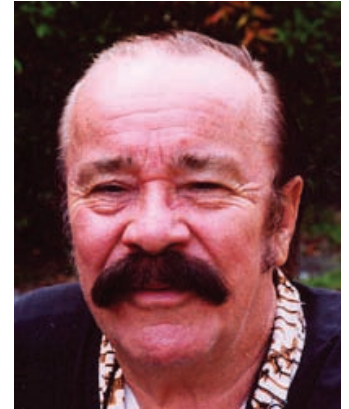


An Odd Problem for Singapore Enthusiasts

A Tight Little Island Thwarts Kiting

With anecdotes, tall tales, gossip, intelligent inside information and the occasional magic trick-----all commented on in a forceful, clipped British accent-----Shakib Gunn of Singapore is easily able to dominate a dinner table of 20. He did it one night on that tight little island at a gathering of the Singapore Kite Association, an organization he helped found and has led for many years. A heart ailment has recently cramped his traveling, but hardly his enthusiasm.



Shakib Gunn

An impressive group, the Singapore organization has one of the oddest problems confronting any kite club in the world. Singapore is so small and its population so dense, kilters literally have no place to fly their kites, not even low-tide beaches. Hard to believe but quite true. Fields can be rented by the hour, but the fees are stratospheric-----Singapore is after all first world nation. The association makes do with small, out of the way spots, but as to flying satisfyingly big kites, well that is only for dreaming.

Still, Malaysia is just across the causeway and the state of Johor there is very welcoming-----a kite is the country's unofficial symbol as well as being the insignia of the national airline-----and the Singapore gang, including den mother to foreign guests Gadis Widiyati, hangs in there and manages.

A famous figure in the global kite scene by sheer force of character, Shakib has not traveled that widely around the world, he reports sorrowfully. But he has reached out with good counsel to such as Valerie Govig of Kite Lines magazine and has been available for advice to kite groups in adjacent Asian nations such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. Just having him on their side gives the Singaporeans a big moral boost.

Mr. Shakib, as he is often called, has had a most interesting life. Born in England of British parents, but named Shakib by a Turkish godfather, Gunn served as a military officer in Malaya-----as it was then known-----during the Communist insurgency there in the mid-1950s. He was a convert to the tropics. Returning home to be demobbed, he headed right back to Southeast Asia and joined an advertising agency.

He met Rabiah (nicknamed Teh), with a family tree that includes the sultans of Kedah, and also Tunku Abdul Rahman, first prime minister of Malaysia. "I met her in Kuala Lumpur when she was looking for a job," he says. Soon the family asked, "Are you asking for her hand?" Shakib responded: "I'm actually looking for some square meals." Marriage followed. A daughter, Fairuz, was born.

"Ever the activist," says Shakib, "during the period 1968-74 I worked for a non-governmental organization with outside interests; this got me gazetted and banned from Malaysia for life. I left for Singapore on the 10 p.m. mail train-----under escort." (The ban was lifted 15 years later, apparently through intercession by authorities in Johor state who were planning a kite festival and wanted Shakib to attend. "Is this an example of kite power?" he asks.)

Shakib set up in Singapore, while wife and daughter remained in Kuala Lumpur. For years they saw each other only on very occasional visits by Teh and Fairuz to Singapore. It wasn't until the late 1970s that the family was able to reunite. "Very hard years," says Shakib.

Meanwhile, Shakib had established himself in the advertising and graphic design business and taken out

Singaporean citizenship. Because daughter Fairuz chose to obtain her university education in Perth, the family bought a second residence in Australia. It was there that Shakib struck up an enduring friendship with the Indian-Australian kiter Michael Alvares, star of kite festivals around the world. Fairuz married and now has two children. She is the vice president of a stock brokerage. The family of six now occupies an airy two-story house in a posh section of Singapore, on a small plot of land. In choked Singapore, to even have your own lawn is a financial triumph. "But it's not my house, I rent it!" emphasizes Shakib. "I'm not a millionaire."

Attached to the house in the backyard are sheds storing Shakib's household gear, tools, books, kites and kite memorabilia and, more noticeably, pens for stray cats "saved from death by Teh and Fairuz," says Shakib. "But I am a respecter of all sentient beings." He is asked just how many cats the family is taking care of. "Forty-eight," he says. This is a family humane society with a vengeance.

As a younger man, Shakib went in for scuba diving, hydroplaning in Indonesian territorial waters where "confrontations" (Shakib's word) were possible, catamaran sailing, and paragliding. "For me, it was always wind and water." Now he settles for daily swims in the sea. "Yah, yah. I drift thro' fragments of life and thoughts of mortality. I like my warm-water beach-bumming."

Thanks From Royalty

"Dear Mr. Scott Skinner,

"Because of the ongoing work of the Government of Cambodia to nurture its traditional cultural traditions, such as dance and music and kiteflying, the Government's Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts has made a particular effort to publish another important book on Khmer kites with the financial assistance of the Drachen Foundation of Seattle, Washington, U.S.A.

"On behalf of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts I would like to express to the Drachen Foundation and you the very sincere thanks for your gracious help in financing this project.

"In this connection the Ministry has recently made a gift of 500 Khmer kite books to the Drachen Foundation. These books will also be used for diffusion purposes nationally and internationally.

"Because the Drachen Foundation is able to aid and foster the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts in fulfilling its mandate to preserve permanently an ancient and vital Khmer folk and religious tradition, the people of Cambodia proudly make this gift to the people of the United States of America."



Sim Sarak, a high government official in Cambodia, and wife Cheang Yarin are co-authors of the important new book Khmer Kites, published in Khmer, French and English.

Prince Sisowath Panara Sirivuth
Secretary of State
Phnon Penh, Cambodia