example, the Dubai Reform Movement that emerged in the 1930s, the history of which indicates that Dubai was not segregated from the region but was socially, culturally, and intellectually influenced by the above-mentioned regional shifts (Zahlan, 1978). The Great Depression during the 1930s, the development of the Arab world, and the successful reform movement in Kuwait led Dubai's elites (or merchants) to demand similar reforms (Peck, 1986: 39–40). The Dubai Reform Movement achieved the establishment of a *majlis* (council). The *majlis*, in turn, established institutions and policies which have impacted the state system to the present, including municipal councils, a social security system, schools, and customs (Davidson, 2005: 40–41). The *majlis* and the Dubai Reform Movement were short-lived, as both dissolved in 1939. Still, they constituted an important turning point in the UAE's formative history since they opened the door for similar demands to be made in the 1950s, although then they would be much more nationalist in orientation given the influence of Nasserism, Third Worldism, and the rise of anti-British sentiment (Kanna, 2011: 25).

It was not until the 1820s, when the British started to collaborate with the prominent tribal chiefs in the region, that the territories which later became the UAE began to possess recognised boundaries and legitimate rulers who could exercise a right to speak on behalf of their peoples (Kanna, 2011: 23–24). Britain only dealt with cooperating rulers; the relationship between Britain and the local sheikhs was such that the sheikhs were not allowed to sign any foreign agreement without informing Britain beforehand (Davidson, 2005: 34). Non-cooperating rulers were severely sanctioned, either militarily or economically. For example, if a ruler refused to cooperate with British representatives, they were replaced with more "pro-British" members of the family, as was the case with Sheikh Zayed's takeover from his brother Sheikh Shakhbut in 1966 (Bristol-Rhys, 2009; Razzaq Takriti, 2019). According to the British narrative, Sheikh Shakhbut's negligence in spending oil funds on the people increased anti-British sentiment in the land and thus caused a problem for British state and companies interests (Joyce, 1999; Rabi, 2006; Davidson, 2009). The British implemented a similar policy in Sharjah; when Sheikh Saqr supported the Arab League and adopted increasingly pan-Arabic policies, effectively challenging British interests in the region, he was replaced with Khalid Muhammad in 1965 (Rugh, 2007; Sato, 2016: 1964–67; Razzaq Takriti, 2019; Bradshaw and Curtis, 2022; *Secrets and Deals: How Britain left the Middle East*, 2022).

On the other hand, cooperative rulers and families benefited from the agreements insofar as a close relationship with Britain solidified their own local political position. As Zahlan points out:



When they [local sheikhs] first signed the General Treaty of Peace in 1820, the tribal chiefs in the southern part of the Arabian Gulf could hardly have been described as rulers even in the loosest sense of the word, for their respective positions were governed by the vicissitudes of tribal loyalties, which caused an amorphous and fluctuating political structure. As time went by, and the same chiefs, and later their descendants, were drawn into further treaties with Britain, they began to acquire a certain amount of stability and authority as rulers. (Zahlan, 1978: xi).

This is not at all to claim that local families and Britain were perpetual friends. Nor is it to assert that friction never emerged between Britain and local leaders: Back in the 1800s, major disagreements occurred between Britain and the Qawasim, resulting in the fall of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah (Davidson, 2005; Onley, 2009; al-Qāsimī, 2016; Ota, 2018). Rugh (2007: 123) argues that, despite once being the most important power on the coast, the influence of the Qawasim rulers was greatly diminished as a consequence of their “uncompromising stance” against the British. Eventually, the Qawasim’s land was either divided among different lineages of the family (today’s Ras Al Khaimah and Sharjah are controlled by different branches of Qawasim) or lost to non-Qawasim families (Rugh, 2007). In the long run, Qawasim have never arose as the hegemonic power of the land. The British possessed the authority to determine the fate of individuals and families, exemplified by the Qawasim case as a family or Sheikh Saqr and Sheikh Shakhbut’s deposition.

The UAE’s identity-building project began by consolidating the families’ exclusive right to their land. Various ruling families proclaimed land as their own, insisting that the “real natives” of the emirates were their own respective tribes. As Kanna (2011: 8) mentions with regard to the case of Dubai, even though the Al Maktoum family has ruled Dubai since the 1830s, their history and right to “ownership” are not up for discussion, considering that it is an “eternal” homeland for them.

In relation to this, a brief note on the UAE’s geography and network system is needed. There is some scholarly and political controversy as to where the UAE belongs exactly—whether it is part of the Middle Eastern Arab network or of the Indian Ocean system. The UAE currently chooses to present itself as part of the Middle Eastern Arab network. This allows it to claim exclusive ownership rights to the land and to exclude Persians, Indians, and even African natives or inhabitants of the region from citizenship, as if the descendants of these groups are not “real Arabs” or “original Emiratis” (Akinci, 2018a). Kanna (2011: 24–25) suggests that pre-oil, Dubai’s elites, rulers, and merchants’ identities were far more Arabo-Persian and Pan-Indian Ocean in nature. Onley (2007: 216–217), for example, studies the Gulf States as a frontier of the Indian Empire (British-India), arguing that Arabia had once been an informal part of that Empire. As a matter of fact Anscombe (2004: 21) considers the region as “anational” due to its extreme transnationality, even if he refers more to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait. Yet a shift towards a uniform national identity began by the second half of the 20th century, with the UAE taking European identity as a model. In a sense, the UAE turned itself into a Middle Eastern or Gulf state, with the Arabs in those territories becoming the primary concern of that state. The shift towards becoming an Arab ethnostate did not mean that



all other ethnicities were erased, but rather that they now came to be treated as if they were non-locals, or non-natives, of the land. In short, they became “foreign” residents of a land in which they used to be considered local. The state’s concern became primarily its own citizens’ wealth and welfare, at the expense of those precluded from citizenship (Kanna, 2011: 47). Onley (2014) argues the orientation of the Gulf states to the Arab world at the expense of the Indian community was reinforced by the nationality laws, which negatively affected the Indians and their businesses, as it made them into foreigners. Even when some families do acquire citizenship today, they are not necessarily guaranteed equal or unconditional citizenship (Kapiszewski, 2001; Vora, 2013; Jamal, 2015; Lori, 2019) However, the everyday Oceanic network is still valid (Vora, 2013).

The strict definition of citizenship has a direct link with the migration. Moreover, the dynamic relations between migration and state-society relations is a matter of consideration in migration administration. (Hanieh, 2021, pp. 260–261) argues

Because the sale of work permits can be a highly profitable endeavour, citizens compete for access to these rights. Migrants are portrayed in the public sphere in a highly racialised and gendered manner, with government spokespeople and media stressing the ‘threat’ that migration poses to citizenship in the cultural, linguistic, demographic, sexual, and economic senses. The heavily securitised nature of migration discourse in the Gulf has been accompanied by a downward displacement of everyday migration control to the level of private employers and individual citizens. In this manner, migration shapes the identity of citizens and their positioning vis-à-vis the state and ruling families.

The UAE’s apparent “homogeneity” and “purity” has not been designed purely through immaterial initiatives as promoting national symbols and creating a shared national heritage. Rather, legal affairs have played a major role, particularly as concerns the UAE’s nationality law and other state disciplinary measures. The “Emirate” identity project has aimed to create an “Emirati” national identity based on a purified (federal) citizenship approved by Abu Dhabi and intended to outperform the tribal and sheikhdom allegiances with which most inhabitants were once familiar. This, it was hoped, would facilitate the process of acceptance of the UAE state structure as both taken for granted and natural. And yet, the dynamic of citizenship is worth examining in the UAE, as locals and citizens are not identical, and citizenship cannot be taken for granted.

Jamal (2015) classifies UAE locals into three categories: first, those who can trace their ancestry in the UAE to before 1925 and thus carry a family book “*khulasat al-qaid*”; these are full citizens who enjoy state benefits. Second, those who do not have the family book but have some other documents issued by one of the emirates. And third, those who are legally considered stateless, or “*bidoon jinsiya*”. Those in the second group live in precarious limbo; they can either be granted citizenship rights and be integrated into the first group, or they can be treated as stateless, much like the third group. Most interestingly, some others are granted a passport of the Union of Comoros (Lori, 2019). Sultan Qassemi (2010) considers this phenomenon to be Orwellian, in that the system effectively declares that “all Emiratis are equal, but some Emiratis are more equal than



others". In essence, possession of a family book decides who is a "real Emirati" and who is not. As the family lineage continues with males, women who marry non-Emirati men are not able to pass their citizenship along to their children, which creates another level in the UAE's already tiered citizenship. Al Hussein (2021) studies the tiering of citizenship through the lens of gender, showing how these women's relationship with their children no longer entitles the latter to inherited citizenship but instead requires sponsorship, as the women are treated as if they are not real citizens.

The nationality law which passed one year after the independence of the UAE requires the person to be Arab and also being able to track family's ancestors to at least 1925. Since 1972, new legal developments occurred which reshaped the belonging as citizenship (Alqadi, 2015; Jamal, 2015; Lori, 2022). The law was amended in 1975 by allowing citizenship to Arab tribes and also "children of Emirati mothers and unidentified fathers" (Alqadi, 2015: 69). In 1982, the passports of some people were not renewed in local emirates (Davidson, 2012; Alqadi, 2015). The *kafala* (sponsorship) system, which require for each foreigner to be sponsored by local person or company, was centralised (Alqadi, 2015). In 2004, a significant legal initiative was made which was issuing an Emirates ID to all citizens and residents. However, the Emirates Identity Authority requests the "family book" as a prerequisite from the citizens. Thus, the locals who had passports but lack of "family book" were effectively shifted to be "foreigners" (Alqadi, 2015; Zacharias, 2018). In 2008, the deadline for Emirates ID was set and the process of offshoring the citizenship began (Alqadi, 2015; Lori, 2019). All of these initiatives are seen as steps toward "Arabizing" the nation, since the state regards anyone without a family book as Persian, Baluchi, and African merchants and slaves who came to the country before the country's independence. Other categories include children of non-Emirati fathers and migrants who arrived in the nation prior to the implementation of the kafala system or tight immigration controls. (Lori, 2019).

Thus, the nascent state sought to purify its national identity by centralising migration and citizenship. By doing so, multicultural people from various ethnic, racial, linguistic, and geographic origins were purified and "Gulf Arab" were considered the guardian of Emirati citizenship (Gallois, 2006: 59–61). Furthermore, nationals and expats are now designed to be distinct categories. While the state uses the legal mechanism to achieve this goal, it has also made significant investments in symbols which standardise the heritage and cultural image of the country which are the topic of coming part.

2. Purifying the Nation and Constructing the "Emirati" Identity

The UAE's proposed national identity was based on particular forms of inclusivity and exclusivity. The new nation-state was ostensibly inclusive in that it treated all emirates as if they shared one identity, regarding themselves collectively as Arab, *Khaleeji*, or Bedouin; participation in this collective identity, it was argued, is what makes one an Emirati. Residents from other ethnicities and histories, however, were all excluded– if not in practice, then in recognition as there are "many 'clues' to determine an Emirati's ethnic, sectarian, cultural, linguistic, and geographical origins" (Akinci, 2018a). Considering that the pre-UAE environment had a more localised identity, getting the population to accept the UAE identity itself was challenging (Alexander and Mazzucco, 2021).



The “Emirati” identity was not immediately accepted and internalised by the locals. In its construction of national identity, the UAE thus followed other nation-building projects occurring around the world; it employed symbols to engender a common society and emphasise national unity. Nation-states typically instantiate symbolism in multiple forms, including national holidays, commemorative coins, flags, and national myths. Hightower (2018) argues that the UAE, both at the federal level and individual emirate level, created a harmonised discourse in terms of heritage. Hightower (2014) further argues that most of the UAE’s heritage institutions present flexible identities by representing heritage at both the local and national levels, thereby emphasising both identities simultaneously.

Over time, a unique Emirati identity has increased its influence over other long-held identities in the country, much in the way national identities worldwide have overtaken competing markers of identity (Foley, 1999; Alexander and Mazzucco, 2021). The Emirati identity was built on the assumption that UAE nationals are homogeneous, that state diversity is a matter pertaining to the treatment of foreigners, and that the diversity question only arose in the post-oil period– this despite the fact that so-called homogenous nationals share diverse backgrounds stemming from other Gulf states, Persia, Africa, Yemen, and the Indian Ocean (Akinci, 2018b). Onley (2014), AlMutawa (2016), and Akinci (2020) have examined the diversity versus homogeneity narratives at play in the UAE; their work provides strong evidence that the land was socially and culturally diverse long before the UAE’s formal independence or the discovery of oil. The misleading image of national homogeneity in the UAE was achieved through state initiatives and power, which includes citizenship law as a significant instrument.

Jones (2017: 1–2) divides the UAE’s process of citizen-making into two categories; “citizen 1.0”, which is concerned with instilling national identity, patriotism, and providing basic welfare to citizens (she describes these as first-order needs); and “citizen 2.0”, which is about creating pro-globalisation, self-sufficient, and tolerant citizens. Citizens 2.0 targets both the minds and hearts of the citizens. Indeed, the process of instilling national identity and patriotism in the UAE’s citizenry increased with the Yemeni intervention and Gulf Crises, both of which occurred within the last decade (Diwan, 2015; Freer, 2017; Ardemagni, 2019, 2020; Parvez, 2020; Dogan-Akkas, 2021). Therefore, even as this study agrees with Jones’ depiction of the UAE’s supposed national homogeneity as occurring as a result of top-down social engineering, it emphasises the importance of ongoing, ever-increasing, state efforts to instil national identity and patriotism.

2.1. Promoting “Emirati” Discourse

After long and intense policy negotiations in 1971, the UAE came into existence as a state and a general “Emirati” identity was promoted. However, neither the federal state nor the nation was appealing to the general population (Alexander and Mazzucco, 2021). It was essential, therefore, for the newly established state to conceive policy solutions which could strengthen national unity and identification. In 1974 Sultan bin Muhammad al-Qasimi (the ruler of Sharjah) chaired a committee to investigate the problems the federation experienced and to suggest ways by which identification with the newly established state might be deepened. However, his ten-page report, prepared over a period of five months, did not bring about significant changes. Another meeting was held



in 1975, this time by the UAE's Supreme Council (consisting of the seven rulers chaired by Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, at the time the president of the UAE and Ruler of Abu Dhabi). A further report was prepared by the Ministerial Committee chaired by Maktoum bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai (Muhammad al-Qāsimī, 2012: 79–81). All these efforts demonstrate that the UAE's national identity was not founded upon objective criteria but by top-down decision-making and initiative.

Some national symbols now considered indisputable in the UAE– the flag, capital, and even the word "Emirati"– were the product of top-down efforts to promote them. Even the Emirati flag– which today is on display everywhere in the UAE and even has a commemorative day reserved for it (November 3)– was not raised in the individual emirates for a long time; this change only occurred when the ruler of Sharjah lowered the emirate's banner and hoisted the union flag after the opening of the Sharjah Traffic Department on November 4, 1975. When Sharjah's (Qawasim) flag was replaced with the Union emblem, not everyone from Sharjah was content; opponents of the change considered the act an attack on their very existence as Qawasim or Sharjah. In response, the ruler offered the following justification: the Sharjah flag, he argued, was not an authentic symbol of the emirate but rather had been imposed by the British after the emirate's defeat (Muhammad al-Qāsimī, 2012: 88–90). This rebuttal won the day: soon after, other emirates began replacing their own sheikhdoms' flags (or emphasising the Union flag at the same time) with the federal banner (Muhammad al-Qāsimī, 2012: 90). Today, the UAE flag is a highly visible national symbol of the UAE. During my fieldwork, one of my interlocutors observed that the frequency of the flag's appearance across the country resembled American-style patriotism. Another interviewee, who has been in the UAE for more than 20 years, stated that the visibility of the flag had increased day by day– particularly in recent years, as the UAE has undertaken a more interventionist foreign policy based on military operations.

The use of the word "Emirati" to denote nationality must also be emphasised as a component of the UAE's nation-building project. Like the raising of the national flag, the labels "the UAE" or "Emirati" were not accepted instantly. It was not until November 6, 1976, that a decision was made to emphasise the unity of the "union" by stating that the name of the state (the UAE) should be used before that of any individual emirate and that the role of any sheikh should be referred to first in terms of his membership in the UAE Supreme Council and only subsequently as the emir of a particular emirate. This custom is still observed (Muhammad al-Qāsimī, 2012: 130). For example, when mentioning Mohammed bin Rashid by his formal title, one would first state his capacity in the federal state, and then state his capacity in his individual state, as follows: "H. H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai".

Since the establishment of the federation, several particular words referring to the UAE (like *Ittihad*, Union, or Emirates) have been intentionally circulated as part of the nation-building project. "Emirates Airlines", for example, a Dubai-owned aviation company, opts for a more inclusive name in order to stress the federal umbrella. The same applies to "Etihad Airways", which is an Abu Dhabi-owned company carrying the name of the "Union". Given their passenger potential and significance in the UAE, naming national carriers after the federation rather than their individual emirates helps naturalise words



associated with national identity in daily usage and creates a sense that each emirate considers the union as an essential part of its identity.

The same holds true for many squares and parks in different emirates, such as "Ittihad Square" in Dubai, "Al-Ittihad Park" in Sharjah, and "Etihad Square Park" in Abu Dhabi. Popularising the word "Emirate", "Emirati", and their Arabic translations are considered essential for nation-building in modernist theories of nationalism; such acts amount to a form of *Banal Nationalism*, associating the nation with places people go and things they use in their everyday lives (Billig, 1995: 6, 43–51, 77).

The great emphasis on "Emirati" as a signifier of the nation– whether when referring to the national or in naming particular spaces and institutions– at the same time strengthens and banalises identification with the nation. In this respect, another concrete example of an "imagined" community is the word "Emirati"; the word does not refer to any ethnic or racial group, was coined only after the foundation of the state and is employed to foster a sense of unified national identity.

The role of the capital city triggered another dispute, though more during the pre-independence negotiations (William Luce Special Collection, MS EUL 146/1/3/16). During the negotiations, it was agreed that a new city would build between two emirates which would serve as the capital city. Even though the name was proposed previously as Al Karama, the city was never built, and it was in 1996 that Abu Dhabi became the permanent capital city. Even though the phone code 01 was reserved for the planned capital city, it was never concretised (Ulrichsen, 2017). This may be seen as another phenomenon that had been taken for granted but was not beyond discussion.

2.2. The Myth of Founding Father(s)

Another fact that many have taken for granted is the presidency of the union. The role of president was not given to the ruler of Abu Dhabi in perpetuity, and his position was even challenged by the British when Zayed increased his relationships with the Soviet Union, Libya, Sudan, and Syria. However, it was seen as a big danger for the union either to change the leadership from him to another member of his family or from Abu Dhabi to Dubai as it would create instability and fragility in the union (Muḥammad al-Qāsimī, 2012: 12–14). He was challenged again by other rulers when he proposed a constitution that increased his own (and federal) authority over the power of the individual emirates. Zayed's intentions were questioned, and no consensus was reached when he announced his plan not to renew his role as president. After much deliberating, the other rulers agreed to the demands he had made, such as being given authority over state matters and the right to execute federal powers over individual emirates (Muḥammad al-Qāsimī, 2012: 129–130).

This history of political contestation stands in sharp contrast with the depiction of Sheikh Zayed in the UAE today. Considering the great role that is attributed today to Sheikh Zayed as a founding father of the nation, one can hardly imagine a time in which his position within the UAE was challenged and not secured. Today, Sheikh Zayed is remembered not only simply as a president who served until his death but rather as the founding father of the UAE, whose vision still enlightens the country. His image is visible in all emirates, accompanied by pictures of his sons, Sheikh Khalifa and Sheikh



Mohammed, standing alongside the ruler of the emirate in which the picture was taken. Figure 1 shows an iconic image, widely circulated in the UAE, depicting the founding seven emirs standing together. Figure 2 shows the founding father image as presented in the emirate of Dubai. The three portraits show the current emir of Dubai, the founding father of the UAE, and the current president of the UAE at the time the photo was taken (2020). Figure 3 shows similar portraiture in the case of another emirate, Ajman. In Ajman, the portraits include the UAE's first president, current president, prime minister and emir and the crown prince of Ajman.

Figure 1: Iconic image showing the rulers of the seven emirates with the UAE flag. UAE, 2019



Credits: by author

Figure 2: Sheikh Zayed, Sheikh Khalifa, and Sheikh Rashid (in a hotel in Dubai), Sana Quadri, 2020



Credits: by author



Figure 3: Showing the state leaders with the Ajman Emir and Crown Prince, Ajman, 2019



Credits: by author

National identity was gradually established by consolidating not only state institutions but also by propagating national discourse and images about unity, as exemplified above regarding the flag, the name of the state, and the “founding father” narrative.

Economic integration helped spur this process along: even before the waves of oil money inundated the region, Abu Dhabi had already begun to support the other emirates for the sake of strengthening national unity. For example, in 1972 alone, Zayed funded the construction of 400 houses, ten mosques, five medical clinics, and 200 water wells in Sharjah (Muḥammad al-Qāsimī, 2012: 9). The financial aid of Abu Dhabi has, in turn, always been attributed to the generosity of Sheikh Zayed; this part of his character is now deeply embedded within the official discourse and has contributed to his mythologisation as a founding father figure (Sulṭān ibn Muḥammad al-Qāsimī, 2012; *Zayed the Generous: Icon of Global Charity and Humanitarianism*, 2013; *Sheikh Zayed: His Charitable Deeds Live on*, 2018; *Sheikh Zayed 'Our Role Model in Humanitarian Work', says Ruler of Dubai*, 2022).

As we have seen, the UAE’s national identity was not only founded upon objective criteria. Rather, as in the case of most of the world’s nation-building processes, it required intense national mythologisation– for example, the decision to overlook the history of Zayed’s plan to resign his presidency in favour of casting him as the indisputable founding father of the nation and attributing the success of the union to his leadership (Ahmed, Miller and Al-Sayed, 2016).

In explaining the role of Sheikh Zayed’s legacy in shaping Emirati identity, however, one crucial warning is in order: Pointing out Zayed’s influence as a renowned political leader– this admiration sometimes even verges on a personality cult– does not in any sense imply the existence of an “Oriental Despotism” in the UAE. Instead, the UAE blended both traditional and modern discourses to elevate Zayed as a symbol, an icon, for the nation. On the one hand, the UAE’s traditionalism derives from its admiration of Zayed as a father figure, leader, and symbol of tribal society. On the other hand, the UAE’s modernity is based upon the notion of Zayed as a founding father in another sense: he represents for the UAE what George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Jefferson represent for the US, or what Atatürk represents for Turkey. “Western” or “Eastern”, “monarchy” or “democracy”, nation-states have long traced their legitimacy back to



specific founding fathers, which legitimate the state by symbolising the historical struggle for the creation of the contemporary nation (Wallace, 1982).

The discourse of the founding fathers arises in different ways: sometimes, it is established by the leader himself and sometimes by his supporters after his death. Lenin, for example, did not iconise himself to the point of being a cult leader, while Stalin, in order to strengthen his own position and legitimacy, created a joint cult of himself and Lenin. At other times, an existing cult is erased after the leader's death: Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini were among those whose cults were deleted by their successors. By contrast, Atatürk's legacy was ensured by a new law introduced after his death, which aimed to protect his memory. The same applies to the US; regardless of their moral and human status, the "vision" of the American founding fathers continues to be invoked by American politicians and the public.

The critical role of Sheikh Zayed in forming the union of the UAE's emirates is so visible that Enver Khoury identifies the motivation lying behind the union as "Zayedism" (Davidson, 2005: 72). As Davidson states, "a significant portion of the UAE's ongoing political stability must still be attributed to Zayed's consensus rule and the enormous personal respect he continues to command from the people of all seven emirates" (Davidson, 2005: 72). Both during his lifetime and after his death, he remained a significant symbol shared by the people of emirates and, to a certain degree, by expatriates.

Sheikh Zayed's vision for the UAE has been mythicised via state initiative, with the UAE's stated policies of "tolerance", "women empowerment", "humanitarianism", and care for identity and heritage all attributed to him (Qasimi *et al.*, 1999; Wakefield, 2014; Ahmed, Miller and Al-Sayed, 2016; Antwi-Boateng, 2020). His role as the father of the nation has also been reinforced in the memoirs and books written by the rulers of the other Emirates. Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum (the ruler of Dubai), for example, repeatedly emphasised Zayed's nation-building activities, his vision for the future, and his caring for traditions (Al Maktoum, 2015). Sultan bin Mahmud al-Qasimi also made similar remarks about Zayed, pointing out the founder's care for the UAE's values and vision (Sulṭān ibn Muḥammad al-Qāsimī, 2012).

Most crucially, in order to strengthen Zayed's role as a symbol, the UAE leadership has made him visible everywhere in the country; many universities, hospitals, bridges, roads, mosques, prizes, and even an entire year are named after Zayed in honour and commemoration of his presidency. Mosques have also played a significant role in constructing the Zayed myth in the minds of UAE nationals. Natalie Koch studied the concept of the mosque and the father of the nation (examining, in particular, the case of Sheikh Zayed Mosque in Abu Dhabi) and concluded that under Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the new government continues to legitimise its claims to authority by discursively upholding the founding vision of Sheikh Zayed (Koch, 2016: 358–359). Another mosque with the name of Zayed— less known and glorious than the one in Abu Dhabi— exists in Ras al-Khaimah.

In addition to the mosque, a Founder's Memorial— designed by world-famous artist Ralph Helmick and opened in 2018— was installed in Abu Dhabi by the Ministry of Presidential Affairs (now the Presidential Court). Zayed's personality cult as the founding father of the UAE is most clearly indicated by this attempt by the state and society to visualise



him ubiquitously, from hanging his picture everywhere (particularly the famous depiction of him standing in the middle of the other six rulers), to reciting his name during Friday *khutbas*, to prizes given out in his name, to an entire year being named after him to commemorate his 100th birthday (Passela, 2018; 'Friday Sermons Archive', no date; 'Sheikh Zayed Sustainability Prize', no date). Among the many prizes given in his memory are the following: the Sheikh Zayed Book Award (one of the most prestigious honours in literature), the Sheikh Zayed Horse Race, the Sheikh Zayed Sustainability Race, and the Sheikh Zayed Environment Prize ('About Sheikh Zayed Book Award', no date; 'The Zayed International Prize for the Environment, no date).

2.3. Symbolising Traditional and Visionary Nation: Emirati Coins

The last symbols to be examined in this study are coins and banknotes. Joseph Galloy considers coins not only according to their purchasing power but also in terms of their material power in shaping "ideas about past, and therefore, identity" (Galloy, 2000: 15–16). Likewise, Cesar (2011: 3–4) states that

Images printed on currency condense national history. By analysing the banknotes in the wallet and the coins in the pocket of a common citizen, the foundations of national history and present and past glories can usually be observed. Currency reproduces the historical memory that exalts and distinguishes the nation from other countries.

As relates to this symbolic, national, value of currency, this article discusses the UAE's coinage in terms of two main groups. The first group of coins deal with "tradition"; the remainder deal with "achievement" and "vision". The first group, non-commemorative coins, which make references to the past, heritage, and tradition, are generally circulated coins. In this respect, the UAE's coinage uses the United Arab Emirates Dirham, divided into 100 fils. Below is a list of the circulating non-commemorative coins, which typically depict images associated with traditional life in the Gulf (Figure 4):

- 1 Fil: Date palms, with inscription in Arabic meaning "To increase the production of food crops"
- 5 Fils: Fish, with inscription in Arabic meaning "Cleaner seas mean more food for humans"
- 10 Fils: Dhow, with no inscription other than the date
- 25 Fils: Gazelle, with no inscription other than the date
- 50 Fils: Three oil derricks, with no inscription other than the date
- 1 Dirham: *Dallah*, an Arabic coffee pot, with no inscription other than the date.



Figure 4: The UAE's Coins, (Global Exchange)



Credits: by author

As mentioned, all these coins depict significant cultural elements with which the UAE has attempted to associate the state and on which it has attempted to build a sense of national identity. Fish, gazelle, dhow, and coffee pots are all symbols frequently foregrounded and promoted by the UAE's national institutions ('HHC celebrates UAE's Year of the 50 at ADIHEX', 2021). Even though the depictions on coins were chosen among the national symbols, the depicted symbols on the coins became the standard ones representing the country. For example, the coffee pot (*dallah*) on 1 dirham becomes the standard *dallah* that represents the UAE's specific currency (Figure 5). While the *dallahs* are shared heritage within the Gulf and Arab world, the image depicted on the *dallah* has become the national one, with some differences from the neighbouring states (Figure 6), resembling Valeri's (2018) concept of othering the (br)other. The sand gazelle on 25 fils is also another national symbol for the UAE (Langton, 2021). The sand Arabian gazelle are considered a part of the national heritage, and efforts have been made to preserve the animal (Bardsley, 2016).

Figure 5: 1-dirham coin, (Numista)



Credits: by author



Figure 6: The Coffee Pot Exhibition, depicting the pots of Arabian Peninsula, 2019



Credits: by author

The drawings on the circulated coins (Figure 4) show the immense political importance of heritage in the UAE. With a possible exception of oil derricks, the rest of the images refer to the land claimed to be part of the UAE's heritage, depicting life in the pre-oil era. The dhow on 10 fils is another artefact that elites have attempted to embed in the cultural heritage of the UAE (Gilbert, 2011; Rab, 2011).

The dhow also refers to a pre-oil lifestyle, referencing both the maritime and slave trade (Gilbert, 2011). The fish depicted on the 5 fils is another carefully chosen symbol; it refers to the pre-oil cuisine and to one of the bases of the pre-oil economy (Blue *et al.*, 2013; Khansaheb, 2021).

On the other hand, commemorative coins contain more visionary and achievement-oriented messages. Since the circulation of these coins is low (with some exceptions, such as the one struck for the Year of Zayed as I have encountered many 1-dirham regarding Year of Zayed in my fieldworks) and coins with denominations higher than 1 dirham are even rarer, only commemorative 1-dirham coins will be studied here (the values of other coins range from 25 to 10,000 dirhams). While coins help the state to transmit its version of history, they also help us understand the aims of that transmission. As Cesar (2011: 3–4) states:

Currency is a mirror for the nation; it reflects the past and the image that the nation wants to be projected for posterity..... Currency is an effective means



of transmitting these concepts. The essentials of the nation become portable history, reproduced on millions of examples, circulating in every transaction. Even in the most unimaginable corners of the country, passages of national history are seen, touched, and felt. ... it is an instrument of power and as such, subject to the randomness and contingencies of power. In the context of nation-states, the currency has an important political function. (Cesar, 2011: 3-4).

There are around 40 commemorative 1-dirham coins which can be circulated. These commemorative coins have diverse themes, from the 1986 Chess Olympiad logo to the 10th anniversary of the UAE University, the 35th anniversary of the National Bank of Dubai or the 10th anniversary of the Higher Colleges of Technology. Sometimes the coins commemorate persons who have played a significant role in constructing the Emirati national identity. The most important of these (for this study) is the 2018 commemorative coin of the Year of Zayed as it emphasises the role of Zayed as a father (Figure 7).

Figure 7: 1-dirham coin, Year of Zayed, (Numista)



Credits: by author

Some coins also include awards and programs dedicated to specific figures, such as the 15th Anniversary of the Rashid Bin Humaid Award for Culture & Science, the Selection of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan as the Islamic Personality of the Year for Dubai International Award for the Holy Quran in its 3rd Session and Her Highness Sheikha Fatima Program for Excellence and Social Creativity 2017 with Mother of the Nation Logo.

Due to the state's investment in presenting them as heritage, the above symbols are among the first objects that come to one's mind when talking about UAE history. All of them have a special place both for the Gulf and for Arabs: for example, the *Dallah* (coffee pot), an object which once symbolised the Gulf or the Arabs, has been nationalised to represent the UAE as a nation within its own boundaries over time (Baycar, 2020). However, the fact that the UAE chose distinctly *Arab* symbols brings *the invention of tradition* into question. It is at this stage that the modernist approach to nationalism requires criticism as they do not have objective criteria. Therefore, Smith's understanding



of symbols (*ethno-symbolism*) with some level of historicity and ethnic background is a balance to other modernist nationalism studies.

All symbols mentioned in this study can be evaluated similarly in their meaning. Zayed, as a founding figure, for example, was initially a symbol that the citizens dealt with through direct experience; today, this has changed. One of the interviewees for this study, a teenage non-Emirati Arab, praised Zayed. "We are here together thanks to Sheikh Zayed," she said nostalgically; and she compared him positively to the current emirs. It ought to be asked, however, how a teenage girl, who was 2-3 years old when Sheikh Zayed died, can accurately compare and even appreciate such a person. It is probable that her view was shaped by her upbringing: perhaps, for example, Sheikh Zayed was widely praised by her family. Another interlocutor stated that the UAE's conception of tolerance was mainly a project of Zayed.

Examining the UAE's national identity project, this study has analysed the ways and methods by which the state eliminated differences between the emirates and created a distinct Emirati national identity. Heritage sports or falconry have been studied, for example, by Sulayman Khalaf and Natalie Koch, both concluding that those were an attempt to create an identity in the sense of Hobsbawm's "invented tradition" (Khalaf, 2000; Koch, 2015). The constitutive elements of this Emirati identity were Gulf-based (*Khaliji*), Arab, and Muslim. The preceding network (in the Indian Ocean), a result of traditional trade and British influence, was shifted to become increasingly Gulf-based and Middle Eastern. However, even within the Khaleeji network, diverse projects took place, as can be seen in two border cities, al-Ayn and al-Buraymi, which were once distinct oases but are now under separate states, the first under the UAE and the second under Oman (Valeri, 2018). This unique identity was strengthened with the empowerment of the federal government. Like any other nation, the state used many different methods to strengthen its identity, undertaking a process described as creating an imagined community, an invented tradition, or a form of ethno-symbolism. Ceremonies, the figure of the founding father, and individual policies were all essential explanatory elements of this first identity project.

Conclusion

The present study has focused on the UAE's national symbols (the founding father, commemorative days and celebrations, and coins) whose meanings have evolved in parallel with the motto of the union quoted above ("Unity through Diversity"). By examining how a nation can be built with only a few nationals, this study provides a critical analysis of the evolution of the UAE's identity project since its foundation in 1971 as a result of the British withdrawal from the Gulf. In its early years, the federation of seven emirates was not as powerful as it is today. Initially, the individual emirates either hesitated or refused to transfer their own powers to the federal government. It was on account of this hesitation and air of political pessimism that the UAE was founded upon the slogan of "Unity through Diversity", referring to the evident diversity between the emirates themselves.

The rulers and political elites of the UAE considered the newly established state to be an infant. Over time, that infant grew into a teenager and later an adult; it became not only a regional power but an international player as well. The ruler and the political elites



pushed this process along by following the examples set by other nation-building projects. To be able to create a modern nation-state like any other, the question of “who constitutes the nation” had to be answered. State policies were therefore drafted in order to create the nation’s unique identity or “Emiratiness”. Competing identities (tribal, religious, and ethnic) were intentionally subsumed within a single “Emirati” nation. In addition to encompassing all citizens, this new national identity excluded perceived internal (Indian and Persian) and external (Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism) threats to national unity. From the perspective of today’s political situation, it is clear that these nation-building policies were successful. An example of how citizens have internalised their national identity over either that of the Gulf or of Arabness is the Qatar-UAE dispute that occurs between 2017 to 2021. The United Arab Emirates sided with Bahrain and Saudi Arabia against Qatar, which imposed land, sea, and air blockade. Moreover, the states blamed each other for causing instability in the region. Though many people consider the dispute to be politically motivated, football matches between the UAE and Qatar in the Asian Cup have seen many Emirati fans throw plastic cups and shoes at Qatari players (*Football: Qatar thrash UAE amid shoe barrage to reach Asian Cup final*, 2019). This nationalistic reaction shows how the identity-building projects of both states (Qatar and the UAE) have been successful, especially if one takes into account the fact that Qatar was in a similar process of unification when the idea of UAE federation came under discussion.

If one interprets the UAE nation-building project from a constructivist approach, the UAE may be termed an “imagined” or “invented” nation or community. The UAE’s identity can be considered in terms of Anderson’s thesis of “imagined communities”, with its elements such as “the tombs of unknown soldiers” (Anderson, 1991: 9–12). Unlike many other Arab states, the territory of the United Arab Emirates was not officially a colony or under a British mandate. Rather, it had been formally recognised by the British as being under the autonomy of the tribal sheikhs. Therefore, no significant violent confrontation was necessary for the emirates to gain their independence. This bloodless independence failed, however, to stimulate national pride in the birth of the UAE, to encourage citizens to transmit the national story from one generation to another or to increase patriotic feelings toward the homeland. Only in 2015, when the UAE lost several of its soldiers in Yemen, did the UAE’s leadership officially announce its first official martyrs’ day on November 30– a reference to “the tomb of the unknown soldier”. Interestingly, though, the soldiers being commemorated were not killed on November 30, a date which was selected in honour of a different martyr (Salem Suhail bin Khamis) who had been killed by Iranian forces three days before the formation of the UAE in a territorial dispute over ownership of the island of Greater Tunb (Rogers, 2016).

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