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The Last Dhow Builders of Lamu

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY SAMANTHA REINDERS

On Lamu, off the northern Kenyan coast, builders of the traditional wooden vessels that for more than a millennium enabled sailors to make their living from the sea are today steering them toward a different economic horizon: tourism.



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The Midwest Arabs America Forgot

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL SHAGOURY, PHOTOGRAPHED BY GREG KAHN

Independent filmmaker Josh Chitwood belongs to a small group trying to preserve their Syrian and Lebanese history before it disappears. But how much has already been lost, and what compels people like him to recover what remains?

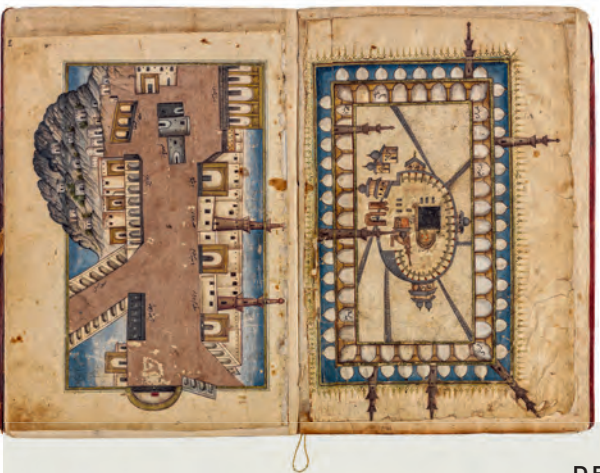


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Playing the Heartstrings of a Region

WRITTEN BY BANNING EYRE, PHOTOGRAPHED BY ARMIN DURGUT

With his acoustic guitar and haunting vocals, Ibrica Jusić of Croatia has honed a distinct style of *sevdalinka*, a musical genre that is rooted in Slavic tradition and influenced by Islamic life.



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WRITTEN BY NILOSREE BISWAS

The 17th-century *Anīs al-Hujjāj* (*The Pilgrim's Companion*), a travelogue of the Hajj with just three surviving copies and newly translated into English, reveals the forgotten maritime world that bound Mughals to Islam's holiest city.

DEPARTMENTS

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FRONT COVER Photographs and other artifacts from Syrian-Lebanese American Josh Chitwood's family history make up the collection at his home in Indianapolis, Indiana.



FirstLook

A Long Look at the Stars

Photograph by
WALEED DASHASH

The night before our visit to Mada'in Saleh, an archeological site in northwestern Saudi Arabia, in March 2015, we camped 20 kilometers (12 miles) south in AlUla, a place of timeless beauty inhabited for thousands of years whose sandstone formations draw tourists today. I had packed my tripod, which would become the most important piece of gear that night.

While everyone gathered for dinner, I wandered away into the quiet desert, looked up and found a sky unlike any I had seen in years. Having lived in Daytona Beach, in the US state of Florida, and Al Khobar, Saudi Arabia, where light pollution often hides the stars, I saw an opportunity to photograph a truly dark night sky. I set up my camera and began experimenting with long exposures, adjusting the aperture and shutter speed. The beauty of long exposure is that, rather than catching one still image, it captures movement.

Capturing the stars alone, however, wasn't enough—I wanted a sense of place. With the rock formations adding scale and character, the long exposure on AlUla's desert landscape proves that one can paint something with light.

📷 @WIDTRAVELERFOODIE

Flavors

Creamy Carrot-Ginger Soup

Recipe by MARIE KACOUCHIA

Photographs by FATOU WAGUÉ

*There's nothing better
than a warm bowl of soup.*

My tip is to spice up your everyday dishes with African spices. Cacao, soumbala, chile powders—explore the possibilities, and don't be afraid to innovate. In this soup, I use the subtle heat of ginger and the smoky flavor of cumin. Just before serving, add a few sprigs of cilantro or parsley or a few roasted cashews. It's a real treat!



Marie Kacouchia is a young Parisian who embraces the cultural references of her two homelands: France and the Ivory Coast. Passionate about cooking, Kacouchia says her goal is to promote this singular culture of hers, between the culture of origin and that of the host country, through cuisine that is essentially mixed. She lives in Paris, France.

(Serves 4)

1 tablespoon coconut oil

1 red onion, chopped

1 garlic clove, chopped

1 teaspoon minced ginger

5 carrots, peeled and sliced

Salt

Black pepper

1 teaspoon ground cumin

2 cups (480 ml) vegetable stock

1 cup (240 ml) coconut milk

4 cilantro or parsley sprigs (optional)

Roasted cashews (optional)

Heat the oil in a heavy-bottomed pan over medium heat. Sauté the onion, garlic and ginger until the onion is translucent, about 5 minutes. Add the carrots and sauté until soft, 10 minutes.

Season with salt and pepper, then add the cumin. Pour in the vegetable stock and simmer over low heat until reduced by one-third, 20 minutes.

Blend with a blender or immersion blender, then stir in the coconut milk until creamy. Top with cilantro, parsley or cashews, if desired.

Reprinted with permission from:

Vegan Africa: Plant-Based Recipes From Ethiopia to Senegal

Marie Kacouchia. The Experiment, LLC, 2022. Theexperimentpublishing.com



Q&A

Digging Into the Gemstones of Nigeria

Written and photographed by RICCI SHRYOCK

Every gemstone has two stories. One begins millions of years ago, beneath the earth's surface. The other begins when someone discovers it.

For engineer, gemologist and jeweler Lotanna Amina Okpukpara, the search to discover such stones has become her life's work.

Long before she could identify quartz or distinguish aquamarine from sapphire, Okpukpara spent her childhood collecting unusual stones on walks home from school in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria. She lugged them home simply because they fascinated her, unaware that those small discoveries hinted at one of Nigeria's richest natural treasures.

Years later, while studying through a scholarship with the Gemological Institute of America (GIA), she made a discovery that surprised even her. Nigeria, she learned, possessed an extraordinary diversity of colored gemstones—yet few people, either inside or outside the country, knew much about them. “I’m a Nigerian,” she remembers thinking. “I’m going to find the stones.”

Nigeria is best known for its tourmalines, according to the GIA, but its ancient rock formations also produce sapphires, emeralds, aquamarine and other members of the beryl family. Most are mined by artisanal miners working across the country's central and eastern regions.

Through her company, Mina's Stones, Okpukpara works alongside artisanal miners to build transparent supply chains, encourage fairer trading practices and ensure mining communities remain partners in the value created by the gemstones they uncover. She also helped organize West Africa's first gemstone and jewelry show, introducing many Nigerians to the remarkable variety of stones found beneath their own landscape.

AramcoWorld spoke with Okpukpara about discovering Nigeria's hidden gemstone landscape, working alongside artisanal miners and why she believes the country's geological treasures deserve greater recognition.



Lotanna Amina Okpukpara touts Nigeria's geological treasures.

Can you take us back to the first gemstone you ever found?

I was 7 years old. It was a quartz, and it just felt different. I don't really know how to explain it. I knew I was holding something unique, or just something that had some sort of connection to somewhere. ... I found it after school by the side of the playground. It wasn't a completely clear gem, but it was shiny and kind of whiteish. I remember taking it back home, and I got in trouble because my mum was like, “Why are you bringing rocks home?”

What kind of gemstones do you source today?

It's mostly aquamarine, so beryl. Then we get some heliodor as well. Heliodor is a yellow version of the beryl family. They all have the same chemical composition and physical structure. The only thing that makes one gemstone pink, blue or yellow is a trace element. The beryl family has aquamarine, emerald, morganite, heliodor and goshenite. Goshenite is colorless, heliodor is yellow, aquamarine is blue, morganite is pink, and emerald is green.

Beryls occur a lot in that area, and tourmalines as well, in greens, pinks and oranges.

For readers who aren't experts, what counts as a small stone and what counts as a large stone?

We don't really have a standard for a small stone or a big stone.

Stones between 0 to 3 millimeters in diameter or in length are called “melees” in the industry. They are usually used as accent stones around a larger center stone. A small stone could be compared to a piece of confetti—literally a dot. A raisin is definitely large.

But there are much larger stones. There are stones that are as big as my head. We've literally carved a quartz that size.

What is the process for finding gemstones?

It's very grassroots work. There are gemstones that I already know, from experience, where they are. The sapphires, for example, are from Kaduna [in north-central Nigeria], and the tourmalines as well. Now, having a team, I don't necessarily do all the exploring [myself anymore]. People travel on the ground, but essentially that's what it is—boots on the ground.

We'll go to somewhere like Kaduna State or [the adjacent] Nasarawa State and ask the locals. When we started, many people didn't necessarily know what gemstones were, so we'd always [carry] samples. ...

Somehow, somebody knows somebody, or someone has seen something, or



heard something. They'll take you to [one person] who may take you to somebody else. That's how I met many artisanal miners. It's very informal.

How are these gemstones relevant to Nigerian art and culture or history?

For example, in the southeastern parts [of Nigeria], they've used jasper, agate and some of these gems as ornaments for their chiefs and village leaders. There's a jewelry history, for sure. ... Then, in the Benin Empire [circa 1180-1897 in southern Nigeria], they had similar traditions, using red-toned gemstone beads for their royal processions and things like that. I think it was mostly agates that were used.

Do you think about that heritage when you're crafting and cutting the gemstones? If so, how does it influence your work?

I know I'm connected to stones. ... We have so many minerals and gemstones around us here.

That's why most of our crafts—not just the cut stones but the jewelry too—have a unique feel to them because I'm more interested in letting people know about the origins, the history, the story behind them.

For example, we recently made a ring with a heliodor. I'd had those heliodors for many years but never really did anything with them. Then I was looking through them one day and thought, "Oh, there's a rock there that [stands] out. This would be perfect for a ring."

It's from Kaduna State, which is symbolic in my gemstone story because that's where ... I began my real gemstone discovery.

Through her company, Mina's Stones, Okpukpara partners with artisanal miners to unearth a variety of gemstones that, once crafted into jewelry pieces, showcase an element of Nigeria's rich history.

[The ring] has its own name, "Hasken Rana" [in Hausa, a primary language in Nigeria and Niger also spoken in Chad, Cameroon and Ghana], and it means the illumination of the sun.

My mum's family settled in Kaduna, so it is ... a big part of my story.

What was the most extraordinary gemstone you've ever found? Why was it unforgettable?

There are many of them, but I'll just pick one. I think it would be the perfectly, perfectly shaped dodecahedron, the specific garnet, the crystal. It had all 12 sides, and they were still intact. It wasn't one of those trips where we went to the mines. This was when the miners came to us. I don't remember what year it was, but some of the miners we work with in Oyo State [in southwestern Nigeria] brought spessartine garnets from their site. We found the crystal in the mix of the parcel and were like, "Whoa!" It was perfectly geometric. They called it Fanta garnet because it has the color of the Fanta [drink].

Is Nigeria's gemstone wealth still relatively untapped? And what would you like to see change in the industry?

I still do think it's untapped. Do I think it's more developed than it was 10 years ago? Absolutely. But many of the conversations and recommendations we were making 10, 15 years ago still haven't been acted on. For example, in Tanzania you have tanzanite, and in Zambia people know about Zambian emeralds. There has been a bit

of intentionality around those projects.

We talk about Nigerian tourmalines all the time. We talk about our sapphires, we talk about our beryls, but there isn't any kind of cohesive action around marketing them.

... There also needs to be more investment in the sector in terms of data and organizing it. Many of our gemstone miners work informally. They're mainly farmers who farm during the farming season and mine during the mining season. It's very subsistence; it's similar to farming.

Looking ahead, what do you hope people around the world will better understand about Nigeria's gemstones?

I don't think we've done enough about putting [out in public] where some of the stones come from because people will see gemstones and assume they come from South America or Asia or just anywhere else. They don't necessarily know that we actually have very high-quality gemstones coming out of Nigeria.



Ricci Shryock is a journalist and photographer based in Senegal who since 2008 has reported mostly from West and Central Africa. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Guardian* and on NPR, among other outlets.

Read more articles like this online at [AramcoWorld.com](https://www.aramcoworld.com).



The Midwestern Arabs

AMERICA FORGOT

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL SHAGOURY, PHOTOGRAPHED BY GREG KAHN



Independent Filmmaker Pieces Together Family History That Assimilation and Passing Time Nearly Erased

In the Near Westside neighborhood of Indianapolis sits a modest house on North Mount Street. A flag honoring the Indy 500 hangs over the front porch, consistent with most houses on the block. Inside, the house tells a different story.

Near the entrance, an old stereoscope sits on a small shelf beside a stack of black-and-white cityscape photographs of Beirut, Lebanon, and Damascus, Syria, from the early 1920s. A scratchy musical track by Eddie “The Sheik” Kochak, an Arab American musician from the

1950s, plays in the background. Behind the dining room table, a small library holds vintage Levantine cookbooks, titles of which include *The Art of Syrian Cookery*, by Helen Corey and *Lebanese Mountain*

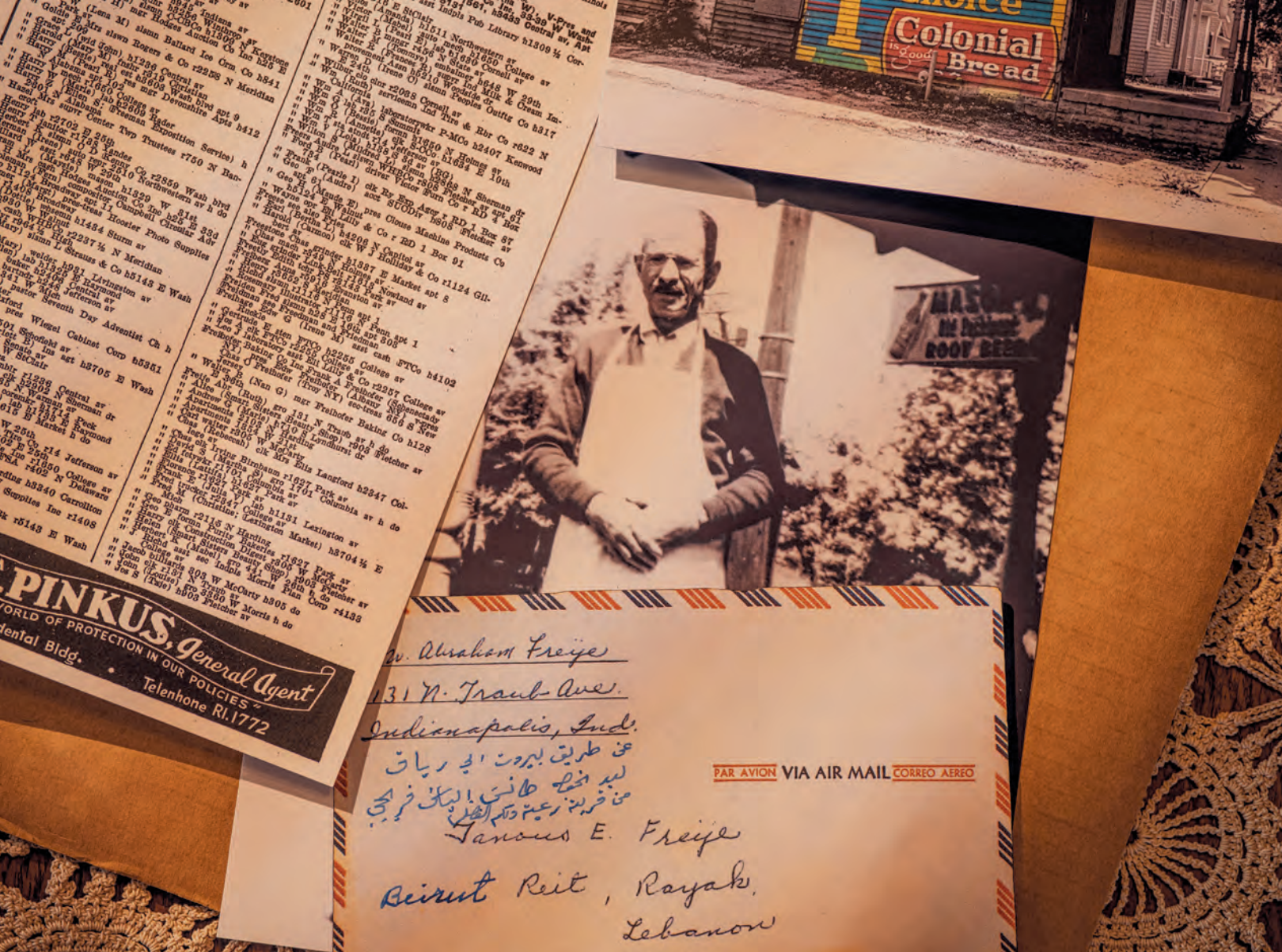
Cookery, by Mary Laird Hamady.

Josh Chitwood, an independent filmmaker, lives here with his wife, Morgan, and three sons. Chitwood is a descendant of the Syrian Lebanese immigrants who came to Indianapolis, the capital of the American Midwest state of Indiana, in the early 20th century and has spent much of his adult life piecing together his family’s past, scanning family photographs, interviewing elderly relatives and filling his home with artifacts that might otherwise disappear.

“I was always proud of my heritage, but I never really understood it,” Chitwood says.

As generations have passed, assimilation, whether intentional or not, has gradually eroded family traditions and the presence of the Arabic language.

OPPOSITE AND ABOVE Filmmaker Josh Chitwood shows his Syrian Lebanese family artifacts to cousin Ronald Ellis at his home in Indianapolis, capital of the American Midwest state of Indiana.



OPPOSITE, TOP A postcard Chitwood's great-grandfather sent to family in Lebanon rests among his collection, which includes vintage Levantine cookbooks, **BOTTOM LEFT.** Edward Curtis, **BOTTOM RIGHT,** Indiana University Indianapolis professor, assisted Chitwood in tandem with research into his own Middle Eastern ancestry. **THIS PAGE** At the college's library, **TOP** Denise Rayman, director of Distinctive Collections, looks through artifacts from the Syrian Ladies Aid Society; and **BOTTOM** Anna Proctor, digitization manager, scans a newspaper page.

Chitwood belongs to a small group of descendants trying to document and preserve this history before it disappears. But how much has already been lost, and what compels people like him to recover what remains?

Growing up in small-town Illinois, Chitwood always knew he was of Syrian Lebanese origin. It showed up at Christmas in the dishes his mother and grandmother prepared—including kibbeh, baklava, tabouleh—and in the extended family network that stretched across Indiana. But knowing one's heritage differs from understanding what it means.

"I almost wish we were Italian," he says, laughing. "It's such an easier heritage to wrap your head around. Frank Sinatra. Spaghetti. American pizza."

Chitwood is among more than 24,000 Indians who claimed Arab heritage as of 2024, according to the independent World Population Review, which tracks historical population data. Most trace their ancestry to Lebanon, though 2009-'16 saw an influx of displaced immigrants from across the Middle East, says Edward Curtis, a professor of world languages and cultures at Indiana University Indianapolis.

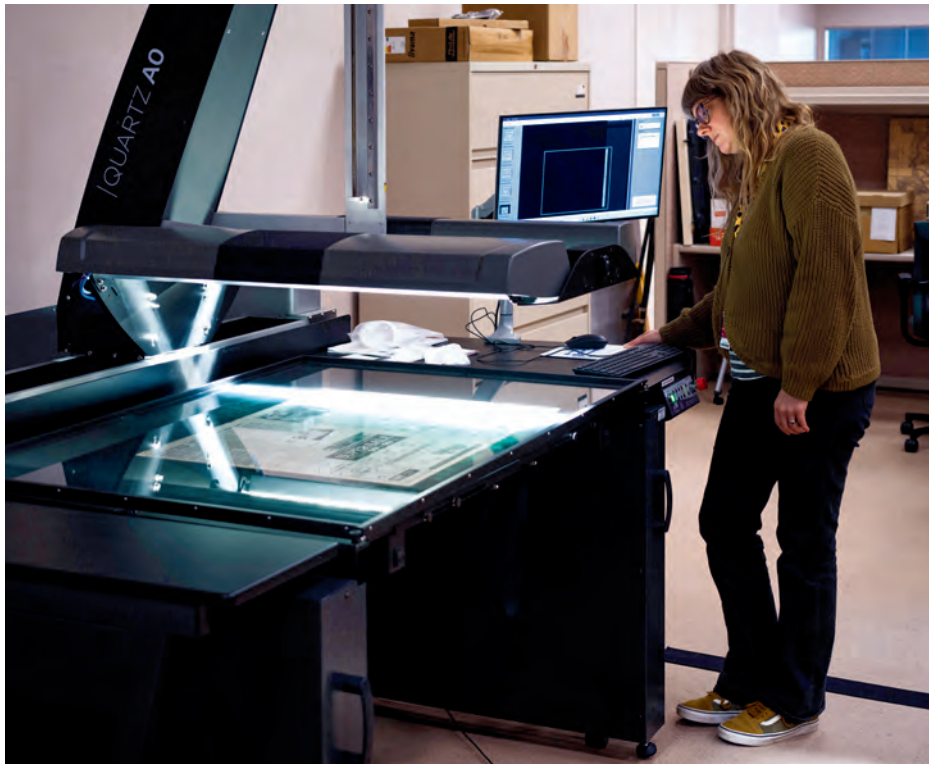
As Chitwood's research expanded beyond his own family, he struggled to find much written about Indianapolis's early Arab community. His search led him to Curtis, one of the country's foremost scholars of Arab American history in the Midwest.

"By the turn of the 20th century, the United States experienced one of the largest migration events in American history," Curtis explains. "The country had become the world's largest industrial economy, and it needed workers." Word spread quickly across the wider region around Syria and Lebanon that opportunity waited across the Atlantic.

"It was said that the streets were paved with gold in the United States, a story that has circulated in our families for generations," says Curtis. "There wasn't much gold, but there were a lot of jobs."

By 1920, 100,000 Syrian and Lebanese migrants had settled in the US. While New York established itself as what historians would later call the "mother colony" of Arab America, the Midwest was not far behind. Indianapolis attracted migrants through its train station, then second only to Chicago's in passenger traffic.

"Even if you decided not to stay, you often came through Indianapolis on your way somewhere," Curtis explains as he scrolls a handwritten accounting ledger from the Syrian Ladies Aid Society Archive at the Indiana University Library.



"It was said that the streets were paved with gold in the United States. ... There wasn't much gold, but there were a lot of jobs."

—EDWARD CURTIS



ABOVE The former Freije's Food Market is now a family home. **OPPOSITE** Chitwood holds a photo of his great-grandfather Abraham Freije, who, like many early Arab immigrants to the US, opened a grocery store.

EARNING A LIVING

Chitwood's great-grandfather Abraham Freije was part of that first wave. He migrated in 1902 from a small village in modern-day eastern Lebanon.

The work Abraham found when he arrived was typical of his generation. The common portrayal of the early Arab immigrant in America is the peddler, the door-to-door salesman moving through small towns and rural counties with a pack on his back, selling canned goods, perfumes and dry goods. Many went on to open grocery stores.

Census data suggests, however, that most Arab immigrants in the Midwest were industrial workers. The peddler reputation stuck partly because of the character the work required. "In order to make a sale, you have to be annoying at times. You really can't take no for an answer," Curtis laughs.

"I learned that my great-grandfather being a peddler and having a grocery store was not something unique to our family. That was like the thing that Syrian Lebanese men did during that first wave. It was such a discovery," Chitwood explains.

By 1905, Freije had settled in Indianapolis on Willard Street, a racially integrated neighborhood that today sits beneath the multipurpose Lucas Oil Stadium. An excerpt from *The Indianapolis Journal* from 1903 describes the street as "two rambling rows of broken down one-story frame houses." Six years later he married his first wife, Latifa, and together they had five children, including Chitwood's grandmother, and built a life that included a grocery store and multiple rental properties.

"The neighbors loved him," says Ronald Ellis, one of Freije's grandsons and Chitwood's cousin. "He had a little clipboard, and he would make what were basically credit cards for people from used doughnut boxes. He kept a bill for people in the neighborhood. Everything was written in Arabic, and people would come pay at the end of the week."

Hard times, however, followed the early years of stability. Latifa died from heart failure in 1923 after the death of the couple's sixth child the previous year. Then in 1935, in the midst of the Great Depression, Freije lost his business and returned to peddling. Ellis recalls a story from about that time that he believes



shaped the trajectory of the entire family.

According to family memory, a group of racists threatened Freije at his home.

“Grandpa put all the kids behind him. He had a shotgun and said, ‘If they’re coming in, they’re going to have to go through me.’” (They left without incident.)

Ellis pauses. “I think there was always that in the back of everybody’s mind. You wanted to assimilate, so you would be part of the broad American culture, if there was such a thing.” Assimilation followed. Freije’s children all married outside the Syrian community, and over time the Arabic language disappeared from family life.

For Chitwood, however, there was always a pull in the other direction.

One early moment came in a middle school home economics class. The teacher offered chicken parmesan as the default for a family-meal assignment but mentioned that students could cook something from their own tradition. Chitwood prepared a full Lebanese meal from scratch, which included kibbeh, a deep-fried bulgur and meat dish, and baklava. “That’s

where I really started to own the heritage,” he says.

Chitwood scanned photographs. He read the book *Becoming American* by Alixa Naff, a Lebanese-born American historian. The book was one of the first academic studies of the Syrian Lebanese diaspora, which became, in Chitwood’s words, “gold.”

After one of his aunts, Mabel, died, he felt “an alarm” go off. Time was running out. He began visiting his great-aunt Louise with a camera, determined to capture what family stories remained. While teaching himself Arabic, he once brought a notebook of vocabulary to her house. At first she dismissed the words. Then one triggered a memory.

“It literally felt like we were uncovering a family album that had been lost.”

—JOSH CHITWOOD



LEFT In a nod to Syrian Lebanese culinary heritage, the Saratoga Restaurant in Terre Haute, Indiana, serves dishes including kibbeh nachos.

BOTTOM Cathy Azar, whose great-uncle opened the restaurant in 1942 and ran it with her grandfather, operates it today with her husband, George.

She began repeating expressions her father had used decades earlier.

“It literally felt like we were uncovering a family album that had been lost,” Chitwood recalls.

The search eventually became “When We Were Syrian,” a short documentary about his own family history, commissioned by Curtis, also of Arab heritage, who had been raised by his Arab grandmother to identify proudly as Syrian and Lebanese.

For Curtis, the project connected to his own parallel effort: digitizing a decadeslong archive of Midwest Arab American records held by Thomas Tadros, historian of the Midwest Federation of American Syrian Lebanese Clubs. Working with archivists and library students at Indiana University Indianapolis, Curtis spent more than a year scanning hundreds of photographs, letters and annual convention programs catalogued with metadata so that researchers anywhere in the world can now find them.

“By digitizing the archive, it served my greater goal of allowing people to come to know the story of my great-grandparents and the people who helped to build the Midwest,” Curtis says.

Ellis appeared in the documentary and put it plainly: “I learned more from Josh than I did in my whole history.”

FOODS PRESERVE SYRIAN LEBANESE TRADITIONS

The history Chitwood uncovered wasn’t confined to family photographs and archival records. It also survived in places like the Saratoga Restaurant, at Fifth and Wabash avenues in the town of Terre Haute, a 1-hour’s drive from Indianapolis. Here, generations of Syrian Lebanese traditions are still kept alive through food.

The restaurant has been owned and operated by



“My grandparents were immigrants, and they worked so very hard. We just want to keep the legacy going.”

—CATHY AZAR



the Malooley family for 84 years. After returning home from serving the US in World War II, Abe Malooley, along with his brother Joe, opened the Saratoga Restaurant in 1942. Today, Abe's granddaughter Cathy Azar runs it with her husband, George.

Every Thursday, Azar serves kibbeh nayyeh, a traditional dish consisting of raw meat, bulgur and spices, prepared using recipes passed down through her mother and aunt. The restaurant today maintains a family atmosphere. Azar and her husband welcome customers, many of whom they know by name, while their daughter Alexis oversees the bustling kitchen. Some elderly patrons claim to have been eating the dish there for over 40 years.

"It's a tribute to that first generation," Azar says. "My grandparents were immigrants, and they worked so very hard. We just want to keep the legacy going."

But she is also candid about the limits of what food alone can hold. "I have grandchildren, and I don't know how much they will carry on to their kids and grandkids. We'll see."

Chitwood carries a similar uncertainty alongside his conviction. Understanding where his family came from has also changed how he thinks about

where they belong.

"It's made me proud to be American and understand who we are as Americans," he says. "Growing up, the Syrian Lebanese heritage was often dismissed or misunderstood. So preserving and telling these stories is me owning my heritage and encouraging others with this heritage to be proud of it, but also for those who are American from other places to see us as a fabric of America."

What gets passed forward, and what doesn't, remains an open question, one that Chitwood is still, carefully, trying to answer for himself and his children. **AW**

A historical marker notes the Syrian Quarter outside Lucas Oil Field, the stadium where the Indianapolis Colts football team plays.

► **Author discusses Arab American identity. Please see page 38.**



Michael Shagoury is a multimedia journalist and media strategist based in Washington, DC. He has covered stories across the Middle East and North America for outlets including AJ+ and CNN International. As managing director of SideKix Media, he leads projects at the intersection of storytelling, digital strategy and emerging technology. **Greg Kahn** is an award-winning American documentary and fine-art photographer. Kahn's photography centers on the forces that shape personal and cultural identity. His work has been exhibited in major galleries and museums around the world and published in *The New York Times Magazine*, *National Geographic* and *British Vogue*, among others.







PLAYING THE HEARTSTRINGS OF A REGION



Croatian Balladeer Carries Forth *Sevdalinka*, Traditional Music of Love and Longing

WRITTEN BY IAN BANCROFT, PHOTOGRAPHED BY ARMIN DURGUT

From beyond Dubrovnik, Croatia's commanding stone walls, an elderly gentleman with swept-back gray hair emerges with cautious steps. In his left hand, a guitar case; in his right, a long lead restraining an Akita named Simba. These are his two anchors, his two loves.

A regional legend, singer Ibrica (born Ibrahim) Jusić, now 81, is to some synonymous with this place, the town of his birth, the pearl of Croatia's Adriatic Coast. He pauses for a moment to savor the sea view once more, his black T-shirt and jeans absorbing the beating sun.

For more than 60 years, Jusić has been one of the stars of *sevdalinka*, a musical genre associated



ABOVE Zanin Berbić is gaining recognition in sevdalinka circles. **RIGHT** The National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Nirha Efendić is an expert on the genre. **PREVIOUS PAGES** Singer-songwriter Ibrica Jusić, with his dog Simba, is a sevdalinka fixture in the Old Town of Dubrovnik, Croatia, on the coast of the Adriatic Sea.



with neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through acoustic guitar and deeply emotional vocals, he has woven a distinct and recognizable style.

The word “sevdalinka” derives from *sevdah*, or in Ottoman Turkish *sevda*, meaning “love,” “longing” or “passion.” Jusić explains its Arabic origins in *sawda*, meaning “black bile,” an excess of which was believed to cause melancholy. Asked what the word truly meant, a child remarked, in Jusić’s words, “Sevdah is when my father [*babo*] sings, and he is crying, but he isn’t sad.”

SEVDALINKA AND THE FLOURISHING OF THE IMAGINATION

For Nirha Efendić, an ethnologist and curator at the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, sevdalinka is a “traditional Bosnian love song that

appeared in a Muslim environment ... rooted in the local Slavic tradition but heavily influenced by the Oriental way of living.” In December 2024, sevdalinka was inscribed into UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in recognition of its unique musical traits.

It flourished from the 16th century in the *mahalas* (urban neighborhoods) where the lives of men and women were strictly separated and meetings between young people before marriage were heavily supervised. Often the woman could see the man completely, but he couldn’t see her. “He had to clutch to his flourishing imagination to picture her as a whole,” Efendić says, often only hearing her voice.

“That environment is exactly where sevdalinka appeared in its most beautiful verses—born from that tension of intense desire on one side and an insurmountable barrier of tradition on the other,” Efendić explains.

“Sevdalinka comes from what I always say: Nobody in life has ever made a love song without it being an experience,” Jusić reflects. “You want to experience it, and now you are experiencing suffering. That is sevdah—suffering from the very essence of love.”

Many of the songs are not abstract reflections but instead capture a lived moment—a chance encounter, longing and yearning, a forced separation.

In “U Stambolu na Bosforu” (“In Istanbul on the Bosphorus”), the sick pasha, his soul at its end and “gravitating toward the black earth,” voiced one final prayer before passing away. After his wife learned of his death, “a tear fell from her eye, and next to the pasha she fell dead, the pasha’s true love.” Their lives—and deaths—were perfectly bound together.

“Žute Dunje” (“Yellow Quinces”) further depicts the anguish of loss. “Two young people loved each other ... [but] their enemies did not let them,” begins the song. Fatma soon falls ill and yearns only for yellow quinces from Istanbul. Her beloved goes to fetch

the fruits but is gone for three years, “neither sending word nor returning.” When he finally comes back, with the quinces, Fatma is being laid to rest. He offers the pallbearers money in return for one final kiss.

What distinguishes sevdalinka, or sevdah, is the emotional weight with which it is sung. “They say today that it is a song of the heart—and it’s true: You can sing it, you can lament, you can even out-shout one another,” Jusić says, “but it only works when you possess that raw, genuine emotion and energy.

“Sevdah is lived,” he continues. “It has to deeply move us, to season our souls. That is how it has always been.”

Sevdalinka’s origins have remained a source of intrigue. “Everyone thinks that it came from the East, but the Sephardic Jews brought the sevdalinka structure in the 15th century when they were expelled,” Jusić says, referring to the Spanish Inquisition, “and then they settled through Dubrovnik into Bosnia.” The Ottoman Turks, he says, didn’t reject them; on the contrary, “they embraced them all,” he reflects. “Over time it became an intrinsic part of daily life for the Bosnian people, evolving into their traditional song.”

Zanin Berbić, one of the rising stars of sevdalinka in Bosnia and Herzegovina, started singing these songs as a child. “For me, sevdalinka means life,” he says. It is “a unique song because it represents a conglomerate of different cultural influences that permeated Bosnia and Herzegovina for centuries.”

A keen historian of the genre, Berbić argues that it reflects and portrays the different social and political conditions the country has endured. Sevdalinka, he believes, constitutes “a witness and a symbol of Bosnian persistence and continuity.”

The genre has evolved through several distinct historical phases, according to Efendić.

“That first phase was when public meetings were problematic and the songs lived in private spaces,” she says. The transition to Austro-Hungarian rule in the late 19th century saw sevdalinka “moving from private houses to cafes (*kafanas*, as the Ottomans called them) ... blending *à la Turca* and *à la Franca* styles.” The advent of radio finally brought it into homes in urban and rural areas. “It is essentially our local jazz—a beautiful, famous and deeply rooted tradition.”

A fundamental part of this evolution was the broadening of music’s reach. “In the beginning, sevdalinka was an oral creation that was transmitted and shaped by word of mouth,” Berbić notes, “but with the development of technology and media, it established itself as a musical genre that would reach the culmination of its popularity after 1945.” Since World War II and the birth of the former Yugoslavia, sevdalinka singers have enjoyed enormous popularity.

FROM THE STREETS OF DUBROVNIK TO GLOBAL FAME

One of seven children, Jusić was born into a musically gifted but impoverished household. The family’s property in Dubrovnik was divided by the state, forcing them into cramped quarters.



“They put us in the basement; they put us in the storehouse,” Jusić reflects, recalling a youth spent carrying heavy fruit crates to help the family get by. “Since I was a kid, I didn’t have a chair to sit on,” he says. “Those are things that change you—it gave me [the determination] to be tough, to never let anyone walk over me.”

Music was both an inheritance and a form of escapism. “My dad had a Dallapé accordion [a famous Italian brand] with 120 basses,” he recalls. “Go find an accordionist today who even knows what a 120-bass Dallapé means!” (The company closed in 2010 after 134 years, and vintage versions are increasingly hard to find.)

“My mother sang very beautifully,” Jusić continues. “She had a gentle soprano voice ... around the dinner table, it sounded gorgeous.” Her delivery became a blueprint for his own.

His late brother, Đelo, founded the famous Dubrovački Trubaduri (Dubrovnik Troubadours). “Đelo

The saz, used for traditional folk music, arrived in the Balkans with the Ottomans. Today it continues to be played in folk ensembles and at cultural events, including those featuring sevdalinka.

“Over time [sevdalinka] became an intrinsic part of daily life for the Bosnian people.”

—IBRICA JUŠIĆ

“I remember on the television broadcast, the host introduced me, saying, ‘He sings beautifully and with immense passion, even in broken languages.’”

—IBRICA JUSIĆ

was relentless,” Jusić says. “He held that guitar in his hands constantly, just to show everyone he was the best. He would practice his heart out in secret and sit there dissecting how the tones and chords fit together.”

By only 17 or 18, Đelo was performing live concerts in Dubrovnik. “I used to pluck the double bass right next to him,” Jusić says. “Through that, he was my role model. It didn’t matter what I was doing—I just wanted to be near him.”

Jusić’s own break came on the streets of his birth as a Muslim in a predominantly Catholic country. After serving in the Yugoslav army, he returned broke and desperate. He took his guitar to the stone stairs, known as *skaline*, outside the Dominican

monastery. Jusić recalls that moment: “Sit there. That is your place ... open up, move ... spread positivity, spread love!” A young couple stopped to listen. “My heart was captured. ... Someone is listening to me. I’m not alone!”

Those steps became his stage and emotional home, his audiences drawn from the different religious traditions of Dubrovnik.

At midnight one evening, a famous local artist heard Jusić performing and persuaded Pero Gotovac, a composer, to invite him to the Zagreb Festival, the region’s prestigious music event. “I had papers ready to go to Germany to work as an automotive upholsterer,” Jusić recalls. But stardom awaited. In 1968 he would win a major prize at the festival, catapulting him into the public consciousness. Thanks to this success, Jusić would remain tied to his hometown.

Sevdalinka was not the only musical influence he was exposed to in his youth. “We stayed at the festival in Dubrovnik, where there were classical concerts,” Jusić recalls. Along with local legends, Jusić became a definitive pillar of the coastal *chanson* style. “It was the Italian school on which we all grew up,” he says—less raw and arguably more melodious and catchy.

This diversity of heritage ultimately led Jusić to France, thereby fulfilling a childhood dream. “I didn’t go to Paris just to play for some local Yugoslav diaspora club—I was performing in the elite cabarets, like Don Camilo,” he says. “I remember on the television

Jusić is the subject of the biography *Čovjek bez kafića* (A Man Without a Cafe), by Amer Tikveša. Its title is taken from Jusić’s album of the same name.





broadcast, the host introduced me, saying, ‘He sings beautifully and with immense passion, even in broken languages.’”

The “most beautiful moment” in Jusić’s life came when, after covering a song by Jacques Brel, the master of modern chanson, Brel told him, “I have a feeling I wrote that song for you and not for myself.”

JUSIĆ’S UNIQUE AND ENDURING CONTRIBUTION

Wherever Jusić went, however, he carried sevdalinka in his soul, remaining true to its ideals. “Ibrica is incredibly knowledgeable and truly understands the tradition of sevdalinka,” Efendić says. “He lives it, and feels it deeply. He knows how to transmit the genre in his own specific way. He creates modern arrangements, but he deeply respects and knows the ‘soul’ of sevdalinka.”

As Berbić contends, “it is extremely important that artists of such quality as Ibrica Jusić feel and recognize the value of sevdalinka. His interpretation of sevdalinka is valuable because, on one hand, it is rooted in its primal, traditional stylistic qualities whilst also being strongly colored by Jusić’s unique artistic individuality, which has distinguished him for decades.”

As the older generation has passed away, responsibility for guarding these principles has fallen on

Jusić’s shoulders. For him, the future of sevdalinka depends entirely on that spiritual preservation.

“What is actually most effective among all true sevdah performers?” Jusić asks rhetorically. “It’s that we can all start singing intimately, quietly, so that we aren’t even overheard by the neighboring table.” It requires a certain setting, a venue where an audience member can feel that it is them, and only them, who is being sung to. It is about proximity, not amplification.

On another afternoon, echoing the past decades, Jusić sits on the steps outside the Church of Saint Dominic, in the Old Town of Dubrovnik, watching a passing wedding party. In his mind, he is singing about someone. His face is content, despite the anguish of his music. His bulging, boyish eyes swallow the surroundings.

For this is his city, and the walls of Dubrovnik will forever echo with the wailing of his voice and the yearning of his guitar. **AW**

Jusić still sings and plays his guitar on the stone steps of the monastery where his career began.



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The Last DHOW BUILDERS of Lamu

Despite Economic Headwinds,
Traditional Boats Survive by
Finding New Purpose

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY SAMANTHA REINDERS



T

he sail of the *Amina* catches what remains of the afternoon's intermittent wind, flutters and then goes slack. Catches it, flutters and then goes slack

again. On the horizon, the sun is doing what it does here every evening with theatrical reliability, sinking into the Indian Ocean in long ribbons of amber and copper. From somewhere deep in the mangroves we drift past, cicadas provide a soundtrack.

There is no engine. No hull-slap of a speedboat, no crackle of a radio. Just the occasional creak of the wooden mast, and the breath of a wind that has been crossing this ocean for thousands of years. It is difficult, in a moment like this, not to feel that you are inside something very old.

I am. The dhow is the vessel of one of the oldest continuously practiced forms of seafaring on the planet. For more than a millennium, boats like this one connected East Africa to Arabia, Persia and India. They ran on monsoon logic: the socioeconomic philosophy that respects seasonal rains and their associated winds, and accumulated knowledge of wind and tides and boatbuilding techniques. They carried mangrove timber and ivory north, cloth and dates and porcelain south, and in both directions something harder to inventory: language, religion, gene pools and ideas.

That kind of seafaring, in its original form, is gone. But on Lamu—this small, car-free island off the northern Kenyan coast—something of it persists. The question is what, exactly, and for whom.

THE MONSOON TRADE

The word “dhow” is, strictly speaking, a European convenience—a catch-all applied by outsiders to dozens of distinct vessel types that Indian Ocean communities had long named precisely.

Maltese-born Dionisius A. Agius—British Academy Fellow and Al Qasimi Professor at the University of Exeter in England and author of several books

OPPOSITE Boatbuilding has defined the island of Lamu, Kenya, for centuries. **THIS PAGE, TOP** Idris Ali Ahmed works on a Mozambique-style double-ended dhow commissioned for tourist sunset cruises.

CENTER Most wooden dhows are still built by hand and by eye, with traditional designs carved into the imported teak planking that goes over mangrove frames.



on dhow traditions—notes that the term's origin is contested: Earlier scholarship traced it to Arabic or Persian, while more recent research suggests a Swahili root (*daw*, meaning vessel), reflecting the layered exchanges of the Indian Ocean world. The term entered wider European usage during the colonial period, when British naval authorities in East Africa were regulating and suppressing trade routes across the western Indian Ocean.

Dhows themselves have specific names: *jahazis* and booms, *mtepes* and *baghlas*, the latter with their ornately carved sterns, alongside countless smaller coastal craft whose names shifted across regions and time.

What they shared was a relationship with the monsoon winds so intimate as to amount to a kind of annual conversation: northeast from November to March, carrying sailors down from Arabia; southwest from April to October, pushing them home.

In *The Life of the Red Sea Dhow*, Agius describes the dhow as “not simply a vessel, but a way of life,” linking ports and peoples in networks of exchange that long pre-date modern political boundaries. Abdul Sheriff, an author and historian based in Zanzibar, expands this beyond trade: “Sailing across the seas involved sharing of knowledge not only of wind systems and navigation but also of boatbuilding.”

TRADITIONAL DHOW BUILDERS

I meet Ali Skanda, a master boatbuilder, or *fundi* (from Arabic *fann*, meaning skill or craft), in Lamu. Tall and lean, with gray beginning to thread through his long beard, Skanda carries the easy authority of someone long accustomed to being listened to. People greet him constantly as we walk through town.

“Sailing across the seas involved sharing of knowledge not only of wind systems and navigation but also of boatbuilding.”

—ABDUL SHERIFF

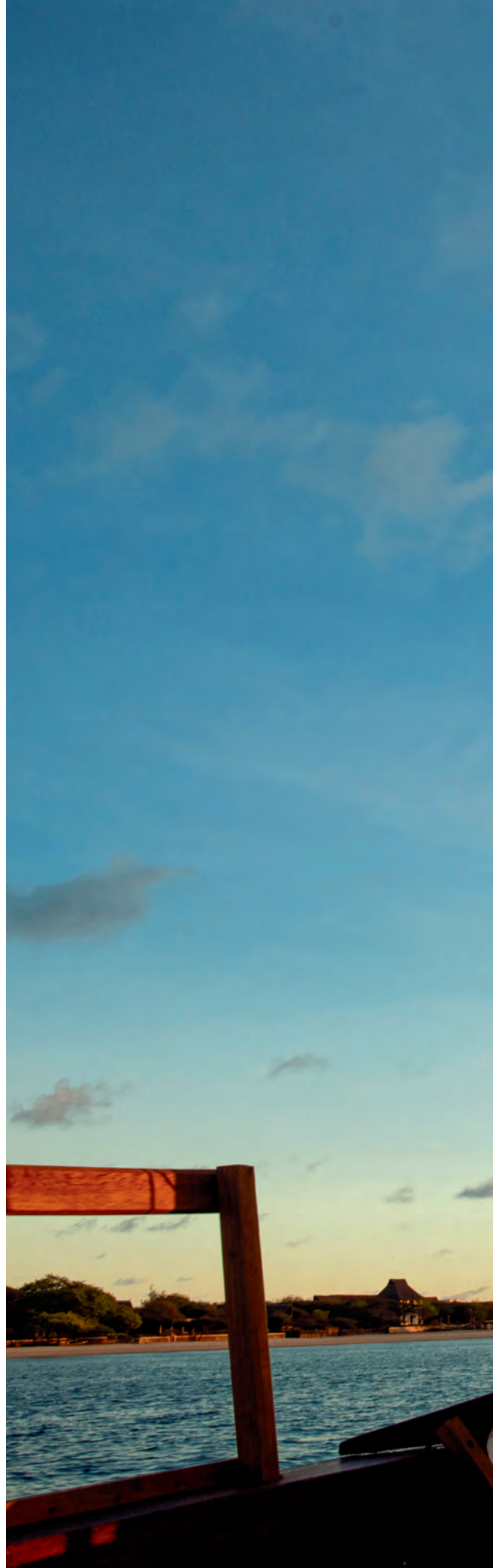
He traces his lineage on the archipelago back at least 700 years and is somewhat of a cultural figurehead for the tradition of boatbuilding.

Unlike many on the island, Skanda has traveled widely beyond Lamu—abroad and across the continent—and he moves comfortably between worlds: soft-spoken, deliberate, equally at ease discussing monsoon trade routes and modern tourism economies. His clothes are those of a workman, though: a dust-marked T-shirt and worn trousers streaked with paint and sawdust.

After many hours working in his father’s workshop during school vacations, he mastered the art of carpentry and boatbuilding, learning to make dhows the old way—with no blueprint in sight. His most important tools: memory and an inherited understanding of materials and balance.

Skanda is best known as the chief boatbuilder behind the Flipflop, a campaign against single-use plastic whose flagship project—the world’s first sailing dhow made entirely from recycled plastic waste—brought international attention to Lamu’s boatbuilding traditions. He has even designed a dhow that now resides in the collection at the Mariners’

The *Amina* carries visitors across the Lamu Channel at dusk. Such dhows represent the small coastal craft that have kept Lamu’s boatbuilding tradition alive.







Museum and Park in the US state of Virginia.

He points me to Matondoni, a village on the sheltered northwest coast of Lamu Island, reachable only by boat. For centuries it was the center of dhow building. At its peak in the 1930s and '40s, nearly every household was connected to the trade: as craftsman, sailor or supplier of mangrove timber. Then, in the mid-20th century, the world that had made the dhow necessary began to dissolve.

As Skanda tells it, containerization and motorized

shipping took the cargo routes. Logging regulations restricted access to timber. The building of the great oceangoing vessels—the jahazis, the mtepes, the long-haul dhows that had knitted continents together—stopped. By the 1960s the largest types had mostly disappeared from East African waters. Agius concurs, adding that the advent of the oil industry in the Middle East ensured that the dhow world could not continue in any recognizable form.

A HANDFUL OF BUILDERS

I arrived at Matondoni on a still morning. The village was quiet, the pace unhurried. Several boats lay marooned in the mud of the low tide, like skeletons in a desert. There were only a handful of wooden dhows; the rest were made from fiberglass. This is not an uncommon sight these days.

Fiberglass boats are cheaper to build and maintain, builders tell me, particularly now that timber is expensive and tightly regulated. In earlier generations, much of the wood could simply be cut locally. Fiberglass hulls also require less fuel when winds fail and engines take over.

But economics is only part of the story. Younger boat owners increasingly see fiberglass boats as modern—cleaner, faster, aspirational in a way wooden dhows no longer are.





The knowledge of traditional boatbuilding is alive, but the context around that knowledge has changed.

“Today’s generation want to be TikTok stars, not fundis,” says fundi Ali Bakari Bwana, 60. Up close, his eyes appear almost clouded by cataracts, and he carries himself like a man older than his years.

Although he learned the trade from his father and grandfather, Bwana has not taught it to his children. There is little future in it for them, he implies, and little money.

“One day the only dhows left are going to be the ones like Ali and I took to America and are in museums,” he tells me, referring to a vessel he built with Skanda for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C.

Retirement seems less like a conscious ending than something toward which he has gradually drifted. He tells me he still has enough work: one boat underway, another

OPPOSITE In Shela, a Swahili village on Lamu Island with narrow sandy lanes and no cars, the rhythms of the tide still shape the day. **THIS PAGE, LEFT** A fiberglass dhow sits moored—cheaper to build, easier to maintain and increasingly common on Lamu Island. **BELOW** A donkey hitches a ride in Lamu Channel.









commission waiting. But there are fewer dhows passing, he says, pointing to the water, and most new ones are fiberglass.

So, is the craft in decline? It's complicated. Wooden boats are still being built. The knowledge—how to read the grain of mangrove poles, shape imported teak planking, bend wood with fire and diesel, seal with shark oil, measure a hull by eye—is still alive. But the context around that knowledge has shifted.

DIFFERENT BOATS FOR A DIFFERENT WORLD

The boats being built on Lamu today are not the ones that built the island's reputation. The jahazis—deep hulled, oceangoing, built for heavy loads across open water—are gone from the yards. What remains, and in some ways thrives, is smaller: coastal craft for fishing, transport, tourism and racing.

Among them are boats like the *Amina*, what builders call the Mozambique style: an elegant double-ender, wider in beam and shallower in draft than



**“This is what
we inherited
from our father.”**

—IDRIS ALI AHMED

older designs, better suited to the calm waters of the Lamu Channel. It is built for stability and comfort. Its customers are guesthouse owners, tourism operators, captains running sunset cruises for visitors, like me, who want to feel, for an hour, that they are inside something very old.

Brothers Idris Ali Ahmed, 33, and Ahmed Ali Ahmed, 49, continue to build boats on Lamu, carrying on what they call “their legacy.” “This is what we inherited from our father,” says Idris. They are a few weeks from completing *Eco*, a wooden Mozambique-style dhow commissioned for sunset cruises. For the entire time I'm on Lamu, I watch as they chisel, sand and hammer on the hull of the new vessel. It's just before the rainy season, and it's incredibly hot. Sweat mixes with sawdust in equal measure.

This kind of adaptation is not new. Both Agius and Sheriff note that the dhow was never a fixed form but a working vessel that shifted among cargo, pearl

TOP Ali Skanda, master boatbuilder and cultural figurehead of Lamu's dhow-building tradition, learned the trade in his father's workshop. **BOTTOM** Ali Bakari Bwana, 60, is a master boatbuilder still working in Matondoni, the village where the craft has its deepest roots. **PREVIOUS PAGES** A crew member prepares a dhow for racing. The competitive events are held on New Year's Day, Eid, Easter and during the annual Lamu Cultural Festival in late November.



diving, warfare and trade as demand required in a monsoon economy, the term for a system in which a region's livelihood depends on seasonal rainfall and wind. Today that demand is tourism and, increasingly, racing.

Each year, when the trade winds that once powered the monsoon economy fill sails again, the waters off Lamu host a series of dhow races. The races are timed to the wind at its strongest, when the channel shifts from calm to volatile in minutes. The water darkens and chops under sudden gusts, frothing white near the mangroves—a far cry from the flat turquoise of tourist brochures.

On New Year's Day, Eid, Easter and during the annual Lamu Cultural Festival in late November, up to 15 racing dhows compete on courses marked by buoys, their crews balancing on cantilevered beams, adjusting sail and weight with practiced precision. And it's not just in Lamu. Agius notes that similar racing cultures are growing in Bahrain, Qatar and the Red Sea.

The races are not staged for tourists, although they come to watch. They are fiercely competitive community events, with prize money and local prestige at stake. They also require boats—new ones built for speed—drawing younger sailors and builders into the tradition.

The winds that once carried cargo now power

something else. The monsoon hasn't disappeared. It has found new work to do.

INTO THE EVENING

By the time the *Amina* brings me back to the Lamu waterfront, the last light has gone. The sail comes down with practiced ease, folded with the efficiency that comes from repetition.

The tradition that once carried ivory and mangrove timber across the Indian Ocean now carries visitors across a sheltered channel. The winds that drove the monsoon trade now decide the outcome of a race. The master builder who once supplied cargo fleets now takes commissions from guesthouse owners.

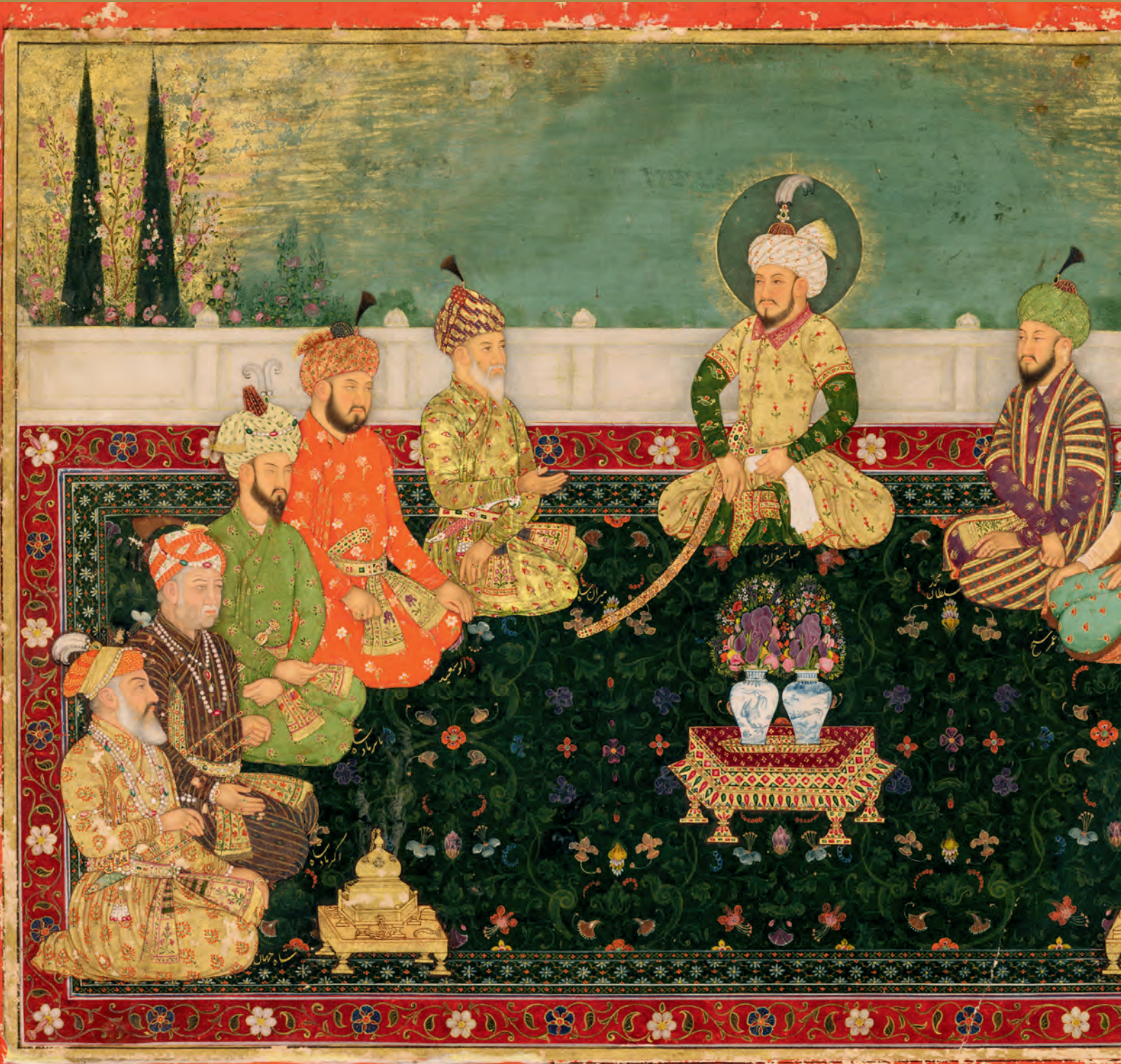
None of this is what it was. But then, it never quite was. The dhow has always been a vessel in motion—not just across water but across time, absorbing what each era required of it and carrying forward what it could. In Lamu, at least, it is still moving. **AW**

Details reflect the heritage and artistry behind a dhow belonging to Skanda.



Samantha Reinders (samreinders.com; @samreinders) is an award-winning photographer, book editor, multimedia producer and workshop leader based in Cape Town, South Africa. She holds a master's degree in visual communication from Ohio University, and her work has been published in *Time*, *Vogue*, *The New York Times* and more.

WHEN INDIA SAILED TO Makkah



350-Year-Old Travelogue of Hajj Unfurls Maritime World That Bound Mughals to Islam's Holiest Place

WRITTEN BY NILOSREE BISWAS



On the morning of September 20, 1676 (12 Rajab, 1087 AH), the Baghdadi merchant ship *Salamat Ras* set sail from Surat, the great Mughal port on India's western coast, also known as *Bandar-i-Mubarak* (the Blessed Port). Its canvas caught the northeast monsoon—the seasonal winds that for centuries carried merchant vessels and pilgrim fleets across the Indian Ocean to Arabia. Slowly, the shoreline would dissolve into haze.

Among the 472 named passengers gathered on deck—together with another 40 whose names went unrecorded—stood *Safi bin Vali al-Qazvini* (sometimes written as *Safi ibn Vali al-Qazvini*), a Mughal scholar and court official who wrote under the pen name *Haqir*, meaning “the lowly” or “wretched.” Like hundreds of fellow pilgrims aboard, he was bound for Makkah, in modern-day Saudi Arabia, to perform the Hajj, the pilgrimage that Muslims who are physically and financially able are expected to undertake once in their lifetime.

Watching India disappear behind him, *Safi b. Vali* wrote: “Facing the receding land, they were pulled out by the tide of contemplation to sink into deep reflection upon that world of water and the raw reality of crossing the Almighty's mighty ocean.”

His words survive because he chose to record the details of this sacred voyage.

OPPOSITE

The rulers of the Mughal dynasty from Babur to Aurangzeb, with their ancestor Timur, India, c. 1707-12, MSS 874

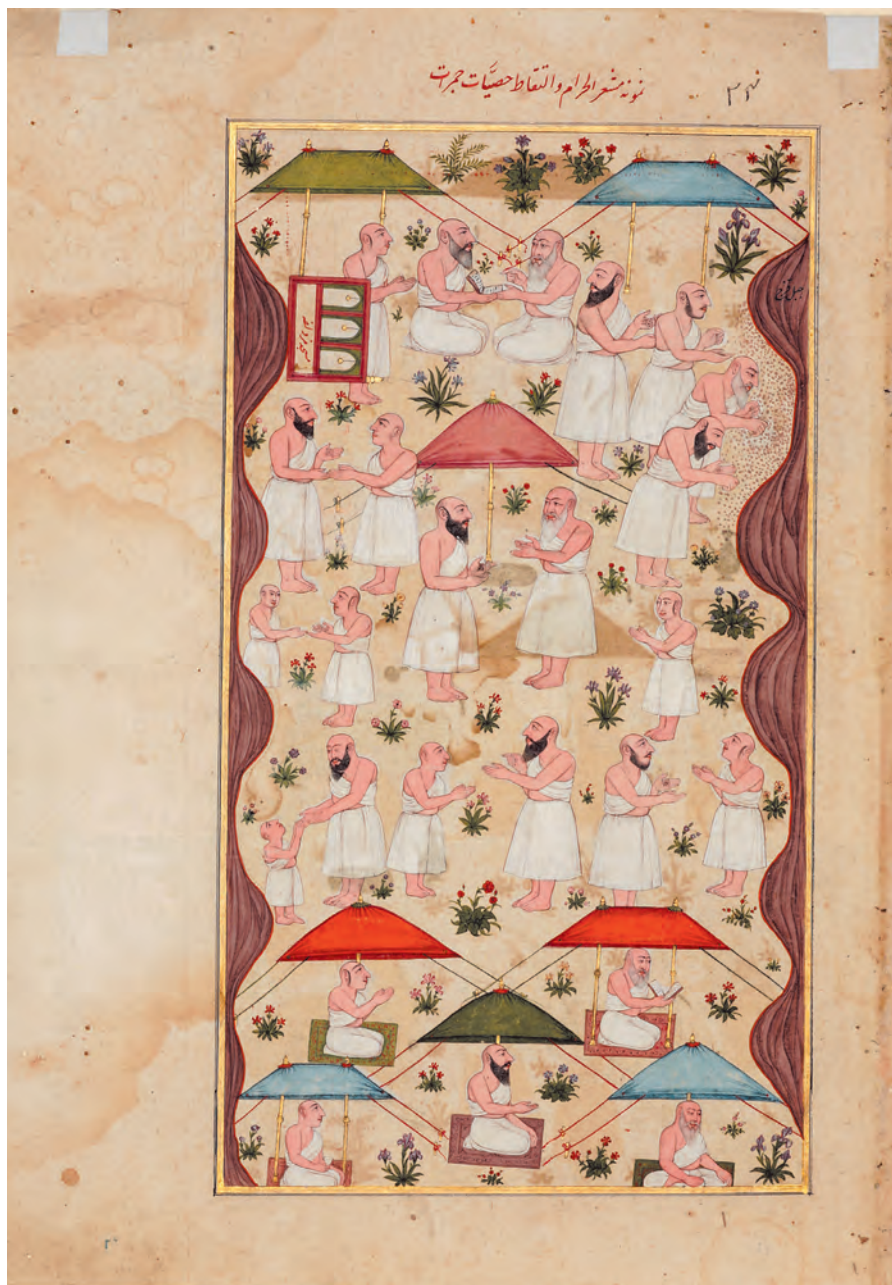
BELOW Landing place. Jeddah. *L'embarcadère*, early 20th century, photo-postcard, ARC.pc 290



Landing place.

JEDDAH.

L'embarcadère.



Al-Mash'ar al-Harām and the Gathering of Pebbles for the Jamarat, *Anīs al-Ḥujjāj* by Safi ibn Vali, India, 1666–67, MSS 1025, folio 10a

Three and a half centuries later, only three copies of *Anīs al-Ḥujjāj* are known to survive: two illustrated manuscripts, in the Khalili Collection in London and the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya in Mumbai, and an unillustrated copy in Iran.

Despite its importance, the work had remained largely inaccessible to English readers. “The main reason is that the text is extremely rare,” says Qaisra Khan, curator at the Khalili Collections and author of the extended introduction to a new English-language translation.

Much of what English-language scholarship has said about the manuscript ultimately derives from excerpts circulated by the Indian Ocean historian Jan Qaisar’s unpublished handwritten translation produced in the 1980s. Although scholars had long recognized

the need for a complete modern edition, translating and studying the manuscript has proved a lengthy undertaking. Khan, who first encountered the manuscript in 2008, says publishing the full work had remained “a long-standing ambition.”

In the spring of 2026, the Khalili manuscript became the basis of the first complete English translation, opening a window onto a world where faith traveled by sea and the annual pilgrimage bound Mughal India to the wider Islamic world.

“In the colloquial sense of an inflection point, this volume therefore represents a milestone in the study of the manuscript, and more broadly in Indian Ocean, Mughal and Hajj studies,” says Michael Burns, a cultural heritage expert who specializes in Classical Arabic and Persian texts and translated the book from the original Persian.

The work defies easy classification. “It is at once travel narrative, devotional writing and courtly document, including poetry, theology, history, anthropology, linguistics, medicine and practical advice,” he says.

“The Mughal Empire was one of the largest, wealthiest and most culturally influential empires of the early modern world,” says Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi, a historian of the Mughal Empire and former professor of medieval Indian history at Aligarh Muslim University in northern India. Standing alongside the Ottoman, Safavid and Qing empires, its thriving manufacturing economy and extensive international trade linked Mughal India closely to the wider Islamic world.

For historians, *Anīs al-Ḥujjāj*’s outward-looking perspective is part of the manuscript’s significance. Most Mughal chronicles focus on emperors, wars and court politics. “Vali, by contrast, looks outward,” Rezavi says.

Part travelogue, part practical handbook and part courtly manuscript, the book’s folios are ruled with elegant Persian calligraphy, headings illuminated in gold and framed by deep indigo, reflecting the refined craftsmanship of Mughal manuscript production.

Turn the page, and words give way to image: a ship under full sail, pilgrims circling the Kaaba (Ka’bah)—the cube-shaped stone building at the center of Islam’s holiest site—the ports of Surat and Jeddah, on the Red Sea. Across 46 paintings, the voyage unfolds scene by scene, drawing the reader into the crossing itself. The manuscript’s visual emphasis is telling. Surat is the only Indian location to appear in the illustrations, highlighting the city’s role as the principal maritime gateway to the Hajj.

For Rishad Choudhury, a historian of South Asia

and the Indian Ocean at Oberlin College in the US state of Ohio, the illustrations rank among the manuscript's greatest achievements. The Khalili copy, he says, is "ornamented with some of the finest visual artworks produced on the Meccan pilgrimage from the premodern era [and depicts] the ports of Surat and Jeddah, images of pilgrim ships crossing the Arabian Sea, and illustrations of the rituals that were performed at different stages of the hajj, including the sacrifice of animals at Mina."

Beautiful as they are, the paintings conceal one mystery: Who painted them?

Khan believes the paintings were the work not of Safi b. Vali but of another hand.

The style, she argues, "points to an artist who was clearly trained but not working at the very highest courtly level." Khan suggests the painter was probably active just north of the Deccan, perhaps in Gujarat: "Certain features, such as the large, wide-open eyes and dark pupils of the figures recall Deccani painting, while the overall compositions and familiarity with maritime settings suggest a Gujarati background."

THE CROSSING

When Safi b. Vali boarded the *Salamat Ras*, he joined a floating world. His journey was far from unusual. As Rezavi notes, he belonged to "a broad and established pattern of mobility," as pilgrims, merchants and scholars traveled regularly among Mughal India, Iran and Arabia.

Around him were: "Arabs, Rumis, Turanis, Indians, Iranians, Afghans, Georgians and 'Araks,'" Safi b. Vali writes. Some, he observed, were "astute and obtuse, proper and crass." For weeks they would share the same decks, provisions—and uncertain horizon.

Makkah may have been their common destination, but Safi b. Vali's curiosity lay in the journey itself. Before he tells readers how to approach the Kaaba, he explains how to survive the crossing.

Choose your ship carefully, he advises: "Select a ship that is neither small nor very old; one whose bow is the shape of a bird's breast."

Take more provisions than you think you will need: "For the pilgrim will be as contented as his pantry is broad." Even eggs, he notes with reassuring practicality, "keep better when stored in salt or sand."

It is this attention to the ordinary that distinguishes *Anīs al-Hujjāj* from almost every other Hajj account of its age.

"What gives the text much of its character ... are what I would call 'sketches': short anecdotes and observations, sometimes humorous, woven throughout the narrative," Khan notes. "These add color and personality to the account and remind the reader that this was an experience rather than simply a religious manual."

They are what give *Anīs al-Hujjāj* its warmth, she suggests. Safi b. Vali lingers over the people he meets, the ports he passes and the small practicalities of life at sea. They remind the reader that this was

"This volume ... represents a milestone in the study of the manuscript, and more broadly in Indian Ocean, Mughal and Hajj studies."

—MICHAEL BURNS

a lived experience.

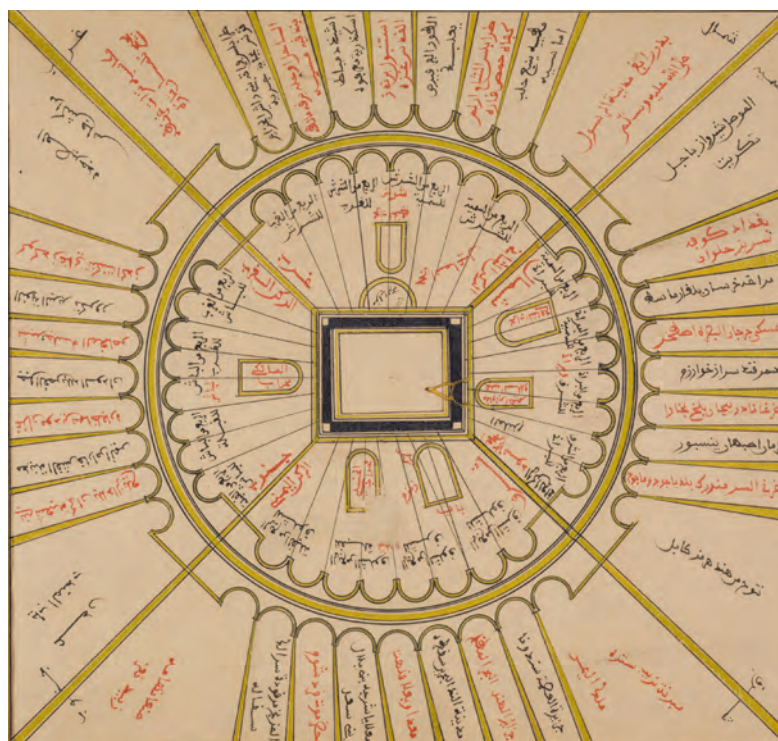
"What makes the work particularly pathbreaking is the level of attention given to the practical experience of travel. Safi ibn Vali writes not only about religious devotion but also about ports, sea routes, towns, supplies, fellow pilgrims and the organization of the Hajj caravan," Khan adds.

It's what makes the manuscript stand out, says Choudhury, whose research explores the history of the Hajj across the Indian Ocean.

"Safi bin Vali gave readers a fascinatingly vivid view of the internal social world of a Mughal-era seagoing vessel," he says.

"He wrote of how shipmen carried out their duties, with the captain (*naukhuda*) and the supercargo (*kar-rani*) working together to supervise the passenger manifest (*siyaha*); of the ship's room and board facilities, noting some of the finer points of how passengers were accommodated on deck (*arsha*) or inside cabins (*balanj*); how fresh water was

Diagram showing the orientation of various cities towards the Ka'bah, arranged within four sectors corresponding to its corners (arkān), North Africa, 18th century, MSS 765



The Sea of Oman and Ships, *Anīs al-Hujjāj* by Safi ibn Vali, India, 1666-67, MSS 1025, folio 3b

distributed from the ship's tank (*finta*); and how foods like breads and baked goods (*nan*, *kulcha*, *sambusa*), sweets (*shakarpara*, *halwa*) and meat dishes (*qurma*, *qima*) were stored and prepared in the ship's kitchen (*matbakh*). So far as we know, there exists no comparable account—perhaps in any language or from any region in South Asia from before circa 1800—that provides such densely detailed information from inside an Indian Ocean ship.”

Unlike official Mughal chronicles, which largely focus on emperors and court politics, Rezavi says, *Anīs al-Hujjāj* records “the experiences of an educated Mughal traveler.” It reveals pilgrimage, maritime travel and commercial networks through the eyes of someone moving across the wider Islamic world rather than remaining within the empire's frontiers.

Safi b. Vali's account records the voyage in extraordinary detail. The voyage itself, however, depended on something less visible: patronage.

MUGHAL PATRONAGE—THE BENEFACTOR PRINCESS

Not every pilgrim who reached Surat could continue the journey. Crossing the Indian Ocean demanded money, preparation and powerful networks of support. Few pilgrims undertook the Hajj without assistance. Behind many journeys stood patrons who financed scholarship, rewarded loyal service or enabled pilgrims to travel thousands of miles before they had even reached the coast.

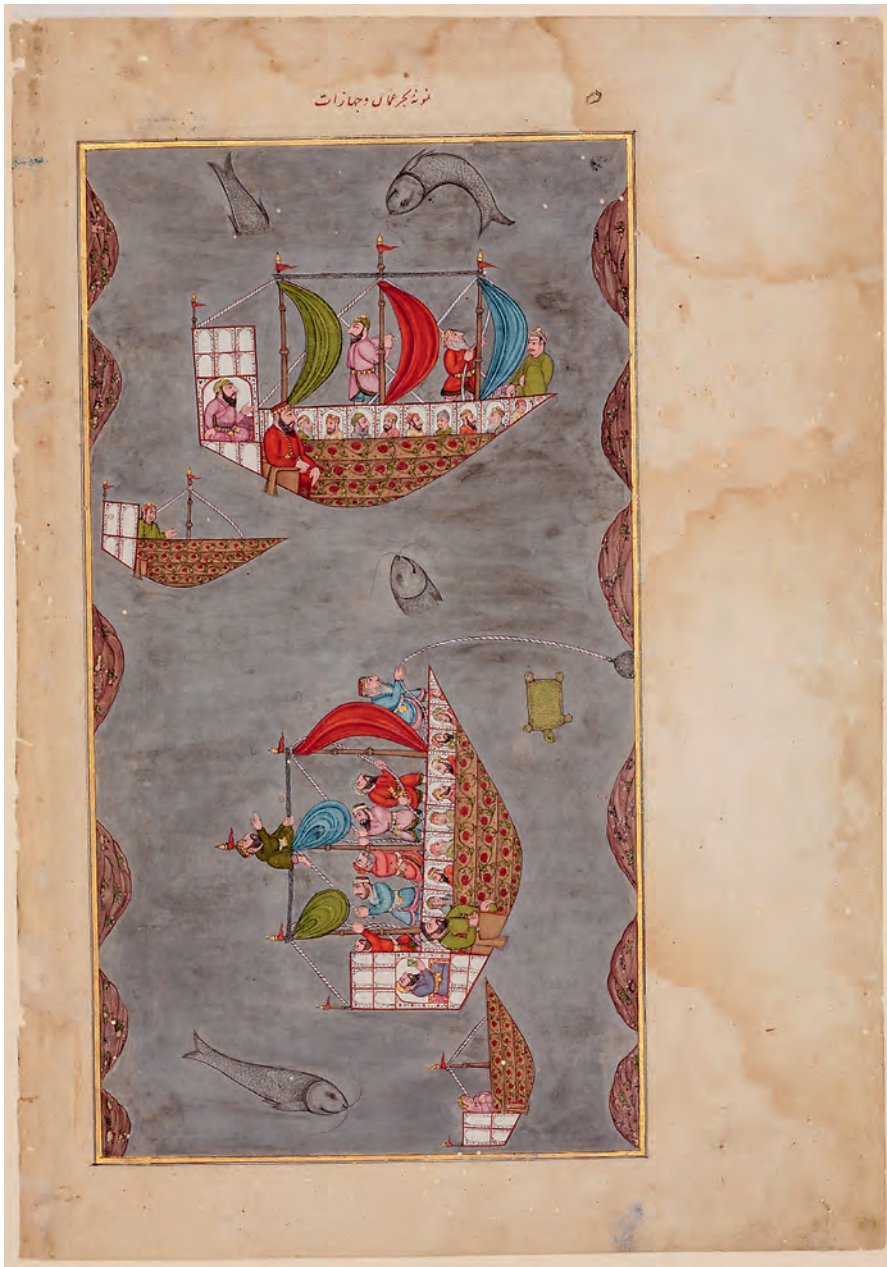
Safi b. Vali's own journey appears to have unfolded within just such a network.

Before leaving for Makkah, he had completed a Qur'anic commentary, *Zeb al-Tafasir*, dedicated to Zeb-un-Nissa, the eldest daughter of Emperor Aurangzeb. Poet, scholar and patron of learning, she was a *hafiza*, or one who has memorized the holy book, and wrote Persian verse under the pen name Makhfi—“the hidden”—and presided over one of the most intellectually vibrant circles at the Mughal court.

Zeb-un-Nissa sponsored Safi b. Vali's pilgrimage, most likely as both an expression of Mughal courtly patronage and a reward for his scholarly service. Khan also suggests another intriguing possibility: that Zeb-un-Nissa may have wished to undertake the Hajj by proxy through a trusted scholar who could perform the pilgrimage and return with a learned and richly illustrated account. “Beyond that,” Khan says, “we can only speculate.”

Long before Safi b. Vali boarded the *Salamat Ras*, Mughal royal women had helped shape that tradition. At its forefront was Bega Begum, wife of the Mughal dynasty's second emperor, Humayun. In 1564-'65 she went on the pilgrimage, returning bestowed with the title Hajji Begum. A decade later a robust all-female group went on Hajj, led by Gulbadan, daughter of Mughal founder Babur and sister of Humayun. Their generosity became so renowned that, as Choudhury says, the distribution of “gifts, charity and alms” by Gulbadan's party provoked intense jealousy from the court of the Ottoman Sultan Murad III, unwilling to share religious prestige with members of a rival dynasty.

“The Mughal harem or *zenana* [the part of the traditional Indian Muslim house reserved for women] broadly included some of the most dynamic patrons and participants of the Hajj from pre-modern India,” Choudhury notes.





Placed alongside Safi b. Vali's account, those journeys reveal something larger than the story of one pilgrim. They reveal an Indian Ocean that connected Mughal India to Makkah through routes of learning, commerce and faith. As Rezavi puts it, "The Hajj was perhaps the single greatest institution binding these regions together."

Ships carried spices and textiles, but they also carried books, scholars, poets, jurists and pilgrims. The voyage was one of the ways the Mughal world believed itself part of a wider Islamic community.

That world might easily have been forgotten were it not for Safi b. Vali's determination to record it.

Turn the pages, and the sea begins to move again. The *Salamat Ras* slips from its moorings. The monsoon gathers in its sails. India recedes into the haze while Makkah still lies beyond the horizon. Around Safi b. Vali, strangers become companions, sharing food and uncertainty as they cross an ocean together.

Three and a half centuries later, the voyage has not ended. It simply continues in another form, carried now by a manuscript that preserves one man's pilgrimage—and an entire Mughal world. **AW**

ABOVE LEFT Ewer, northern India or Deccan, 16th century, MTW 1656

ABOVE RIGHT A monumental planispheric astrolabe made for Shah Jahan, probably the work of Diya' al-Din Muhammad Lahuri, 1648–58, Lahore, SCI 53

LEFT Complete *sitr* for a *maḥmal*, commissioned by Sultan Mahmud II and later reused by Isma'il Pasha, the Khedive of Egypt, Cairo, c. 1808–79, TXT 469



Nilosree Biswas is a columnist, author and filmmaker who writes about Asian history, art, culture, food and cinema. Her articles regularly appear in national and international media.

Author's Corner

Heritage and Human Connection: A Conversation With Nawar Shora

Written by MICHAEL SHAGOURY

What happens when humor becomes a bridge between cultures? For more than two decades, Nawar Shora has used laughter, storytelling and conversation to help audiences discover the unexpected connections among Arab, Muslim and American experiences.

As conversations about identity, belonging and cultural understanding continue to evolve in the United States, we talked with Shora—who was born in Syria and immigrated with his family to the United States as a child—about inherited assumptions, the surprising cultural threads that connect communities and why he believes the most radical thing he can do in a room full of strangers to change perceptions is simply be seen.

Shora, an author, educator and advocate, has spent more than 25 years working to help audiences better understand how Arab, Muslim and Arab American communities are perceived and who they are. His book *Muslims, Arabs & Arab Americans* has become a resource for law enforcement, universities and corporations alike. But it's his seminars—built on humor, personal storytelling and what he calls “infotainment”—that tend to leave a deeper impression.



Muslims, Arabs & Arab Americans

Nawar Shora.
Cune Press, 2024.

When people first encounter Arab or Muslim communities, what tends to shape that initial understanding most?

It's the media. I was a journalism major before I went to law school, and I still believe to this day it is the biggest shaper of perceptions and misperceptions. I hear people say, “Everything I learned about Islam, I learned from Jack Bower in the TV series ‘24.’” I am immediately like, “Sit down. Let's talk.” I see that in my seminars, specifically for law enforcement national security attendees.

I was teaching a group of officers two years ago on the northern [US] border and an instructor—the equivalent of SWAT—walked up to me, shook my hand, and he's like, “This class is nothing like I thought it was going to be. Thank you. I learned so much.” That anecdote happens time and time again.

Where do people most often discover unexpected connections with Arab and Muslim cultures?

Culture overall. It's just that we don't learn about it. My natural instinct is to bond with people. I love telling people that we have a



thousand words in English derived from Arabic. I love telling Spanish speakers that about 3,000 Spanish words are also from Arabic because we were all the same people for 800 years in Spain. People are shocked to find that out.

Mandingo [West Africa's Mandinka] people, while not Arab, were Muslim. And many of the slaves [in the United States], though they were not Arab, spoke Arabic because many of them were Muslim. Arabic was used as a secret language to plan slave revolts. And so I say that to people and they're like, "Oh my god, now there's a bond. Now I see me in you." And I'm a big fan of seeing people and being seen.

All I'm saying is just see me, and I want to see you. I've said it for 25 years. Our greatest challenge in society is lack of trust. And we get to lack of trust through lack of communication and lack of understanding. You flip all those elements into the positive, and the formula is so simple.

What makes your seminars resonate with so many audiences?

So, the content is easy. Here are the countries. Here's the geography. Here are cultural norms. What makes this a winner is humor. Time and

A 1975 gathering of Arab Americans in Detroit, in the US state of Michigan. Nawar Shora reflects on why personal stories and shared experiences resonate more deeply than facts alone.

again people say, "You take a topic that is intimidating, that is foreign to me, that is frankly mysterious and scary, and you disarm it with humor." I use personal stories. I use a lot of humor. I use a lot of self-deprecations. I call myself an Arab redneck.

When I explain that I grew up in Syria and I grew up in West Virginia, all of a sudden, people are like, "Wow, you just blew away everything I was expecting to hear." So, I pride myself on it being almost infotainment.

What have those conversations taught you about people?

People aren't often malicious. Yes, there's hate and there's fear and all that, but in most cases, people learn. When I tell people I was born in Syria, they're like, "Oh, you speak such good English." I'm like, "Thanks. I've been here 40 years." Or I tell people I'm Muslim, and they're like, "But you're not an extremist." I'm like, "No, of the 1.8 billion Muslims in the world, most aren't."

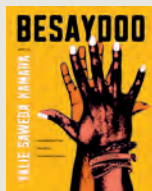
After all these years, what have you learned about changing perceptions?

Helping people see that we are not what they think. I'm a big superhero fan. If you recall, in the first "X-Men," Professor X says, "We are not what you think." I remember watching that thinking, "We're not what you think. ... That's true for Arabs, Arab Americans and Muslims, too."

People walk up to me expecting an accent. ... They're expecting some rich guy driving a Bentley. ... I'm like, "I have a Subaru." I may not have claws that come out of my hands, and I may be a superhero only in my own head, but we're not what they think. And in most cases, we're better.

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Reviews

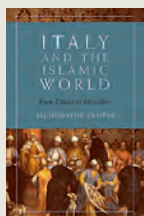


Besaydoo: Poems

Yalie Saweda Kamara. Milkweed Editions, 2024.

Yalie Saweda Kamara's third collection, *Besaydoo: Poems*, winner of the Jake Adam York Prize, takes readers on an evocative journey through her experiences as a child of African immigrants navigating life in the United States and Sierra Leone. Comprising 51 poems, the collection explores the complexities of identity, culture and belonging, particularly through the lens of a Black woman moving between two worlds. Kamara's command of language and metaphor draws readers into a deeply personal landscape where her specific memories resonate with universal emotional power. In poems like "Space," she reflects on how growing up in an immigrant family shaped her understanding of herself, including the impact of misspelling her own name and the resulting questions of identity. "Eating Malombo Fruit in Freetown, 1989," captures the elusive nature of memory and experience as Kamara recounts choking on a malombo fruit pit during a childhood visit to Sierra Leone, a memory her sister insists did not belong to her. The title poem, "Besaydoo," centers on a tender family moment in which Kamara's mother mishears a casual phrase between teenagers and transforms it into a cherished expression. The phrase becomes especially meaningful as the family faces life's challenges, including illness.

More than a memoir in verse, *Besaydoo* is a meditation on memory, cultural expectations and the immigrant experience. Each reading reveals new layers of meaning, making the collection both intellectually engaging and emotionally resonant long after the final page. —DIANNA WRAY



Italy and the Islamic World: From Caesar to Mussolini

Ali Humayun Akhtar. Edinburgh University Press, 2024.

How deeply has Italy's history been shaped by the Islamic world? That question anchors Ali Humayun Akhtar's sweeping study, which argues that centuries of exchange across the Mediterranean forged the foundations of modern Europe. Dividing his book by geography and era, Akhtar sails through nearly 2,000 years—from the Roman Empire to World War II—with the ease of the Italian ships that once crossed the "middle sea." He traces shifting centers of power from Rome to Constantinople (Istanbul) and follows how medieval Sicily and Italy's coastal regions traded with, or were ruled by, Muslim states. By the 15th century CE, the Italian Renaissance owed much of its brilliance—and the wealth that sustained it—to goods, ideas and expertise arriving from North Africa and southwestern Asia. Glassmaking, gunpowder and rediscovered classical and Arabic texts transformed Italy into a cosmopolitan contact. By situating Italy within its Mediterranean and Islamic contexts, Akhtar powerfully reshapes how we see its past. The second half of the book follows Italian communities in Istanbul; Alexandria, Egypt; and colonial Tripoli, modern-day Libya; and their return to Italy after the 1950s. Their legacy survives through figures like Italian actress Claudia Cardinale, born in Tunis in then French Tunisia, whose fame embodies the intertwined identities Akhtar restores to view. *Italy and the Islamic World* ultimately reminds readers that Europe's story was never self-contained—it has always crossed the sea. —CHRISTINA RIGGS



Food for Sharing: Love and Spices From an Immigrant Kitchen

Ashia Ismail-Singer. Ph. Lottie Hedley. Interlink Books, 2025.

Being an immigrant often comes with an expectation of preserving one's culinary heritage, along with developing curiosity about the foods and markets encountered along the way. *Food for Sharing* (the US title for *The Laden Table*), Ashia Ismail-Singer's third recipe collection, draws on her Indian heritage, upbringing in Malawi and subsequent life in England and New Zealand, as well as influences from her extended family in France and the Arabic-speaking world. In her new cookbook, Ismail-Singer, a former nurse with a passion for simple food, pairs her recipes with her life memoirs: learning her mother's famous biryani or sharing corn masala at family firepit evenings. Ismail-Singer steers away from classifying the dishes by region, instead grouping them by social occasions, such as breakfasts, picnics or festive feasts. To her, family gatherings are about mixing recipes from different regions and cultures, so by organizing the book this way, she presents food as a means of connecting with those cultures around the table. With so many cookbooks competing for attention, *Food for Sharing* stands out by offering a broader portrait of an immigrant kitchen shaped by mobility and exchange rather than strict authenticity. In the kitchen and between the pages of a cookbook, Ismail-Singer disrupts the idea of a singular isolated cuisine, creating one that spans geography.

—AIBARSHYN AKHMETKALI

*"Every element of this book
is a fusion of flavors and cultures,
overflowing with the joy of sharing food,
gathered together with loved ones."*

—*Food for Sharing*

Without endorsing the views of authors, the editors encourage reading as a path to greater understanding.

Reviews

Collection Covers Nile Delta's Long, Underappreciated History

Written by CHRISTINA RIGGS

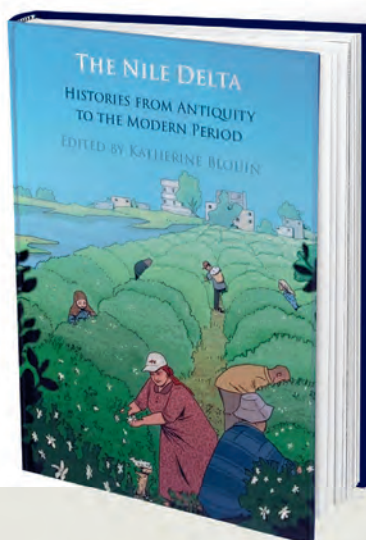
If Egypt—as Herodotus said—is the gift of the Nile, the Nile Delta is more than a decorative bow. With rich farmland, marshes, waterways and lagoons, its deep green fan spreads toward the Mediterranean from a point just north of Cairo. For millennia, it has been a crossroads of coast, desert and Nile valley, opening Egypt out in each direction.

Renewed with silt each year, until the Aswan High Dam put a stop to annual floods, the delta was crucial to Egyptian agriculture: food crops, flax for oil and linen, or cotton in modern times. Today, it is a flashpoint for changes in the climate, as the sea encroaches and farmers contend with depleted soil.

Given its importance, why is the delta so little visited or studied compared to the rest of Egypt? In this edited volume, ancient historian Katherine Blouin asks 18 scholars from a variety of disciplines to address this oversight. Chapters cover ancient Egypt, the Greek, Roman and Byzantine eras, the Arab conquest and medieval period, as well as Ottoman rule and European colonialism.

The delta was a place of regeneration and a certain mystery, thanks to the difficulty outsiders had navigating its web of canals and marshes. In ancient myth, it is where the goddess Isis goes to hide with her infant son, Horus. But whenever would-be conquerors set their sights—and armies—on Egypt, the delta's strategic

position made it a key area to control. The famous port city of Alexandria is the focus of one chapter; another looks at the challenges of mapping the delta, using 18th-century French examples. By the late 19th century, Egypt's first railroad cut travel time between Alexandria and Cairo from days to hours, and tourist guidebooks treated the delta as a literal backwater to move through without stopping. Archeologists first explored the region in hopes of finding places mentioned in the Bible. One of the most interesting chapters uses the archives of British Egyptologist W. M. Flinders Petrie to identify dozens of Egyptian women and girls he hired as excavators between the 1880s and 1920s, especially in the delta. At Tanis, site of a major ancient city, one girl was so eager to work that she gave her father's name instead of her own. Petrie knew she wasn't a boy, and snapped her picture, but he never recorded her real name. She is "Mohammed Hassan," a fitting face today for the resilience of the delta and its people.



The Nile Delta: Histories From Antiquity to the Modern Period.

Edited by Katherine Blouin.
Cambridge University Press, 2024

"The Delta is undoubtedly the most difficult part of Egypt to map."

—The Nile Delta

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Events



Installation view
of the exhibition
space for the film.
© Wael Shawky

Filmmaker Shawky Delves Into Humanity's Construction of Origin Stories

What is one thing people around the world share? We all rely on storytelling to define—and redefine—our cultural identities. Renowned artist and filmmaker Wael Shawky's *I Am Hymns of the New Temples* reinterprets shared creation myths and theatrical traditions to explore our need to make sense of the world through storytelling, and the way our narratives are adapted and reshaped for national purposes.

Shawky set most of the Arabic-language film among the ruins of Pompeii in modern Italy, where actors in ceramic and papier-mâché masks move through the ruins of the ancient crossroads of exchange among Egyptian, Greek and Roman cultures. In restaging traditional stories and historical events, the artist—who

also wrote the 57-minute film's score—challenges dominant interpretations of history, according to M+, the film's current host venue.

"The exhibition reminds us how the simplest and most effective way of bringing us together are the stories that we imagine, tell and listen to," says Silke Schmickl, Chanel senior curator, head of Moving Image for M+. "Stories are a space for imagination and truth, full of potential for changing our perspective on the world."

The film by Shawky, who exhibited at Desert X AIUla 2020 in Saudi Arabia and represented his native Egypt at the 2024 Venice Biennale, is a timely example of cross-cultural dialogue by one of the world's highly regarded and award-winning contemporary artists, Schmickl notes. "At a moment [when] we witness major global geopolitical shifts, the work powerfully evokes the larger cycles of an interconnected and shared humanity."

► M+, Hong Kong, through October 25, 2026.

Highlights from [AramcoWorld.com](https://aramcoworld.com). Please verify a venue's schedule before visiting.

Current / September

Unearthing Vindolanda: Footwear From the Edge of the Roman Empire uncovers over 100 footwear-related artifacts from Vindolanda, a Roman auxiliary fort and settlement just south of Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland, England. On view for the first time in North America, these remarkable objects are part of the Frontiers of the Roman Empire UNESCO World Heritage Site, which is renowned for its ongoing archeological excavations, providing unprecedented accounts of life at the edge of the Roman Empire.

► Bata Shoe Museum, **Toronto**, through September 2027.

BELOW The uppers from this military boot are a style known as "fishnet" because of the many small holes punched into the leather to create a decorative pattern, c. 100-105 CE.



Current / November

Uzbekistan: Heritage in Motion presents the Islamic heritage of the country from the introduction of Islam in Central Asia until the present day, showing how Uzbekistan's identity has built itself firmly on its Islamic legacy. Partnering with the Art and Culture Development Fund of Uzbekistan, the Museum of Islamic Art's exhibition is the latest to promote the art and culture of Uzbekistan on the international stage.

► Museum of Islamic Art, **Doha**, September 3-November 28.

Coming / October

The 19th annual Atlanta Arab Festival (AAF) draws attendees reflecting the diversity of the Atlanta metropolitan area and beyond. The AAF supports Arab American artists, artisans and businesses. Adults and children alike enjoy the delicious food, the unique performances, the rich cultural exhibits and workshops, engaging in games and activities and a real taste of Arab cultures.

► Alif Institute, **Atlanta**, October 3 and October 4.

Angels & Mara examines the tensions between good and evil, compassion and conflict through contemporary art inspired by religious, philosophical and cultural traditions. Featuring works by Thai and international artists—including "Here Is Brick," a video installation by Mahtab Hussain and Guy Gunaratne that explores 30 years of British South Asian and Muslim experience—the Bangkok Art Biennale reflects on the social, political and spiritual challenges shaping the modern world.

► Bangkok, Thailand, October 29 through February 28, 2027.

Archeology of Libya on Display

Libya, A Revealed Heritage presents 10 archaeological sites spanning the country's history from prehistoric through medieval times. Through photographs and videos, the exhibition highlights the work of the French Archaeological Mission in Libya, showcasing the diversity of the country's heritage and the challenges of preservation and restoration.

► Institut du Monde Arabe, **Paris**, through October 20.

LEFT Roman baths of Apollonia, Trajanic period



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What's Online?



Venice Biennale: Three Pavilions Keeping Cultural Heritage Alive

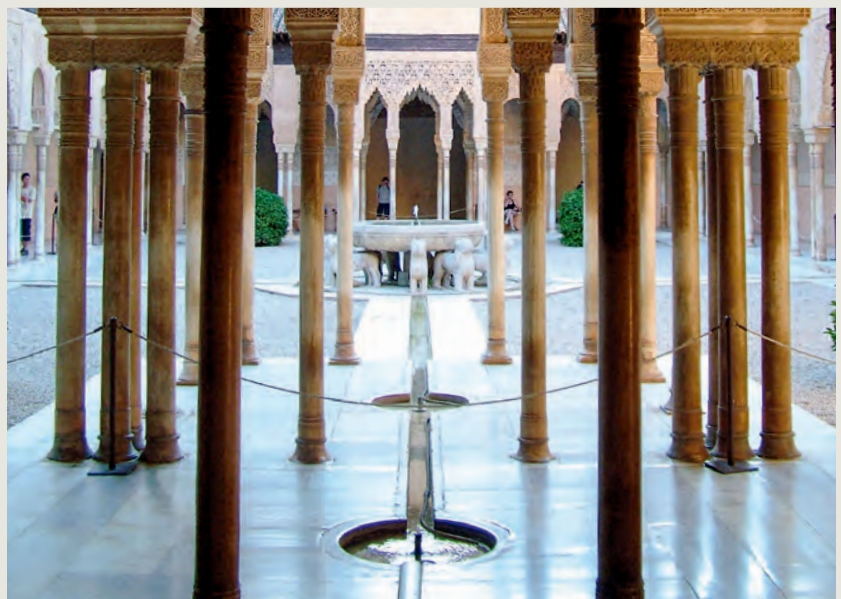
At the 61st Venice Art Biennale, artists from Saudi Arabia, France and Morocco—debuting its first national pavilion—explore the preservation of intangible and tangible culture via works in textiles and clay.

Momma's Maqluba: From Damascus to My Alabama Table

This recipe shows how a homey lamb and rice dish from the Levant became this writer's family story in the US state of Alabama, one generation at a time.

Learning Center

How can one village inspire the world? Learning Center explores how literature and cultural heritage foster understanding across borders.



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Quiz

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Which project is by Antoni Gaudí, the late visionary architect who embraced Islamic design elements in some of his works?



A

King Abdulaziz Palace
in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia



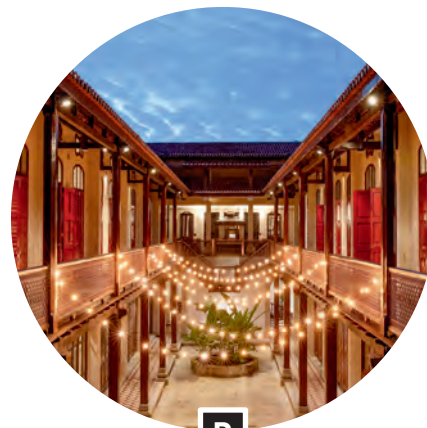
B

Decapolis in modern-day Jordan



C

Sagrada Família in Barcelona, Spain



D

Seven Terraces Hotel
in George Town, Malaysia

Answer: C. One hundred years after Gaudí's death, the Sagrada Família rises toward completion, echoing his fascination with Andalusí palace arches, mosques' filtered light and imagined church spires of Tangier, Morocco. Read more at AramcoWorld.com.



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ABOVE The neck of a saz (detail), a stringed instrument used in traditional folk music, including *sevdalinka*. *Read more on page 16*



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