



# The Gulf Pearl

The Memory of the Twentieth Century



**Written by**

Khalid Abdullah Abdulaziz Ziyara

**Translated by**

Samar Hamood Alchichakli

1446 AH - 2025 AD

GCC Center for Translation, Arabization, and Promotion of Arabic Publications



**Khalid Abdullah Abdulaziz Ziyara**

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Phone: (+968)2496887 Fax: (+968)2460755  
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### General supervision:

**Professor Abdullah Saif Al Tobi**

Director of the GCC Center for Translation,  
Arabization and Promotion of Arabic

### Translation:

**Samar Hamood Alchichakli**

Senior Translator at the Ministry of Culture, Qatar

### Follow up and administrative coordination:

**Salim Mohammed Al Hajri**

Head of Cooperation and public relations

### Editing and substantive follow-up:

**Ohood Khamis Al Mukhaini**

Translation and Arabization Expert



## Dedication

To lifelong companion and partner in life, Umm Majed,  
who has endured much for our sake.

This is an expression of gratitude to you,

With all my love and appreciation.

Abu Majed





## Preface

Humankind has known pearls since the dawn of civilizations- Babylon, Assyria, Pharaonic Egypt, Persia, Phoenicia, India, and China-and has marveled at the Creator's power to inspire nature to bring forth such breathtaking beauty. In this foreword to the book, I wish to speak to you about pearls, which for hundreds of years formed the backbone of the economy and the center of life in this region, just as oil wealth does today.

Just as today's youth face the challenges of nature, braving the heat of the deserts and the depths of the seas to uncover and utilize the nation's resources, so too did their fathers and grandfathers struggle under harsh conditions to sustain life, cultivate the land, and build a prosperous future.

By divine decree, the rise of oil wealth followed the decline of the pearl trade. Though the years of hardship weighed heavily on the people and the land, they stood as a testament to the resilience, determination, and perseverance of those who ensured survival and growth despite adversity.

The pearls of the Arabian Gulf were renowned for their clarity, lustre, and beauty, qualities shaped by the unique conditions of their habitat-warm waters, high temperatures, and gentle waves. These factors created the ideal environment, giving Gulf Pearls a reputation that surpassed all others. The pearl

trade flourished, accumulating wealth in the hands of the region's leading merchants and elites until pearls became the foundation of the economy and way of life.

Over time, pearl diving evolved into a structured industry that drove profound social, cultural, and civilizational changes. Shipbuilding advanced, trade expanded, and hundreds of Bedouins transitioned from desert life to the seas as sailors and divers. Many Africans also arrived in the region to work aboard the pearl diving ships and the merchant vessels known as "Tawawish." This transformation shaped society's structure and social hierarchy according to the demands of this vital industry. Through experience and perseverance, the people of the region mastered the art of locating and harvesting pearls from the seabed, known as "heirat."

As I write this introduction, memories of a bygone era return—an era that left a deep imprint on this land's history. This book is a valuable addition to our libraries, and its author deserves great praise for his efforts.

My mind drifts back to the 1930s when pearl prices plummeted to less than a tenth of their previous value. A series of economic and external factors tightened the grip on this industry, hastening its decline. I can still envision the last pearl-diving ships returning to their final resting place as if making way for the first oil tanker to set sail from the same shores. However, life continued, and the journey of progress endured.

God has bestowed great blessings upon us, and now the responsibility lies with the youth of this nation. They must rise, with determination and dedication, to contribute to the

path of prosperity, guided with wisdom and foresight by His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Amir of this beloved country-may God protect him.

Let us embark on the journey within these pages, revisiting the memories of an era worthy of reflection and appreciation while keeping our eyes firmly fixed on the bright future of this generous homeland, each in their respective field of expertise.

A Devotee of Pearls

Hussein Ibrahim Al-Farda





## Introduction

Nothing is born out of nothingness, and progress, in the end, is an accumulated effort, most of which is built upon past achievements. The future is a part of our present reality, flowing like a continuous river, rendering any strict division between days, years, or centuries meaningless. Time intertwines-days blend into days, years into years, and centuries into centuries-while life continues. And here we are, entering a new century, the closing chapter of the second millennium in human civilization's history.

With the dawn of this new century, we can discern many of its features and contours in light of our present reality.

The rhythm of events, the depth of their impact, and the significant transformations that took place throughout the twentieth century cast their shadows over all nations of the world, including, without a doubt, the countries of the Arabian Gulf. Their passage through the last century was far from the ordinary century ablaze with struggle, ambition, and grand aspirations, marked by profound political, economic, and social transformations. Throughout it, the Gulf nations aspired to a future imbued with stability.

The impact of oil did not begin to manifest in the region until the middle of the twentieth century. Before that, life in these lands was characterized by hardships and a scarcity

of resources. Its people toiled in fishing, pearl diving, and other rudimentary economic activities. It was an era that our forefathers experienced firsthand—a time of harsh conditions, where they opened their eyes to a suffocating environment, immersing themselves in its struggles and enduring its burdens. They savoured its bitter taste, finding in their relentless toil a unique gratification. The men of this region bore extraordinary hardships at a time when there was no place for the idle or the dependent. They wrested their livelihood from the jaws of the sea, their sole source of sustenance. Their sacrifices were immense, inscribing one of the greatest epics of the century—a legacy carved in letters of light, recording the history of a people who knew how to enter the annals of time through its grandest gates. The pearl, extracted from the depths of the Gulf, became the defining emblem of the region's people and a cultural legacy that will remain a source of pride for generations to come.

Despite the severity of their circumstances, the people of the Gulf remained hopeful, looking ahead to what the twenty-first century might hold for them. The pearl was but one among many distinctive features that set the region apart in the twentieth century, marking its uniqueness and serving as an extension of its rich history. Among the most prominent of these features was the science of navigation, which flourished and thrived throughout the century as a natural consequence of the prosperity of the pearl trade. The pearls of the Gulf became a magnet for traders worldwide, drawn by their widespread fame and reputation. During this golden era in the region's history, the world recognized the greatness of the Gulf's maritime pioneers—men for whom pearl diving

was a profession and a source of immense pride. It was their preoccupation, their treasure of tremendous worth, and they had their skilled captains and seasoned seafarers to guide them.

In this book, we embark on a journey through their world, seeking to document their memories of their endeavors and preserve them as a testament to their role in shaping the history and identity of the region.

Author:

Khalid Ziyara



**1**

# **The Formation of Pearls**

## Natural Pearls

The formation of a pearl within an oyster shell has long remained one of life's profound mysteries, eluding human understanding. People once believed that pearls were a secret of nature and that only destiny could bestow such a beautiful gem upon us<sup>(1)</sup>. According to this belief, pearls were considered a gift from the sea to their finders. The waves would carry the shells ashore, scattering them across the sandy beaches. When these shells were retrieved and opened, they would reveal the pearls hidden within.



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(1) «In traditional Gulf culture, the formation of pearls was historically shrouded in myth, with many believing that pearls originated from raindrops falling into open oyster shells.»

Historical accounts and the writings of poets and scholars often claim that pearls were formed from raindrops. Many believed that the quantity and quality of pearls were directly influenced by the amount and timing of rainfall in a given year. Some even argued that the more abundant and timelier the rain, the greater the presence of pearls. However, opinions varied regarding their origin. Some suggested that pearls formed naturally within the shell, much like an egg develops within an egg-laying creature. Others believed that oysters would rise to the surface of the sea to catch raindrops, which would then solidify into pearls.

This concept is beautifully illustrated in the verse of one poem:

“Like drops of rain within the shells, they became pearls,  
While within the bellies of serpents, they turned into venom.”

Modern scientific research, however, has revealed the truth about pearl formation.

“A pearl forms when a foreign object penetrates the oyster shell, triggering the oyster to protect itself by secreting layers of nacre (mother-of-pearl) around the irritant.”

To protect itself, the oyster secretes layers of nacre (mother-of-pearl) around the intruding object, smoothing it out until it becomes harmless. This process continues over time, resulting in the creation of the lustrous pearl we cherish today.

And thus, the pearl forms through a natural process that cannot be measured. When a foreign particle enters the shell and, over time, layers of nacre form around it, the result is

a natural and beautiful pearl, provided no deformity occurs. This natural process has granted the small natural gem its great popularity. This fact is affirmed in the book (The Simplified Arabic Encyclopedia)<sup>(1)</sup> which states about natural pearls:

“Pearls are a substance secreted by certain molluscs. They are used to create jewelery and consist of the same material that forms the mollusc’s shell, arranged in alternating layers around a nucleus, which may be a grain of sand, a parasite, or some other object.

Pearls appear in various shapes and colours, depending on the type of mollusc and the kind of foreign body.”

Therefore, there is a significant difference between the formation of natural pearls and those involving human intervention. Natural pearls are created by God’s will when a grain of sand enters the shell, causing the mollusc pain and triggering the secretion of nacre over the intruding particle. This secretion continues for years, and the mollusc’s lifespan lengthens as it produces more nacre.

Over time, hundreds of layers may accumulate, forming the pearl and shaping its appearance, whether round, oval, button-shaped, or cylindrical. These are some of the names of pearls that will be discussed further in the book. The layers that form over the grain inside determine the pearl’s age, and as soon as the shell is removed from the water and opened, the pearl’s growth ceases.

This process is entirely natural and occurs by the will of God,

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(1) The Simplified Arabic Encyclopedia, published in 1965

with no human intervention. Through their knowledge and experience, experts in pearls can sometimes deduce that the outermost layer of a pearl may conceal an exquisite quality underneath, unnoticed by the untrained eye.

Only a skilled expert dares to remove this upper layer, often revealing a superior and refined type of pearl. This is what inspired the poet to say:

“To pearls belong to people who recognize their worth.

Without them, they would remain mere stones.”

Thus, natural pearls retain their lustre for hundreds of years without affecting their shape or appearance. By God’s will, natural pearls possess a kind of intrinsic quality that conveys a unique sensation, understood only by those who truly appreciate the essence of something natural.

This is where cultured pearls fall short, unable to evoke the same sensation. Additionally, the test of time has proven the actual value of natural pearls, exposing the inadequacy of dealing with artificial substitutes.

### **Cultured Pearls (Man-Made Pearls)**

Scientific studies of natural phenomena have enabled humans to control the process of pearl formation. In the early 20th century, Japanese technological advancements led to a breakthrough when experts discovered the secret behind pearl production. After years of tireless research, they successfully developed a method to cultivate pearls by manually stimulating oysters, ensuring the creation of high-

quality pearls with guaranteed formation.

The Japanese scientist Vito Shiki Bikkau was the first to formulate the basic principle of pearl cultivation in 1907. He stated:

*“A foreign object penetrates the oyster’s tissue, and when the oyster is unable to expel it, the object becomes embedded within. If the object carries epithelial cells from the mantle, these cells will coat it with nacreous secretions in layers. Upon exposure to air, these layers quickly solidify, forming a pearl. The foreign object thus serves as the nucleus of the pearl.”*

However, Bikkau’s experiment did not initially yield a perfectly round pearl. Later, Japanese scientist Tsui expanded on this research and discovered the missing link-demonstrating that inserting the epithelial membrane along with the nacreous layer into the oyster’s tissues was essential. This crucial step proved that cultured pearls could be indistinguishable from natural pearls.

<sup>(1)</sup>The true Japanese pioneer of pearl cultivation, Kokichi Mikimoto, recognized as early as 1888 that natural pearls were under threat due to increasing demand and declining oyster populations in the seas and oceans. Determined to preserve the pearl industry, he embarked on extensive research, collaborating with marine biologists and experts. After seventeen years of continuous effort, he developed a reliable technique for growing oysters and cultivating nacre within them, ultimately producing cultured pearls that rivaled natural ones.

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(1) Mustafa Murad Al-Dabbagh, «Qatar: Its Past and Present,» page 45.

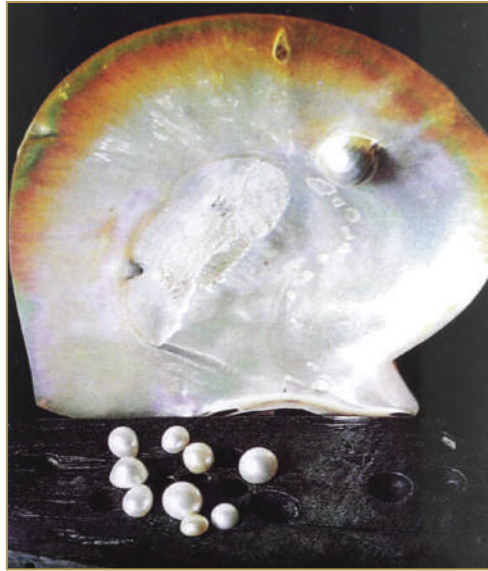
<sup>(1)</sup> “In his famous book *Around the World in Two Hundred Days*, writer Anis Mansour extensively discussed Mikimoto, stating: ‘He was the first person to invent cultured pearls. Courts in Paris and Rome ruled in his favor, after lawsuits were filed against him. They requested that he label his pearls as “natural pearls,” but he refused and instead used the term “cultured pearls.” ‘Mansour also noted: ‘When cultured pearls began posing a significant threat to the natural pearl industry worldwide, lawsuits were filed against Mikimoto in London. However, the courts ruled in his favor, recognizing his contributions. He was called the King of Pearls.’

Mikimoto’s fame spread worldwide, and his pearls became known by his name. He passed away at the age of 99, leaving behind one of the most important pearl farms in the world. His factories produced approximately 20 million pearls annually, employing around 180,000 workers across his companies.

Since that time, cultured pearls have entered the global markets, competing with natural pearls, and the only way to distinguish between them is through X-ray imaging. However, international laws and trade customs have mandated that pearl dealers specify the type of each pearl, by issuing a certificate indicating whether it is a natural pearl, a cultured pearl, or a synthetic pearl.

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(1) *Around the World in Two Hundred Days*, by Anis Mansour



## Artificial Pearls

What we commonly see in public markets and what most women around the world adorn themselves with are imitation or artificial pearls. These are created from hollow glass beads coated with Gelbin, an adhesive derived from bones. This coating is mixed with fish scales, giving the pearls a shimmering luster similar to natural pearls.

Sheikh Tantawi Jawhari speaks about artificial pearls, stating that in the year 1650 CE, a Frenchman named Jacquin was washing a specific type of fish in freshwater when he noticed that the liquid from the fish gave off a radiant glow, resembling the luster of pearls when dried. This observation led him to coat glass beads with this iridescent material after mixing it with a small amount of wax to help it adhere to the glass. He successfully did so, thereby creating the first artificial pearl

in history. His pearls gained immense popularity among the women of that era, and this craft soon became a renowned French industry based on fish-derived substances.

In modern times, Indian scientists at the Aquatic Research Institute in Cochin, India, have developed an innovative and cost-effective method for producing artificial pearls.

These researchers discovered that pearls could be cultivated in small concrete tanks filled with low-salinity water, offering a cheaper and more efficient alternative to traditional pearl farming in open seas and oceans. This method also allows for easier monitoring and development. Reports confirm that scientists have successfully produced a collection of artificial pearls using this technique, available in various shades of white and gold. The process was conducted under salinity levels ranging between (18 to 32, and although some pearls exhibited minor defects, they were successfully treated and refined.

Experts in the field affirm that this innovation and similar advancements will contribute to the widespread availability of artificial pearls. Research is actively being conducted to improve their quality and color variations. However, despite all these developments, the natural pearl remains an unparalleled marvel-an extraordinary testament to the Creator's divine craftsmanship. It is a precious, living treasure that emerges from the depths of a mortal being only to transcend time as an enduring gem of rare beauty.



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## **Globality and Evolution of Pearls in the Arabian Gulf Region**

## Pearls in History

For thousands of years, pearls have been regarded as precious treasures, and the quest for these natural gems has been a defining feature of various civilisations, including the ancient Chinese, Indian, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman cultures. Throughout history, the mesmerizing luster of pearls has captivated women worldwide and enchanted the wealthy and the elite in every corner of the globe. Historical figures such as the Queen of Sheba, the Mughal emperors, and Queen Elizabeth I prized pearls as symbols of wealth and status.

As one of the most esteemed gemstones, pearls have fascinated humanity since the dawn of civilisation. Historical records confirm that pearls have been highly valued throughout different eras. The Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote about pearls in his book *The Reports*, which explored various precious stones, including pearls. Aristotle's observations, recorded before passing in 332 BCE, became a significant source for scholars. In one passage, he describes pearls as "a noble gem, a precious substance of both mineral and organic origin. Among all gemstones, it holds the highest value, beauty, and utility, serving as an adornment to be worn. Unlike other transparent gems formed from earthly elements, the pearl is unique in its organic origin."

Ancient Chinese civilisations also revered pearls. Their

perpetual radiance and mysterious emergence from the depths of oyster shells led to beliefs that pearls contained the hidden spirit of the creature that produced them. Four thousand years ago, the Chinese even used pearls to pay tribute to their rulers before the invention of currency.

The Greeks and Romans were particularly enamored with the iridescent beauty of pearls harvested from the sea's dark depths. During the Roman Empire, pearls became a status symbol, signifying aristocracy, wealth, and influence. Roman society regarded pearls as a marker of social rank, and the Roman general Vitellius is said to have financed an entire military campaign by selling just one pearl ornament from his mother's collection.

Historical manuscripts indicate that pearls were considered the most valuable treasures in ancient Greece.

Meanwhile, the Mughal emperors adorned their opulent palaces with pearls in India and depicted themselves wearing elaborate turbans encrusted with these precious gems. The Maharajas of India further emphasised their wealth by riding elephants adorned with pearls and other priceless jewels.

Ancient coins often bore images of queens adorned with pearl jewelry, a testament to the prestige of pearls throughout history. In the Arab world, pearls were embedded in gold-threaded turbans and garments, often accompanied by other precious gems. To highlight their natural beauty, Arabs preserved pearls in water-filled jars, considering them an emblem of natural elegance.

The Arab civilisation had long recognised the value of pearls, incorporating them into various aspects of life. Precious stones and pearls were widely used for adornment, and historical accounts suggest that Queen Cleopatra famously wore exquisite pearl earrings. In a legendary extravagance, she is said to have dissolved one of her pearls in a cup of wine and drank it to demonstrate its unparalleled worth.

<sup>(1)</sup>Arabic poets often celebrated pearls' beauty in their verses, weaving their brilliance into vivid imagery. However, misconceptions spread among literary scholars, suggesting that pre-Islamic Arabic poetry largely neglected the sea and its treasures. This notion is attributed to Al-Jahiz, who, in his book *Al-Hayawan* (Animals), implied that exploring maritime themes in poetry was of little literary value.

Later scholars, including Taha Hussein, embraced this view, reinforcing that pre-Islamic poetry had little engagement with marine life. Nevertheless, modern literary studies confirm that pearl-diving imagery was less frequent in early Arabic poetry than imagery of other aspects of sea life.

With the advent of Islam, pearls gained even greater prominence. The expansion of the Islamic empire brought newfound prosperity, transforming social and economic norms. The second Caliph, Omar ibn Al-Khattab, expressed concern over the increasing luxury among Muslims following the conquest of Al-Mada'in in Iraq.<sup>2</sup> Historical sources recount that he wept at the sight of opulence, fearing its effects on

<sup>(1)</sup> Qatari scholar Dr. Salama Abdullah Al-Suwaidi explores the symbolism and cultural significance of pearls in ancient Arabic poetry in her study «Pearls in Pre-Islamic and Islamic Poetry,» published in Volume 19 of the *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* at Qatar University.

the Muslim community.

During the Umayyad dynasty, pearls became even more widespread. The Umayyad caliphs adorned themselves and their surroundings with pearls, symbolising status and splendor. Caliph Yazid ibn Abd al-Malik was known for his passion for collecting rare pearls. As a gesture of generosity, he rewarded a poet who praised him with a poem by filling the poet's mouth with pearls.

<sup>(1)</sup>The Abbasid caliphs also highly regarded pearls, treasuring them as valuable possessions. They frequently used pearls instead of coins for trade and travel, showcasing their immense worth. High-ranking officials competed to acquire exquisite pearls, with Caliph Al-Mutawakkil famously rewarding poets he admired by ordering their mouths filled with pearls.

Al-Tawaifa Kings of Al-Andalus adorned themselves with pearls and precious stones, amassing immense wealth. Over successive ages, the fascination with pearls continued to grow, elevating their status to a level rarely attained by other gemstones. This reverence for pearls found its way into Arabic poetry during the Islamic era and beyond, inspiring poets to incorporate them into their verses in various artistic expressions.

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(1) Further perspectives on the role of pearls in Islamic civilisation can be found in George Zaydan's History of Islamic Civilization.

## Arab Gulf Pearls: A Legacy of History and Authenticity

For centuries, the Arabian Gulf was the world’s leading producer of pearls. The region’s rich pearl-diving industry thrived, with Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait emerging as its most important centers. Historical records confirm that, long before the discovery of oil, and for thousands of years, the Gulf served as a vital commercial hub, linking East and West. Through Bahrain and Basra, pearls were traded for silk, tea, and other goods, making the pearl trade the primary economic pillar for Gulf societies.

Historical sources indicate that Indian traders purchased Gulf pearls and transported them to their capital, Bombay, where they were drilled, polished, and sold within India. The remaining pearls were then exported to China, one of the wealthiest markets of the time.



The wealthiest individuals-merchants, princes, and emperors-were captivated by pearls, considered the most precious

gemstones, believed to bring love, wealth, and happiness. The pearls of the Arabian Gulf, which reached them via India, were held in the highest regard. Their reputation soon spread to the Persian Empire and later to the Ottoman Empire, flourishing even further during the Crusades. Over time, European elites became acquainted with Arabian Gulf pearls. These exquisite gems were reserved exclusively for royalty and the wealthy for an extended period, particularly in the United Kingdom, where some of the most renowned Gulf pearls are still preserved in museum collections today.

From this, it becomes evident that pearl diving was the foundation of life in the Arabian Gulf for centuries, shaping its people's identity, aspirations, customs, and social relationships. To Gulf communities, pearl diving was more than just an economic activity-it was a symbol of manhood and a rite of passage into adulthood. It was the primary national and individual income source, sustaining livelihoods throughout the year. The economic impact of pearl diving was not just significant, it was monumental, as it provided a source of income for the divers and supported various other industries such as shipbuilding, trade, and luxury goods. However, pearl diving was also an unpredictable pursuit-many voyages yielded little to no profit, leaving men burdened with debt and hardship. Yet, they endured with patience, holding onto hope for the next season when fate might grant them a fortune. The success of pearl diving was never based on fixed guarantees but instead on luck and the diver's fate.

## Diving “Ghaws”: Its Meaning and Role in the Gulf

Linguistically, the term ‘ghaws’ (diving) carries the profound meaning of descending beneath the water or entering it. Similarly, ‘ghā’is’ (diver) is the one who performs this act, and the intensive form ‘ghawwās’ is also used. The ghawwās is the person who dives into the sea searching for pearls, a linguistic journey that enriches our understanding of the Arabic language.



<sup>(1)</sup>Ibn Manẓūr, in *Lisān al-‘Arab* (Volume Five, under the root “غ و ص”), reports that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) forbade what was known as the “striking of the diver,”

(1) Ibn Manẓūr explains that ghaws also means to launch oneself at something suddenly, and one who does so is called a ghā’is. Al-Azhari added: “The term is used for someone who dives in the sea to extract shells; he is called a ghā’is or ghawwās.” In this context, ḡhā’is refers to the person who undertakes the sudden and risky act of diving for shells, highlighting the bravery and skill required in such a task.

a practice where someone would say to the diver: “Dive into the sea, and whatever you bring up will be yours.” This practice was considered unjust and deceitful, as it involved gharar—an element of uncertainty or deceit, and the Prophet prohibited it to uphold justice and fairness.

Ibn Manzūr further elaborates that ghaws can also metaphorically mean launching oneself into a challenging endeavour. Similarly, the scholar Al-Azhari describes the pearl diver as “one who plunges into the depths of the sea to extract oysters.”

### **<sup>(1)</sup>The Gulf’s Legacy of Pearl Diving**

For centuries, the Arabian Gulf was renowned for its pearl diving industry, with its people deeply devoted to the craft of pearl extraction. Historical records and travelogues dating back to the early 19th century offer detailed accounts of this thriving economic activity and the involvement of Gulf inhabitants in pearl diving. <sup>(2)</sup>The historian Al-Mas’udi (who died in 346 AH) provided extensive information about pearl diving locations, seasonal schedules, tools, and the types of pearls extracted in the Gulf.

In addition to Al-Mas’udi, references to pearl diving can also be found in the works of Ibn Battuta, Al-Biruni, and other prominent scholars, confirming the deep-rooted tradition of this profession and its historical significance.

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(1) Al-Masoudi’s book (Muruj (The Gold) Part One, published by Dar Al-Ma’rifa in Beirut in 1982 AD, and edited by Muhammad Muhyiddin

(2) Al-Mas’udi (d. 956 CE), a renowned Arab historian and geographer, described pearl diving in the Gulf in his encyclopedic work Murūj al-Dhahab (Meadows of Gold), one of the earliest sources on Arabian maritime practices.

“Over time, the term has (الغوص) in the Arabian Gulf came to encompass all activities related to the process of pearl diving, while its literal meaning remained ‘descending into the water.’ In Lorimer’s renowned encyclopedia, The Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman, and Central Arabia, in its revised and updated edition prepared by the Translation Department of the Amiri Diwan in Qatar, the historical section states that the term commonly used for pearl harvesting is <sup>(1)</sup>ghaws and that all individuals involved in the industry, regardless of their specific roles, are referred to as ghawwāsūn (غواصون)-divers.”

The people of the Arabian Gulf had known and excelled in pearl diving for centuries, making it their primary source of livelihood. They practised the craft with remarkable skill and mastery, even though anyone who engaged in it and experienced its hardships knew it to be one of the most demanding and gruelling professions. The work required immense physical effort, long hours spent diving each day and enduring the psychological toll of being away from their families for extended periods.

The pearl diving season began with the arrival of summer, in May (Ayyar), in an event known as ‘Al-Dasha’ (الدشة) or ‘Al-Rakba’ (الركبة) and lasted until the end of the season in September (Aylūl), when colder waters marked the beginning of ‘Al-Qaffāl’ (القفال)-the return journey home.

Historical sources relied upon in documenting this period

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(1) ghaws (Arabic: غوص) – literally «diving» or «descent into the sea»; the term encompasses all activities related to pearl diving, including preparation, tools, diving practices, and post-dive trade.

confirm that pearl divers endured harsh conditions and numerous illnesses during their time at sea. Being away for four months or more was neither easy nor trivial, especially as such a journey was fraught with dangers and faced with the unknown, known only to Allah, the Almighty.”

According to these sources, the diving season begins with what is known as “Al-Ghaws Al-Oud”, which refers to the main diving period. During this time, all large and small pearl-diving vessels set out into deep waters in search of pearls in well-known locations called “Al-Hiyarat” the designated areas where pearl-bearing oysters are found. The singular form of “Al-Hiyarat” is “Heir”, which refers to a site in the middle of the sea with a depth ranging between 10 and 20 meters, abundant with seagrass and oysters. At times, an experienced diver skilled in identifying “Al-Hiyarat” can spot an “Heir” during low tide in broad daylight.

## Types and Categories of Gulf Pearls

Gulf pearls have not received sufficient study and in-depth analysis from various perspectives, except for limited efforts. Most previous studies have primarily focused on pearl diving activity as an economic activity, relying on official state records that typically include lists of ships and their crews, diving expenses, profits, and other administrative and commercial details. However, the classification and definition of pearls have not received the necessary attention despite their fundamental role in the pearl diving tradition.



Since pearls are one of the most defining features of this heritage, our objective in presenting the following classification of names, types, and categories of pearls is to document and preserve this scientific material to prevent its loss or disappearance. We have observed that existing books on pearls lack precision in defining Gulf pearls and fail to provide a proper scientific classification of these pearls, which possess unique qualities not found in their counterparts worldwide.

Although pearls are found in various locations worldwide, Gulf pearls are known to be the finest in their class. No other region in the world has ever produced such a continuous supply of pearls, both in quantity and quality, as the Arabian Gulf.

For centuries, the process by which pearls formed within oysters has remained one of the most captivating and poetic mysteries in human history, fascinating people across different civilizations. Numerous legends have surrounded pearls, often referred to as the queen of all gemstones. One ancient Indian manuscript mentions such tales, highlighting how India, Persia, and other Eastern nations passed down these myths to the rest of the world.

This contributed to the prestige, allure, and mystical charm traditionally associated with pearls.

1- One of the legends surrounding the creation of pearls tells of how the oyster opens its shell as it is gently rocked by the waves, allowing moisture and the radiant ivory beams of the moon to enter. According to the myth, these elements form pearls.<sup>(1)</sup>

2- While many of these legends are widely accepted in Arabic and other historical sources, the actual process of pearl

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(1) The legend of moonbeams and moisture entering oysters is well translated but could benefit from contrast with scientific reality. While these stories reflect the poetic imagination of earlier civilizations, modern science has shown that pearls form through a biological response to foreign particles irritating the oyster's mantle tissue.

formation is entirely different from what early scholars once believed.

Although pearls are recognized worldwide for their distinct qualities, the Gulf pearl is the most renowned and prized variety (Lulu' Al-Khaleej). This type is considered the finest in the world today. Experts in pearl science and seasoned pearl divers confirm that natural saltwater pearls from the Arabian Gulf, particularly those found near the shore, never produce identical pearls in colour, size, or shape.

This is because Gulf pearls form naturally from the moment the oyster begins its life cycle, with the nucleus developing and maturing organically, especially in the case of medium and large-sized pearls.

This stands in contrast to cultured pearls, whose shape and size can be influenced and controlled to a certain extent by pearl farmers. Advances in cultivation have led to cultured pearls known for their brilliant lustre, uniform shape, and high value. However, natural Gulf pearls remain unparalleled in quality, exquisite shape, unique colour, thickness of the nacre layer, and individual pearl size.

These factors have earned Gulf pearls a distinguished status in international markets.

With this in mind, let us embark on a journey to explore the true nature of Gulf pearls, their unique characteristics, rarity, and classification, as experts worldwide recognize them.”

<sup>(1)</sup>To further clarify this subject, we explain the characteristics, names, and types of pearls found in the Arabian Gulf. This information has been meticulously gathered from trusted narrators and experienced pearl traders involved in pearl commerce during this pivotal era in Gulf history.

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(1) All classifications and definitions of Gulf pearls in this section have been carefully documented and verified through reliable sources, including narrators who were interviewed as part of field research:

1. Al-Wajih Hussein Al-Fardan – Qatar
2. Al-Wajih Hamad bin Rahmah Al-Shamsi – Dubai
3. Al-Walid Harib bin Rashid Al-Harib – Qatar
4. Kunuz Al-Khaleej (Treasures of the Gulf), Bahrain – Ministry of Information.»
5. (Qimāsh) «Used metaphorically due to the resemblance of pearl shine to the fine white fabric.
6. These terms, used specifically for the largest and most prized pearls, evoke a sense of awe and admiration due to their rarity and significance in the Gulf's pearl trading

## Classification of the Most Important Types of Gulf Pearls

Experts in the Gulf’s pearl industry affirm that the finest, the most exquisite pearl, known as *Dāna* (دانة)<sup>(1)</sup>, signifies a pearl of exceptional size and flawless quality, a term deeply rooted in Gulf trading lexicon.” This term, of Indian origin, is used to describe any pearl-small or large-that possesses these superior qualities. Sometimes, it is also referred to as *Hasbāh* (حصباه), a term that conveys the same meaning and characteristics.



While legends once claimed that pearls were formed from moonbeams falling into the ocean, the scientific explanation is more grounded.

Pearls form as a biological defence mechanism in molluscs (mainly oysters and muscles) when an irritant enters the shell. The mollusc secretes layers of nacre (calcium carbonate and protein) around the irritant, gradually producing a pearl. Pearls may be natural, cultured, or imitated.

(1) «In Gulf societies, possessing a *Dāna* pearl was a symbol of affluence and was often passed down through generations as a family heirloom.»

A uniquely rare Hasbāh pearl is called ‘Dānat Al-Ghaltānah’ (الدانة الغلطانة)-a pearl that was discovered either by sheer luck or through immense effort. This exceptional pearl has been praised in vernacular poetry, where poets admired its unparalleled beauty and esteemed value.

### Sources and Documentation:

It is worth noting that the people of the Arabian Gulf refer to raw pearls, regardless of their shape or size, using the term ‘Qimāsh’ (قماش), with its singular form being <sup>(1)</sup>‘Qimāshah’ (قماشه). This designation was inspired by the resemblance of the pearl’s pure, radiant lustre to the bright white fabric of a garment. According to several narrators, this is the term’s origin as used in Gulf pearl terminology.”

<sup>(2)</sup>All pearl traders in the Arabian Gulf unanimously agree that the terms ‘Dāna’ (دانة) and ‘Hasbāh’ (حصباه) are widely recognized in the region.

A unique and rare pearl is referred to as ‘Dāna’, with its plural form being ‘Dānāt’ (دانات), while ‘Hasbāh’ is also commonly used, with its plural form ‘Hasābi’ (حصابي). This term is used specifically for the largest and most prized pearls, whereas the most miniature pearls are called ‘Yikka’ (اليكة)-tiny pearl grains.

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(1) The term “Qimāsh” (قماش), meaning “fabric,” was used metaphorically to describe raw pearls because of their resemblance to fine white cloth - a poetic reflection of their beauty and purity in Gulf culture.

This designation was inspired by the resemblance of pearl’s pure, radiant luster to the bright white fabric of a garment

(2) These terms, used specifically for the largest and most prized pearls, evoke a sense of awe and admiration due to their rarity and significance in the Gulf’s pearl trading.

The lowest quality pearls are referred to as Khashrah (الخشرة). According to the traditional weight system used at the time, a Hasbāh (حصباه) pearl weighed between one and ten Rattī (رتي). If a pearl exceeded ten Rattī, it was classified as a Dāna (دانة), making it one of the most significant types of pearls.

“ There is also a classification below the Rattī (رتي) known as Hasbāh Batan (حصباه بطن). The traditional pearl weighing trays used in Gulf pearl trading consisted of six bowls, and the classification of a pearl depended on where it settled during weighing:

If the pearl remained in the sixth tray, it was called Hasbāh Al-Rās (حصباه الرأس).

If it fell into the last tray, it was known as Hasbāh Al-Udhun (حصباه الأذن).

If it landed in the fourth or third tray, it was classified as Batan (البطن).

If it sank to the very bottom, it was referred to as Sahtīt Nā'im (سحتيت ناعم).”

The Dāna (دانة) or Hasbāh (حصباه) belongs to a category known among Gulf pearl traders as Jiwan (الجي. ون).<sup>(1)</sup> Jiwan is a term used to describe a category of highly valued pearls in Gulf pearl trading. This category includes a variety of pearls that may be classified as small or large Dāna, depending on their type, integrity, and color.

Therefore, the value of pearls varies according to their shape,

(1) For instance, pearls like Al-Kawl (الكول), Al-Sijni (السجني), and Al-Batan (البطن) are all part of the Jiwan category.

quality, colour, lustre, weight, and brilliance-specifically, the way a pearl reflects or refracts light through its calcium carbonate crystals or aragonite or how light penetrates the depths of its surface. The most exquisite pearls, with their unparalleled beauty, are those that combine both luster and inner radiance simultaneously.

The most exquisite pearls are those that exhibit both luster and brilliance simultaneously.

Within the Jiwan category, there are several prestigious types of pearls, but three varieties are considered the most valuable and highly sought after by collectors in the region:

Al-Kawl (الكول) - Al-Sijnī (السجني) - Al-Batan (البطن)”

The shape of a pearl is determined by its position within the oyster shell and the amount of nacre secretion surrounding its core. This process results in different pearl formations:

-A perfectly round pearl is called *Kawl* (كول).

-A teardrop-shaped pearl is known as *Sijnī* (سجني) or *Tumbul* (تمبول).

-A half-spherical pearl is referred to as *Batan* (البطن).

In terms of classification by type, pearls must be either:

- Kawl (perfectly round)
- Batan (half-spherical)
- Sijnī (teardrop or pear-shaped)

These are considered the most prestigious varieties of Gulf pearls.

## Evaluating Pearl Quality

In terms of its perfection, the Dana (pearl) must be free from any scratches. If Dana is classified as “Koll”, it must be perfectly round. When described as “Slam”, it means that it is flawless, without scratches or impurities, and possesses a high luster, with a smooth, sleek body. A pearl that meets these criteria can be categorized under the classification “G1”. Koll. Salam” a terminology adopted by pearl traders to evaluate pearls based on their type and quality.

As for colour, the most desirable pearls are those with a pinkish or pure white hue. The most luxurious and valuable among them are those with a white colour that leans slightly red or pink. Therefore, the finest-quality pearls must exhibit a white tone with a slightly pinkish hue, making them among the most prestigious and highly sought-after pearls. Pearl merchants in the Arabian Gulf recognize this high-grade variety and classify it as the top tier of pearls, referring to the finest quality, colour, and size as “Dana. G1. Koll. Slam”.

These premium pearls emerge naturally from the oyster, formed by the divine creation of God (Glorified and Exalted Be He), shaped by the secretions of the marine organism inside the shell. However, some G1 pearls are found attached to the shell, and an expert must extract them carefully by removing some layers with extreme precision. When this process is completed, what emerges is called a “Nagfa”, from which a “Dana G1 Baton” is obtained, meaning it is not fully spherical but rather a half-circle, hence referred to as “Baton”.

If the G1 group is recognized as the finest category of pearls due to its exceptional quality, flawless attributes, and distinctive colours, then the Yaka group follows closely behind. Although Yaka pearls differ slightly in colour diversity, they are not considered second-grade. Instead, they maintain all the essential first-grade qualities, making them highly valued. However, G1 pearls are typically regarded as the elite selection within the Yaka category.

The Yaka group includes pearls of varied grades, often classified among the smallest-sized pearls. Some notable types within this group include:

- Al-Adasi: Named after it, it resembles a lentil seed in shape.
- Aq'azi: A slightly raised semi-circular pearl.

Despite these variations, Yaka pearls remain highly esteemed due to their excellent quality and durability, making them a prized possession among pearl traders and collectors.



Another high-grade category of pearls is known as “Al-Kolwah”, an excellent and valuable type. According to the classification used by pearl traders, pearls of high quality are categorized into distinct grades, each with its level of distinction. Al-Kolwah falls into the second tier but still holds a remarkable status. This category includes all pearl types, such as Koll (perfectly round pearls), Baton (semi-round pearls), and Sajni (elongated pearls), along with other naturally occurring formations. Due to their exceptional quality, Al-Kolwah pearls remain highly sought-after and command high prices.

In approximately the fourth tier, a type of pearl is known as “Al-Badlah.” This group comprises various subcategories and is characterized by irregular shapes rather than perfect roundness. Al-Badlah pearls vary in quality, ranging in degrees of surface irregularities, clarity, and overall formation. Their price is determined mainly by their final shape, as pearl shape is a crucial factor in the market and plays a significant role in assessing its commercial value.

These pearls are often used for rings, necklaces, brooches, and other jewelry.

#### How Are Pearl Prices Determined?

If we want to answer this question, it is essential to understand that the price of a natural pearl depends on three main factors:

Shape of the pearl, weight and luster (shine and brilliance)

Larger pearls command higher prices, increasing their value based on exceptional shape and unique colouration. It is also

worth noting that even tiny pearls of superior quality (from first-tier categories) can be highly valuable if they exhibit outstanding characteristics.

While G1, Yaka, and Kolwah pearls are naturally formed and extracted from oysters in their final pearl shape, Al-Badlah pearls are attached to the oyster shell and require careful shell breaking to extract the pearl from within.

The next category is called “Nimro,” which, like Al-Badlah, is also attached to the oyster shell. After breaking the shell and cleaning it, the extracted pearl has a flat base and is semi-circular in shape. Nimro pearls are classified into specific grades, assessed based on clarity and quality, which determines their value and price. These subcategories include:

Nimro G1, Nimro Yaka, Nimro Koll

Because Nimro pearls are embedded in the shell, specialized experts are required to extract them with precision. This process is conducted onshore, where oysters containing this type of pearl are collected in special cloth bags and sold in their raw form, exactly as they were extracted from the shell after the diving expedition.

Another type of pearl is known as “Al-Tibaba,” which includes all kinds of pearls and is also attached to the shell. Pearl traders (Tawwash) acquire these pearls by chance, meaning that once the shell is broken, the discovery might be a rare high-quality pearl (Majhoola), a G1 pearl, or nothing valuable at all. This is where the expertise of a skilled Tawwash becomes crucial. A seasoned trader can distinguish between

pearls of different grades, sorting them individually before evaluation. Some buyers only seek G1 pearls, while others specifically look for Yaka pearls, and so on.

According to pearl experts, a skilled Tawwash is one who knows how to classify pearls accurately and prepare them for sale based on their type and rarity.

Another type of pearl is called “Al-Badlah,” which is also attached to the oyster shell. It is considered equivalent to a pearl variety known as “Kam Shahi,” which is comparable in quality and classification to Al-Badlah. Specialists clean and refine these pearls, but their natural shape is often irregular.

To provide a structured understanding of pearl types, characteristics, and classifications, and to simplify the process of identifying pearls and their commercial value, we present a practical and structured table aligned with the prioritization and ranking system recognized by Gulf pearl traders (Tawawish).

## <sup>(1)</sup>Terminology for Types of Pearls: A Brief History

**Kawl (كول):** A perfectly spherical pearl. The term ‘Kawl’ is derived from the Arabic word for ‘perfect’, reflecting the flawless nature of this type of pearl. It includes various types, including the *Naqi*-a flawless pearl free from scratches or surface blemishes, known for its high luster and a sheen that tends toward white with a rosy hue. One of the *Kawl* types is

(1) (This classification reflects the deep-rooted expertise of Gulf pearl traders, ensuring pearls are accurately categorized, appraised, and marketed based on their quality, rarity, and demand.)

called *Kawlooh*, a single pearl slightly lower in quality than the *Jaywan*, though still perfectly round.

**Baṭn (بطن):** A semi-spherical pearl. It comes in different forms, including the *Yikkah* and the *Kawlooh*. Among its subtypes is the *Baṭn Aq'azi*, a half-round pearl with a unique slightly elevated dome shape, and the *Baṭn 'Adasi*, which resembles a lentil in shape-flattened and tapered at both ends, making each of them a fascinating study in pearl morphology.

**Sijni (سجني),** also known as *Tamabool*, this type of pearl resembles a teardrop or a pear and comes in various shapes and grades.

**Naqfah (نقفة):** A pearl that is attached to the interior of the oyster shell. Its plural form is *Naqf*. It is removed from the shell, then cleaned and broken apart. It is a type of *Nimru* and sometimes turns out to be a high-quality *Dāna* (large pearl). These pearls appear in different forms, most commonly semi-spherical (*Baṭn*), then called *Fas Nimru* (Nimru stone).

### Types of Pearls:

**Jaywan (جي ون):** The finest and most luxurious type of pearls. It comes in multiple colors and includes various forms of pearls with the following characteristics: intense brilliance, high luster, rosy-white hue, and transparency. It is also referred to as *Ross-in*. Jaywan includes several forms:

- **Kawl (كول):** Perfectly round
- **Baṭn (بطن):** Semi-circular
- **Sijni (سجني):** Pear-shaped



**Yikkah (يكة):** Plural: *Yikāt*. Another superior class of pearls, similar in characteristics and color variations to *Jaywan*, but slightly lower in grade. The top selections from *Yikkah* may be classified as *Jaywan*. This type also includes:

- *Jaywan Sillam* (round),
- *Jaywan Baṭn* (semi-spherical),
- *Jaywan Sijni* (pear-shaped).
- Yikkah pearls are typically round. They share most features of *Jaywan*, differing only slightly in color grading.

**Kawlooh (كولووه):** Plural: *Kawloāt*. A high-quality type of pearl known for its elevated price and variety of colours and forms. These pearls are generally close to round or fully round. They include:

- *Baṭn* - *Kawl* - *Sijni* - *Adasi* (lentil-shaped) - *Aq‘azi* (domed semi-spherical) - **Badlah (بدلة):** Plural: *Badlāt* is an irregularly shaped pearl of various sizes and forms. They come in several grades depending on their curvature, clarity, and overall quality. Despite their irregularity, they have commercial value and are commonly used in necklaces, rings, pendants, brooches, and other jewelry items.

**Tibabah (تبابه):** Plural: *Tibāyib*. A mixed collection of pearls encompassing all known types, shapes, and colors. It is essentially a random assortment, and it may include:

- Tibabat Nimru
- Tibabat Yikkah

- Jaywan
- Kawlooh
- Badlah

Or it may contain nothing of real value; it all depends on luck. Here, the skill of the seasoned *Tawwāsh* (pearl merchant) plays a critical role. With his unparalleled expertise and keen eye, he carefully sorts the *Tibabah* collection, classifying the pearls by type and selling them at appropriate prices.

This kind is among the least valuable pearls, characterized by odd shapes and various colours, including dark black, smoky grey, and other unusual tones. Some are called *Mufarras* and *Fouli*-irregular in shape, often with visible surface deformities-nevertheless, specialized merchants in the market deal exclusively in *Khashrah* pearls, appreciating their unique beauty.

**Nimru (نيمرو):** A pearl that is stuck to the oyster shell. A pearl appears with a base still attached when the shell is broken open.

These pearls, including the rare and valuable *Nimru Jaywan*, *Kawlooh*, and *Badlah*, are cleaned and come in various types. Typically semi-spherical in shape, each type includes specific categories and grades, with their value assessed based on clarity and overall quality. Specialists are tasked with their appraisal. *Nimru* pearls, in particular, remain inside their oyster shells until the end of the diving season, after which they are sold in bulk and unprocessed to pearl merchants (*Tawwāwish*).

Some merchants extract the pearls from the shells, clean and refine them, then sell them as finished products. Others sell the oysters as they are, unprocessed—a practice referred to as *Mukhshar*.

### **Mukhshar (مخشش):**

Plural: *Mukhāshir*. This refers to a mixed assortment of various pearl types. However, high-quality pieces are separated and placed into a special pouch called *Al-‘Awāli* (the “superior ones”). Some *Tawwāwish* buy and resell the oysters in their raw state to expert handlers who carefully extract and clean the pearls. These specialists remove the outer layers and deposits from the shell. Occasionally, they uncover a valuable *Jaywan Dāna* or a *Kawlooh Dāna*, which is then sorted out and classified separately. The rest are grouped by size, color, and type, which fall under the broad category of *Nimru*.

### **Majhoolah (مجهولة):**

Plural: *Majāheel*. These are irregularly shaped pearls that remain attached to the inner shell. There is hope that such pearls may contain a valuable *Dāna*. Experts specialize in purchasing and breaking them open to reveal what lies within. If luck is on their side, they may discover a rare and precious *Jaywan* pearl, marking a prosperous year. They may also find a pearl of lesser quality—or none at all. In the latter case, the buyer incurs a significant loss. Few *Tawwāwish* dare to purchase *Majhoolah* pearls, which is considered a high-risk venture with the potential for high reward.

### Na'imah (ناعمة):

Plural: *Nawā'im*. These are small-sized pearls, graded by size, and come in various colors and shapes. The smallest kind is called *Saḥtīt* or *Rattī*, which is about the size of a needle's tip. After sorting the oysters, the following types are commonly found:

- *Na'imah Sheereen*
- *Na'imah Mukhallat* (Mixed)
- *Na'imah Kawl*
- *Na'imah Baṭn*
- *Na'imah Sijni*

### Barbookah (بربوكة):

Plural: *Barābeek*. A pearl that is hollow on the inside and forms in various shapes. It is relatively low in value but has a group of specialized salespeople.

### 'Azmah (عظمة):

Plural: *izām*. A hard pearl attached to the oyster shell must be cut out. This process requires precision and care, and the 'Azmah pearl also has its market specialists who are skilled in this labor-intensive task.

### Mufarras (مفرص):

A type of pearl consisting of two or more pearls fused. Experts undertake a meticulous process of separating and cleaning

them, restoring them to their proper shape and natural form. This dedication ensures the quality of the Mufarras pearls.

### **Kām Shāhi (كأم شاهي):**

A type of pearl that belongs to the *Badlah* class. It is attached to the oyster shell and is extracted, cleaned, and assembled into coordinated sets known as *Kām Shāhi* collections.

### **Jabtah (جبته):**

A thin, delicate type of pearl.

### **Sinkbāsi (سينكباسي):**

A grey-coloured pearl tends toward a darker, almost black shade, though sometimes it displays slightly lighter tones. It may be found among various pearl assortments.

**Nabāti (نباتي):** A rare type of pearl that is white with a slight reddish hue. It includes several varieties and is considered among the finest kinds of pearls, making it a fascinating subject for pearl enthusiasts.

**Fouli (فولي):** A kind of pearl with jagged, irregular shapes, leaning toward blue and black hues. Its lack of uniformity in form adds to its unique beauty, making it a treasure for pearl traders and enthusiasts.

**Kāt (كات):** The highest quality type of *Badlah* pearls, commonly referred to as *Kāt*.

**Kallābi (كلابي):** Considered the most luxurious of all pearls, this is what is known as *Jaywan*. It is always a white pearl with a soft pink tint, distinguished by its intense brilliance, evoking

a sense of awe and admiration among pearl enthusiasts.

**Rattī (ریتی) / Saḥtīt (سحتیت):** The smallest form of pearl, sold by weight in *mithqāl*. It is frequently used in traditional medicine for its perceived health benefits, sewn onto fabrics and garments for decorative purposes, and incorporated into specific types of jewelry. It has been widely used in India, Persia, and Turkey, reflecting its cultural importance beyond its aesthetic value.

<sup>(1)</sup>**Rakam (رکم):** Finally, we come to this critical term in the lexicon of pearl merchants. *Rakam* refers to a large stockpile of pearls owned by a *Tawwāsh* (pearl merchant) or major dealer. For instance, “*The Rakam of so-and-so was sold*” may mean a significant pearl transaction occurred that day. The *Rakam* signifies an extensive collection of pearls encompassing all types and classifications, and its sales often mark a significant event in the pearl trade.

## Weights and Methods of Transaction

Following this comprehensive overview of pearl types and classifications, we turn to a key aspect of pearl diving culture in the Gulf region: the methods of transaction and the units of weight used.

It is well known that gemstone traders worldwide use carats to measure precious stones. However, merchants in the Arabian Gulf traditionally used older weight units known as *Shaw*, which have a complex relationship to the carat.

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(1) In the Gulf pearl trade, *Rakam* signifies a trader’s accumulated pearl stock, often of great value. Referring to it by name implies prestige and scale, like a modern auction lot or a private vault.



## Hamad bin Rahmah Al-Shamsi

In this critical segment on pearl diving, we hear from Hamad bin Rahmah Al-Shamsi, a prominent Dubai pearl merchant and one of the leading figures in the pearl trade. He inherited this profession from his late father, Rahmah bin Abdullah Al-Shamsi, a man of great expertise and extensive knowledge in all aspects of the pearl trade, from wisdom and sound judgment to mastery in sorting, classifying, and evaluating different pearls.

His father was regarded as a trusted authority in the field, frequently consulted by those outside the trade for advice. Diving shipowners and pearl merchants often sought his expertise, presenting their newly acquired pearls for his assessment. Additionally, he was a respected mediator in commercial disputes within the pearl trade due to his integrity and deep understanding of the trade's intricacies.

Hamad bin Rahmah acquired his expertise from his father. He recalls:

“I received my first lessons in pearl trading at fourteen. Since I lived in the same household as my father and constantly accompanied him, I learned much about business, the traders, and the shipowners involved in the trade.

Unsurprisingly, I gained considerable experience from a man who spent his life among the most prominent figures in the pearl trade.

Among those he worked with were the late Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, Ruler of Dubai (may Allah have mercy on him); Sheikh Ahmed bin Rashid Al Mualla (may Allah have mercy on him); and Ali bin Abdullah Al-Owais (may Allah have mercy on him), whose office was frequented by distinguished individuals, scholars, and merchants from various nationalities for buying and selling pearls.

Ali bin Abdullah Al-Owais was a highly regarded figure in trade, particularly in pearls, and he financed several large diving ships in Sharjah and Al-Za ‘ab Island in Ras Al Khaimah. Throughout my years with my father, I had the opportunity to meet many influential figures in the pearl industry,

including Ahmed bin Majid Al-Ghurair, Salem bin Misbah bin Hamoudah, Abdullah bin Mohammed Al-Budoor, Mohammed Balqeizi, Ali Balqeizi, Abdul Mohsen Al-Saneh, Saeed Al-Dalil, and Mohammed bin Khalifa Al-Khalafi, along with others whose names I cannot recall at the moment.”

<sup>(1)</sup>With the background of an expert in diving tools regarding weights and measures, the father, Hamad bin Rahma Al Shamsi says: Speaking from his deep knowledge of pearl diving tools, weights, and measurements, Hamad bin Rahmah Al-Shamsi emphasizes:

“Experience plays a fundamental role in determining pearl types, shapes, classifications, and pricing. That is why every pearl merchant ensures that he has an assistant, a specialist who acts as an expert, accompanying him in buying and selling transactions. However, finding a qualified expert is no simple task, as they are scarce. These specialists are responsible for sorting and evaluating pearls, selecting the finest specimens using specialized tools.

Pearl traders use a handbook containing weight conversion tables to determine pearl sizes based on a standard unit known as the *mithqāl* or *ṭāsa*.

Even slight variations in pearl size are noteworthy, as indicated using *ṭāsas*, which may consist of forty or more units. These indicate the various pearl sizes, classified through sieving and sorting using specialized sieves, each referred to as a *ṭāsa*. These sieves have openings of different sizes, allowing only pearls of a specific size to pass through.

During the sorting process, the pearls are initially measured using the *ṭāsas*. They are typically grouped by similar sizes, though they may vary in quality. Pearls of similar sizes are then categorized accordingly, based on their group and color.

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(1) A Dedicated Interview for This Book: This interview with Hamad bin Rahmah Al-Shamsi, a distinguished Dubai pearl merchant, was conducted in Dubai specifically to contribute to this book.

Hamad bin Rahma Al Shamsi continues explaining his insights: “Through this sorting process, pearl types and their prices are determined using specific weighing tools with distinct names. The *mithqāl* is used to weigh smaller pearls, while the *ratī* is used for larger ones. For pearls classified from *saḥtīt* and above, the *shō* unit is used. The traditional weight units consist of the following:

(*Dānī – Ratī – Āna – Shō – Dūkka*)

Therefore, weight measurements follow established methods with well-documented calculations. According to maritime traditions, 24 *ratīs* equal one *mithqāl*, which corresponds to 22.5 carats. Additionally, one *mithqāl* is equivalent to 330 *shō*.”





He adds that no (ṭawwāsh)<sup>(1)</sup> can do without his specialized tools, which are kept in a dedicated wooden box called the *bishtakhta*. This box is made of high-quality *sīsam* wood, known for its durability and resistance to the elements, to the extent that some have lasted over 300 years without any deterioration. The quality of the *bishtakhta* varies from one *ṭawwāsh* to another.

This box always remains with the ṭawwāsh-whether in his gathering place or during his travels-and never leaves his side, even during the pearl diving season while searching for pearls at sea. Inside the *bishtakhta*, the *ṭawwāsh* stores his pearls, money, and essential tools of the trade, which are collectively referred to as the *dasta*. This set includes weighing tools, sieves, measuring instruments, magnifiers, and similar items.

(1) Pearl diving trips are led by the « Tawash,» a pearl trader who moves between diving ships in search of pearls. He is responsible for the crew aboard the ship and determines the duration of their stay at sea.

To use these tools, the *ṭawwāsh* lays out a red cloth with a white-trimmed border, square in shape and about one to one and a half meters long. Within this cloth, he keeps his essential instruments, which include: (a balance scale, weights, *ṭāsast* (sieves), a scoop, and a ledger)

The first task a *ṭawwāsh* performs is placing a quantity of pearls in the first *ṭāsa*, which has the largest openings, to begin the sieving process. The pearls that remain in this *ṭāsa* are called *ḥaṣābī*. He then continues the process using progressively smaller *ṭāsas*, each with finer openings. The pearls that remain in the second *ṭāsa* are known as *ra's al-ṭāsa*. This process continues through the various *ṭāsas* until the smallest pearls, called *yikka*, are separated.

Explanation of the *ṭawwāsh's* tools:

- Balance scale: Made of brass, it is lightweight, highly sensitive, and consists of two pans-one for placing the weights and the other for the pearls to balance the measurement.

### Weights and Measurement Tools in Pearl Trading

The weights are typically made of agate stones, which serve as the standard for measuring pearls. These stones have specific names, such as (*mithqāl*, *ratī*, *āna*). Pearls are weighed using these stones according to their respective measurements before being converted into the *shō* unit.

For example, if a particular *dāna* (pearl) weigh 6 *ratī*, it is equivalent to 20.5 *shō* and 12.5 *dūkka*.

## Tools Used in Pearl Sorting and Handling

- **Ṭāsas (Sieves):** These are specialized sieves made of brass, used for sorting pearls by size. They come in multiple sizes and can number more than forty, each featuring openings of various diameters to separate pearls accordingly.
- **Kafsha (Scoop):** Also made of brass, this tool is used to scoop and transfer pearls while they remain inside their designated cloth. It ensures that pearls are not handled directly by hand, as it is customary among pearl traders to avoid touching the pearls with bare hands during transactions.
- **Ledger (Daftar):** This notebook is used by the *ṭawwāsh* when purchasing pearls. It allows him to convert weights from *ratī* to *shō* to determine the pearl's value. Pearl traders rely heavily on this ledger, as it serves as a well-known reference for recording and calculating pearl weights accurately.



## The Pearl Trading System

The process of pearl trading has its own unique customs and regulations. Hamad bin Rahma Al Shamsi shares insights into the traditional methods of buying and selling pearls, which he continues to practice to this day.

According to him, the pearl trade among Gulf pearl merchants follows strict and complex auctioning systems, ensuring rigorous adherence to the rules. These systems closely resemble those used in modern pearl trading, except for the shift from traditionally furnished trading rooms of the past to today's luxurious and air-conditioned offices. However, despite these societal changes, the traditional pearl-selling method remains largely unchanged.

Even today, transactions are conducted using the same old customs-by placing the traditional red cloth over the carpet when a deal is made between pearl traders. This process is not without excitement, as it follows the silent auction system, a well-known and widely practiced method among Gulf pearl merchants.

In this system, if a buyer wishes to keep his offer confidential from others in the room, he and the seller conceal their hands beneath a red cloth. They then begin bidding by signaling numbers with their fingers, allowing them to negotiate privately without revealing their offers to bystanders.

This traditional auctioning method has been in use for hundreds of years and remains an essential part of pearl trading in the Gulf today.





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# **The Pearls of the Gulf: Decline and Revival**

## The Beginning of the End

The 1940s marked a turning point in the lives of the people of the Arabian Gulf, ushering in a transformation that became evident by the early 1950s.

Many researchers, historians, and veteran pearl divers agree that the primary reason for the decline of the pearl diving industry and the cessation of its once-thriving trade was the discovery of oil. The emergence of the oil industry led to the decline of pearl diving and the collapse of the pearl trade.

However, beyond this commonly accepted view, the reality of that era reveals that international factors also played a crucial role in dismantling the Gulf's primary economic resource and lifeline.

Oil was the dawn of prosperity that relieved people's lives after years of hardship and struggle. As a result, many shifted their focus to the oil industry, favouring its relatively stable and lucrative opportunities over the extreme hardships and life-threatening risks associated with pearl diving and maritime labour.

“In my view, although oil impacted the decline of the pearl trade, it did not lead to its complete disappearance. It was not the primary or direct reason that caused the people of the Gulf to abandon this trade. The proof lies in the fact that Gulf pearls still retain their brilliance in international auctions,

maintaining active markets, traders, and collectors, both in the Arabian Gulf region and across the world.”



During the 1940s, the region was not spared from setbacks, transformations, and events that wiped out its primary source of livelihood. Yet, the brave and honorable men of the Gulf did not succumb to these challenges. They turned their lives into an unbearable struggle, but they also showed remarkable resilience. Hardships converged upon them from all directions, and it was during this period that a new and unfamiliar type of pearl emerged in full force-what came to be known as Japanese pearls, or as some preferred to call them, artificial pearls.

This new competitor quickly dominated global markets, overshadowing natural Gulf pearls. It flooded international markets at exceptionally low and competitive prices, drastically reducing the value of Gulf pearls and disrupting their trade, particularly in India, the primary marketplace for Gulf merchants at the time.



This period coincided with World War II, which cast a gloomy shadow over the region and significantly impacted global pearl sales. Throughout the 1930s and beyond, pearl diving was still the backbone of the Gulf economy, with its influence reaching far beyond the region. However, as the war disrupted global trade, many studies attributed the decline of Gulf pearls to the war's economic repercussions. Some scholars even considered the war one of the main reasons behind the collapse of the pearl trade during that era, underscoring the global impact of this local industry.

However, from my perspective, the most significant turning point was India's declaration of independence. While some historians and contemporaries do not see it as a direct cause for the decline of the Gulf pearl trade, those directly affected—those whose businesses and livelihoods suffered—fully grasp this event's devastating impact on their trade and way of life. This personal perspective brings to light the human impact of these historical events, making them more relatable to the audience.

## **The Beginning of the Decline in Pearl Diving**

The discovery of oil reserves in the region played a crucial role in shifting economic priorities away from pearl diving. Oil exploration companies made key discoveries in:

- Bahrain (1932)
- Kuwait (1938)
- Saudi Arabia (1938, commercial exports in 1939)
- Qatar (1940)

Bahrain began regular oil exports in 1934, followed by Saudi Arabia in 1939. However, within months of the first oil shipment from Ras Tanura, attended by King Abdulaziz on March 1, World War II broke out, shattering hopes of immediate prosperity.

Despite continued oil production in Bahrain, operations in the rest of the Gulf slowed dramatically or completely stopped.

Although exploration and development continued in Saudi Arabia, oil exports were suspended. In Kuwait and Qatar, all operations stopped, leading oil companies to withdraw their staff and shut down newly discovered wells in Qatar.

The Impact of Japanese-Cultured Pearls on Gulf Pearls  
Meanwhile, the Gulf economy suffered another major blow in the 1930s when Japan introduced cultured pearls, which significantly reduced the value of natural pearls.

However, pearl industry experts agree that Japanese cultured pearls initially had no major impact on Gulf pearls during the early 1930s.

Sources indicate that Indian markets continued to absorb large quantities of Gulf pearls, in all varieties, until the 1940s without being affected by the new competition.

In fact, Gulf merchants credit India for helping them integrate into the modern global market. Their interactions with British officials and traders in India exposed them to global trade practices, and many Gulf merchants even learned the English language during this time.

## New Trade Practices and the Indian Market

Through their interactions with international merchants, Gulf traders became familiar with new consumer products and commercial methods. Most of their pearl sales occurred in Bombay, where pearls were polished and drilled to be strung into necklaces.

At the time, the Indian market was vast, capable of absorbing large quantities of pearls without hesitation. The market particularly thrived when a Maharaja's son was getting married—an event that would cause pearl prices to skyrocket.<sup>(1)</sup>

During such occasions, representatives from Indian royal courts would arrive, purchasing all available pearls, especially the finest ones, to craft necklaces and jewelry. The demand for natural pearls was exceptionally high. If three Maharaja weddings took place in a single year, Gulf merchants considered themselves extremely fortunate, as such events meant substantial profits.<sup>(2)</sup>

Additionally, European demand for pearls remained strong in the years leading up to the decline of the pearl trade. Merchants from France, the United States, and Britain frequently visited the Gulf region to purchase natural pearls.<sup>(3)</sup>

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(1) The Indian market, with its vastness and capacity to absorb large quantities of pearls without hesitation, played a pivotal role in the operations of Gulf traders. Their interactions with international merchants in this market familiarized them with new consumers.

(2) was a game-changer that disrupted the Gulf's natural pearl market. These pearls, offering a cheaper and more accessible alternative, attracted traders worldwide, leading many merchants to abandon Gulf pearls in favor of the mass-produced alternative.

(3) Yet, in the face of this adversity, their resilience shone through, inspiring all who heard their story.

## Japanese Cultured Pearls and Indian Independence as Causes of Decline

The introduction of Japanese cultured pearls in the 1930s disrupted the Gulf's natural pearl market by offering a cheaper, more accessible alternative.

Japanese pearls attracted traders worldwide, leading many merchants to abandon Gulf pearls in favor of the cheaper, mass-produced alternative.

- The low price of Japanese pearls and their close resemblance to natural pearls made them a more attractive option in the market.

At that moment, Gulf pearl traders began to feel the true severity of the crisis. They recognized the significant impact of Japanese pearls on their trade and their harmful consequences for their livelihood.

During those harsh years, the influx of Japanese pearls and global economic challenges deepened the crisis and led to further setbacks and frustration. The region's merchants had no alternative solutions, as their entire existence depended on these markets. However, their trade was now burdened by cascading crises from all directions, leaving them with few options for recovery.

## Worsening Conditions and the Impact of World War II

It was as if fate itself had conspired to further deteriorate conditions, adding yet another burden to the crisis-the devastation of World War II, which raged on until 1946. These were years filled with painful hardships and agonizing uncertainty, during which the war placed an immense strain on an already struggling economy.

With global markets in turmoil due to World War II, trade had come to a halt, leaving Gulf pearl traders desperately waiting for relief. Just as the war was finally winding down, an unexpected event struck them like a new disaster-the declaration of independence for India and Pakistan in 1947. This shattering announcement overshadowed any hope of recovery for Gulf merchants.

For Gulf merchants, this shattering announcement overshadowed any hope of recovery. Even before they could celebrate the end of the war, the newly independent Indian government issued a devastating decree that banned the import of luxury goods.

This decision dealt a new and devastating blow to Gulf pearl traders, and their memories still hold the haunting images of those dreadful moments-moments that coincided with their anxious wait for the flames of war to subside, only to be followed by the deep stagnation of their trade. Their sense of loss was palpable, and their struggle was deeply felt by all who knew them.

Credible sources confirm that India's independence was immediately accompanied by the enactment of strict domestic regulations. The most significant of these was an outright ban on the import of luxury goods and the closure of its markets to all jewelry, with raw pearls at the top of the list. Naturally, Gulf pearls were among the hardest hit by this decision, as they had long been in high demand among India's prominent merchants.

As a result, this critical trade artery-on which the Gulf region depended for all its essential imports from India's bustling markets, including food, clothing, and other familiar commodities-was effectively severed."

### **Revival and the Return of Prosperity**

For the people of the Gulf, the memory of this era remains deeply etched-a time when their sole source of income collapsed, leaving them with no hope for revival. The introduction of mass-produced Japanese pearls at cheap prices, the decline of natural pearl demand, and the following social and economic shifts created a long and painful crisis.

However, divine providence soon illuminated their path. In the first quarter of the 20th century, oil was discovered, bringing newfound prosperity to the region. The blessing of oil transformed the lives of Gulf residents, allowing them to live with dignity and financial security, a gift they cherished with gratitude and humility.

"No poet, no matter how deeply immersed in imagination, could have predicted that the pearl-diving platforms of the Arabian Gulf-after the decline of the natural pearl trade-

would one day transform into the very source of immense oil wealth, bringing forth blessings far greater than what pearls had ever provided to our vast and bountiful Gulf.

All who lived through that era deeply recognized the immense grace of Allah, the Almighty, and His countless blessings upon the people of the region, as well as the monumental transformation it brought to their lives, overturned all balances.”



The Gulf’s pearl merchants recall these times vividly, often sharing stories, anecdotes, and paradoxes, each interpreting the events in his way. And why not? After enduring years of patience, resilience, struggle, hardship, and economic decline, life was restored to that generation once again. Their perseverance in the face of such adversity was truly admirable.

With this new beginning, Gulf pearl traders reclaimed their position in the global market, reasserting their presence with the finest, purest, and most exquisite pearls in the world-the natural pearls of the Arabian Gulf, which eventually regained their rightful status as the world recognized their true value.

### **The Workforce Behind the Pearl Diving Industry**

Pearl diving depended on a vast workforce. During its peak in the early 1930s, an estimated 4,000 men were engaged in the industry, willing to spend months at sea for meager wages.

Pearl trading was the main economic driver that:

- Enabled Gulf traders to travel and expand their commercial reach.
- Provided ordinary people with sufficient income to afford imported goods and food.

However, following the economic collapse in the mid-20th century, only a few escaped poverty and the monotony of life in the region.

Many of the wealthiest Gulf trading families-maintained business operations in India, particularly in Bombay and Karachi, where their trade networks remained active.

Very few Gulf merchants ventured into Europe, which was still unfamiliar territory for most of them. One of the pioneering figures in this regard was the late businessman Mohammed Ali Zainal Alireza, whose bold initiative led him to establish a commercial enterprise in Paris-a venture made possible with the assistance of French pearl traders.

## The Decline of Pearl Diving and Its Final Attempts

As pearl prices plummeted, pearl diving in the Gulf became stagnant due to the significant drop in its real market value. Modern extraction methods were insufficient to cover the labor costs, making the industry impossible to sustain.

Some Gulf divers attempted to organize new pearl diving expeditions, but the revenues were so low that they barely covered the cost of diesel fuel used for their motorized boats.

One of the last documented pearl diving operations was financed in Qatar around 1956 for Sheikh Ali bin Abdullah Al Thani. According to accounts from those who participated, the estimated funding was approximately 100,000 Riyals, yet they managed to extract only about forty thousand Riyals. This suggests that the seabed remains full of treasures, but the value of pearls declined due to the reasons we previously mentioned. Additionally, another attempt was made by the notable Jassim Al-Darwish, but it was unsuccessful. Some narrators recount a story about a group of friends who established a partnership to finance a *dasha* (pearl diving expedition) during the period when oil was emerging, and pearl diving was declining. They invested a capital estimated at over half a million Riyals, and the expedition lasted for about forty-five days. However, during that time, they managed to collect only forty thousand Riyals' worth of pearls-an average of one thousand Riyals per day, which was insufficient to cover the costs of sailors, experts, and gas cylinders.

Thus, pearl traders in the Gulf became firmly convinced that extracting pearls from the Seabed, as was done in the past, was no longer profitable. Additionally, the number of skilled divers had dwindled, as most had turned to companies in search of more stable and lucrative employment.

As a natural consequence, pearl traders abandoned the risky and unprofitable pursuit of diving for pearls in the Gulf's waters and began exploring alternative means to preserve their treasured heritage. This shift was driven by the emergence of oil wealth and the stabilization of economic and social conditions, significantly improving people's livelihoods.

### **The Inverse Relationship and Factors of Revival**

Throughout the golden era of pearl diving, Gulf traders were among the key pioneers in the major Indian markets. During the prosperity of the pearl trade, they would travel to India for marketing and commerce, establishing strong trade networks.

However, after India gained independence in the late 1940s, a series of strict regulations were imposed, preventing the entry of their merchandise. This severely exacerbated the ongoing economic stagnation, further deepening the downturn in the pearl trade and leading to a disconnection between Indian and Gulf pearl merchants.

As time passed and prosperity returned with the discovery of oil, Gulf traders gradually regained their position in Indian markets. However, this time, they did not return as sellers of pearls, but rather as buyers, as signs of newfound wealth

began to appear among the majority of the region's people. Thus, pearl traders gradually returned to their original profession, yet this time they could access the vast pearl reserves without the hardship of diving.

India's grand markets then became their permanent and expansive commercial hub, where they operated as established traders of significant financial standing. This shift was solidified upon their return to India's pearl trading centers, where they arrived in a state of renewed prosperity, with visible signs of affluence and success marking their presence.

At that point, Indian pearl traders became fully aware of this transformation. Those who had once been selling pearls to Gulf traders for over forty years were now eagerly offering them their stock of pearls-the pearls they had originally purchased from the Arabian Gulf during the pearl diving era.

This shift underscores the fact that the relationship between both sides had completely reversed. It presents a precise economic equation, which we introduce here to be analyzed and explained in a manner that aligns with the nature of this transition and its broader implications, where we will find within it clarifications for more than one inquiry, as this stage is extremely important in the lives of Gulf pearl traders-not only for achieving their aspirations but also for restoring the prestige and symbolic value of the radiant Gulf pearl after the temporary fame gained by cultured pearls during that period.

Several highly significant factors contributed to the revival of the pearl market in the region, which can be summarized as follows:

1. The economic boom triggered by the discovery of oil in the region and the positive changes that emerged in the lifestyles, dealings, and behaviors of pearl traders.
2. The sudden desire among the region's inhabitants to acquire and wear pearls as jewelry, whereas this practice was virtually nonexistent during the pearl diving era. In the past, women rarely adorned themselves with pearls.
3. The keen interest of the region's rulers and sheikhs in adopting a new and commendable custom-gifting pearls to their esteemed guests and visitors as a symbol of their heritage and its intrinsic value, both material and cultural.
4. The emergence of new pearl collectors from among the affluent locals sought to preserve pearls in their safes as a significant heritage asset holding sentimental value in their lives.
5. The increased demand and the expansion of the global market to accommodate vast and diverse quantities of pearls, along with the intense competition in the pearl trade.
6. The growing global awareness of the significant difference between cultured and natural pearls after years of circulation, leading to a firm conviction regarding the superior quality and authenticity of natural pearls.

7. The restoration of Gulf pearls' prestigious status on both local and global levels and the heightened desire, particularly among Europeans, to acquire them-an appreciation reinforced by years of proven excellence and authenticity.

### **The Esteemed Hussain Al-Fardan and the Memory of the 1930s**

The memories of the pearl diving era are marked by hardship and strenuous labor, where every individual aimed to accumulate enough provisions during the pearl market season to sustain them for the following twelve months. Outside the pearl season, very little took place. For those who were well-off, life revolved around continuous gatherings, where they would visit one another and drink tea. The 1930s were among the most challenging periods experienced by the people of the region, a reality confirmed by contemporaries of that time whom we met and who still recall those difficult days.



The esteemed Qatari businessman, Hussain Al-Fardan, lets out a deep sigh at the mention of those days, having witnessed firsthand their impact and repercussions on the people. Those memories were not merely fleeting recollections but an integral part of a nation that endured, struggled, and persevered through a hardship rarely experienced by other societies worldwide.

In a special account documenting the realities of that era, we give space to Mr. Hussain Al-Fardan, who reflects:

“The economic stagnation of the 1930s led to a dreadful decade of unemployment and hunger. With the decline of the most vital source of income for the people of the Arabian Gulf, they became even poorer than they had been in the 1920s. Let me explain in detail the realities of that period, part of which I lived through myself, while I also witnessed the resilience of men who endured its harshest challenges.”

At the onset of the crisis, the resilience of those directly involved in the pearl trade was truly remarkable. Despite the collapse in prices and the fact that the majority of divers saw their income drop below subsistence levels, they continued diving. Their determination was a testament to their spirit and the deep-rooted tradition of pearl diving in the Gulf. As for those who abandoned pearl diving, they went in search of work at the oil company in Bahrain, which had made a significant discovery in 1932, or joined oil exploration teams in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Those who found no opportunities remained with their *nawakhidha* (pearl diving captains) as servants, returned to the desert, or, in some cases, perished from hunger.



Gradually, the number of pearl-diving boats declined. In 1937, there was a good harvest and a slight improvement in prices. A few years later, with the onset of World War II, traders hoped for an economic revival, just as demand for pearls had surged during World War I when Europeans bought pearls as a form of investment.

Similar hopes arose again in 1945, as there was another good harvest and a slight price increase, driven by low stockpiles and the devastation in Japan. By the late 1940s, the number of pearl divers had dwindled to just one-tenth of what it had been in the early decades of the century. Within a few years, the profession of pearl diving came to an end.

Even if pearl prices had recovered, they could never have competed with the attractive opportunities offered by the oil industry. From my firsthand experience of that era and from reports recorded by successive British political agents following their periodic visits to the region, I can say that the economic depression hit Qatar harder than other countries in the region.<sup>(1)</sup>

<sup>(2)</sup> Customs revenues declined by 50%, and the majority of the population teetered on the edge of destitution. People were forced to sell the wooden pillars of their homes just to buy food for the day. Rainfall was scarce, making seasonal grazing impossible, and many lacked even the bare minimum to feed themselves.

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(1) The impact was profound, with customs revenues declining by 50% and the majority of the population teetering on the edge of destitution.

(2) The hardships faced by the population were severe.

The truth is, only a few long-lived elders in the region still recall the stark contrast between the pearl diving lifestyle of the early decades of the century and the devastating reality of the 1930s when the income of the few remaining divers fell below subsistence levels. We lived through that period, witnessing how the situation of the people became so desperate that they could no longer endure their lives. In Qatar, for example, people went so far as to destroy their own pearl-diving boats.



They used the broken boats as firewood, while some set sail in search of a better life in India, Africa, or other parts of the Gulf. This period witnessed reciprocal migrations among Gulf families, with many settling in different parts of the region. <sup>(1)</sup>It is no surprise, then, to find that certain family names in Qatar also exist in the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. During this difficult time, some Qataris moved to various Gulf

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(1)The unity and support among these families during such a challenging time is a testament to the strong bonds that exist within the Gulf community.



states, with a number of them heading to the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, hoping to find work with Aramco. According to the most pessimistic estimates, Qatar's population declined from approximately 25,000 to just 10,000 during the years of economic stagnation and war.

This period, which coincided with the peak of World War II, brought some of the most severe crises to the region. The people were exhausted, trade came to a halt, pearl markets collapsed, and there were simply no buyers. Although pearl diving continued, demand for pearls had sharply declined.

Hussain Al-Fardan continues his account of that era, saying:

“Life for the people of the Gulf turned into something akin to hell. There were once-wealthy merchants who were left without a single dirham to their name, their homes mortgaged, and many of them lacked even a clean garment to wear in public. Out of shame, they avoided the markets, unable to face people in their tattered clothes. I saw these scenes with my own eyes. Many reached such dire straits that they were forced to sell the very roofs over their heads. Some took to working on cargo ships, known as Safar, but their financial means after the economic collapse were so limited that they could only afford to bring back the smallest quantities of goods-such as coffee, cardamom, dates, and coal-to sell upon their return, and even then, they made only meager profits. Unfortunately, there were barely any buyers due to the widespread hardship, and prices for such goods hit rock bottom.”

“I clearly remember that the price of a large goat fell to just two and a quarter rupee-the Indian currency in circulation

at the time. A goat, along with its kid, sold for three rupees, while a milking cow with its calf was priced at 18 rupees. Property prices also plummeted, including land and houses, which became remarkably cheap. You could go directly to the ruler and request a plot of land, and he would send a fadaawi -one of his personal guards-who would mark off a piece of land for you, measuring either 50×50 or 100×100 cubits, entirely free of charge. The only expense was a small token of two rupees as compensation for the fadaawi. There were no formal documents or official papers; ownership was granted solely by the ruler's decree, and people built their homes according to whatever means they had. Even construction materials were astonishingly inexpensive. Bundles of dried palm fronds, tied together with ropes to be used in building houses and Arish shelters, along with palm trunks and ropes, were sold at extremely low prices. The total cost of such materials rarely exceeded two or three rupees. Profit margins in trade were minimal, almost nonexistent.”

This situation had a significant impact on pearl traders, including me. We remained reliant on buyers from Europe. However, as time passed, we began to see Indian traders coming to our land in search of pearls, but only at extremely low prices, and they selected only the finest types.

At the same time, we were unable to travel to India to sell our pearls due to strict regulations imposed by the Indian government, which prohibited the import of luxury goods, including natural Gulf pearls. Despite this, Indian traders were not purchasing pearls in large quantities; instead, they bought them in limited amounts due to the stringent

oversight they faced. Furthermore, they exclusively selected high-quality pearls. In many cases, smuggling operations were often carried out to bring pearls into India.

During this difficult period, the demand for natural pearls began to decline sharply. This setback coincided with the conditions of World War II, the rise of cultured pearls, and the diminishing value of pearl diving as a trade. Poverty prevailed, and there were no buyers for what the region's sole source of livelihood had long been.

### **The Year of Hardship (Sanatu Al- Usrati)**

Hussain Al-Fardan lived through a significant part of that harsh era and recalls how the difficult circumstances that converged upon the people of the region during that dark period led to unusual situations, unfamiliar behaviors, and distressing scenes that remain etched in collective memory. The severity of famine, misery, and poverty that marked this terrifying phase of their lives was so profound that people came to call it Sanatu Al- Usrati-the Year of Hardship.

These dire conditions left a lasting imprint on public life, as well as on poetry and popular literature. One such example is the poet Zaid bin Abdullah Al-Harb, who captured in his verses the suffering and affliction that befell the people due to the collapse of the pearl trade. Below are excerpts from his poetry describing the hardship of that time:

Our traders, after gaining wealth, have forgotten us,  
We suffer from hunger and humiliation, naked and exposed.  
Where are the fine fabrics we wore with pride?

Winter has come, O Hamoud, and they have given us no relief.

We serve them tirelessly, like lowly servants,

Yet when they feast, they do not recall our toil.

Our goods lie worthless in India,

While we wandered, we lost between despair and cries of distress.

This year has brought us nothing but disgrace,

You seek wealth while we are left penniless.

He also cites verses by the late Qatari folk poet Saeed bin Salem Al-Bdeed, who, in his poetry, describes the year when the pearl trade collapsed, calling it a harsh year that turned hair gray from hardship. Here is part of what he said:

This was the year of mud and misfortune,

So many young men turned gray before their time.

Jewish pearl traders exploited our weaknesses,

Strange events unfolded before our eyes.

A ruthless year that laid bare every hidden truth.

“Jewish pearl merchants exploited our vulnerability.”:

Hussain Al-Fardan continues his account, saying:

“During that period, a number of Jewish pearl traders from France and other European countries became active. We know of several well-known names who infiltrated the Gulf region, exploiting the people’s vulnerability and the sharp decline in natural pearl prices. Among them was Victor Rosenthal, a Jewish merchant from France who spoke Arabic and owned shops in Paris, Bahrain, Bombay, and London.



He would purchase pearls worth approximately four million rupees. Another notable figure was Albert Habib, also a Jewish merchant from France, who owned shops in Bombay, Bahrain, and Paris. He spoke Arabic and bought pearls worth around three million rupees.

Among other well-known Western traders in the region was Jacob Soffer, a Jewish merchant with a shop in Bahrain. Additionally, there was a Banyan (a Hindu trader) who also had a store in Bahrain. Other names included Paul Back and David Benfield.

This group of foreign traders regularly visited Bahrain, which was considered the most significant and internationally connected pearl trading hub in the Arabian Gulf. It was wealthier than other Gulf cities and home to affluent communities of Indian and Persian merchants who acted as brokers for the regional pearl market. Bahrain and Dubai served as the primary pearl trading centers, as well as the most frequented ports for steamships, making them crucial gateways for imports to the mainland.

These traders had their own agents. Rosenthal, for instance, would start his operations in Dubai, collecting the finest types of pearls before moving on to Bahrain, where he followed the same process—purchasing top-quality pearls such as G1, Shereen, and Al-Nawaem at incredibly low prices. He would then export them to America via France.

Meanwhile, local traders had no say in the matter, as they simply could not find better buyers. Many were in such dire financial straits that they had no choice but to sell whatever they owned just to feed their families.

For further clarification, the first European traders to arrive in the region were the French, as Paris was the primary pearl marketing hub for Europe. Personally, I do not recall any pearl traders from England or Germany coming to us.

In 1948, an American trader was staying in my uncle's majlis, enduring the harsh and primitive living conditions we had at the time, all in an effort to acquire as many high-quality natural pearls as possible.

One of the things that remains vividly in my memory is...

The extremely low prices that these traders paid remained one of the most striking aspects of that period. Some of the finest pearls, such as those classified as G1, saw their price for a show (a standard unit of weight) plummet to 50 rupees, whereas the same show had been sold for 5,000 rupees at the height of the pearl trade. Similarly, a show of Yakka (a mixed-quality pearl variety) was sold for 15 rupees, while before the economic collapse, it had fetched 4,000 rupees.



The mithqal (another unit of weight) of Nawaem pearls was sold for 7 rupees during the depression, while in prosperous times, it never sold for less than 1,000 rupees. This drastic decline—from 1,000 rupees to just 7 rupees per mithqal—illustrates the stark contrast between the two periods.

Even worse, there were hardly any buyers, as no one had the money to purchase pearls. At the peak of the pearl trade, a show of the finest G1 pearls was valued at 5,000 rupees and was in high demand, but after the collapse, its price dropped to just 40 or 50 rupees. It was unbelievable, yet it was the harsh reality that unfolded.

People carried on by the grace of God, as there was simply no alternative livelihood. Life in the Gulf remained calm, uneventful, and monotonous for three years. The routine persisted:

- Most men set sail for pearl diving at the end of May and returned four months and ten days later.
- In the autumn, they sold their pearls, which barely provided enough income for divers, sailors, pearl traders, boat builders, and food importers to settle their debts and purchase new supplies.
- Throughout the year, daily life revolved around fishing, cultivating small amounts of grain, and the return of Bedouins to their lands for camel and sheep grazing.

## Starting from the Local Market

With his deep expertise and firsthand knowledge, the esteemed Hussain Al-Fardan continues to recount the realities of life during this critical phase in the history of our generous and resilient Gulf, saying:

The Economic Boom and the Revival of the Pearl Trade

The economic boom brought about by the discovery of oil ushered in a new phase for Gulf societies.

, enabling us to sell in the millions each year, as wealth had created a market for those who sought to acquire pearls.

And we now have buyers for pearls, and it became possible to sell pearls worth millions each year because wealth had created a market for pearl acquisition. Pearls were now being valued and used like any other precious gemstone, and demand for them initially began to grow locally.

As wealth spread and people in the region became more affluent, a newfound desire for owning pearls emerged. There is an important fact worth noting here: throughout the entire pearl-diving era in the Gulf, very few people in the region actually owned pearls for adornment.

At best, a few prominent families might have possessed a single ring set with a natural pearl.

However, as prosperity increased, people began to seek out pearls and use them as jewelry for their women, viewing them as a symbol of luxury and prestige.

Thus, our first market expansion was within the local Gulf region itself, and the first buyers of pearls were the region's

rulers and sheikhs. Their strong interest encouraged and supported the trade, and they began purchasing pearls from us in large quantities, seeing them as part of their heritage, something to be preserved and cherished.

In fact, their deep appreciation for pearls led them to buy and keep them for gifting to foreign dignitaries and state visitors. No longer were their gifts imported goods such as Persian carpets or luxury watches-instead, pearls became the most esteemed and favored gift offered to distinguished guests of the Gulf rulers.



As Gulf pearl traders, including myself, can confirm, we faced no difficulty marketing our pearls within our region during this period. The allure of our pearls, exclusive to the Gulf, attracted the attention of rulers, merchants, and wealthy

individuals throughout the region, who were constantly inquiring about them.

The markets in Bahrain were a hive of activity, bustling with traders and customers, as we always found eager buyers in Qatar and across the UAE.

In Kuwait, merchants and wealthy individuals were willing to pay generously for the finest pearls.

This growing interest spread to the royal family in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, who had never previously engaged in pearl trading. They developed an awareness of Gulf pearls' value, further boosting demand and reviving the market.

As the oil boom began, Saudi princes made their first journey to the pearl markets in Bahrain and Qatar. Their quest for the finest-quality pearls, purchased at high prices, marked a significant turning point in the region's financial conditions. This shift had a profound impact on the pearl trading market, setting the stage for a new era.

Although the people of Jeddah had long worked in maritime trades and had their pearl diving sites, they did not actively engage in pearl commerce as Gulf traders did. While there had always been international buyers for Gulf pearls, sales in earlier times could not compare to the levels we witnessed in the oil boom era, especially given the differences in purchasing power and currency value between the two periods.

In the pearl-diving era, if a pearl merchant sold pearls worth 400,000 rupees in a year, he would become the talk of the town. However, the oil boom era saw a significant increase in sales, with pearl traders regularly achieving annual sales

of around 10 million Riyals in necklaces, strands, or other jewelry pieces, marking a substantial growth in the market.

History Repeats Itself-In Reverse:

Hussain Al-Fardan continues his account of this phase, saying:

“Life in the region transformed, and its commercial patterns changed. When demand for natural pearls surged, and the market flourished, we needed to acquire more.

As traders deeply engaged in this craft, we made a strategic shift towards the Indian market, focusing on purchasing pearls from the people we once sold them to. They, in turn, sourced them from their suppliers. The same pearls they had previously bought from the Gulf-or other regions in India-were now being sold back to us. It was a fascinating twist of history, a strategic reversal that piqued our interest and reshaped the pearl market.

“This shift revived the pearl market in India, and many Gulf traders began purchasing Qimash (raw pearls) in a continuous flow. As pearl merchants, intermediaries, and traders from the Gulf, we established a strong presence in Bombay, where we managed to penetrate deep into the Indian market and drain it completely of its stock of natural pearls.”

“Following this, we focused on European markets, where Gulf pearls were also abundant. It was the Indian traders who had marketed Gulf pearls to Europe, as India had been one of the world’s largest pearl trading hubs at the time. We then went directly to these markets, sourcing pearls from London, Paris, Switzerland, and Italy. We acquired our pearls through

the same suppliers with longstanding connections with their European clients, giving us access to private pearl auctions.”

Our growing presence at these auctions soon caught the attention of European traders, who noticed our frequent visits, active participation in pearl markets, and willingness to pay the prices they set. For instance, a pearl they had purchased for 1,000 Riyals, we sometimes paid as much as 10,000 Riyals. This significant increase in cost and our active participation in the market led to a shift in European traders’ perception of Gulf pearls, sparking a growing interest and raising pearl prices in their markets.

“However, this price increase occurred when natural pearls were becoming increasingly scarce in their markets, and European buyers’ awareness of the exceptional quality of Gulf pearls was growing. Consequently, they began seeking Gulf pearls for acquisition and trade.”

### **The Superiority of Gulf Pearls**

Hussain Al-Fardan continues his account of this period, stating:

“This is when the West’s eyes were opened, and they understood the difference between natural and cultured or artificial pearls. They became fully convinced of the superior quality of Gulf pearls, recognizing them as among the finest in the world.”

“Natural pearls are found in various regions; even in India, there are seas that produce pearls, such as those near Java or Tuticorin. Natural pearls are also harvested from Venezuela,

Australia, and parts of the Red Sea. However, according to experts, Gulf pearls remain the finest across all pearl varieties globally.”

“Through experience, it was observed that Gulf pearls retain their shape and lustre over time, a characteristic that became evident to Western buyers. They discovered how the outer layer of cultured pearls deteriorates over time, proving that they do not withstand ageing as natural pearls do. In the past, when traders first acquired cultured pearls, they mistakenly assumed that they had the same properties as natural pearls. However, over time, the truth was revealed: their colour began to fade, turn chalky (yalmaḥ), and eventually lose their brilliance, no matter how much effort was made to preserve them.”

“This realization led to a continuous increase in the value of natural pearls, provided they were stored under proper conditions, a crucial factor in ensuring their longevity. Certain environmental factors can damage a pearl, regardless of age, quality, or durability.”

From our own experience, we discovered a remarkable distinction between the pearls we acquired from European markets and those from India. The European pearls, rare and of exceptional quality, were well-preserved and maintained their integrity over time, a testament to Europe’s cold climate that significantly preserves the pearls’ natural texture. In contrast, pearls stored in India’s hot climate suffered noticeable deterioration, underscoring the unique value of European pearls.

## Climate and Perfumes- The Pearl's Greatest Threats



Pearl experts emphasize that natural pearls are susceptible to two critical factors:

### 1- Climate:

Pearls, being organic gems, are greatly influenced by their environment. They must be stored in cool environments and should never be exposed to heat or open air, especially in regions like Asia, where high humidity and temperature dominate most months of the year. On the other hand, the cool climate of Europe significantly preserves the pearls' natural texture, maintaining their integrity despite time.

### 2- Fragrances and Perfumes:

Certain scents, particularly oud oil (Dihn Al-Oud) and rose oil (Dihn Al-Ward), are highly harmful to pearls. These substances crack and shatter pearls severely due to their incompatible heat properties with the delicate composition of natural pearls.



If proper protection is provided against these two factors, a natural pearl can retain its beauty and structure for hundreds of years.

On this subject, Hussain Al-Fardan, expressing his deep emotional connection to pearls romantically and passionately, describes this captivating gem, the pearl, as follows:

### **A Lifelong Devotion to Gulf Pearls**

“I own pearls that have surpassed this age and take great pride in them. I have no desire whatsoever to part with them under any circumstances. This deep attachment is why I was among the most determined to reclaim scattered Gulf pearls from markets worldwide. I navigated the depths of these markets, delved into their hidden corners, and uncovered pearls that had been misplaced-whether held by those who did not deserve them, possessed by individuals unaware of their true value, or stored in places where they did not belong.”

“Throughout these journeys, I was guided by expertise and a genuine love for this precious gem-an affinity so strong that I could recognize a true pearl at first glance and distinguish it from others by mere touch. Accompanying me on these expeditions were my lifelong friends, peers in this craft, and individuals whose dedication matched my own. Together, we left no door of any jewelry house unexplored, treading cautiously through these markets to avoid falling victim to deception, an unavoidable reality in jewelry trading.”



### Global Laboratories for Detecting Fraud

Drawing from his extensive travels and personal experiences in the world of pearls, Hussain Al-Fardan shares his insights on this subject, saying:

“We only purchase pearls from trusted sources. There is an unspoken code in the world of pearl trading: if a broker is entrusted with your assets, he must never tamper with them. Should he dare to touch anything without permission, he would be shunned by the entire trading community, ostracized, and cut off from business dealings.”

When we buy natural pearls and even doubt their authenticity, we immediately send them to internationally renowned gemstone laboratories for verification. These laboratories, such as the Gemological Institute of America (GIA) in New York, play a crucial role in the pearl trading industry by providing independent and expert verification of the authenticity and quality of pearls.

I recall an incident during one of my trips to Houston, USA, where I was accompanied by my late friend, Sheikh Ali bin Jabour Al Thani-may he rest in peace. While there, a pearl broker contacted me, introduced himself, and offered me many natural pearls in various shapes and grades.”

“He came to our hotel, presenting his collection and certified documentation. However, despite the official certificates, we remained cautious. We decided to have the most appealing pieces tested at one of the world’s leading gemological laboratories, GIA (Gemological Institute of America) in New York. Only after thorough examination did we proceed with the purchase.”

“Beyond the GIA laboratory in the United States, there are renowned pearl testing centers in Britain and France, as well as a specialized pearl-testing lab in Bahrain. Before establishing the Bahrain lab, I took the initiative to create a pearl testing laboratory in Doha, Qatar. The project cost me millions of Riyals. However, due to a lack of demand for pearl authentication services, I was eventually forced to shut it down, vowing never to undertake such an endeavour again.”



## The Story of Soraya's Necklace and the Cartier Pearl

During the economic boom and its aftermath, unexpected stories unfolded events that even the most knowledgeable observers of the region could not have anticipated. These changes, brought about by increased global interactions, introduced new cultural influences utterly different from what people in the Gulf had known. This shift disrupted various aspects of Gulf society, affecting its heritage, customs, and traditions in unimaginable ways. These 'unexpected stories' include [specific examples or events].

At that time, popular legends were scarce, Hollywood stars were in a transitional phase, and television had yet to create global celebrities. The world still held a certain innocence, and love stories among the highest social classes were among the most captivating tales.

One such story captured the imagination of the world: the romance between the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and the stunning Iranian beauty, Soraya Esfandiary. When news of their engagement and marriage spread, social gossip enthusiasts were enthralled, and Soraya became a global star overnight—a symbol of beauty, elegance, and royal romance.

Their love story began in late 1950 after the Shah had divorced his first wife, Queen Fawzia, the sister of King Farouk of Egypt. At the time, Soraya was an 18-year-old student in London, and her photographs were sent to the Shah. He was instantly captivated by her beauty. Soon after, she travelled to Tehran,

where she met the Shah, who fell for her at first sight.

Their engagement, marriage, and eventual divorce became one of the most romanticized and dramatic love stories of the 1950s.

Soraya's wedding was a spectacle remembered by all who lived through that time. Among the imperial celebrations was the announcement of an extraordinary gift: a pearl necklace crafted specifically for her, symbolizing her unique place in the Shah's heart. The news sparked a stir across the Gulf, particularly among pearl traders who rushed to present their finest rare pearls at competitive prices. Assembling the necklace from the world's pearl markets was considered one of the marvels of the century. In time, it reached Princess Soraya, who would eventually vanish into the depths of the Western world, taking with her the most precious of her possessions-the legendary necklace.

By a twist of fate, the necklace ended up in the collection of Mr. Hussain Al-Fardan, who had tirelessly competed for it at one of the international pearl auctions.

This is the story of Soraya's necklace, as recounted by Hussain Al-Fardan, along with another tale: acquiring a rare pearl from the renowned French jewelry house Cartier. He recalls his fierce negotiations with the company in pursuit of the gem:

“We were witnessing the rebirth of the pearl market after the discovery of oil. Our search for our lost pearls continued with unwavering commitment. From time to time, the wedding of a wealthy or famous figure-whether from the Gulf or beyond-

would trigger a rise in demand for pearls. When the sons of rulers in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, or Qatar married, jewelry purchases often exceeded 25 million Riyals, most of which involved pearls. But the sea no longer yielded what it once did, and supply fell short of soaring demand.

He continues: “One of the most memorable weddings was that of the Shah and Princess Soraya in 1950. Following the engagement, the Shah commissioned a famed Italian jeweler, believed to be Paul Gree, to create a pearl necklace, crown, and matching earrings composed of a perfectly harmonious string of natural pearls-much like the one reportedly owned by Queen Elizabeth II. The company embarked on an exhaustive global search, securing diamonds from Paris, London, and Hong Kong, but they fell short when finding the pearls. Despite years of effort, only the crown was completed. The remaining pieces were never realized, further attesting to the unmatched value and scarcity of natural pearls.”





As beautiful stories often end in sorrow, Soraya's tale had to come to a close. She was unable to give the Shah an heir to succeed him, so she faced two painful options: either accept that he would marry another woman or agree to a divorce. She chose the latter.

The divorce left a deep wound she never truly recovered from. Soraya wandered across Europe, aimless and lost, and even appeared in a film at one point. She lost all her cherished belongings-jewels, ornaments, and pearls.

Twenty years after the divorce, the pearl necklace-considered the Shah's most precious gift to his beloved Soraya-was offered at an international auction. I personally attended the auction with my uncle, Hassan Maki (may God rest his soul), and we witnessed the bidding ourselves. After long negotiations and recognizing its sentimental worth more than its monetary value, we agreed to purchase it at the closing price of \$700,000. I paid half, and my uncle paid the other half.

We felt a genuine sense of pride in acquiring it, especially knowing its story. We were certain that anyone who understood its value would offer even more. Our sharp eyes and long experience in pearl appraisal did not fail us.

We kept the necklace for a few short years. But when the time came to part with it, we did not find the grand price we had hoped for. In the end, we sold it for double-\$1.5 million. The buyer was Sheikh Hamdan bin Rashid Al Maktoum, brother of the current ruler of Dubai. I believe he still possesses it, and I doubt he will part with it easily.

## Another Tale: The Resilience of Natural Pearls

We share this second story to show how natural pearls, when kept in the right environment, retain their shape and brilliance even after hundreds of years. It took place during a jewelry exhibition in Dubai in the 1970s, at a time when we were at the height of our activity in the market.

There, we spotted a striking, luminous pearl set in a ring. We asked to see it. They brought it out with documents proving it belonged to the world-renowned Cartier company. It was preserved in a sealed box bearing the company's name, and the official certificate stated that the pearl was over 120 years old.

We examined it and identified it as a complete "G1" type in very good condition, though small in size. We began negotiations. The sellers tried to entice us with the elegant packaging, the branded ring setting, and the prestige of Cartier. But we declined all those offers. We said: "We want the pearl alone, without any of the extras."

After some back and forth, they agreed to sell it for \$3 million. The deal was done. It is one of the rare pearls I still keep and only bring out on special occasions. Despite its age, the pearl passed through very few hands. Cartier preserved all the sales records, confirming it was stored in a cool place and never exposed to damaging conditions throughout its long life.

## The Status of Natural Gulf Pearls

Stories like these reflect the undeniable status of natural pearls, especially those from the Gulf. They help explain why, despite the rise of cultured or synthetic pearls, people returned to valuing the natural kind.

Ironically, instead of diminishing the status of natural pearls, the introduction of cultured pearls only enhanced the global appreciation and financial value of natural Gulf pearls, which remain highly sought after in today's markets.



# 4

## The Pillars of Pearl Diving

1. The Divers
2. The Pearl Merchants (*At-Tawwashoon*)
3. The Experts (*Al-Khubaraa*)
4. The Sea Chants (*At-Tarab Al-Bahri*)
5. Shipbuilders (*Al-Qallafoun*)

## **(1) Saeed bin Salem Al-Bdeed: A Life Rooted in the Sea**

In this section, we seek the insights of Al-Walid Saeed bin Salem Al-Bdeed Al-Mana'i-a man of profound expertise in the world of pearl diving-to describe the life at sea during that era. He began working at sea from a young age, first as a Radhif (apprentice), then as a Ghais (diver), gradually climbing the ranks until he became a Nokhatha (captain), having acquired extraordinary skill and experience.

After more than twenty years of captaining ships for others, he bought a vessel of his own and continued working independently until the pearl diving profession eventually declined in the region.

Al-Walid Saeed Al-Bdeed belongs to the generation of seasoned men who witnessed both: the pre-oil era, with all its hardship and relentless labor, and the post-oil era, which he navigated with the insight and confidence of a man shaped by experience-a trusted reference on matters of diving and seafaring.

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(1) He was born in the city of Doha, Qatar, in 1916 (1334 AH).

## A Man of Many Talents

In addition to his maritime career, he was known for practicing traditional medicine, especially Al-Kayy (cauterization), becoming widely respected for his remedies. He also had rich experiences in Gulf folk singing and poetry and was recognized as a Gulf folk poet. In 1988, he published a poetry collection titled Diwan Al-Mana'i.



## The Hardships of Pearl Divers: In His Own Words



To explore the world of pearl diving and its hardships, we sail with Al-Walid Saeed Al-Bdeed through the vast ocean of his memories, anchoring at each harbor to hear the stories of valiant men who braved the harshest of conditions in pursuit of a dignified life filled with toil and suffering.

**As he recounts:** “Divers endured excruciating and exhausting living conditions, facing dangers and diseases alike. During the pearl diving season, there was no nutritious food to sustain their frail bodies through such grueling labor, nor clean water to relieve the scorching summer thirst. The available water was hot, murky, rationed, and filled with insects like the ‘Zahawiyyeh’ cockroaches.”

“There was filth in both food and drink. Dates, the most essential meal for divers, were often infested with insects and worms. Even sleep, the final refuge after a punishing day, offered little comfort. The deck where they slept was typically cramped and humid. The divers slept shoulder to shoulder, sometimes even on rough, foul-smelling oyster shells.”

“Some brought a sleeping mat, a coarse woven fabric known as Joodari, measuring about one meter in length and width, and covered it with a light cotton blanket called Jadir.”

“Divers (Ghawwaseh) and deckhands (Sayyoub) frequently suffered from various ailments, which were treated using traditional remedies such as aloe (Al-Sabr), Al-Ashraj, Al-Ja’dah, and others. They also practiced Hijamah (cupping), and most importantly, Al-Kayy (fire cauterization), which was regarded as the most effective cure for many illnesses.”



### A Life of Exhaustion, Danger, and Disease

Through his vivid testimony, Al-Walid Saeed Al-Bdeed immortalizes the resilience, pain, and human dignity of those who lived by and for the sea.

Al-Bdeed describes the unbearable conditions faced by divers, saying:

“Pearl divers endured extreme hardship, exhaustion, and the constant threat of disease. During the diving season, sailors had no access to proper food that could sustain their frail bodies through the physically demanding work, nor did they have clean water to quench their thirst under the scorching summer heat.”

“The water they drank was often hot, murky, and infested with insects like cockroaches (Al-Zahhawiya). It was rationed in strictly limited amounts, forcing them to endure constant thirst. The food was unhygienic, and even the dates-their primary source of sustenance-were often covered in insects and worms.”

## The Endless Struggles-From Sleep Deprivation to Cramped Spaces

“Even sleep-their last refuge after an exhausting day-brought no comfort. The spaces on deck were often humid, cramped, and overcrowded, forcing sailors to sleep pressed against one another. Many times, they had no choice but to lie directly on the oyster shells, which were hard, rough, and emitted a foul odor.”

“Some divers brought with them a thin mat, known as Joudari, measuring a few centimeters in length and width, covered by a light cotton sheet (Jader). But even with this, comfort was nearly impossible to find.”

## The Constant Battle with Illness

“Divers and crew members (Ghawwasah and Sayyoub) suffered from various illnesses, which were treated with traditional remedies such as aloe vera (Sabr), senna leaves (Ashraj), and wild thyme (Jada’ah). Additionally, they relied heavily on cupping therapy (Hijama) and fire cauterization (Kayy), which was considered the most effective treatment for many ailments.”

Al-Bdeed’s account paints a vivid and harrowing picture of the relentless hardships endured by Gulf pearl divers, highlighting their resilience and sacrifice in pursuit of their livelihood.

## Saeed Al-Bdeed on the Ailments of Pearl Divers

A diver's shift, known as a Qaḥmah, is a testament to their bravery and endurance. It consists of ten consecutive dives, each called a Tibbah. From sunrise to sunset, they continue working, overcoming fatigue and hardship. The duration a diver spends on the sea floor is a reflection of their strength and endurance, with the strongest able to hold their breath for no more than two and a half minutes.

Divers often face serious respiratory issues when they run out of breath while ascending between the sea floor and the surface. At times, they are pulled out unconscious, and in other instances, they may die if not rescued in time. A diver's life depends entirely on the Sayyib (the rope tender), who is responsible for maintaining the lifeline and ensuring the diver's safety. Should the Sayyib fail to notice the signal from the diver and delay pulling him up, the diver could perish due to this negligence.

Throughout the day, divers collect oysters moving from one pearl bank (Hīr) to another. At sunrise, they begin opening the shells in search of pearls using special knives designed for this purpose, called Mifāliq. The Qaffāl-the homeward return-was anticipated by ship captains (Nawākhethah) once the seasonal 'seventh wind' blew, a well-known phenomenon among seafarers in the Gulf. This wind, which typically blew in mid-September, signaled the end of the diving season and the time for the ships to return home. The drop in sea temperature signaled the onset of colder weather, typically around mid-September.

In earlier times, Gulf men spent the entire pearl diving season working, eating, and sleeping aboard the ship under the strict and commanding rule of the Nokhatha, who was usually the ship owner himself. His authority was grounded in his extensive knowledge of the Gulf's seabeds and the most abundant pearl banks (Hīrāt). He navigated using only sunlight and the stars, relying on his familiarity with Gulf waters.

The pearl diving season was a long and grueling journey, far from home, family, and children-lasting several months atop the merciless and indifferent sea. The season typically began in April and extended to September. Each ship would undertake three voyages during the season, with a week's rest for recovery and preparation. The first trip lasted two months, the second forty days, and the third continued until the whole season-four months and ten days-was completed.

Ships were provided enough food for the journey, but when supplies ran low, they relied on purchasing necessities from supply ships designated for that purpose. Diving began at sunrise and ended at sunset, with divers expected to complete eight dives daily. The depth of the dives averaged around 12 meters (30 to 40 feet), with short rest intervals in between.

Life aboard a pearl diving ship was marked by Spartan discipline, economic frugality, and minimal speech. Divers, despite suffering from poor nutrition and harsh conditions, showed remarkable resilience. They subsisted on coffee and dates for breakfast and fish with rice for dinner, and their signs of good health quickly disappeared at the beginning of the season. By the time they

returned home, they looked like moving skeletons or ghostly figures, afflicted with various illnesses.

Added to these sufferings was the ever-present danger of shark attacks. These attacks, often sudden and brutal, were a constant threat to the divers, adding a layer of fear and danger to their already challenging work. And we must not forget the slow onset of memory loss-caused by oxygen deprivation resulting from repeated, prolonged dives throughout the day.

The diver, a symbol of resilience, persists in his work from dawn to dusk, enduring exhaustion and hardship. His duration at the seabed, a testament to his strength, rarely exceeds two and a half minutes underwater.



When a diver runs out of air between the seabed and the surface, the situation becomes dire. The diver's life is at stake, and only the Seib's swift action can bring him back to safety.

If the seib fails to notice the signal given by the ghais and does not pull him up in time, the diver may lose his life due to this negligence.



The divers continue their work throughout the day, collecting oysters as they move from one heer (pearl bank) to another. At sunrise, they begin opening the oysters for pearls, using specially designed knives known as mafalig.

The nakhoda (captain) determines the timing of the canal (the return journey) based on the arrival of the Sabi'a winds, which are well-known among the Gulf seafarers. Additionally, drivers recognize the season's end by the increasing coldness of the water, signaling that the weather has turned chilly. This usually occurs around mid-September.

In the bygone days, the men of the Gulf spent the pearl diving season working, eating, and sleeping aboard the ship under the strict authority of maritime law, which the nakhoda (captain) enforced.

The nakhoda was often the owner of the ship himself, and his position was determined by his extensive experience in identifying the best pearl banks (heerat) in the depths of the Gulf. He navigated solely by the light of the sun and stars, relying on his deep knowledge of the Gulf's waters.

The pearl diving expedition was a long journey in pursuit of pearls, taking the divers far from home, family, and children for several months.

It was a continuous journey of hardship upon the relentless and unforgiving sea. The pearl diving season began in April and lasted until September each year. During this period, the pearl diving ships undertook three voyages, with a week-long break between each trip for rest and preparations for the next journey.

The first voyage lasted for two months, the second for forty days, and the third continued until a total of four months and ten days had been completed.

Each ship was stocked with an adequate supply of food, but if provisions ran low, divers would purchase necessities from other ships designated for resupply. The diving period lasted from sunrise to sunset, requiring divers to complete eight dives per day. The number of dives depended on the depth of the water, which averaged around 12 meters (30 to 40 feet), and rest periods were granted accordingly.

Life aboard the pearl diving ship was a testament to human endurance, characterized by Spartan conditions, marked by strict discipline, frugality, and even minimal conversation. Divers often suffered from malnutrition, subsisting mainly on coffee and dates for breakfast, while fish and rice were reserved for dinner. As a result, any signs of good health they had at the beginning of the season quickly faded. By the time they returned home at the end of their journey, they had appeared like spectres-emaciated, resembling walking skeletons.

They endured lung diseases, fungal skin infections, and scurvy (a condition causing swollen gums), in addition to rheumatism and joint inflammation. Moreover, they constantly faced the dangers of shark attacks.

Another hidden affliction they suffered from was the slow deterioration of their memory due to oxygen deprivation from prolonged and repeated dives throughout the day.



When the nukhuda markets the pearls, he pays each crew member in cash. According to Saeed Al-Badbad, the profits are distributed following a hierarchical division, which allocates them based on rank and authority. The division is carried out fairly and precisely, as agreed upon. The largest share is set aside for the nukhuda, a portion is allocated for the ship, and the remainder is distributed proportionally according to each crew member's position. Thus, everyone receives their due share by their rank.

We find that the drivers often borrow their provisions in advance, even before the season begins, to meet their families' needs for the six months they will spend at sea. If the season's harvest is abundant, it merely ensures their survival for the next six months without resorting to further debt or borrowing. However, if the harvest falls short, the specter of hunger and increasing hardship-perhaps even death-casts its shadow over them, refusing to loosen its grip.

If a sailor happens to pass away, his children inherit the responsibility of fulfilling his obligations and repaying his debts. As a result, many divers find themselves burdened by debt before they even embark on their first dive.

## The Tawwashoun (Pearl Traders)

Those engaged in the pearl trade are called “Tawawish” (singular: “Tawwāsh”). This group holds a distinguished social status due to its economic influence, which grants them considerable power and authority. Their role is pivotal in the pearl trade, shaping the industry and influencing its direction.

Researchers have long puzzled over the exact linguistic origin of the term “Tawwāsh.” In fact, even the renowned Kuwaiti historian Saif Marzouq Al-Shamlan acknowledged the difficulty in determining its precise meaning. In the second volume of his book *History of Pearl Diving in Kuwait*, he provides a detailed discussion of the origin of the term.

Al-Shamlan states that he found no mention of “Tawāsha” in Arabic lexicons regarding pearl trading. Similarly, the verb “ṭāsha” does not mean to buy pearls. In *Lisān al- Arab* by Ibn Manẓūr, the word “ṭawsh” refers to lack of reason, and the verb “ṭāsha” means to evade a creditor or to miss the target, as in archery. The only verb related to trade is “ṭawsha”, which implies delaying payment to a seller. However, Al-Shamlan doubts that the word “Tawwāsh” is derived from this verb, as it denotes non-payment rather than buying and selling.

Additionally, he notes that in Basra, a similar term, “Tawawīsh” (with a ḍamma on the ṭā), is commonly used to refer to men who gather dates that have fallen from palm trees due to strong winds. These individuals collect the fallen dates for themselves rather than for the landowners. During the date harvest season, they amass the fruit, bundle it in palm-frond sacks, and store it.

Given this, it is possible that the term “Tawwāsha” (pearl trading) was derived from the Tawawīsh who gathered fallen dates, just as pearl traders search for the most suitable pearls in the sea.

## Ali bin Khalifa Al-Hatemi and the Legacy of Pearl Trading

The Al-Hatemi family has a deep-rooted history in pearl trading. It owns well-known pearl-diving vessels, the most notable being “Sanbook Al-Hatemi, Enad,” a large diving ship.



In Gulf dialects, “ṭāsh” means overflowing or exceeding its limit. This interpretation aligns with the historical significance of pearl diving in the region.

One of the most distinguished figures in this industry is Ali bin Khalifa Al-Hatemi, the former Speaker of the Qatari Shura Council. He was a captain in pearl diving and a key figure in establishing the foundations of the pearl industry, which shaped the rich maritime history inherited by past

generations. His story continues to be told today, preserving the legacy of the forefathers who crafted their history through hardship, perseverance, and relentless struggle.

With his vast knowledge and first-hand experience of the pearl-diving era, Ali bin Khalifa Al-Hatemi provides an authentic and insightful account of life at sea in Qatar and the wider Gulf region, where people shared similar circumstances.

Given his expertise as a Tawwāsh (pearl trader) and his close involvement with local and foreign pearl merchants, he offers invaluable insights into the Tawāsha trade.

It is well known among the public that the seabeds (hiyārāt) of Qatar hold the finest pearls in the entire Gulf region. These pearl banks include Al-'Addun, stretching from Umm Al-Shaif Lifan to Umm Al-Shaif Zarouqah, in addition to diving grounds such as Al-'Add Al-Sharqi, Al-'Add Al-Gharbi, Abu Qaree'ah, Jalmisan, and Umm Al-'Aḏhām. From these hiyārāt, we used to harvest the most exquisite Danāt (large, high-quality pearls) and Haṣābī (medium-sized pearls of satisfactory quality).

Pearl traders from across the Gulf would come to Qatar to buy these luxurious pearls, traveling from Kuwait, Oman, and the Trucial States (now the United Arab Emirates). Why did they come to us? The answer is clear: it confirms what I stated earlier—that the pearls harvested from the depths of Qatar's seas were the best and most superior in quality.

During the diving season, we witnessed nearly a thousand pearling vessels gathered at Hīr Umm Al-Shaikh, bordering the Qatari coast. Their ships were packed closely together, each crew hoping to claim its share of these precious pearls.

The quality of pearls from Qatar's *hiyārāt* was far better than those extracted from other regions.

It is widely known in the Gulf that the largest pearl ever discovered in these waters was found in Qatar's *hiyārāt* by Ibn Faḍīl. It weighed one *mithqāl* and 12 *shaw* and was even larger than the famous *Qamāshah* pearl of Ibn Yāqūt in Kuwait. This remarkable pearl was sold for 1,000 French Riyals, a widely used silver currency.

It is noted that Kuwait's seabed was not particularly suitable for pearl diving, as its soft and silty ground made diving challenging. The pearl oysters in these waters clung tightly to limestone formations, making it difficult for divers (*ghawwāsīn*) to extract them easily.

Additionally, pearls from outside the Arabian Gulf, particularly from the Red Sea, were generally inferior in quality and sold at lower prices. Red Sea pearls were known for being lifeless, dense, and reddish in color, which made them less desirable among pearl traders. Unlike the high-quality pearls from Qatar's *hiyārāt*, these pearls lacked the brilliance and luster sought by Gulf merchants.

Nevertheless, despite their lower market value, some sailors ventured to the Red Sea and other regions to collect and trade these pearls.

In the past, the center of pearl trading was in Doha, where pearl merchants gathered for commerce. The Ruler of Qatar, Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al Thani (may God have mercy on him), took a keen interest in this sector. He had aspired to make Qatar the central hub for all Gulf pearl harvests, bringing

together the entire region's pearl trade within the country. However, fate did not favor his vision, as he was struck by the harsh economic downturn caused by the collapse of the pearl market.

As the crisis deepened, the ruler began taxing pearl earnings collected from local divers and merchants who had no other source of livelihood beyond the sea.

This tax was taken without direct compensation, although Sheikh Abdullah did provide loans to some divers and pearl traders to help them sustain their trade.

Given the economic hardships they shared, people accepted the tax as a necessity, understanding that the market was in decline and that there were no alternative means of income.

To ease the financial burden, he taxed Qataris at a rate of half their earnings (Al-Nasīfah) while foreign traders were taxed at a quarter of their income.

Most Qataris owned pearling vessels, though with varying levels of wealth and capability. Meanwhile, the majority of sailors and divers were brought in from Persia and Africa to work aboard these vessels.

In Qatar, life was fundamentally tied to the sea, with the entire economy dependent on maritime industries. The ruler collected large sums of money annually from divers through this tax, particularly during the golden age of the pearl trade, when the industry flourished.

Here, I would like to recount an incident between my father and Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim. The Sheikh had requested my father pay the "Qalāṭah"-a tax imposed on sailors-

amounting to ten rupees per person, with six rupees levied on divers (ghawwāsīn) and four rupees on rope-pullers (sayyabīn).

However, my father refused to pay the tax, arguing that some of these sailors accompanied us at sea, while others remained behind to guard our livestock and property from theft and looting. He questioned the fairness of taxing those not actively working in the pearling trade.

Upon hearing this, Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim ordered their exemption from the tax, restricting taxation only to those directly working aboard the pearling vessels.

We witnessed the late Yousef bin Ahmed Al-Jaber going around with his collection bag, gathering taxes from divers (ghawwāsīn) and foreigners who worked on citizens' ships.

If any sailor attempted to evade payment, refusing to pay the required tax-six rupees for divers and four rupees for rope-pullers (sayyabīn)-he would face trial and punishment, as this tax was mandatory for all. The country had no other source of income besides the sea and its harvests, making taxation a necessary financial policy.

However, at times, Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim showed leniency, particularly if he found that a diver's income was too low. Aware of their hardships, he would exercise discretion and offer exemptions, approaching the matter as a form of cooperation rather than strict enforcement.

Our lives were deeply intertwined with the sea-we hardly left it throughout the year, except for about a month during winter, when we would tend livestock in the desert. Under normal circumstances, as being Tawawish (pearl traders), we

would gather in the markets to buy and sell pearls. We had a café in Souq Waqif, where we would meet to discuss pearl prices and the movement of the external market.

In Qatar, when divers (ghawwāsīn) first collected their pearls, they presented them to the ruler and the sheikhs who were involved in the pearl trade. These figures had priority, selecting whatever pearls they wished to purchase. Once they had taken their share, the remaining pearls were sold in the market.

I still remember when we sold Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim a set of exquisite Danāt (large, high-quality pearls) for 42 Riyals, and in return, he gave us a rare red Morris car—a truly remarkable exchange at the time!

I want to point out that the relationships among pearl traders (Tawawish) and their interactions with the divers (Ghawwāsīn) were generally harmonious. A diver would sell his pearls to a merchant and often wait over a month for payment, only requesting his dues after the Qaffāl (the official end of the pearl diving season). There was a deep sense of trust between all parties.

Some pearl merchants even provided financial support to the divers, offering them loans (Yamaddūnahum) without charging interest. Settlements were made at the end of the season, with transactions carried out in an atmosphere of brotherhood and mutual respect.

I also know that Indian pearl traders residing in Dubai, such as Al-Ghurair and Al-Futtaim, supported divers, thereby covering their voyage expenses. Rather than paying them in cash, they provided supplies and provisions necessary for the journey. At the end of the season, they would collect

their share of the pearl harvest and distribute the profits accordingly.

Our family, Al-Hatemi, was considered one of the strongest players in Qatar's pearl market, along with several other well-known families in the trade.

The financing of pearl diving was primarily handled by well-known market traders who provided financial support and supplies for the fleets.

Meanwhile, Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim played a significant role in the pearl trade, selling Qatari pearls to Indian merchants in Dubai. At that time, Dubai had become a major center for pearl trading, though before it, the city of Lengeh, located on the Persian coast and ruled by the Al-Qawasim, served as the primary hub for pearl commerce. Lengeh attracted Tawawish (pearl traders) from Qatar, Kuwait, the Trucial Coast (now the UAE), Bahrain, and Darin, making it the central gathering place for merchants in the region.



## The Structure of the Diving Season

The start of the pearl diving season was a moment of great anticipation, marked by the “Rikbah” or “Dasha”, the official departure of fleets toward the pearl banks. This event symbolized hope for a new season, bringing livelihood and prosperity to the divers and their families.

At the end of the season, the “Qaffāl” took place—the return to land and the distribution of earnings. Pearl diving was highly organized and governed by strict regulations among Gulf maritime communities.

One of the most important rules was that each Gulf nation appointed a commander for its fleet, known as the “Sirdāl” or “Amīr al-Baḥr” (Commander of the Sea). The ruler selected this leader and was responsible for:

1. Overseeing the ships and their crews during the diving season.
2. Guiding and advising the Nukhudha (captains).
3. Setting the official date for the end of the diving season, typically after four months.

The Sirdāl signaled the end of the season by raising a flag and firing a cannon shot, officially announcing the closure of pearl diving activities.

This prompted all ships to begin their journey back home together in an event called “Al-Qaffāl”, a testament to the unity and camaraderie among the divers.

### The Prestige of Ending the Diving Season

Due to the importance of the Qaffāl, some of the most prominent Nukhudha (captains) would purchase the honor of

leading the final journey. By paying a sum to the government, a Nukhudha could set the official closing date for the season and lead the fleet back home, securing recognition and prestige among sailors and merchants.

One of Qatar's most well-known Sirdāls was Ibrahim bin Nasir Al-Nasr, appointed by the ruler. When he lowered the official flag (Al-Bandeirah) and raised the white flag, all divers and ships knew that the season had officially ended, and the fleet would begin its final voyage back to Qatar.

When the Sirdāl (fleet commander) lowered the Bandeirah (official flag) and raised the white flag, it signalled the end of the pearl diving season.

At this point, all diving ships would enter a state of readiness, preparing to return home.

As the season's conclusion approached, all ships gradually moved closer to the Sirdāl's vessel, awaiting his final command. The agreed-upon signal for the fleet's departure was the firing of a loud gunshot, echoing across the pearl banks (hiyārāt). Upon hearing this, the entire fleet set sail for home.

This grand return, or "Al-Qaffāl", was only observed during the official pearl diving season, known as "Ghawṣ al-'Awd".

In contrast, smaller, unofficial diving expeditions, such as the first, second, and third "Dasha" (short diving trips) and the Khammeās (quick pearl hunts), operated without these formal procedures.

Famous Sirdāls and the Legacy of Qatar's Maritime Commanders

We worked under the command of Ibrahim bin Nasir Al-Nasr, the Sirdāl of Qatar, during our time. We followed his leadership both during the Dasha (departure) and the Qaffāl (return),

According to our elders (Shaybānah), the first-ever Amir diving in Qatar was Mohammed bin Khalifa Al-Asiri Al-Ma'adid. He commanded the famous "Bateel" vessel, widely known as "Umm Al-Ḥanāyā", a name derived from the many bends and curves in its hull.

Later, this historic ship was inherited by Sheikh Khalifa bin Jassim bin Mohammed Al Thani, as it originally belonged to his mother's maternal uncle. The ship itself was initially brought from Oman,

One unforgettable memory that remains etched in our minds is the period of economic hardship that struck Qatar and the entire Arabian Gulf following the emergence of Japanese cultured pearls, which we referred to as "artificial pearls" due to their low prices. The challenges that followed were neither simple nor easy to overcome.

I still remember Khalil bin Ahmed Al-Baker as the first person to introduce Japanese pearls to the Gulf. His action faced strong opposition and severe reproach from pearl traders and the ruling sheikhs of the time. The merchant who had brought these pearls to him was punished harshly after his guilt was proven.

Despite being a well-respected and influential trader, he was not spared from punishment. As a public lesson and



deterrent, he was forced to ride a donkey backwards, his face was painted, and he was paraded through the markets on a Friday-a punishment deemed deserved at the time. The arrival of Japanese cultured pearls caused natural Gulf pearls to lose their value and desirability, plunging the region's economy into a crisis. However, by God's grace, the downturn did not last long, only about three years before conditions began to recover.

### **This revival coincided with two significant events:**

1. The discovery of oil, which transformed the Gulf's economy.
2. The end of World War II ushered in a global economic recovery.

With these changes, prosperity returned, life flourished, and the region embarked on a new era of growth. Today, we continue to witness this progress and abundance, and we can only praise and thank God Almighty for His countless blessings.

## Rashid bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Asiri

He stated that his father was one of the foremost pearl experts in the Arabian Gulf region, not just in Qatar.



His family was renowned for their involvement in Qatar's tawwashah (pearl trading) profession. This trade connected him closely with pearl merchants, both in Qatar and across the region, as well as with foreign specialists in the field. He holds abundant memories of this profession, and his recollections remain vivid, particularly regarding the pearl trade.

### Rashid bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Asiri recounts:

“We have many prominent and smaller scale tawwash (pearl merchants) in Qatar. My late father, Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Asiri, along with my brothers and our kin, were primarily engaged in tawwashah. We were considered among the leading tawwash in the country, and our ships ventured far into the pearl banks across the entire Gulf.



We used to meet with significant pearl traders, whether in Darin in Al-Ahsa, where we would discuss pearl trade matters and engage in buying and selling, or in Bahrain, which was considered the center of the pearl trade in the entire Arabian Gulf.

Bahrain was considered the principal hub of the pearl trade in the entire Arabian Gulf-whether for buying and selling, procuring supplies essential for operating ships, or staying informed about the pearl markets in Bahrain, India, and Europe.

The connection between pearl traders in Qatar, the rest of the region, and the city of Bombay was particularly strong in terms of pearl marketing.

At that time, Bombay was a crucial center for this trade, home to a large number of wealthy buyers who were willing to pay exorbitant sums for highly sought-after Gulf pearls. They purchased them eagerly and without hesitation.

In mid-autumn, about a month or more after the pearl diving season ended, we would travel to Bombay, where we had well-established relations with pearl merchants and brokers. As Arab traders, we sold the pearls we had purchased from Gulf divers to foreign merchants in India, who sold them in European markets, particularly in Paris and London.



During that period, when we were engaged in pearl diving, Bahrain was also a key center for the pearl trade. Major foreign traders had established shops there specifically for purchasing pearls.

There were also small boats operated by junior tawwash (pearl traders) that sailed to the pearl banks. Sometimes, two or three traders share a single boat to minimize expenses. Each trader would buy pearls for himself, or they might collectively invest in purchasing and selling pearls, sharing both profits and losses if their trade was unsuccessful.

Life aboard tawwash ships was very comfortable. I recall that whenever we set out toward the pearl diving ships during the seasons, our vessel was fully equipped with all the necessary provisions for the journey.

Throughout our stay, which began when the divers entered the sea and ended with their return (Rafael), we only consumed clean, high-quality food-unlike the conditions on the pearl diving ships.

Both lunch and dinner were always well-prepared and appetizing. We added premium fat, known as Adani, which was highly expensive, to our rice dishes.

As was customary, every tawwash ship had an excellent cook on board. Additionally, on these ships, we drank only clean, cooled water stored in a hab-a clay vessel used for cooling.

We also enjoyed tea, coffee, and fresh milk, which was obtained from the goats that accompanied the ship specifically for this purpose.

As is well known, tawwash (pearl traders) would set out for the pearl banks about a month after the divers had departed. This timing allowed them to collect pearls and stay informed about their market prices in international trading hubs. When the diving season ended (qafal), we, as tawwash, would return to our homeland along with the divers.

Each tawwash was associated with divers for whom he covered the expenses of the journey, enabling them to participate in pearl diving on his behalf-a system known as al-tisqam.

Senior tawwash, like us, were generous in their payments to the nawakhedh (dhow captains), who, in return, were obligated to reserve the collected pearls exclusively for the trader who financed them. If a dispute arose over the price, trusted tawwash would mediate and settle the matter.

On a tawwash ship, the trader would bring along the finest sailors to accompany him on his pearl-buying expedition. He would agree with several sailors, specifying a fixed wage for the entire voyage, a system referred to as al-qutoo'ah. The number of sailors usually ranged from five to ten, while on larger tawwash ships, the total crew could reach around twenty, including experienced men and younger apprentices. A tawwash ship was never without a small rowing boat called qalas. When a tawwash was in the hair (pearl bank) among the divers, he would board the qalas, which was rowed by a crew of four to eight sailors, depending on its size. The tawwash would then move among the divers, boarding the pearl-diving ships (ghaws) to inspect the pearls the nawkhada (dhow captain) presented to him. Negotiations over the purchase price would occur, often leading to disagreements, as the entire marketplace existed at sea.

A tawwash with limited financial resources would typically use a smaller mahmal (boat) and travel around the pearl banks looking for trade opportunities. In this profession, there was no strict distinction between a small or a large tawwash-everyone worked according to their means and fortune. However, the larger tawwash ships were naturally better equipped and provided greater comfort. Some prominent tawwash eventually introduced engines to their vessels, eliminating the need for rowing at a later stage.

Families such as Al-Asiri, Al-Darwish, and Mohammed Abdul Latif Al-Mana were among those who modernized their vessels.

While at sea, we navigated the hiyārāt (pearl banks) using the galas, moving from launch to launch, from banish to

banish, and from Ushuaia to Shuai, collecting as many pearls as possible. However, some mahamil (boats) did not sell at sea, as they had prior agreements with financiers (al-tisqam investors).

In such cases, people would say, “The nawkhada cannot sell because a contract binds him.” Instead, these merchants would accumulate their pearls until they returned to shore, where they would deliver them to their agreed-upon financier. The distribution and final transactions would occur after weighing and sorting the pearls. If the diver or trader was in debt, the amount owed would be deducted from his earnings, or the debt would carry over to the following year’s diving season.



The tawwash then begins sorting pearls by placing them into special sieves called taws to sift and classify them according to size. Afterwards, he weighs the sorted pearls using a precise scale. To prepare for this task, he spreads out a dasta, a kit containing weighing and sorting instruments, measures, and

other tools, upon a square piece of red fabric approximately one to one-and-a-half meters long, known as the khirjah.

The first step the tawwash undertakes is placing a quantity of pearls into the first sieve, which has the largest openings. Pearls remaining in this sieve are called hasabi, representing the largest size category. Each subsequent sieve sorts pearls into increasingly smaller sizes, each with a distinct name. The largest type of pearl is known as hasaba, the smallest is termed yikka, and the lowest-quality pearls are called khashrah.

Large pearls, valued at approximately one thousand rupees during that period, were weighed using a special unit called a shaw. Naturally, the heavier the pearl, the greater its value, with scarce and precious pearls called danah.

## Pearl Experts

Expertise holds profound significance among seafaring men, a level attained only by those gifted with exceptional talent bestowed upon them by God. The pearl expert (Khabeer al-lu'lu') enjoys special importance and respect among pearl merchants in the Arabian Gulf. Their expertise is indispensable, prompting the tawwash (pearl trader) to frequently bring an expert along during market visits to select the finest pearls.



## The Late Expert Hassan Maki

The extensive knowledge and profound expertise in pearls inspired respected men during the 1980s, such as the late Hajji Hassan Maki-a dignified figure who passed away in September 1998-to dedicate themselves sincerely to understanding every detail of pearl trading. This dedication was rooted in their heritage and ancestral legacy, stretching far back into history. Such devotion earned them a prestigious status among pearl traders and specialists worldwide. They became renowned for their exceptional skills, profound understanding of pearl shapes, meticulous classification, remarkable ability in evaluating and refining pearls, and talent in selecting samples of the highest and most luxurious quality-skills acquired through experience and the innate gifts granted by God.

## An Expert's Reflections Before His Passing

The late Hajji Hassan Maki, who inherited his expertise from his forefathers, was one of the most skilled pearl evaluators in the Arabian Gulf. He was distinguished among leading pearl merchants, having worked with many of them in Qatar, Bahrain, and several coastal cities of the Emirates. He was frequently summoned by the region's sheikhs and prominent *tawwash* (pearl traders) during sales and purchase transactions, as his touch and discerning eye alone could determine the actual value of a pearl, rendering further questioning unnecessary.



Shortly before his passing, *Hajji* Hassan provided a rare documentation of this profession, deeply intertwined with pearl diving. He shared memories accumulated over the years, from a time when pearls were life itself. This interview was conducted as part of the research for this book.

He stated: "Out of a thousand *tawwash*, you will find only about five who work as true experts. This highlights the rarity of a *khabeer* (pearl expert), and when one exists, the demand

for him never ceases. However, there are variations among experts, depending on their natural talent, sharp intuition, and experience. This profession is primarily a divine gift from God, followed by years of practice.

Take, for example, our family, the Al-Fardan family. All its men work in *tawwashah* (pearl trading), yet only a rare few possess the talent for true expertise. Among them, Hassan Al-Fardan ranks first, followed by Ibrahim Al-Fardan, and then me.”

“No one in our family has reached the level of expertise that we have attained, for God bestows knowledge upon whom He wills, a knowledge that He does not grant to others. As the Quran says:(And above every possessor of knowledge, there is one more knowing.)”

The reality is that the greatest *tawwash* in the region would summon me for consultation when dealing with *danat* (exceptional pearls), even though my uncle, Ibrahim Al-Fardan, was far more skilled than I, and my grandfather, Hassan Al-Fardan, was an unparalleled expert. He was known as *Al-Jarrah* (The Surgeon) for his precision and expertise. The talent that God granted me was refined through the experience I gained from my grandfather, whom I accompanied during his final years while I was still young. Later, I had the opportunity to learn from my uncle, Ibrahim, observing him closely and attentively whenever I sat beside him.

Reaching the level of a *khabeer* (pearl expert) requires unique qualities. When an expert carefully opens a *danah* (a rare, high-quality pearl) and extracts its ‘offspring,’ it is as if he is performing a delicate surgical procedure, akin to removing a

layer of human skin. It is by no means an easy task to remove the protective coating surrounding the *danah*. The process demands extreme caution, ensuring that the second layer remains intact, as any mishandling could ruin the pearl entirely. This intricate procedure requires a sharp knife and a skilled, steady hand to execute it properly. The art of peeling away the delicate outer layer of a pearl is a rare skill that only those with extraordinary talent can master.

This ability is a divine gift from God, but even among experts, there are varying degrees of skill. One's talent, combined with dedication to the craft, determines their level of expertise. For instance, the moment I lay eyes on a pearl, I instantly recognize its quality and value. I then begin negotiating with the seller-if he offers it for 400 rupees, I carefully examine it while bargaining until we reach a final price, and I purchase it. In doing so, I assume the risk, because as an expert, I trust my instincts. My intuition never fails me, and I never hesitate to advise on the worth of a pearl. This is the essence of an expert's role."



As I grew older, this talent developed with me, and I began working as a *khabeer* (pearl expert). At first, I worked for Ali bin Abdullah Al-Owais in Sharjah, then for Ahmed bin Khalaf bin Ateeiba, where I specialized in refining and assessing *danat* (exceptional pearls) and was frequently consulted on their value.

In Qatar, I worked as an expert for Sheikh Falih bin Nasser and later for Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad, who would send a private car to bring me to his palace whenever he intended to purchase a *qimashah* (a collection of pearls). My role was to sort, weigh, appraise, and classify the pearls according to their value, which sometimes reached as high as five million Riyals.

I also worked as an expert for prominent *tawwash* (pearl traders) in Qatar, such as Mohammed Al-Rubban, Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Asiri, and Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed from Umm Salal, among others. Due to my deep expertise and established reputation, I was also sought after in Bahrain by traders who consulted me on *danat* despite having skilled experts of their own. However, my level of expertise surpassed theirs, which is why the leading pearl merchants in Bahrain regularly called upon me.

Among those who sought my expertise were Abdul Rahman Al-Qusaibi, Abdullah bin Ahmed Al-Manai, Khalil Al-Moayyed, and Mohsen Al-Tajir-the father of Mahdi Al-Tajir, the well-known diplomat and businessman from the UAE-along with Khalifa bin Matar and Isa bin Hindi. These were some of the most renowned pearl merchants and *tawwash* in the region. As is well known, Bahrain was a thriving hub for the

pearl trade, home to nearly five thousand *tawwash* and pearl traders at that time.

## Memories of the Profession

“We were born into a world where pearls were everywhere, and people depended on them entirely. Our only source of income came from pearl revenues, making the pearl trade the dominant commercial activity at the time. Western countries placed great value on Gulf pearls, considering them a strong competitor to other types of pearls. However, it was not the Westerners who first recognized the exceptional quality of Gulf pearls-it was the Indians.

The Indians were our closest trading partners in the pearl industry. I remember when they visited us to purchase pearls, we would welcome them warmly, open our homes and shops to them, and sell to them with generosity. They, in turn, would market our pearls in Europe. It was well known throughout the region that India was the largest market for Gulf pearls, as it was home to *rajahs*, kings, and wealthy individuals who eagerly sought Gulf pearls, especially for celebratory occasions.

It was not only Western merchants who came to appreciate the superior quality of Gulf pearls-every knowledgeable trader and pearl collector recognized their exceptional value. From the moment we opened our eyes to this world, we knew nothing but *tawwashah* (pearl trading). This experience gave us deep knowledge of pearl diving and expertise in identifying the finest *hiyarat* (pearl banks), despite their vast number and widespread locations across Gulf waters.



In Qatar alone, there are more than thirty *hiyarat*, and we know them well, so well that we can pinpoint the locations where the finest pearls can be found. This was our livelihood: the divers (*ghawawis*) extracted pearls, the *tawwash* purchased them, and we sold them in global pearl markets. Such was the life of pearl diving in our time.

The *tawwash* profession revolved solely around buying and selling pearls, while the craftsmanship of pearl refinement was left to specialized artisans.”

#### The Global Reach of the Gulf Pearl Trade

“Most of the craftsmen we were familiar with were from India, which was the primary market for our pearls, followed by Europe. I recall that the first person to travel and sell pearls in France was Abdul Rahman Al-Qusaibi, while the first to travel to India by airplane was Mohammed Mulla Zainal. From India, he marketed pearls to Paris, traveling by air. Eventually, French traders themselves began coming to the region to purchase pearls directly.

I traveled to France as well and remember purchasing a collection of pearls from a well-known merchant named *Rosenthal*, who belonged to a prominent Jewish family in France and was one of the world’s leading *tawwash* (pearl traders). At the time, neither I nor anyone of my standing could access him-only the most renowned and influential merchants could. In India and Bahrain, where he had shops for buying pearls, he was under heavy security, and no one could meet him without police authorization.

Now, however, things have changed. When I visit France, I am warmly welcomed by him, and he even offers me opportunities to work with him. I once purchased a single-strand pearl necklace from him, which I later sold to Mr. Hussein Al-Fardan for two million Riyals. This same powerful trader-whom no one could meet in the past-now comes to us, negotiating pearl prices directly.

At that time, France was one of the most important centers for marketing pearls in Europe, and from there, Gulf pearls spread to the markets of Britain and America. In the golden era of pearl diving, they were the only Western traders we regularly saw in the region, actively engaging in the pearl trade.”

### The Market of the Elite

“India was the most important center for marketing Gulf pearls, and our ties with it are deeply rooted in history. For a long time, it was the only place we knew for selling our pearls, and it served as our gateway to global markets.

Here, I would like to offer a glimpse into the means of travel to these regions, particularly to India, which our ancestors considered a distant and arduous destination. For them, reaching India was nothing short of a miracle, as it was the only market they knew for selling pearls. At that time, Indian traders did not travel to us and were unfamiliar with the Gulf region’s location.

Our forefathers recounted that travel to India was undertaken aboard large sailing ships known as *saffar*, which transported dates to India and Pakistan while carrying pearls for sale as



well. However, by the 1930s, we began to witness Indian merchants visiting our region. This coincided with the rise of steamships navigating global waters, as the world discovered accessible routes to the Arabian Gulf.

It is worth noting that ships arriving from India or elsewhere did not dock directly at Gulf ports. Instead, they anchored at *Bandar Lengeh*, a port on the Persian coast, which was ruled by the *Qawasim*-the same tribe that now governs the emirates of Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah in the United Arab Emirates.

Bandar Lengeh was a major gathering point for Arab pearl traders. During the winter, after the pearl diving season had ended, traders from across the Gulf would converge there to conduct business. From this port, they would continue their journey to a harbor in present-day Saudi Arabia, before setting sail to <sup>(1)</sup>Bombay, India,

Because the ships used at that time could only reach a limited distance, the farthest they could travel was a designated port-they could not sail directly to Bahrain. Thus, Gulf traders would disembark in Bombay and remain there for about four to five months, selling off their stock of pearls. Once their transactions were complete, they would return along the same route, bringing back essential food supplies and textiles. These goods would then be displayed in the markets during the summer, before the pearl diving season began.

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(1) -one of the world's most significant pearl trading hubs.

I have vivid memories of those journeys, filled with extraordinary scenes. On my first trip to India at the age of 18, we traveled through various cities and regions of the world. I recall passing by Henjam Island, Bandar Abbas, Jask, Muscat, Chabahar, Gwadar, Karachi, Umm Al-Barawah, and Bangalore.

We sailed aboard the well-known shipping lines of the time, such as the British *Karim Kinsey* steamships. The journey from *Bandar Lengeh* to *Bombay* would take approximately 17 days.

Once in Bombay, we would meet traders from across the Gulf—from Bahrain, Kuwait, the Trucial Coast (modern-day UAE), and Darin. They all came to Bombay to market their pearls, and their appearance was unmistakable, dressed in traditional Gulf attire—*ghutra*, *agal*, and *thobe*. We also gathered for prayers in mosques designated for Muslims, especially on Fridays.

Naturally, the *dallalwah* (brokers) were familiar with all the major Gulf traders. They would greet them warmly at the port, knowing that most had arrived to settle their debts from the previous season. Many had taken loans from prominent Indian traders, who had been waiting for this moment to reclaim their money along with accrued interest. These Indian financiers lent vast sums—sometimes exceeding 20,000 rupees—to Gulf *nawakhidah* (ship captains), trusting that they would repay their loans at the end of the pearl season.

*This system of financing played a crucial role in sustaining the Gulf's pearl trade, as it allowed divers and traders to continue their operations despite seasonal financial constraints.*

On a personal level, I was present during many pearls trading transactions, observing negotiations between both parties. I would offer my opinion on the quality of the pearls, provide expert advice, and determine prices based on their classification and distinct characteristics. I was highly respected in these circles, and this recognition remains the greatest achievement of my life. Everyone knew of my honesty and integrity in pearl evaluation, and I was always met with appreciation-praise be to God.

As for the Gulf region, Bahrain was undoubtedly the largest center for *tawwashah* (pearl trading). It was followed by *Bandar Lengeh*, but in the 1930s, *Lengeh* declined, and its role was overtaken by the Emirate of Dubai. Since then, Dubai has continued to grow and evolve, attracting traders from around the world. Today, it is considered a significant hub and an expansive market for pearl trading.

The Western world has long held a deep admiration for pearls, and Gulf pearls are regarded as among the finest in the world. Paris was the central marketplace for Gulf pearls, which reached Europe through India. In Asia, pearls also commanded great value, often surpassing prices in other regions. China, in particular, was a major destination for pearls imported from the West, and for the Chinese, we were considered part of the “Western” world.

Shanghai was one of China’s largest pearl trading hubs, with its port ranking among the most significant for this purpose. However, even today, the Arabian Gulf remains the best place for marketing pearls, offering the world’s finest and most sought-after varieties.<sup>(1)</sup>

(1) *This enduring legacy of Gulf pearls highlights their unparalleled reputation and their continued significance in the global luxury market.*

## “Our Caution Against Artificial Pearls from the Beginning”

One of the significant experiences I encountered as a pearl expert was the period when Japanese pearls began flooding global markets over sixty years ago. At first, we were confused by their appearance, especially since this happened during the height of the Gulf’s pearl trade boom, around the 1930s. The market was thriving, and the demand for Gulf pearls never waned, even though, like any market, it was governed by supply and demand.

Then, suddenly, these Japanese pearls started appearing in the markets, sold at remarkably low prices. They gained rapid popularity, especially among foreign pearl traders. However, true pearl experts were not deceived.

Initially, I could not immediately distinguish them from natural pearls, and I did not suspect they were different. But something inside me did not trust them, I had an instinct that these pearls would not last.

Yes, their outward appearance was similar, and their origin seemed the same, but the difference was in the *feeling*. For example (to illustrate), when you buy fish, can you distinguish between a wild fish that roams freely in the sea and a farmed fish raised in controlled enclosures? Both are fish, yet you can sense that their taste is different. This is exactly what happened with us.

Japanese or cultured pearls only revealed their true nature after they had been used and circulated in the market. Over time, their artificial quality became apparent as they

deteriorated. Natural pearls, on the other hand, remain unchanged for eternity. We had been handling them for centuries and never observed any alteration in their shape, color, or properties.

From our instincts and experience, we began advising traders, many of whom were initially impressed by the flawless appearance of artificial pearls. We shared our insights and cautioned against rushing to invest in these unfamiliar pearls.

Based on our expertise, we did not recommend hastily purchasing them. However, when people compared the price difference between natural and artificial pearls, many were drawn to the cheaper alternative.

Without a doubt, this shift was one of the key factors that contributed to the decline of the Gulf's premium pearl trade during that period.

## The Value of Gulf Pearls

Yes, a pearl harvested from the Arabian Gulf was worth a great deal to those who understood its value. A single *dannah* (exceptional pearl) could reach a price of around 60,000 rupees. I recall that Hussein Al-Fardan purchased such a pearl at the time, weighing approximately 29 *shaw*, meaning that each *shaw* was valued at over 2,000 rupees.

In contrast, when artificial pearls entered the market, a full *Kam Shahi* necklace, for instance, was priced at only 3,000 rupees. However, as experts, we could always distinguish the real from the fake-by touch, by feel, and by instinct. Over the years, those who had invested in artificial pearls regretted

their decision and suffered significant financial losses. Only then did they remember our warnings and realize that, as I had stated before, an expert's judgment is rarely wrong.

### What About Today's Market?

Some traders claim that there is no longer strong demand for pearls, but this is simply not true. Even the smallest trader today sells pearls worth more than 5 million Riyals annually. In the past, not even a hundred *tawwash* (pearl traders) combined could generate a million in sales.

Of course, currency values have changed-what was worth a million in the past might be equivalent to just ten Riyals today. The volume of sales has never remained constant; it has always fluctuated according to market forces, governed by supply and demand.

Historically, the people of the Gulf did not acquire pearls for personal use; they dealt with them solely as a trade commodity and a source of livelihood through buying and selling. However, in recent years, pearl ownership and adornment have become more common, creating a competitive market for acquiring and using pearls in the region.

Yet, no matter how the market evolves, the role of the expert remains valuable. *As long as the pearl trade exists in the world, the expertise of a true pearl connoisseur will always be in demand.*

## Maritime Songs (*Al-Nahma*)

In *Lisan al-Arab* by Ibn Manzur, the term *nahma* is defined as follows:

- *Nahma* refers to reaching a state of great aspiration or ambition.
- *Nahāmah* denotes an intense craving, particularly for food.
- *Nahama* is a sound resembling a groan, and some describe it as a sound louder than a roar.
- *Nahhām* refers to a lion, named so for its powerful voice.
- *Nāhim* is used to describe someone who cries out loudly.
- When camels are urged forward with a call, they are said to be *nahamat*, a term meaning an urging command.
- *Nahham* camels are those that obey the call, and *nahm* refers to the vocal command used to drive them forward.

This definition of *nahma* closely resembles *huda'* (camel drivers' chants), a well-known practice among Arabs where rhythmic singing encourages camels to quicken their pace. This reveals the connection between the linguistic meaning of *nahma* and *huda'*, illustrating how the concept of *nahma* evolved into maritime singing. Just as *huda'* motivates camels to continue their journey, *nahma* serves to encourage sailors as they work.

(1)In this regard, we turn to *Hareb Rashid Al-Hareb*, who takes us on a journey through this unique art form and other traditions practiced both at sea and on land. His memories are etched in his mind as vividly as if they happened yesterday, filled with emotion and nostalgia for a past rich with diverse events.

Before delving into the world of *Hareb bin Rashid*, we first explore aspects of his life and personality through the following lines.

### **Hareb Rashid Al-Hareb bin Mubarak bin Masoud Al-Boushma**

Hareb Rashid Al-Hareb embarked on his first seafaring journey at the age of seven. He started as a *tibbab*-a term referring to a young boy who enters the sea for two years of apprenticeship-aboard the *Sanbook* of Mohammed bin Ghanem Al-Ghanem.



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(1) He was born in Doha in 1924, in the old **Al-Mirqab** neighborhood.



The *Sanbook* was a type of pearling and travel vessel, reaching up to 60 feet in length, with a capacity ranging from 15 to 60 tons, and accommodating a crew of 15 to 20 sailors.

Later, he worked as a *radheef*, a role responsible for serving the sailors onboard. He moved between several shipowners before settling with Saleh bin Abdullah Al-Ta'an at the age of ten. A year later, he transitioned to working as a *saib* under Yousef bin Ahmed Al-Sulaiti, remaining with him for nine years.

The *saib* held one of the most challenging positions on a pearling ship, as the safety and survival of the diver at the bottom of the sea depended entirely on him.

After this phase of his life, Hareb bin Rashid left pearl diving and transitioned to working in long-distance maritime travel (*asfar*). He was no older than 22 years when he embarked on this new journey, initially sailing along the Persian coast with Mohammed bin Sabah and Sultan Al-Ali.

At the time, maritime trade voyages (*asfar*) held great significance, as those who engaged in them often earned substantial wealth-though the work was strenuous and costly.

Despite the hardships, he continued in this demanding profession, undertaking voyages to distant regions. His travels extended across India, reaching Calcutta and Bombay, as well as the coasts of Africa, including Mombasa, Zanzibar, Mogadishu, and Mukalla in Yemen, along with numerous smaller coastal villages and towns

After retiring from seafaring, the father, Harib bin Rashid Al-Harib, worked for the oil company operating in Kuwait, where he settled for a considerable period during the early years of oil extraction, beginning in 1948. He spent three years working for the company, after which he took up a job in government service. However, he later decided to leave Kuwait after being summoned by his mother. He then settled in the city of Dammam in Saudi Arabia. Upon receiving the news of his mother's passing, he returned to his homeland, Qatar, when economic conditions had improved due to the burgeoning oil industry and prosperity had begun to spread. He subsequently resumed work in the government sector.



This eventful life, etched in the memory of Harib Rashid Al-Harib, calls for the documentation of a portion of its narrative, particularly the era of pearl diving in Qatar. He is considered one of the reliable oral historians in this field, allowing us to explore the intimate details of life surrounding the rituals before and after the diving seasons and the arts practised



by the people, both aboard ships and on land. These arts include traditional crafts, storytelling, and music, among others. Among these is the Nihma (traditional sea chant), in which he excelled, in addition to his recollections of famous ships and their renowned captains in Qatar. On this subject, Harib bin Rashid states:

“We must first acknowledge the profound impact of the Nihma on the seamen. The sailors would perform their strenuous tasks to the rhythm of these chants, energized and seemingly oblivious to their fatigue throughout the day, especially when the Nihham (lead singer) had a pleasant voice. Nihma is an essential part of maritime singing. It is closely tied to poetic expression, particularly the Mawwal, a form of traditional poetry delivered melodically by the Nihham in his beautiful voice. The Mawwal is among the authentic forms of poetry associated with sea songs, performed by the Nihham with a soulful voice that inspires the sailors and instils a spirit of collective effort in them.

This type of folk singing is performed by the Nihham in artistically rich formats, aimed at stirring the emotions of the sailors, to awaken their sentiments, evoke their longings, and give voice to their inner worlds and struggles. The Nihham does this with spontaneity, conveying the profound meanings embedded in the lyrics. These songs resonate deeply within the hearts of the sailors, blending with the ornamental patterns and rhythms of the Mawwal, which in turn fuel their passion and drive to work with enthusiasm and vigour, despite the emotional burden of hardship and the pain of separation from their families and loved ones.”

In the middle of the ship, once it sets sail for a pearl diving expedition, the seamen divide the Nihma (traditional sea chant) into different phases, each with its distinct performance style. During rowing, for instance, there are two types of Nihma, a light chant and a medium one. Raising the Sail has its own dedicated Nihma as well. The act of Khatfah, which is hoisting the sail to the top of the mast (Diqil), is accompanied by rhythmic clapping and a special chant. There are also group performances tied to other stages, particularly during the unfurling of the Jeeb, the smallest triangular sail on the ship. Likewise, there is a specific Nihma for the Lammat al-Jeeb, which refers to lowering this sail from the mast.

Father Harib bin Rashid continues recounting his memories with the Mawwal (melodic poetic chant), saying:

“My passion for the Mawwal began in my early childhood and stayed with me from the start of my life at sea. As I mentioned, I went to sea before turning seven. I was fortunate to be in an environment conducive to learning poetry, and I became enamoured with it during my youth. I studied its foundations and spent time with its masters. Over the years, I acquired a vast collection of Mawawil (plural of Mawwal) by poets from Qatar and the Gulf. I continued memorizing and documenting Mawawil for many years and practised all forms and styles of traditional Gulf arts. My ties grew strong with many involved in these arts, including poets and performers of Sawt, Li'bouni, and Khamari.”

When discussing maritime arts, one must recognize that each has its color or flavor, specific to each region. The

art of Fijiri, for example, is performed in Qatar, Darin, and Dammam. In Bahrain and Kuwait, they perform Al-'Adasani and Al-Haddadi. However, all these communities share such artistic traditions. Many poetic lyrics performed as Mawwal are also performed in maritime contexts. One of the most renowned drummers in Qatar was Saad bin Awad (may God have mercy on him). Among the many well-known Nihhamin (sea chanters), and we entrust them all to God-are Jaham bin Mubarak, Majid bin Sultan, Jawhar bin Butti, Saad bin Butti, Abdullah Al-Badr, Ali Mohsen Bu Hudood, Bu Jilouf, Shaheen bin Fares, Rashid Al-Mas, and others from among the Nihhamin of Qatar.

### **Memories of Diving Days with Father Harib bin Rashid**

Every stage of the pearl diving journey had its unique customs and rituals. It is through the preservation and passing on of these traditions that we keep our cultural heritage alive. Completing the ship's construction before the season began was marked by a special celebration aboard the vessel, during which a distinct type of maritime art was performed. Likewise, when the divers departed for a new season, the farewell voyage had its own ceremonial elements. Entire fareej neighbourhoods would gather, women, children, and the elderly, to bid farewell to the men embarking on their journey into the open sea in search of pearls.

The gathering place was the shoreline (Al-Seef), where the most authentic expression of unity, purity, and harmony among the people was evident as they wished their sons

a safe and prosperous return. This shared experience of bidding farewell and welcoming back the divers fostered a deep sense of community and shared heritage.

### **The Anticipation of the Divers' Return:**

There was also another significant phase in the diving journey which is involving the women and children gathering on the seashore, anxiously awaiting the sailors' return. This period of waiting was particularly challenging and was marked by distinctive rituals. Families would bring palm fronds and symbolically strike the sea, performing songs associated with this occasion-one particularly famous chant among the Gulf people went: "Toub, toub ya bahr, arba'a wal khamis dakhal," meaning, "Settle, settle, oh sea, four months have passed, and the fifth has begun," referring to the months counted until the sailors' expected return.

This scene of families gathering at the shore would recur when sailors finally returned, a moment known locally as Al-Qaffal, featuring specific customs. Innocently and anxiously, families awaited their loved ones, unaware of the hardships and perils faced by the sailors for four months away at sea. Their only source of information was the scant news brought by some men who had returned earlier or pearl merchants who traveled the seas negotiating with the ship captains (Nawakhetha) for pearls. As previously mentioned, no one held the authority to sell pearls at sea except for ship owners or those they authorized.



Doha's shoreline, known as Saif al-Doha, was widely recognized. The entire Al-Jasra area comprised shorelines stretching from Fareej Al-Ghanim, Al-Salata, Al-Bidaa, Al-Khalifat, to Al-Rumaila. These shores served as gathering spots for sailors from diverse backgrounds, with no distinction made among them. Here, I refer specifically to a period I experienced during the reign of the late Sheikh Hamad bin Abdullah Al Thani and subsequently his brother, the late Sheikh Ali bin Abdullah, under whose leadership pearl diving ceased and prosperity flowed into Qatar with the discovery of oil.

During winter, cultural activities thrived in places known as Al-Dur (plural of Dar, meaning "house" or "residence"), with many distinguished houses known throughout Qatar. Life for sea-faring men during the era of pearl diving was exceedingly harsh, filled with hardship, exhaustion, and even humiliation due to the overwhelming responsibilities endured from the season's start until its conclusion. However, despite this severity, winter offered a brief period of relief. People could settle into their homes, transforming their lives into ones of stability, and gather for private meetings to practice cultural arts-those same maritime songs and performances they once performed onboard ships. The difference lay in the calm, restful setting on land.

Throughout the region, special venues for such cultural activities were called Dur. In Doha, these Dur were often named after their owners, prominent maritime artists. Examples included Dar Majli, Dar Idrees bin Khairi, Dur Al-Khababeez, Dar Bu-Mayed in Al-Rumaila, and Dar Rabee bin

Farhan in Al-Salata. Other Dur were scattered across different parts of the country, such as Al-Khor and Al-Wakra, including Dar Jawhar Bu Salmeen, Dar Ma'youf, and Dar Al-Bu Haif.

Each Dar owner had a dedicated group of thirty to forty men bound by unity, loyalty, and solidarity. The Dar owner enjoyed special respect among peers. Owners of different Dur frequently exchanged invitations and visits, offering each other the utmost hospitality and warmth and engaging in friendly competition to showcase their finest performances, individual or collective. Their repertoire primarily consisted of pearl-diving songs, performed passionately and nostalgically, inspiring creativity and friendly rivalry in pursuit of excellence and entertainment. The seafront of Doha (Seif Al-Doha) was well known, and the Al-Jasra area was lined with shores stretching across Fereej Al-Ghanim, Al-Sulta, Al-Bida, Al-Khalifat, and Al-Rumaila. These were gathering places for sailors of all backgrounds and nationalities, where no distinctions were made between one person and another.

I speak here of an era I personally witnessed, during the rule of Sheikh Hamad bin Abdullah Al Thani (may God have mercy on him), followed by his brother, Sheikh Ali bin Abdullah (may God have mercy on him). It was during their time that pearl diving came to an end, as prosperity flowed into Qatar with the discovery of oil.

## The Flourishing of Maritime Arts in the "Dour" (houses) During Winter

The lives of sailors during the bygone days of pearl diving were defined by hardship, exhaustion, and relentless labor—a life of suffering and burdens, from the rigorous preparations before the season to the final return. The weight of responsibilities often felt overwhelming, even humiliating, due to the sheer physical and financial strain involved in sustaining their livelihood.

Yet, despite the harshness of their profession, winter brought a season of relief. During this period, people could finally settle in their homes, and with this stability came a renewed sense of social connection and artistic expression.

Throughout the region, there were dedicated gathering places where former sailors could perform traditional maritime arts. These venues were called "Dour" the plural of Dar (house or residence). They provided a peaceful and comfortable setting for practicing the same artistic traditions once performed at sea, but this time on land, free from the pressures of survival.

### Famous "Dour" in Doha and Across Qatar

In Doha, several *Dour* became famous, named after their owners, who were skilled performers of maritime arts. Some of the most well-known included:

- Dar Majli
- Dar Idris bin Khairi
- Dour Al-Khabbazeen
- Dar Boumaid (located in Al-Rumaila)

- Dar Rabee' bin Farhan (located in Al-Sulta)

Beyond Doha, similar gathering houses were found across Al-Khor, Al-Wakrah, and other coastal towns. Some notable ones included:

- Dar Jawhar Bou Salmeen
- Dar Maayouf
- Dar Al-Buhaif

Each *Dar* had its own tight-knit group of 30 to 40 men, bound together by loyalty and unity. The owner of the *Dar* held great respect among his peers, and the *Dour* maintained a tradition of hospitality and artistic rivalry. They exchanged invitations and visits, where hospitality and generosity were paramount.

During these gatherings, performers would showcase their finest individual and group singing, particularly pearl diving songs. These songs, rich with nostalgia and passion, ignited enthusiasm among the performers, leading to friendly competitions where each group sought to outshine the others in musical excellence and entertainment.<sup>(1)</sup>

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(1) *These cultural traditions preserved the memory of the sea, allowing former sailors to relive their past through music and storytelling, keeping the legacy of pearl diving alive in the hearts of the people.*

## Maritime Arts as a Cultural Bridge Among Gulf Nations

The tradition of maritime arts fostered a deep sense of connection among the men of the Gulf, leading to frequent exchanges of visits and invitations across the region.

Despite the long and arduous journeys required to travel between these nations, distance was never a deterrent. For instance, the sailing journey between Qatar and Bahrain aboard traditional dhow sailboats would take approximately four to five days. Traveling to Darin and Dammam in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or Oman took even longer.



However, what motivated these men to endure the hardships of travel was their passion for artistic expression, cultural exchange, and the spirit of friendly competition. Their love for maritime music and performance drove them to cross great distances, eager to showcase their talents and learn from one another.

Although Gulf maritime arts share many similarities, each region has its own distinctive musical and performance traditions.

In Qatar, we take great pride in our unique maritime art forms, mastering their performance just as Kuwait, Bahrain, and other Gulf nations have perfected their own styles.<sup>(1)</sup>

In Qatar, after the end of the pearl diving season (*Al-Qafal*), men would gather in the *Dour* during the evenings. These gatherings were a time for storytelling, music, and shared camaraderie, offering a moment of relief from the hardships of the sea.

However, mornings were dedicated to work, as each man resumed his profession, some men went fishing, others worked on net-weaving, and some engaged in *Qallafah* (shipbuilding), a trade held in high regard by *nawakhidah* (ship captains), especially when preparing new ships for the upcoming season.

If a *nawkhada* had a passion for music and maritime arts, he would invite the *Dour* performers to participate in the shipbuilding inauguration ceremony.

The *Dour* members would then bring their instruments and performers, marching from their gathering house (*Dar*) to the shipyard, playing drums, frame drums (*tarat*), and singing traditional maritime chants.

At the shipyard, they would perform all the well-known sea

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(1) *This rich artistic tradition not only preserved the heritage of pearl diving but also served as a bridge of cultural unity across the Gulf, strengthening bonds between seafaring communities.*

songs, bringing life and energy to the event. In return, the *nawkhada* would host them with a traditional breakfast and a generous lunch. Additional food provisions for the *Dar* leader to distribute among his men.

The same tradition applied not only to *nawakhidah* but also to shipowners-both would invite performers from the *Dour* to take part in their celebrations.

### Maritime Arts in Wedding Ceremonies

Another significant occasion for these artistic performances was wedding celebrations. The *Dour* members (people) were responsible for bringing joy to the neighborhood during weddings. They performed traditional songs, music, and chants.

- Their performances lasted for two consecutive nights.
- The groom's father simply had to invite them and reward them with generous feasts and banquets.

#### Early Qatari Singers and the Role of Music in the “Dour”

Among the early singers who gained fame in Qatar's *Dour*, and whose names I can recall, were:

- Mohammed bin Salem
- Mubarak bin Rabee'a
- Mohammed Al-Ahbabi
- The well-known folk artist Salem Faraj
- Mahmoud Al-Linqawi



There were also singers from other Gulf countries who visited Doha to perform. However, during the era of sailing ships, travel between Gulf nations was challenging and time-consuming. The journey between Bahrain and Qatar took approximately four to five days.

Later, with the introduction of diesel-powered ships (*Al-Safarah*), travel and cultural exchanges between Gulf artists became more accessible, making it easier for performers to visit and share their musical traditions.

### Women's Musical and Cultural Traditions in Qatar

Women also had their own musical groups, which played an essential role in celebratory events and communal gatherings.

- These women's groups performed under a single leader, specializing in music and cultural performances for weddings and special ceremonies in the neighborhoods (*Al-Furjan*).

- Their performances were particularly prominent in areas such as Al-Bida, Al-Jasra, and Al-Khalifat.
- These women’s traditions were central to Ramadan celebrations, Eid Al-Fitr, and Eid Al-Adha, with many practices surviving to this day as preserved elements of Qatar’s heritage.

Unlike men’s performances, women had exclusive artistic rituals in which men did not participate. They also had designated open-air spaces called “Al-Mistah”, located outside the residential neighborhoods (Al-Furjan), where they gathered to perform their art freely.

The most famous Al-Mistah locations included:

Al-Mistah in Umm Ghuwailina, Al-Mistah in Al-Jasra , Al-Mistah in Musheireb

In addition to maritime and folk music, there were other imported art forms that became widely practiced and enjoyed in Qatar and across the Gulf. Among them:

Al-Tanbura, Al-Liwa

These two traditions were highly popular among the general public, each with its own rituals and unique performance styles.

- Al-Liwa performances began at sunset and continued until morning.
- Al-Tanbura started in the afternoon and lasted until dawn.

Despite their shared popularity, these two art forms never overlapped. Each had its own identity, style, and dedicated

following, ensuring that they remained distinct cultural traditions in Qatari society.<sup>(1)</sup>

## Life After “Al-Qafal” and the Return of Stability

Now, we transition to explaining the post-Qafal phase, when the sailors return home (Al-Deira), marking the end of the pearl diving season and the beginning of financial settlements.

Once the ships are hauled ashore, the sailors begin visiting the majlis (gathering places) of the senior *nawakhidah* (ship captains) to receive their share of earnings from the “Tisqam”, the distribution of profits among crew members after the pearls have been sold.

Each nawkhada had his own system of accounting, and the profit distribution was conducted fairly based on:

1. The rank and responsibilities of each crew member.
2. The total earnings after selling the pearls.
3. The deduction of any debts or advance loans taken before the diving season.

### The Debt System: “Rady” and Financial Challenges

Before joining a pearl diving crew, sailors often took loans (salfah) from the nawkhada to support their families. This money was used to buy essential household provisions such as:

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(1) *These artistic expressions, whether traditional or introduced from abroad, enriched Qatar’s cultural scene and played a vital role in preserving Gulf heritage and identity.*



Dates, sugar, salt, and firewood. Other necessary supplies for their families.

Some sailors also had “Rady” carried-over debt from a previous season that had not yet been repaid.

If a sailor still owed money from the first diving season (Al-Dasha Al-Oula), he would wait until the second diving season (Al-Dasha Al-Thaniya) to clear his remaining balance.

If he had outstanding debts, the *nawkhada* would not pay him any new earnings, instead deducting his entire share to settle the debt.

This often led to conflicts between the *nawakhidah* and the sailors, as many found themselves trapped in a cycle of seasonal debt repayment.

To escape this financial burden, some sailors offered themselves to another *nawkhada*, asking him to pay off their debts in exchange for joining his crew in the next season.

If the sailor was strong, skilled, and reliable, the new *nawkhada* might accept the offer, settling the sailor’s debts in return for his commitment to join his ship the following season.

This led to negotiations, where the previous *nawkhada* would try to retain the sailor, while the new *nawkhada* would offer an enticing sum to free him from his debt obligations.

Eventually, a mutual agreement was reached, allowing the sailor to:

- Settle his debts.
- Receive his share of the season's earnings (*Tisqam*).
- Enter the next diving season without financial burdens.

### **Qatar's Prime Pearl Banks ((*hiyarat*) هيرات and the Finest Gulf Pearls**

As we conclude this discussion, Hareb bin Rashid shares his final insights on Qatar's role in the pearl diving industry, stating:

*"The pearl banks (hiyarat) of Qatar were among the most important and richest pearl diving sites in the entire Gulf..."*

### **Qatar's Pearl Banks: The Center of Gulf Pearl Diving**

Everyone knew well that Qatar's pearl banks (*hiyarat*) were the most significant in the entire Gulf, followed by those of Bahrain.

In contrast, Kuwait's waters were not known for pearl diving, which is why diving ships from Kuwait, Muscat, Darin, Dammam, Bahrain, and even Lengeh would all converge on Qatar's pearl banks.

The sight of pearl-diving ships anchored in Qatar's *hiyarat* was truly breathtaking. From a distance, one could not distinguish between them-only the flags hoisted on each ship's mast revealed their nationality.

## The Role of the *Sirdal* – The Master Navigator



Each Gulf nation had a designated master navigator, known as the *Sirdal*, a highly skilled figure who led fleets of pearl-diving ships.

In Qatar, this role was held by Ibrahim bin Nasr, who commanded the Qatari fleet during both the start of the season (*Al-Dasha*) and the return home (*Al-Qafal*).

The *Sirdal* was essentially the guide and protector of all pearl-diving ships, as some *nawakhidah* (ship captains) lacked the necessary expertise in navigation. Without proper guidance, they could lose their way at sea or fail to locate the pearl banks correctly. Drift, off course, wasting valuable time diving.

This is where the *Sirdal* played a crucial role. All ships followed his lead, placing their trust in his expert knowledge of pearl diving sites, celestial navigation, and seasonal ocean patterns.

## Responsibilities of Sirdal

The *Sirdal* was responsible for knowing the exact locations of the pearl banks. Understanding star alignments and their calculations. Determining the safest times to enter and exit the sea. Predicting sea conditions, whether calm, warm, or deep. Anticipating storms and strong winds. Identify safe harbors where ships could seek shelter during violent weather.

At the end of the pearl diving season, it was Sirdal who gave the final command, signaling to all ships that it was time to return home.

*This deep reliance on Sirdal highlights the structured and disciplined nature of the Gulf's pearl diving industry, where navigation and survival at sea depended on expert leadership and centuries-old maritime knowledge.*

The End of the Pearl Diving Season and the Homecoming (“Al-Qafal”)

As the pearl diving season came to an end, the Sirdal would raise a flag on the mast of his ship, signaling the official start of Al-Qafal—the homeward journey. Upon seeing this signal, all ships belonging to each country would gather and begin sailing back in formation behind Sirdal.

The Sirdal was not just any navigator; he was often one of the most esteemed individuals in his country, closely associated

with the ruling sheikhs and prominent tribal leaders.

## The Role of the *Nawkhada* (Captain) in the Pearl Diving Fleet

The responsibilities of the *nawkhada* varied depending on ownership:

1. Independent *Nawkhada*: He Owned his own ship. And he had the freedom to sell pearls while still at sea, dealing directly with *tawwash* (pearl traders) who roamed the pearl banks.
2. Contracted *Nawkhada*: Worked on a ship that belonged to someone else.

He did not have the right to sell pearls at sea.

He had to return to shore and deliver the season's yield to the shipowner, who would then sort the pearls and distribute earnings among the crew, including the *Nawkhada*.

Meanwhile, the *Tawwash* would move from ship to ship, purchasing pearls directly from the divers and transporting their collections to major pearl trading hubs such as Dubai and Bahrain.

These merchants then sold Gulf pearls-renowned for their purity and high quality-to international markets, with India being the primary destination for pearl exports.

### Honoring the Memory of Qatar's Great Pearl Divers and Captains

As this journey down memory lane comes to an end, Hareb bin Rashid recalls the names of the great men he sailed with, the ships he knew, and the captains who left an unforgettable

mark on Qatar's pearl diving history:

*"I hope I do not forget anyone, as I am relying on memories that date back more than forty or fifty years. These men were distinguished by their character and integrity, and through our shared experiences, we came to know their true worth. Some have passed away, while others are still with us today. I will mention the names of well-known men from Qatar's noble tribes, regardless of their present status in society."*

Among the prominent *Nawakhadah* (captains) and their ships were:

Ibrahim bin Nasr – Qatar's leading pearl diving captain, commanding a *Sanbook* named "Mashhoor". Ali bin Nasr – Brother of Ibrahim bin Nasr, also a captain of a *Sanbook*. Abdullah bin Saleh Al-Sulaiti – Initially owned a *Sanbook* but later sold it and purchased a *Jalboot* owned by Abdulaziz bin Jassim. Abdulrazzaq bin Hamad and his brother Saeed bin Hamad – Owned a *Sanbook* that dived on behalf of Jaber bin Mohammed. Abdullah bin Rashid Al-Fadala – Owned a *Sanbook* with a team of *nawakhidah* (captains). Mohammed bin Shahin Al-Asiri – Owned a *Sanbook*. Sultan Al-Badr – Owned a *Sanbook*. Abdullah bin Khamees Al-Sulaiti – Owned a *Jalboot*. Jumaa bin Ahmed – Owned a *Jalboot*. Mohammed bin Sabah, Yahya bin Saqr, Isa bin Khalifa Al-Hitmi, and Mohammed bin Saeed Al-Maliki – All notable captains and shipowners.

*These names stand as a testament to Qatar's rich maritime heritage and the legacy of the men who shaped the nation's pearl diving history.*



Among the various types and names of ships and their owners, we mention Khalid bin Ali and his father, who owned a Jalboot named “Barzi” (a name possibly derived from a local dialect or a significant place) and later purchased “Al-Qa’id.” Additionally, there is Aneeq bin Saqr, who had a Jalboot; Saleh Al-Ta’an, who also owned a Jalboot; Mubarak bin Hitmi, who had a Jalboot, and Ibrahim bin Hayyi, who owned two Sambuk vessels, one named “Musa’ed.” Muhammad bin Hassan Al-Maliki also had a Sambuk. Muhammad bin Hassan Al-Maliki also had a Sambuk. Rashid bin Khalifa and Issa bin Khalifa owned two Sambuks, “Enad” and “Hisan.” Yusuf bin Jaber possessed a Sambuk named “Jarouf.” There were also Jassim bin Saeed and his brother Mohammed bin Saeed, who sailed a Sambuk named “Al-Manwar,” and Ali bin Badi, who owned a Jalboot.

Qatari maritime history is not just about ships and their owners, but also about the strong familial connections that were often at the heart of these maritime activities. Yusuf bin Ahmed Al-Sulaiti, for instance, had three Jalboots and

sailed with his brothers Ali and Hassan. Muhanna bin Hamad had a Jalboot captained by a man named Salmeen, further highlighting the familial ties that were so prevalent in Qatari maritime history.

Among other names were Sultan bin Majed and Ahmed bin Majed, who both owned a Jalboot. Ali bin Ahmed Al-Maliki had a Jalboot on which his servant rode, known as “Al-Adham,” a familiar figure in the Al-Mirqab area, a significant maritime hub in Qatari history.

There was a Sambuk named “Mighdeem,” owned initially by Shaheen bin Saleh. After Shaheen’s passing, it was purchased by Al-Jufairi, who used it for seafaring. Al-Jufairi also had a Sambuk named “Al-Talibi” and a Jalboot captained by his brother Abdullah. Abdullah Al-Khal, son of Mahmoud, had a Sambuk named “Al-Maimoul.” Additionally, Sultan Al-Musallamani owned a Sambuk called “Farzan,” Khalid Al-Musallamani had another Sambuk, Muhammad bin Turki owned a Jalboot, and Salmeen bin Nasser Al-Suwaidi possessed both a Sambuk and a Jalboot.





Muhammad bin Khalifa Al-Suwaidi (Al-Bu'Alayan family) owned a Shu'i in Al-Rumailah, while Yusuf Al-Sayyid had a Sambuk. Abdulaziz bin Hassan Al-Ziyarah and his brother Ismail bin Hassan Al-Ziyarah, originally from Ras Al-Khaimah, had a Boom, a Sambuk, and a Jalboot. Abdulaziz owned the Boom, but during the diving season, he served as a captain (Nokhatha) aboard the Sambuk while his brother Ismail captained the Jalboot.

<sup>(1)</sup>Among other notable Qatari ship captains (Nawakhethah) and ship owners were Muhammad bin Salem Al-Ameri, who had a Jalboot; Mubarak bin Hassan, who also owned a Jalboot; Muhammad bin Ali Al-Sha'er, a renowned pearl diver, and his brother Mubarak Al-Sha'er, who jointly owned a Jalboot. Abdullah Ismail had a Jalboot named "Al-Ameriya," while the sons of Bin Imran in Al-Gharyyah also possessed a Jalboot.

In the Al-Khor area, we mention Bu-Matar, who owned a Jalboot he used for diving for two years; the sons of Al-Zeerah, who had a Sambuk; Ahmad bin Issa Al-Mohannadi, who owned a Sambuk; Bin Muharri family, who possessed a Jalboot; and the sons of Al-Sadah, who had wooden vessels

#### (1) Preserving Qatar's Maritime Legacy

These names and ships stand as a testament to the rich maritime history of Qatar, reflecting the deep connection between the Qatari people and the sea.

The pearl diving industry, along with trade and seafaring traditions, shaped the social and economic landscape of Qatar. The ships, their owners, and their captains played a pivotal role in sustaining Gulf trade, pearl exports, and cultural heritage.

Their legacy continues to inspire future generations, ensuring that the memory of Qatar's great seafarers and pearl divers remains an integral part of the nation's identity.

in Al-Ruwais. In Al-Wakrah, we note Saad bin Jubran Al-Buainain, who had a Sambuk, the Al-Bahseen family, who owned a Sambuk, and Hassan Al-Sha'er, who possessed a Jalboot.

## **The Shipbuilders (Al-Qallafoun) – The Backbone of Gulf Maritime Trade**

The art of shipbuilding in the Gulf region was deeply intertwined with pearl diving, fishing, trade, and long-distance travel, professions that Gulf communities have practiced for centuries and continue to honor today.

According to an official 1907 statistic from the *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, Qatar ranked: Fourth in the number of ships in the Gulf. Second in the number of workers involved in the maritime industry.

At that time, the entire Gulf region had approximately 4,500 ships, both small and large, with 7,400 sailors employed in maritime activities.

## **The Tradition of Shipbuilding in the Gulf**

Shipbuilding in the Gulf was known as “Al-Qallafah”, and the shipbuilder was called a “Qallaf”.

The term “Qallafah” is an Arabic word that appears in classical linguistic sources. In its original meaning:

- “Qallafa” a ship meant stitching its wooden planks together using palm fiber and sealing them with tar.
- This method resembled sewing fabric, as wooden planks were bound with ropes instead of nails.



- Before the introduction of modern iron nails, this traditional method was the primary technique used in Gulf shipbuilding.

Even though nail-based construction eventually replaced the older techniques, the term “Qallafah” remained in use to describe the profession of shipbuilding.

## The Flourishing of Shipbuilding in Coastal Villages

The shipbuilding industry thrived in coastal villages along the shores of the Gulf, where communities depended on the sea for:

Pearl diving, Fishing , Maritime trade

Traditional sailing ships (dhows and sanbooks) were the primary means of transportation, linking Gulf communities to India, East Africa, and beyond.

However, shipbuilding techniques evolved over time due to technological advancements and the increasing demands of trade.

In the early days of shipbuilding, the master shipbuilder would:

1. Determine the exact size and shape of the sailing vessel.
2. Create a precise blueprint (printed in blue ink) that detailed measurements.
3. Ensure the ship’s design was suitable for stability, safety, and durability at sea.

## Key Roles in Traditional Gulf Shipbuilding

The shipbuilding process involved a structured hierarchy:

- The “Ustadh” (Master Shipbuilder):
  - Held the highest authority in the workshop.
  - Supervised the entire planning and construction process.
  - Ensured the ship’s structural integrity and seaworthiness.
  - Had the final say on all design and construction matters.
- The “Qallaf” (Shipwright/Carpenter):
  - Followed the instructions of the “Ustadh”.
  - Carved and assembled the wooden planks of the ship.
  - Applied traditional sealing techniques to strengthen the vessel.
- The “Nawakhidah” (Captains and Experienced Sailors):
  - Often observed the shipbuilding process.
  - Provided insights and advice based on their extensive maritime experience.
  - Their first-hand knowledge of ships at sea helped identify potential flaws in design.

## The Role of Experience in Shipbuilding

The collaboration between shipbuilders and seasoned captains was critical.

The “Nawakhidah” (ship captains) had years of seafaring knowledge and could identify weaknesses in ship designs after testing them at sea.



So their expertise ensured that new ships were built to withstand harsh maritime conditions.

This synergy between builders and sailors refined Gulf shipbuilding techniques, producing vessels that could endure long voyages across the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, and beyond.

*The legacy of Gulf shipbuilding remains a testament to the ingenuity, craftsmanship, and resilience of the region's maritime heritage, ensuring that these skills are passed down through generations.*

## **A Conversation with Yusuf Al-Majed – A Master Shipbuilder of the Gulf**

In this section, we are honored to host one of the most renowned shipbuilders (*qallafoun*) in the Gulf, the esteemed **Yusuf Al-Majed**.

Belonging to a family that has practiced shipbuilding for centuries, Al-Majed family has passed down this craft from generation to generation. Their ancestor, Majed, was a *qallaf* during the reign of Sheikh Qasim bin Mohammed Al Thani, the founding ruler of Qatar (may Allah have mercy on him).

Majed is known to have built a *Bateel* ship for Sheikh Qasim in 1880, along with several *Sanbooks* and other types of vessels.

A remarkable artifact from this legacy remains:

Yusuf Al-Majed discovered an old sketch of a *Bateel* drawn in charcoal on paper, which was found among his family's possessions. This blueprint provided valuable insights into the shipbuilding techniques of the past, enriching Yusuf's own expertise.



## The Art of Shipbuilding – Insights from Yusuf Al-Majed

Discussing his craft, Yusuf Al-Majed explains: *“Shipbuilding (Qallafah) requires energy, determination, and physical endurance. These are essential qualities for anyone who wishes to master the trade. A qallaf must possess exceptional physical strength because the craft demands resilience, patience, and immense effort.”*

He also emphasizes that:

The work is physically intense, requiring individuals who are naturally strong and able to withstand the harsh conditions.

The heat in the shipbuilding workshops is extreme, so a *qallaf* must be naturally “warm-blooded” in order to tolerate the demanding conditions.

The path to becoming a skilled *qallaf* is long and rigorous.

A trainee must undergo several stages of apprenticeship, each lasting one to two years, depending on the individual's ability and dedication.

### **A Master at Work – Yusuf Hassan Al-Majed**

Recognized as one of Qatar's most skilled and respected shipbuilders, Yusuf Hassan Al-Majed has been practicing the craft for many years.

He continues to work in the Amiri Shipbuilding Workshop, where traditional Qatari ships are still crafted with expertise and precision.

*His legacy, along with that of the Al-Majed family, remains an integral part of Qatar's maritime heritage, preserving a tradition that has shaped the nation's history and economy for generations.*

As for the stages of constructing a new ship-referred to as *Awshar*, from the verb *yuwashir*, meaning "to build a new ship"-shipbuilders (*Qallafun*), who are highly skilled craftsmen with years of experience, follow specific steps and adhere to a precise plan across the Arabian Gulf region. While some builders may vary slightly in the order of supplementary or secondary steps, the primary procedures involved in building a new vessel are consistent among all shipbuilders, regardless of the vessel's size or type.

The backbone of the ship's structure, the *Bais*, is of paramount importance. It is the foundation upon which all other components rest, including sturdy wooden planks

called Shalamin. After firmly securing the Shalamin with nails, work begins constructing the upper section, the Fannah. The narrow gaps between the curved planks are filled with cotton threads, ensuring seawater does not seep through. The process continues until the final stages, which involve coating and polishing the ship's exterior with varnish, followed by an additional protective layer of fish oil. This protects the vessel from seawater damage or deterioration. Moreover, the pungent odour of fish oil helps repel wood-boring insects and pests.

Like other ships, the Gulf vessel's fundamental structure consists of a central beam, ribs, and planks covering these ribs. The building starts by placing the main beam, known in Qatar as the Bais, onto an altogether level base. Then, the outer ribs (Tari) are assembled. After verifying the straightness of the Bais, the ship's bow-called the Meel (Sadr)-is fitted, followed by the stern, known as the Meel (Tafri). Upon completing this stage, plank installation commences, progressing until the seventh plank, at which point the builder installs the vessel's actual ribs, termed Shalman. This continues until the basic structure is complete.

Special attention is paid to ensuring the straightness of the Bais. If even the slightest bend is neglected, the ship's construction will later proceed on an uneven foundation. To verify the straightness of the Bais, the builder inserts two nails-one at the front and the other at the rear end-then stretches a thread between them, forming a straight line from the ship's bow to its stern. This reveals any curvature. Frequently, the natural drying of the wood causes the Bais

to curve. To correct this curvature, the shipbuilder uses a wooden tool called a Mindi, embedding its base firmly into the ground and positioning its upper end toward the part of the Bais needing adjustment. The pressure the Mindi applies typically pushes the Bais away, correcting the bend. Two Mindi tools are often used to stabilize the correction and prevent it from shifting back, providing support until the vessel's construction is complete. Once finished, these tools are removed, and the Bais retains its corrected alignment.<sup>(1)</sup>

The nature of the ship's construction and shape necessitates that the shipbuilder (Qallaf) uses tools that are suited to the material and the ship's structure. One of the most crucial tasks in shipbuilding is the planing of the planks to form the ship's body. The better the wood is planed, the lower the chances of water seeping into the vessel. This requirement can only be met through specific tools and equipment designed in a particular way for this purpose. For instance, there are various sizes of drills and saws, each with a specific role and time of use. Despite their simplicity, the way these tools are utilized is highly effective in performance.

#### (1) **A Legacy of Precision and Maritime Excellence**

This meticulous process, passed down through generations, ensured that **Gulf-built ships were among the most durable and seaworthy vessels in the region**. Through their craftsmanship, Gulf shipbuilders created ships that could withstand long voyages across the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, and beyond—playing a crucial role in trade, pearl diving, and cultural exchange for centuries.



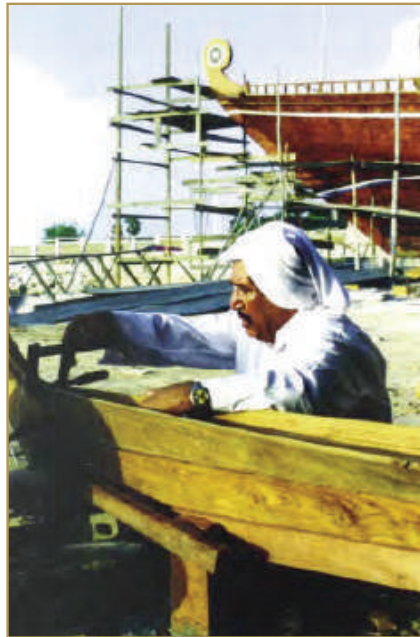
Among the tools most closely associated with the Qallaf is the Jadum (adze) or axe, even though he uses many different tools. The Jadum accompanies the Qallaf wherever he goes, and it has become a tradition among shipbuilders, signifying their identity wherever they are. As Yusuf Al-Majid recalls: *“When we left early in the morning, we would hang the Jadum on our shoulders and head to the workshop because shipbuilding is all about the Jadum. That is why a Qallaf never goes out without his Jadum on his shoulder. When he returns at sunset, he does the same.”*

### **Launching a New Ship – Ceremonies and Rituals in Gulf Shipbuilding**

When the construction of the sailing ship is completed and it is ready for launch, all those involved in the project are informed of the launch date. The people of the area are also invited to witness this grand event.

A powerful team of strong men hauls it over wooden rollers, pushing it toward the sea while chanting traditional maritime songs. The ship owner then boards the vessel for a short inaugural voyage, marking the beginning of its seafaring journey.

The local people from the area were invited to witness this significant event. Strong men pushed the ship along wooden beams, chanting traditional sea songs (Ahazeej). Then, the ship's owner, a figure of great importance, boarded it for a short inaugural voyage, carrying the weight of tradition on his shoulders.



Work progressed vigorously and enthusiastically throughout the ship's construction (Awshar), with the entire community playing a vital role. At each stage, specific ceremonies were observed. For instance, after setting up the bow beam (Meel

Sadr) and connecting the joints (Mawalij) to the main beam (Bais), we say:

“We set the joint and beam, now eat the sweet dish (Khabeesah).”

At this point, the ship’s captain (Nokhatha) would bring two sheep; one is slaughtered at the bow (Sadr), the other at the stern (Tafr). Some captains would offer more than two sheep. This act is known as a “gift” or as popularly called, “warding off misfortune” (Daf’at Bala’). The meat is distributed among people experiencing poverty, and we do not partake in it.

Upon reaching the midpoint of construction (Al-Hashash), the work continued until arriving at the stage called (Al-Tareej). When we placed the deck planks (Hayyab al-Reel), the major hull construction (Al-’Anooj) was complete. Next, we finished the decks, installed the railings (Suwarah) and supporting poles (Mandat, plural of Mindi), and erected the mast (Diqil), which could be either one or two. If a second mast was used, it was called (Ghleimi).

After reaching this final stage, the ship’s captain (Nokhatha), a figure of authority, would come to apply a protective coating known as (Al-Sal) and (Al-Wadaj) and then paint the entire vessel. At this point, he determined whether the ship would serve as a diving vessel (Ghawaas), a pearl merchant vessel (Tawwash), or for general maritime use (Bahar), his decision carrying significant weight.

Another ceremony was known as the ship’s “launch immersion” (Tab’ al-Safeenah)-a sea tradition involving submerging the vessel. Although it was commonly believed

that immersing the ship purified it and attracted blessings, this practice served the practical purpose of cleansing the vessel of insects and pests.

The actual launching process also featured its unique rituals. In Qatar, there were several maritime youth houses known as (Dur Azgarat), each frequented by approximately sixty to seventy young men skilled in diving traditions, who gathered nightly for entertainment and companionship (Wanasah). These youths would be called upon to help launch the newly constructed ship. Bringing along their drums (Tbool) and tambourines (Tarat), they sang and pulled the ship (Al-Mahmal) into the sea. Naturally, among these participants were divers (Ghassah) and water removers (Sayyub), who later emptied the ship of water after it had been submerged for two or three days at sea to test its seaworthiness before official use.

Naturally, among them were the Ghassah (divers) and the Sayyub, whose job was to empty water from the vessel after submerging it in the sea for two or three days, after which the ship would be pulled ashore. Within his explanation of shipbuilding, Yusuf Al-Majed recounts the story of “Ghailan and Mai,” which narrates the origin of the sail and how Ghailan devised it. This tale gained fame and widespread familiarity among the people of Qatar. Various versions of the story exist, some indicating that the first to conceive of pearl diving were also Ghailan and Mai, with Mai discovering the small sail, known locally as the “jeep,” inspired by the inner wing of a grasshopper, and Ghailan creating the large sail after observing the grasshopper’s larger outer wing. The popular tale of Ghailan

and Mai is said to have originated from Khor Al-Mahanadah in northern Qatar. It speaks of a man named Ghailan, who owned numerous pearl-diving ships, and a woman named Mai, who also possessed diving ships. Through these two characters, the story depicts a rivalry in a competition for prime pearl diving locations known as Al-Hayrat.

Ships built in Qatar were typically medium-sized, and their construction usually took five to six months, starting before the pearl diving season. During this period, the vessel was prepared to ensure the ship captain (Nokhatha) would not miss the diving season. If a shipbuilder (Qallaf) sensed he might not complete his work in time, he would call upon fellow shipbuilders for assistance—a practice known as ‘Al-Faz’a.’ This collaborative spirit was a hallmark of shipbuilding in Qatar, with shipbuilders always ready to help each other to ensure the timely completion of their work.

As Yusuf Al-Majed recalls, building the vessel known as Awshar in earlier times incurred substantial costs depending on the ship’s size and type. The price of timber alone, representing more than half of the total cost, was particularly significant. Foremost among these woods was teakwood (Saj), renowned for its flexibility and remarkable durability, imported from Malabar in India. Teakwood types included Shakki, Feeni, Meenej, Daman, and Barada. Teakwood was predominantly used for the sides and decks of the vessel, while ribs were fashioned from Fans wood and teak. Additional costs included nails, paints, cotton wicks (Fata’il), fabrics, and the wages of shipbuilders.



Al-Majed, a prolific shipbuilder, constructed numerous ships in Qatar based on various designs and sizes, some of which had capacities ranging from 140 to 350 tons. These vessels, such as Baqqarah, Shu'i, Sanbuk, and Bateel, were diverse in size and versatile in their use, with some being convertible from one type of service to another.

The Bateel is among the oldest types of vessels, having existed since the sixteenth century. In 1985, Yusuf Al-Majed crafted a model of this ship for Qatar's Ministry of Information and Culture. The model still exists today and exemplifies traditional Gulf shipbuilding methods. This model's keel measures 90 feet, reflecting typical dimensions from that historical era.

Upon consulting various sources, it is evident that this type of vessel is considered uncommon. The Bateel is one of the beautiful traditional ships. Its bow is pointed and raised, a feature known as the Kawsiyah, resembling the head of a violin, while its stern is tall and adorned with decorative carvings. The keel consists of two parts, the smaller of which tilts toward the stern post. The Bateel bears resemblance to the Baggārah type, but it differs in one key aspect: the Sāṭūr, a wooden plank located at the bow of the ship-an element that makes it more similar to the Shu'i. When compared with larger ships such as the Boom or the Baghlah, the Bateel proves less suitable and less capable for maritime trade and cargo transport. A ship's speed is determined by wind movement and direction, and thus, some believe the Boom surpasses the Bateel in speed.



The movement of shipbuilders (Qallāfīn) across the shores of the Arabian Gulf and their migration from one region to another led to a standardization in the craft's techniques. The transfer of expertise also contributed to the rapid development of this profession.

Yusuf Al-Majid recalls, saying:

“Our work in winter was limited to maintaining the ships that had been worn down during the diving season. We called this period Al-Darkāl, meaning the renewal of cotton fiber stuffing between the wooden joints of the ship, replacing corroded nails, and polishing the vessel with Şal (a type of oil).

In summer, we considered it the season of migration for shipbuilders. For example, Bahraini Qallāfīn would come to Qatar, and Qatari shipbuilders would go to the Emirates and Oman. Kuwaiti Qallāfīn would also come to work in Qatar, and builders from the Persian coast would cross over to the Arab side of the Gulf-and so on.

This movement was driven by supply and demand, or by whoever offered better wages. It was easy for a Qallāf to find work wherever he landed. The most fortunate were those who possessed refined skills and mastery of the craft.

The mobility of craftsmen across the Gulf shore motivated by a desire for learning, the pursuit of innovation, and a love of work-was a key factor in continuously advancing the profession of shipbuilding.

The traditional method of learning trade was the reason this knowledge was passed from one generation to the next. Despite its harshness, those who endured its rigors would progress and elevate in their craft, eventually reaching the level of mastery, earning the title Ustādh (Master)-the highest rank in the shipbuilding profession.

This title is not given lightly, but only to those who demonstrate exceptional skill and expertise in the craft. This is something that my father, Yusuf bin Ali bin Hassan Al-Majid, Master of Shipbuilding in Qatar, always emphasized in every gathering and conversation.”<sup>(1)</sup>



#### (1) **The Legacy of Gulf Shipbuilding**

The **art of qallafah (shipbuilding)** was not just a profession-it was a **heritage passed down through generations**, preserving the seafaring traditions that sustained the Gulf's economy for centuries.

**The shipbuilders who traveled between ports, shared knowledge, and refined their skills ensured that Gulf shipbuilding remained one of the most sophisticated maritime traditions in the world.**

**5**

**Pearl Banks of  
Qatar (hiyārāt)**

## Navigation Among the Arabs of the Gulf

The scientific translation movement into Arabic reached its peak during the reign of Caliph al-Ma'mun in 813 CE, who established the Bayt al-Hikmah (House of Wisdom) and the Bureau of Translation. This era gave rise to remarkable scholars such as al-Khwarizmi, the founder of algebra and arithmetic. These translated works inspired the creation of astronomical tables grounded in precise star observations, and the invention of refined astronomical instruments.

The Arabs of the Gulf inherited an extensive maritime legacy. They embraced the knowledge of classical Arab navigation and contributed to it until they became distinguished experts. Their knowledge was documented in references and manuals that enabled navigators to chart courses, measure distances, and identify coasts and anchorages.

### Majāri al-Hidāyah (al-Nā'ila)

This guide, authored by Captain Rashid bin Fāḍil Al-Bin 'Alī in 1918, serves as a nautical manual for sailing between ports, islands, and coastal villages along the Arabian Gulf. Its significance lies in its preservation of ancient maritime heritage, enriched with new features: the inclusion of distances between pearl banks (*hiyārāt*) in nautical miles, meticulous depth recordings of various anchorages, and diagrams illustrating navigational stars in their rising and setting positions.

Captain Rashid was one of the most accomplished Gulf seafarers in the early twentieth century. Born in Al-Hadd, Bahrain, in 1874, he received practical training in pearl diving and Gulf navigation. In 1901, he and his family from the Al-Bin 'Alī clan settled in Qatar, where he spent seventeen years laying the foundations of his scientific maritime expertise.

It was during this period that he expanded his knowledge by exploring pearl banks, studying their characteristics, and documenting their coordinates and water depths. His approach mirrored that of modern natural and applied science researchers. Because *Majāri al-Hidāyah* is a popular scientific treatise in maritime studies, the Gulf Cooperation Council's Folklore Heritage Center (Doha) produced a critical scholarly edition of the manuscript in 1994.

This document draws from that edition to present key sites in the waters around Qatar that were frequented by pearl divers. For accuracy, all excerpts are quoted directly from the original manuscript without modification.

### **The Mariner's Guide for Those Seeking Pearls**

“To all those seeking guidance from our book *Majari Al-Hidayah*, I must inform you that every journey across the vast sea has a beginning and an end. The first and foremost duty of a sefarer is to place his trust in God and rely upon Him.

“A navigator must be equipped with essential maritime tools, including: a well-calibrated compass (*al-deira*), a precise depth-measuring device (*al-balad*), an experienced seaman skilled in depth measurement (*al-bilad*), and a competent helmsman (*sanad mutqin*) capable of steering the vessel efficiently.”

“The navigator must also be well-versed in tidal movements, current directions, and their varying speeds, ensuring he compensates for any deviations to avoid straying from his intended course. He should have an accurate understanding of distances and be diligent in measuring depths when approaching pearl diving sites (hiyarat). Furthermore, he must exercise caution, carefully mapping the low-lying seabed areas (khiran) between the pearl banks and thoroughly understand the locations and conditions of anchorages (banadir). Mastery of star positions for navigation is crucial, as the compass (deira) serves as the definitive guiding system.”

### **Navigational Routes to Qatar’s Pearl Banks (Hiyarat)**

From Fasht Al-Deebel (northern Qatar) to Ras Rakan:

Course direction: 112° (Matla’ Al-Tayr) – 123° (Al-Iklil)

Distance: 24 miles

From Ras Rakan to Ras Laffan:

Course direction: 135° (Matla’ Al-’Aqrab) – 146° (Al-Hamareen)

From Ras Laffan towards deeper waters (depth of 4 fathoms):

Course direction: 175° (Matla’ Al-Suhail)

Extending towards “Injifat Al-Matbakh” (a known location)

Then shifting to 180° (Majra’ Al-Qutb), maintaining a depth of 4 fathoms

The course continues in a manner where all the Fasht formations (shoals) remain positioned toward the mainland, meaning they are located westward in the direction of the coast.

## **Navigational Landmarks and Distances Along the Qatari Coast**

At Ras Rakan, there is a town called Al-Munir.

South of Ras Umm Hisah, there is a town called Al-Ghariyah.

North of Ras Al-Jabal, there is a deep anchorage with a sea depth of one and a half fathoms.

If you wish to anchor near the shore where the depth is two fathoms, you must use a European anchor.

South of Al-Jabal, there is a town called Al-Fuwairit.

Two miles south of Al-Fuwairit, there is another town called Al-Ruwayhah.

## **Distances Between Key Points in Qatari Waters**

From Ras Umm Hisah to Ras Laffan → 10 miles.

From Ras Rakan to Halul Island, on a course south of Matla' Al-Nayir (2121°) → 67 miles.

Halul Island is a high mountain with no sandy spit (tabiyah). When anchoring, a Gulf-style anchor (San) with an iron chain should be used.

From Doha to Halul Island → 47 miles.

From Laffan to Halul Island → 47 miles.

From Halul Island, on a course of Matla' Al-Jawza (1011°) → 45 miles.

From the entrance of Khawr Doha (now Doha) to Abu Dhabi, on a northward course from Matla' Al-Nayir (2121°).

This course takes you north of nearby islands, including:

Daminat Island, Sharawrah Island, Ziniyah Island.

Suddenly, Zarkouh Island will appear on the horizon.

Following the same course north of Matla' Al-Nayir (2121°), Abu Dhabi will come into view, characterized by a small cluster of palm trees.

Distance from Halul Island to Abu Dhabi → 135 miles.

## Routes Between Gulf Cities

From Dubai to Doha (Capital of Qatar) → 165 miles southward.

Continuing this course, passing near Sabbar Abu Nayir, navigating between Das Island and Halul Island, until the Matla' Al-Nayir entrance appears, covering a distance of 1011 miles.

### Routes Around Northern Qatar

From Northern Adh to Halul Island → on a course near Matla' Al-Samak (67°).

From Ras Laffan to Northern Adh → 27 miles.

Northern Adh is a rich pearl diving bank, with its routes beginning between Halul Island.

From Northern Adh to Halul Island → on a course slightly west of Matla' Al-Samak (67°).

From Northern Adh to Khurais → on a course of Matla' Al-Najil, covering 45 miles.

From Northern Adh to Al-Muqattam → on a course of Matla' Al-Shuhail, covering 47 miles.

From Southern Adh to Al-Mas'an, on a course of Matla' Al-Nayir (2121°), leading towards Al-Ma'arid or Abu Al-Manafi' in the west.

From Southern Adh to Doha (Capital of Qatar) → on a course of Matla' Al-Nayir (2147°).

From Doha's anchorage to Abu Al-Fuhaydiyat → on a course of Matla' Al-Nayir (2132°).

### **Navigational Features Around Halul Island**

From Abu Qariyah Mountain on Halul Island to Hir Abu Al-Masan, on a course between Matla' Al-Hamareen (2146°) and Al-Suhail (1957°).

The sea depth here ranges between 1 and 18 fathoms.

Hir Sabbar Abu Al-Masan has a depth of several fathoms and contains large rock formations and underwater caves.

The area extending beyond Hir contains notable seabed formations, marking an important region for pearl diving and maritime navigation.

## Navigational Routes and Depths Around Qatar's Pearl Banks

In the area extending beyond Hir, there is a rocky formation located between Munib Al-Hamareen (2122°) and Al-Sahbeel (2022°), with a sea depth of 12 fathoms between Hir Abu Qariyah Halul and Hir Abna Al-Masan. The seabed in this area appears dark due to the presence of soft coral, which is abundant in the region.

Distance between Hir Abna Al-Masan and Eastern Adh → 8 miles, with a course direction of Matla' Al-Suhail (1957°).

The sea depth between these two points ranges from 18 to 19 fathoms.

Depth between Halul Island and Abna Al-Masan → 22 fathoms.

From Halul Island to Nabwah, on a course of 2111°, with depths varying from 14 to 22 fathoms, and a total distance of 40 miles.

Inside the Nabwah area, depths reach 23 fathoms.

### Eastern Adh: A Rich Pearl Bank

The Eastern Adh is one of the most productive pearl diving banks, known for its abundance of pearls.

Depth: 6 to 7 fathoms, with a seabed containing rocky formations and a moderate-sized area.

From Eastern Adh to Halul Island, on a course between Matla' Al-Qirdan (2111°) and Al-Shansh (2121°) → 18 miles.

From Eastern Adh to Shura'awah Island, on a course of Munib Al-Suhail (1971°):

First reaching Hir Tayib, a site with a depth of 9 fathoms.

Continuing the same route to Shura'awah Island, covering a total distance of 16 miles.

From Eastern Adh to Halat Al-Daminat, on a course of Mutayib Al-Nayir (2127°) → 22 miles.

The tower of Halat Al-Daminat is clearly visible from the ship's bow and serves as a navigational marker.

Navigational Routes from Doha's Anchorage to the Southern Adh

From Doha's anchorage to Southern Adh → on a course of Matla' Al-Samak (1990°).

This course leads to Jawad Abu Al-Salsalat before reaching Southern Adh.

From Doha's anchorage to Hir Umm Al-Madham, Hir Umm Al-Kutub, and Eastern Adh → on a course of 1990°.

From Doha's anchorage to Dhahr Al-Halah and Umm Al-Khinshash → on a course of Matla' Al-Jawza (1011°).

From Halat Al-Daminat to Eastern Adh, Umm Al-Arqoub, and Umm Al-Madham → on a course of Mutayib Al-Nish.

### **Sea Depths Between Key Diving Banks**

Between Al-Marjulah and Umm Al-Buruq → 910- fathoms.

Between Abna Al-Muruq and Umm Al-Madham → 1214-fathoms.

Between Umm Al-Madham and Umm Al-Khors in the Madham → 1415- fathoms.

From all these diving banks (hiyarat), ship masts can be seen in the distance.

From Khurais Umm Al-Madham to Southern Adh → on a course of Munib Al-Nish (2127°), with a sea depth of 12 fathoms.

From Hir Umm Al-Kutub to Hir Umm Khurtah → on a course of Munib Al-Maghrib (2355°), covering 24- miles.

This route leads directly to Halat Al-Khanikhan.

From Umm Al-Kutub to Shura'awah Island, on a course of Al-Qutb (1810°):

First reaching Hir Qarn 'Ishreen, also known as Qarn Ibrij, with a depth of 67- fathoms and a seabed containing coral formations.

The coral formations vary in height (Qasasir), and all the rocky formations have sharp edges (Adhqan). Continuing further, you reach Hier Abu Al-Sala. The sea depth between Qarn Ishreen and Hier Abu Al-Sala is 11 fathoms. While navigating along the Qutb route (1810), Shraouh Island comes into view as two separate mountainous masses, one to the east and the other to the west, with sand lying between their two wings.

Scattered across Shraouh Island are small coral rocks (Khisht). In the northern part near Shraouh, there are tall black coral reefs (Qisar), visible above the water but submerged under a shallow layer of seawater. Between these Qisar formations and the island, there is a passageway for ships.

With this, the essential details of the navigation routes have been covered, but it is also necessary to define distances in miles. It is well known that the estimated length of the ship's neck (Sharaf Al-Nadhq), which is measured at thirty cubits in clear weather, is 9 miles. This corresponds to one hour of sailing in a traditional Gulf sailing vessel when the winds are favorable. However, most ships cover a distance of 6 miles per hour.

### **Additional Information:**

A barid (postal measure) is equivalent to four farsakhs, and a farsakh is three miles. One mile equals one thousand arm spans (ba'). A ba' consists of four cubits (dhira'), with each ( dhira') measuring twenty-four fingers (isba'). A finger is equivalent to six strands of hair, and a strand is the width of six hairs from a mule's tail.

The distance required to shorten prayers while traveling (qasar al-salah) is four burd, which equals 48 miles.



# 6

## **Thematic Glossary of Pearl Diving Terminology**

This glossary gathers and defines key terms from the rich maritime heritage of Qatar and the Arabian Gulf as found in “Majāri al-Hidāyah” and related historical sources. Terms are organized by themes and include Arabic originals, transliterations, and concise explanations.

## I. Professions & Roles

غَوَّاص (Ghawwās / Ghais) - Diver who descends to the seabed to collect oysters in search of pearls.

سَيِّب (Sayyib / Seib) - The rope tender who remains on the ship and is responsible for pulling the diver up to the surface.

نَوَّحْدَة (Nawkhadha / Nakhoda) - Ship captain, usually also the owner of the vessel and leader of the diving voyage.

طَوَّاش (Tawwāsh) - Pearl merchant who buys and sells raw pearls from divers or captains.

قِلاف (Qallāf) - Traditional shipbuilder specializing in wooden sailing vessels.

أَسْتَاذ (Ustādh) - A master shipbuilder or craftsman, the highest rank in the profession of shipbuilding (*Qalāfah*).

## II. Boats & Maritime Vessels

بَتِيل (Bateel) - A beautifully crafted vessel with an elevated, pointed bow (*kawsiyyah*) and a decorated stern; used for diving and short-range travel.

بوم (Boom) - A large and sturdy deep-sea vessel, favored for long-distance trade.

شوعي (Shu'i) - A smaller boat resembling the *bateel*, used for coastal sailing and pearl diving.

بغلة (Baghlah) - A broad cargo vessel, larger than the *bateel*, commonly used for trade.

جلبوت (Jalboot) - A mid-sized traditional wooden vessel commonly used in diving fleets.

سنبوك (Sambūk) - A narrow, fast wooden ship used for diving and coastal navigation.

### III. Pearl Types & Classifications

جي ون (Jaywān) - The highest grade of pearl: round, brilliant, often rosy-white in color.

كول (Kawl) - A perfectly spherical pearl.

بطن (Baṭn) - A semi-spherical pearl, includes variations like *Adasi* (lentil-shaped) and *Aq'azi* (domed).

سجني (Sijni) - A teardrop- or pear-shaped pearl.

يکه (Yikkah) - A high-quality pearl, slightly lower in grade than *Jaywān*.

كولوه (Kawlooh) - A fine-quality, near-spherical pearl.

بدلة (Badlah) - Irregularly shaped pearl, used in jewelry like necklaces and brooches.

تبابه (Tibābah) - A mixed collection of pearls of varied quality.

نيمرو (Nimru) - A pearl that remains stuck to the oyster shell; often broken out and polished.

مجهولة (Majhoolah) - An uncertain, irregularly attached pearl whose quality is only known after breaking it open.

ناعمة (Na'imah) - Small-sized pearls in varying grades, including *Sahteet* (tiny like a pinhead).

فولي (Fouli) - Dark, irregular, blue-black pearl.

كَلَّابِي (Kallābi) - Another name for the finest type of *Jaywān*.

بربوكة (Barbūkah) - Hollow pearl of low value.

عظمة ('Aẓmah) - Hard calcium mass stuck to the shell, sometimes used ornamentally.

مفرص (Mufarras) - Clustered pearls fused together, later separated by specialists.

كام شاهي (Kām Shāhī) - A polished group of *Badlah*-type pearls arranged as a set.

نباتي (Nabāti) - A white pearl with a reddish hue; considered among the finest grades.

ريتِي / سحتيت (Rattī / Saḥtīt) - The smallest type of pearl, sold by *mithqāl*, often used for medicine or in embroidery.

رکم (Rakam) - A term referring to a large and valuable collection of pearls owned by a major merchant.

#### IV. Navigational Terms & Instruments

الديرة (al-Deerah) - The compass used for navigation and star positioning.

البلد (al-Bilād) - Instrument used for measuring sea depth.

سناد (Sannād) - The helmsman who controls the ship's rudder.

الهيرات (al-Hiyārāt) - Pearl banks or oyster beds in the sea.

الخيران (al-Kheerān) - Shallow sea inlets found between pearl banks.

البنادر (al-Banādir) - Coastal harbors or anchorages.

النائلة (al-Nā'ilah) - A traditional navigational manuscript or guidebook.

مجاري الهداية (Majāri al-Hidāyah) - "Routes of Guidance," the title of Captain Rashid bin Fadil's nautical guide.

## V. Units of Measurement

قامة (Qāmah) - A unit of depth equivalent to approximately 6 feet.

الميل (Mīl) - Nautical mile.

الفرسخ (Farsakh) - Traditional Persian unit equal to 3 miles.

البريد (Barīd) - A postal measure; 1 *Barīd* = 4 *Farsakh* = 12 miles.

باع (Bā') - Fathom-like unit = 4 cubits.

ذراع (Dhira') - Cubit; 24 fingers.

إصبع (Isba') - Finger-width = 6 barley grains.

الشعيرة (Sha'īrah) - The smallest unit = a hair from a mule's tail.

مئقال (Mithqāl) - A traditional unit of weight used in measuring small items like pearls.







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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ





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