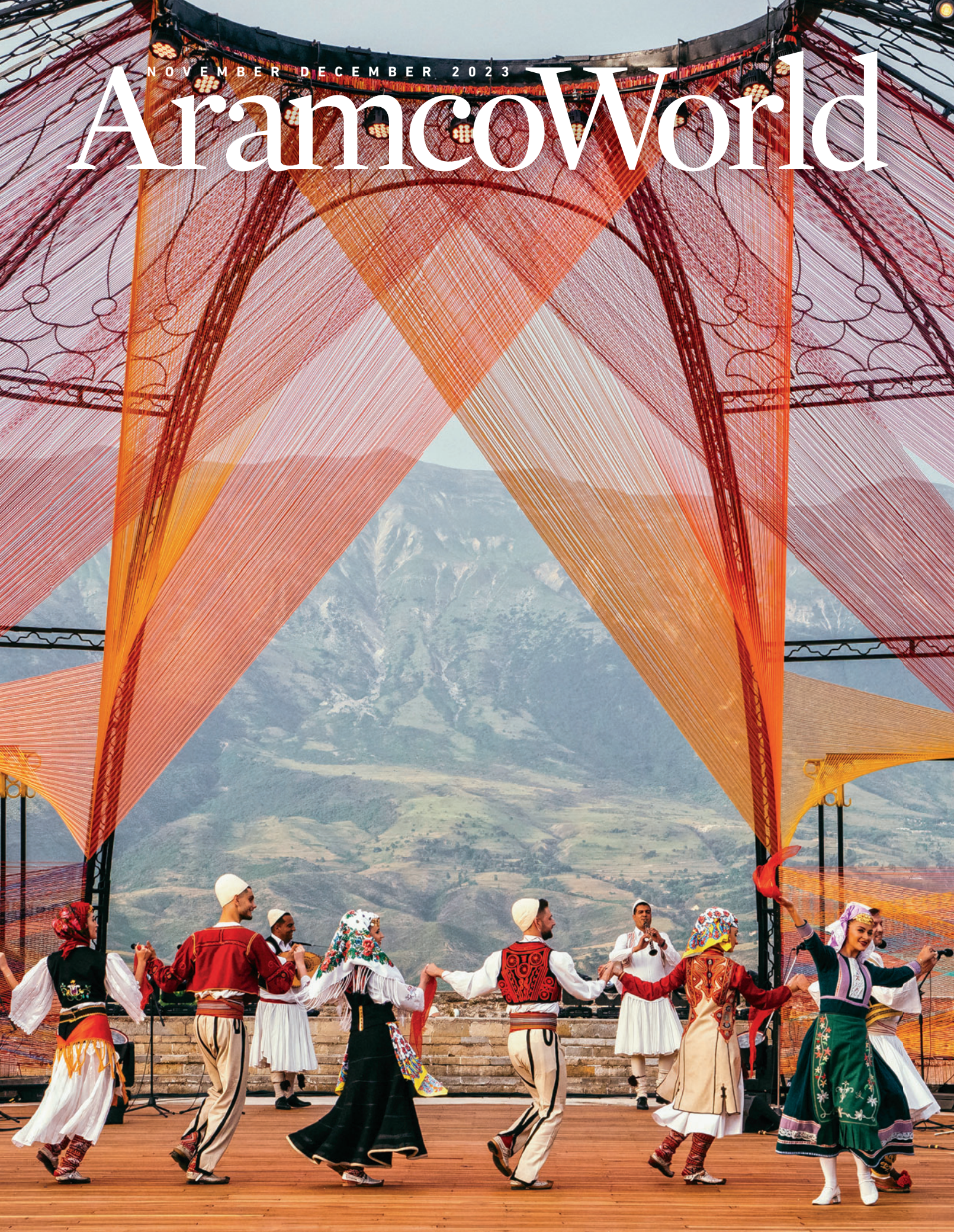
NOVEMBER DECEMBER 2023

AramcoWorld



For centuries iso-polyphony, a style of folk singing, has chronicled Albanian life. The songs are part of a rich tradition, vital to weddings, funerals, harvests, festivals and other social events. Indeed, a Ministry of Culture official dubs it "the autobiography of a nation," a means for the preservation and transmission of different stories. To this day iso-polyphony reflects its origins: Illyrian shepherds and farmers, from whom Albanians descend, communicated by hollering across valleys of the eastern Balkans. Albania's lofty topography served to protect the art form from the cultural impacts of lowland invaders. Recently, crowds gathered for the National Folklore Festival in the ancient "stone city" of Gjirokastër, in southwestern Albania, demonstrating that interest in iso-polyphony remains high. And yet, with record numbers of youth leaving the country or showing little interest in the tradition if they remain, iso-polyphony's future is uncertain. The challenge is getting younger generations to engage with the singing style and appreciate its history. Some are taking up the call.

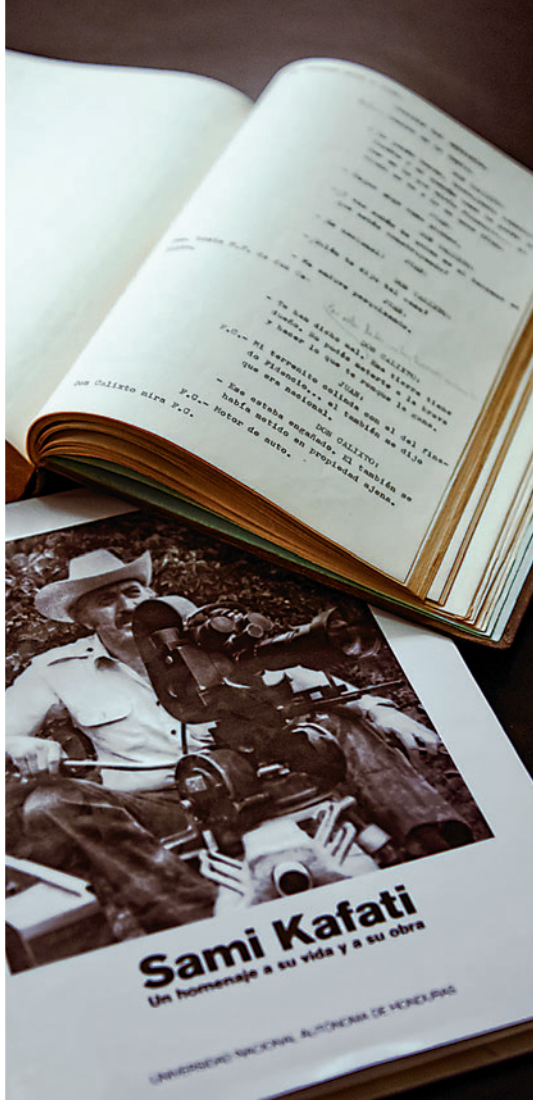
AramcoWorld
NOVEMBER / DECEMBER 2023 | VOL. 74, NO. 6

aramcoworld.com

We distribute *AramcoWorld* in print and online to increase cross-cultural understanding by broadening knowledge of the histories, cultures and geography of the Arab and Muslim worlds and their global connections.

FRONT COVER The music that spills from the stage at Gjirokastër, Albania's 13th-century-CE fortress on the opening night of the National Folklore festival has changed little over centuries. Today's performers of iso-polyphony are working to preserve the singing tradition. Photo by Ilir Tsouko.

BACK COVER Legendary filmmaker Sami Kafati used a Bolex H16 Reflex 16mm camera to shoot Honduras' first narrative film, *Mi Amigo Ángel*. His camera and footage are now housed at Cinemateca Enrique Ponce Garay in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Photo by Meridith Kohut.



40 EVENTS **Online LEARNING CENTER**

Publisher: Aramco Americas | President and CEO: Nabeel I. AlAfaleg | Director, Public Affairs: Hatem Alfayez | Editor: Johnny Hanson | Senior Editor: Amra Pasic | Associate Editor: Alva Robinson | Assistant Editor / Social Media Editor: Sarah Taqvi | Visuals Editor: Waleed Dashash | Copy Editor: Suzanne Garofalo | Administration: Sarah Miller | Print design: Graphic Engine Design | Printing: RR Donnelley / Wetmore | Web design: eSiteful Corporation

Subscribe online: aramcoworld.com

Subscription services: aramcoworld@sfsdayton.com or P.O. Box 292348, Kettering, Ohio 45429 USA

Editorial: editor@aramcoamericas.com or P.O. Box 2106, Houston, Texas 77252-2106, USA

ISSN: 2376-1083

aramco

6: ILIR TSOUKO; 16: PHOTO COURTESY OF MANGA PRODUCTIONS; 22: PETER GOULD; 28: MERIDITH KOHUT

FIRST LOOK

Ramadan Picnic

Photograph by Zoshia Minto

On a warm June evening, people gathered at a park in Bethesda, Maryland, for a community pot-luck dinner welcoming the start of Ramadan. This image is part of a project called Everyday American Muslim, documenting the daily life of Muslims in the US. As part of an effort to share what I see and experience as a practicing Muslim and an American, it challenges some of the stereotypes prevalent in mainstream media, including the notion that one cannot be both Muslim and American.

A lot of the images in this project depict Muslims practicing their faith. Many more also show experiences that we collectively share in daily life. At this event there was a father carrying his son; children and adults roasting hot dogs, corn and marshmallows over an open fire; people mingling at a buffet table while enjoying a variety of food; children chasing each other, laughing and playing games.

Rather than focusing on differences in culture and faith, my hope is that anyone looking at these images of everyday moments can find something that feels familiar, that connects all of us as people.

—Zoshia Minto

@zoshiaminto
@everydayamericanmuslim

www.zoshiaminto.com

Hais (Desert Energy Balls)

Recipe by Sarah al-Hamad

Photograph by Kate Whitaker

Al-Baghdadi wrote his hit medieval cookbook *Kitab al-Tabikh* (*Book of Dishes*) in 1226 CE at the height of Abbasid sophistication and power. It included this recipe for *hais* or date sweetmeats.

The dish has a long and illustrious history; it was thought even the Prophet Muhammad enjoyed it. More importantly, this simple no-bake, one-bite dessert was said to "fortify the traveler" in the days when travels, especially the arduous journey to the Hajj, were often perilous. The original recipe says to "make into cabobs," which I took to mean small balls, but you could roll into finger-shaped sweetmeats or spread the mixture onto a baking sheet and cut into squares. Any which way, they are yummy and energizing.

(Makes 10-15 balls)

- 150 grams (50 ounces) dates, roughly chopped
- 50 grams (2 ounces) almonds
- 50 grams (2 ounces) pistachios
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil, plus extra to bind
- Handful toasted sesame seeds, dried shredded/desiccated coconut or chopped pistachios

Whiz the dates, almonds, pistachios and oil together in a food processor until ground and the mixture is resembling breadcrumbs.

Tip into a large bowl and shape into balls roughly the size of a walnut (they don't need to be the same size). If still crumbly, dab your palm with a little vegetable oil to help bind the mixture. Place the balls in the fridge to set.

To finish, roll each ball in sesame seeds, coconut or pistachio slivers, if desired—the options are endless.

Reprinted with permission from

Sun Bread and Sticky Toffee: Date Desserts from Everywhere

Sarah al-Hamad.
Interlink Books, 2013.
interlinkbooks.com.

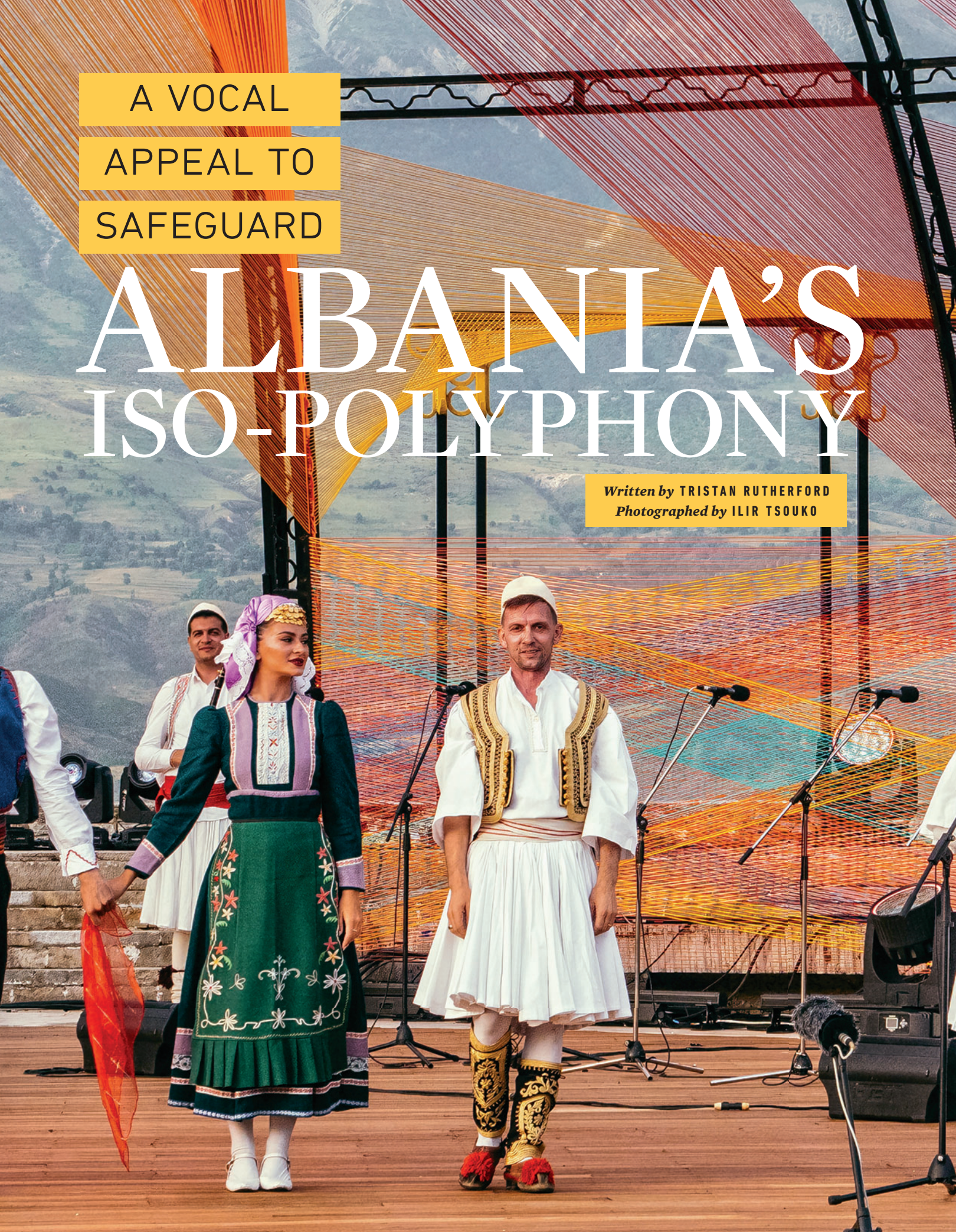
Sarah al-Hamad grew up in Kuwait and lives in London. She worked as an editor for Saqi Books and is the author of several cookbooks, including the award-winning *Cardamom and Lime: Recipes from the Arabian Gulf*. She recently completed her master's degree in creative nonfiction at the University of East Anglia.

KATE WHITAKER

A VOCAL APPEAL TO SAFEGUARD

ALBANIA'S ISO-POLYPHONY

Written by TRISTAN RUTHERFORD
Photographed by ILIR TSOUKO



As dusk begins to settle into the night, Arian Shehu dons his gold-trimmed waistcoat and century-old iron belt, minutes before taking the stage and kicking off his country's largest folk festival. With everything in place, Shehu, known as the godfather of iso-polyphonic singing, strides onto the stage to a wave of applause from the mostly Albanian opening-night audience. Shehu opens with the thunderous notes of a folk song that he later says can be traced back more than 2,500 years. Soon, eight other singers clustered around him join in. The ensuing group chant is captured and shared by a thousand smartphones held aloft in Gjirokastër's 13th-century fortress.

"When I sing with my soul and it goes well, I tear up," Shehu says.

More than 1,200 artists and thousands of folk-music lovers travel across the globe to attend the 2023 National Folklore Festival, an eight-day celebration of Albanian iso-polyphony and other folk music that is held in Gjirokastër, the ancient "stone city" in southern Albania, every five years. Due to COVID-19, it has been eight years since the last festival. The audience buzzes with excitement.

Yet backstage a threat hangs in the air. This music that records Albania's history is being forgotten by younger generations who continue to leave the country in record numbers or who show little interest in learning from Shehu and other celebrated artists, even if they do stay in Albania.

This must change, says Vasil Tole, an Albanian composer and ethnomusicologist who doubles as head of Albania's Department of Cultural Heritage in the Ministry of Culture. Otherwise, these societal songs that have been "the autobiography of a nation" may pass into oblivion, he warns.

Shehu and other musicians share Tole's concern.

The interest is there, Tole says. The challenge is getting the younger generations to not only enjoy the music but to engage with it and learn its history. "Our songs record profound things in life like lamentation, respect for the dead, love, emigration and heroes," says Tole. "Polyphony is vital to Albanian culture."

Backstage, a festival organizer yells "*pesë minuta!*"—five minutes—as a young female group of about 20 races to pull on gold-trimmed boots, blood-red headscarves and floral petticoats that

OPPOSITE Known as the "godfather" of iso-polyphonic singing, Arian Shehu first took the stage at the National Folklore Festival in Gjirokastër, Albania, in 1978. As YouTube and TikTok proliferate across the music world, he hopes the style of harmonizing won't be lost. **ABOVE** A group from the Albanian minority in Montenegro waits at the Castle of Gjirokastër on opening night of the festival. Ethnic Albanians made the trip to either perform or watch from Kosovo, North Macedonia, Greece and other countries.

took 12 months to embroider. When the women gather on the stage, they, too, are greeted by hundreds of cellphones held aloft. These recordings will soon be uploaded, shared and even remixed by Albanian enthusiasts here and around the world.

This unique singing style consists of a lead singer calling out a sort of recitative and two-, three- and four-part harmonizing around him. Historians believe this tradition dates back to the Illyrians, an Iron Age society that inhabited the western Balkan Peninsula for more than a thousand years. "The hypothesis is that iso-polyphony predates the Romans or any other of Albania's many invaders," Tole says.

Over the centuries, Illyrian shepherds and farmers, from whom Albanians descend, honed the craft. They would holler across valleys of the eastern Balkans, covering much of present-day Albania and bordering Greece, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro. The group's iso-polyphonic chant is initiated by the "starter," or *ia merr*, who passes her tune to a second singer known as a "turner," creating a harmonious polyphony. She "turns" her solo to a third "thrower," or a fourth or fifth shepherd who would join in the *iso*, or drone, which completes a pitch-perfect note struck by a backing ensemble.

Nature evolved the music further. Harmonies mirrored gushing rivers. Iso drones mimicked thunder. Cowbells copied the sound of grazing animals. Although iso-polyphony predates musical instruments and uses a pentatonic scale, the simplest five-note schema, their slow introduction—including bagpipes, accordion and violin—added extra "voices" to the mix over the centuries. "The instruments generally imitate sounds from nature," explains Tole.

Albania's lofty topography served to protect the art form from the cultural impacts of lowland invaders, while further influencing the style. For example, singers from mountainous areas like Gjirokastër tend to influence the style with louder and deeper tones that help the melody carry farther. And vocalists from seaside destinations like Vlorë, Albania's third-largest city, tend to sing at a quieter yet higher pitch.

Before Albanian written history, a recent occurrence, iso-polyphony became a millennia-old chronicle as the songs were vital to weddings, funerals, harvests, festivals and other social events. "It served as a means for the preservation and transmission of different stories, tales, narratives," Tole says. "For example, some Muslims sing the history of their religion in polyphonic songs."

After Europe's strictest form of communism took hold in

ABOVE Shkelqim Beshiraj, far right, gives instruction to his group, whose members have spent the past four years rehearsing for the festival. Beshiraj, who is in his 70s, has racked up 1.5 million views on his official YouTube page. **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Thirteen-year-old Orion Demirxhiu is taking up the mantle of iso-polyphony for the next generation; Ilir Loku, 40, wears a traditional costume and carries a broadsword; young women, both singers and dancers from the Albanian minority in Montenegro, take part in the tradition pastime; and dancer Flavio Xhafer, 22, is performing at his third festival as part of the Albanian National Ensemble. "It's my passion to present my nation," he says.

Albania, with a communist government ruling the country from 1946 to 1991, iso-polyphony became even more popular. Authorities deemed singing folk music a positive national pastime while banning foreign music—alongside beards, long hair, overseas travel and Western movies. For decades the capital's music station, Radio Tirana, played only traditional Albanian music. In a land devoid of The Rolling Stones and Bon Jovi, iso-polyphony thrived.

Shehu made his performing debut at the Gjirokastër National Folklore Festival in 1978 at age 16. Born in Gjirokastër, Shehu was inspired to take up singing by his mother and father (his father was also a singer of some repute). The experience of standing onstage that day transformed the then-teen's life, when all the hours of listening and harmonizing with other singers in his community really paid off. "At the castle of Gjirokastër, for me, it was a special moment," Shehu recalls. "Since then, I never missed any festival."

Communism collapsed in Albania in 1992, sparking a cataclysmic revolution. The effect on iso-polyphony was twofold. "Teenagers could suddenly listen to any pop music," remembers Edit Pula, a music producer and artistic director who grew up under communist rule. Though iso-polyphony had been used for two millennia, it vanished from [Albanians'] ears. "We even danced to Arabian music—anything that was different," she says.

In post-communist Albania, the youngest of Albania's three million population went abroad to find work. According to the United Nations International Organization for Migration, by the following decade, more than 700,000 Albanians had emigrated.

At the same time, long-standing singing ensembles separated, music schools shut down and even teaching methods started to be forgotten. "Our system broke along with all our industries," Pula says. "There was a bit of a gap where youngsters didn't understand or care about iso-polyphony."

> "There was a bit of a gap where youngsters didn't understand or care about iso-polyphony."
>
> — EDIT PULA

The fight to safeguard iso-polyphony began in the mid-2000s. Realizing the form was in decline,

With its ancient stone houses and narrow, winding streets, Gjirokastër, in southern Albania, is often called the "City of Stone." It's recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its unique blend of Ottoman and Albanian architecture and was, at various times, also occupied by Greeks, Romans and Byzantines, with each of these cultures leaving their mark.

Tole prepared a dossier comprising every facet of the music style, from its techniques to its history, helping secure a place for Albanian iso-polyphony on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list by 2008. He compares it to jazz in America. "Both are communal forms of improvisatory music," he says.

The UNESCO status raised the music's profile, and soon tourists began showing up in towns specializing in iso-polyphony. "When foreign tourists come and visit Butrint or Gjirokastër," only an hour's drive apart, explains Tole, "what do they ask to see? A group of polyphonic singers."

At the same time, the advent of YouTube, smartphones and other technological innovations made it possible for anyone to begin preserving the music. Streaming has evolved the art electronically, with Albanian deejays like RDN mixing ambient dance beats to help modernize and popularize iso-polyphony tracks for a lost generation. This practice is not without controversy, however. "Iso-polyphony is the voice of our ancestors," warns Tole, "so you can't kick it too much."

While deejays are remixing, others like septuagenarian singer Shkelqim Beshiraj have begun uploading YouTube videos of

In an effort to preserve this traditional musical style—and make it accessible outside of the opportunity that the festival provides—a museum, **TOP**, dedicated to iso-polyphony recently opened in Gjirokastër, in a network of Cold War-era bunkers below the city's 18th century Bazaar Mosque. Visitors can stroll and learn about the art form and its history, **BOTTOM**, via a tunnel that streams iso-polyphonic tunes into a chamber that allows them to absorb not only the sound, but the feel of the music.

themselves bellowing from rural mountaintops, with some logging as many as 1 million views. He traveled from Italy, where he is based, to join the 2023 Gjirokastër festival. "This year is the biggest festival yet," he says.

Orion Demirxhiu, aged 13, also records videos of himself performing and looks forward to his own performance at the festival later in the evening. "This tradition is important," asserts Demirxhiu, who claims that iso-polyphony beats Netflix any day. "Every time we go on a family gathering, in a car or a cafe, we always sing the most beautiful songs you've ever heard."

Pula, the music producer, presides over the most recent beacon of hope. In 2022, she opened an iso-polyphony museum beneath Gjirokastër's Bazaar Mosque, an 18th-century mosque that sits directly below the castle alongside a network of subterranean Cold War-era bunkers. One section has been turned into a sound tunnel that streams iso-polyphonic tunes into a dark, dank chamber. The museum and its tunnels are all part of her quest to spark people's interest by making music more accessible.

Pula admits that preserving the traditional musical style remains a challenge. "Twenty-year-olds are streaming what's in fashion like Dua Lipa," the British-Albanian pop star whose Kosovo Albanian parents fled the Balkans in 1992. Meanwhile, the

> "This tradition is important. Every time we go on a family gathering, in a car or a cafe, we always sing the most beautiful songs you've ever heard."
>
> — ORION DEMIRXHIU

songs of Shehu and other master singers are on a few youngsters' playlists. Pula hopes at least her visitors "come out of the museum knowing an Iso-polyphony for Dummies."

Of course, not everyone is positive about the music's digital evolution. One of the principal themes of iso-polyphony is expressing lamentations for times gone by. For some, even the videos proliferating online signal something has already been lost.

As Gjirokastër prepares for night two of the festival, Shehu is in a lamentable mood. Sitting on his balcony terrace looking across to the Gjirokastër fortress, he explains the sorrowful expression of iso-polyphony comes out of life experiences. "Perhaps you're at a wedding," he says. But instead of lyricizing happy thoughts, "you see a mother crying as her daughter moves to a new home. Everyone who feels their soul can write verses."

The pairing of modern music with iso-polyphony distresses Shehu. In 2023, the grand master came across a TikTok video

After the pandemic extended the time between festivals from five to eight years, participants and tourists came from far and wide to experience this year's National Folklore Festival in Gjirokastër, a weekend of color, song, dance and rhythm.

through one of his daughters (two of his other children have emigrated to the US) that spliced his songs with contemporary beats. "The new generation hears remixes and copies things," he says. "I dedicated my life to creating 500 new pieces of music. This next generation is copying, not creating."

So, the art, as Shehu sees it, cannot develop via technology alone. But it continues on in other ways.

In the Gjirokastër fortress, Ilir Loku is warming up for night two of the festival. He is dressed like a handsome brigand from Hollywood's central casting and carries a broadsword and a bow. Aged 40, Loku is part of the roughly 30,000-strong Albanian diaspora in Montenegro, where his ethnic group once faced discrimination. This only made Loku and the other

Visitors to the folklore festival use the old stones as perches to get a view of the action on stage during the opening performances at dusk. The city of Gjirokastër's name is derived from the Albanian word "kala," meaning "castle," and it is home to a 13th-century fortress that sits atop a hill overlooking the city.

performers in his troupe more determined to preserve the tradition. "We could only sing these songs at home," he says. "People fought for us to wear these costumes."

Kristaq Gerveni, a 64-year-old submariner from the city of Vlorë, some 130 kilometers northwest of Gjirokastër, has experienced firsthand how this music survives in the Albanian diaspora. His family originated in the Korçë region, along the Albania-Greece border, he says, before his Aromanian-speaking community was deported during a Balkan conflict over two centuries ago. Twenty family members are present this evening, with several about to go onstage. The reason is simple: "Our iso-polyphonic songs are in the language of our ancestors."

Near midnight an impromptu group unites in song outside Gjirokastër mosque. After the starter and turner sing the polyphonic verses, anyone can join in the chorus, even if they don't know the words. "The magic of iso-polyphony is that it doesn't have a lot of verses," Tole says.

For Shehu, the magic resides in the very timelessness of this age-old art form. He has a theory that tradition comes from a place everyone understands. Maybe it started with a single Albanian walking alone at night, he imagines. When others joined in, that first person would know they had an entire community at their back. "You'd sing when you're scared," he says. "And your song was reassured by a second person."

Although Shehu worries about the future of iso-polyphony, he tries to focus on the music. "For the next generations it's difficult," he explains. "But it is part of me, and as long as I have my eyes open, inshallah, I will do it."

Tristan Rutherford Tristan Rutherford is a 7-time award-winning journalist. His writing appears in *The Sunday Times* and *The Atlantic*. He has been visiting Albania since 2002. **Ilir Tsouko** is a visual storyteller based in Berlin and Tirana, Albania, who focuses primarily on migration, social issues and political events.

Related articles at aramcoworld.com
Rajasthan's folk musicians: May / Jun 2023
Mappila rhythms: Jul / Aug 2020

EMBARKING ON AN ARABIAN ANIME JOURNEY WITH JAPAN'S MASTERS

Written by MATTHEW TELLER

In the Nakano district of western Tokyo, Mohammed Aldhafeeri was getting ready for a battle—dressed in a *thawb*—a men's ankle-length robe, he tucked in at the waist and adjusted his traditional Arab *shamagh* headdress preparing for combat.

It was 2018. The venue was the headquarters of Toei Animation, one of Japan's oldest and best-known animated-film-production companies.

Toei staffers watched enthralled as Aldhafeeri squared up to his brother, who was similarly dressed—and armed with a carefully designed cardboard sword. Cameras recorded the "battle," as the two men exchanged good-natured blows.

"We were models," says Aldhafeeri, now 38, a concept artist born and raised in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, who has lived and worked 12 years in Japan. He explains how his Japanese colleagues were tasked with animating a battle scene from ancient Arabia. But they were falling short with their lack of firsthand historical knowledge.

They needed to see how a *shamagh* wrapped around the head, how the fabric of a *thawb* moved in the air, how a traditional Arabian sword differed from more familiar Japanese weapons.

Aldhafeeri explains that he tailored costumes himself and brought them to the office to wear in front of his colleagues, so

Depicted in the style of anime, *The Journey* is a tale based on the history and culture of ancient Arabia. It tells the story of Abraha, who led a military attack on Makkah.

ABOVE *The Journey* is the result of a unique co-production between Saudi Arabia and Japan. The script originated in Riyadh before moving to Tokyo, where animators brought ancient Arabian battle scenes to life. **BELOW** The actors hail from both parts of the world as well. Clockwise from upper left: Yûichi Nakamura of Japan voices Nizar; Syrian singer-songwriter Rasha Rizk voices Hind; Kuwaiti actor Jassim Al-Nabhan voices Abd al-Muttalib; and Takaya Kuroda of Japan voices the villain, Abraha.

they could study them and touch them, and also created weapons and other cultural artifacts to be as authentic as possible. "In the end, we broke both swords—it was a long fight!" he laughs.

The battle scene formed part of *The Journey*, a unique co-production between Japan and Saudi Arabia in the burgeoning field of animated movies, or "anime" (AN-ee-may). This distinctively Japanese style of animation is often characterized by bright colors, flat backdrops and complex, dramatic storylines. As in manga—a related Japanese art form whose medium includes printed graphic novels and comic books—characters are drawn with bold lines and oversized, expressive eyes, displaying strong emotions through a range of stock facial expressions and body movements. Community, loyalty and collective purpose underpin many narratives, and the lone superhero figure of American comic books is almost entirely absent.

In many parts of the world, cartoons may be dismissed as kids' stuff, but in Japan, manga and anime are hugely popular across society. Stores in every town include racks of manga. Multiple

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SAUDI ARABIA'S MANGA PRODUCTIONS

Saudi Anime Expo attendees enjoy playing with dubbing *The Journey* at Manga Productions' booth. The experience demonstrates the popularity in the country of both the film's origin story and anime.

broadcast and streaming channels feature anime series of all genres and styles. Ride Tokyo's subway and you are likely to see many fellow travellers, young and old alike, reading manga or glued to anime on their phones. Some content is aimed solely at children or teens, but much also addresses adult concerns: war, social issues, sex and spirituality.

Japanese pop culture spread internationally during the 1970s and '80s, as TV networks across the world began to screen anime dubbed into local languages. By the time one of the most successful series, *Pokémon*, premiered in 1997, anime was already in demand across the US, Europe and farther afield.

That popularity fuelled the imaginations of a global generation. One example is *Captain Tsubasa*, which centers on the exploits of soccer prodigy Tsubasa Oozora and his friends. It first appeared in 1981, serialized in a manga magazine and then broadcast on Japanese television. It is still in demand, with a new TV series premiering in late 2023.

Some 90 million copies of the manga are in circulation, across more than 100 editions, alongside dozens of TV shows, movies and video games. World-renowned former Spanish striker Fernando Torres, who played for several of Europe's leading soccer clubs between 2001 and 2018, has credited his childhood enthusiasm for the sport to watching *Oliver y Benji*, the Spanish-language dub of *Captain Tsubasa*.

In the Arabic-speaking world, *Captain Tsubasa* became *Captain Majid*.

"As a kid, I played video games and watched anime like *Captain Majid* and [giant space robot] *Grendizer*," says Khalid Alshaye, 30, a business-development manager born and raised in Riyadh. "Everything was dubbed into Arabic, and I had no idea it was Japanese. I just loved it."

Syrian writer Obada Kassoumah, 33, has spoken about how the streets in his neighborhood of Damascus used to empty when *Captain Majid* came on TV, as he and his school friends tuned in for the latest episode. Then, inevitably, they would head out to reproduce Majid's soccer tricks.

"Once I tried to copy Majid so hard, I knocked myself out. I was imitating his [acrobatic overhead] kick and hit my head on the ground," Kassoumah told Japanese news site Nippon.com.

After training for two years with a pro soccer club in Syria, Kassoumah won a scholarship to study in Tokyo. In 2017, he published the first translation of the *Captain Tsubasa* manga series into Arabic, evoking the vivid linguistic style of the original and restoring storylines that had been rewritten for broadcast to Arab audiences 20 years before.

The ubiquity of TV anime feeds a growing appetite for the art form. Anime has become "wildly popular in Saudi Arabia and the [Middle East]," writes Washington-based analyst Daniel Sharp, with Saudi Arabia hosting "the largest anime fan base in the region."

That popularity has shaped a policy. In 2017, the kingdom's nonprofit Misk Foundation created animation studio Manga Productions to help kickstart a homegrown industry of manga, anime and video games. Manga Productions opened offices in both Riyadh and Tokyo and began hiring. Although there had already been some experimental short films made as Japan-Saudi co-productions, the 2017 agreement between Toei and Manga opened the door for a full-length animated feature. As part of the agreement, some 300 Saudi creatives moved to Tokyo to work with Toei.

Script development originated in Riyadh, under the title *The Journey*. The story was based on the legend of the Year of the

Saudis pass a movie poster for *The Journey* at Vox Cinemas Riyadh. After the pandemic delayed its release, the film opened in Japan and Saudi Arabia in June 2021 and later elsewhere around the world.

Elephant, in which Abraha, a 6th-century ruler of the kingdom of Axum—modern-day Ethiopia and Yemen—led a vast army attacking Makkah, only to be repulsed by divine intervention. The tale is well-known from the Qur'an but is referenced there in only five short verses.

Creative content director Sara Oulddaddah, 32, outlines how *The Journey*'s script teams adhered to their source but also gave themselves the freedom to introduce material to help bring the story to life. They created a new protagonist, named Aws, and filled in his backstory. "We imagined, 'What if this character had fought Abraha's invasion and witnessed the incredible outcome of this uneven battle?'" says Oulddaddah.

With a story outline in place, responsibility moved to screenwriter Atsuhiro Tomioka. In 2018, Toei Animation also brought in director Kobun Shizuno—famed for his *Godzilla* anime trilogy—to helm the project. "Early on I went to Riyadh to meet the Saudi creative team," says Shizuno, 50. "Their style was different, and I wanted to learn from them. From the start, I knew that we would be able to create something unique." That exchange went both ways, as Saudi artists and animators also moved to Tokyo to work alongside their Japanese counterparts.

> "We never felt there was a power imbalance. Both sides were really eager to understand each other."
>
> —SARA OULDDADDAH

Aldhafeeri speaks of being "fascinated with how beautiful Japanese culture was" as a child. Having mastered the Japanese language in Saudi Arabia, he studied graphic design and illustration at Japan's prestigious HAL Osaka technology college before being brought on for *The Journey*, initially as a cultural adviser.

"It was a challenge," he grins. "I was working directly with the Japanese teams, and there was a lot of misunderstanding to start with."

Oulddaddah clarifies that the misunderstandings were cultural. "For example, when we would discuss a sad scene, the Japanese team would think of rain—but for us as Saudis, when we see rain, we are happy. It's very subtle, and it was fascinating to realize how what we think of as common sense is affected by cultural perception," she says.

Body language was another complication. "If someone is angry, in Arabic we use a lot of hand gestures, whereas in Japanese they prefer expressions or body movement," she says. For a scene with strangers meeting, Japanese artists would draw a character inclining their head, while Saudi artists would have them touching their hand to their chest. All these issues needed working through.

ABOVE Manga Productions' Abdulaziz Alnaghmoosh, from left, executive producers Essam Bukhary and Shimizu Shinji, and Manga Productions' Anas Alsajwan and Abdulhameed Khan attend *The Journey*'s Indonesian premiere in September 2022. **BELOW** Manga Productions' Mohammed Aldamk, left, and Sulaiman Alomayri accept the Best Experimental Film award at the Septimius film festival in Amsterdam. *The Journey* won in that category for its innovative combining of four drawing styles: traditional Japanese, modern Japanese, watercolor and van Gogh.

One of the contrasts proved especially positive, Oulddaddah notes. The age difference between the Saudi creatives, mostly younger than 35, and the Japanese team, mostly in their 40s and older, "really enriched the creative process. We never felt there was a power imbalance. Both sides were really eager to understand each other."

Toei's animators visited Saudi Arabia, traveling into the desert and experiencing the culture firsthand in order to inform their work. Voice actors added dialogue in Japanese and Arabic (an English-language dub followed), and music director Kaoru Wada composed a sweeping orchestral score.

The result, almost entirely hand-drawn, looks Japanese, feels Japanese and—in its original version—sounds Japanese, but is nonetheless a Qur'anic story that is steeped in Arab tradition. Visually spectacular and conceptually groundbreaking in its cultural blend, it "offered Saudi audiences a glimpse of stories told from their perspective using a popular foreign medium," Sharp wrote.

> "Directors are becoming more aware of Arab cultural influences, writing Arab characters and even hiring Arab voice actors in original Japanese productions."
>
> —KHALID ALSHAYE

Although *The Journey* was ready by early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic delayed its release. It eventually opened in Japan and Saudi Arabia in June 2021 in Japanese and Arabic versions, subtitled in English. An English dub screened in the US in 2022, and a German-language dub also followed, with the movie available worldwide on anime streaming service Crunchyroll.

Anime critic Ryota Fujitsu called the film "richly thought-provoking," while Alex Saveliev wrote: "The amalgamation of Arab and Japanese sensibilities works to this unique film's advantage." A Japanese anime blogger who goes by the pseudonym Marion Eigazuke noted how *The Journey* focuses on "people who change

The Journey premiered in December 2022 in Hong Kong. It is available today on anime streaming service Crunchyroll.

the world through their powerful faith. This isn't easy in Japan, where people have a loose connection to religion. It's a beautiful achievement."

One of the film's most distinctive elements is its confidence in cutting away from the action at crucial points. Nested within the main narrative arc are three mini stories, designed to shed light on the sources of Aws' determination to prevail against the odds. These sequences, told in flashback, draw on the Qur'anic tales of Noah, Moses and the mysterious lost city known as Iram of the Pillars to evoke hope in adversity. Each sequence has a unique look, decorative and stylized, in contrast with the fluid action of the main story. They are, in the words of reviewer Rebecca Silverman, "striking and…quite beautiful," and reflect director Shizuno's skill in adopting the story-within-a-story technique familiar from traditional Arabic folktales.

Oulddaddah, part of a creative community at Manga Productions that is 70 percent women, reflects positively on the production. "We recognize that Japan has exceptional creative power in this industry. Our aim with this collaboration was to transfer that knowledge to our team, to raise our own production capability."

Internships and training programs run by Manga Productions continue to foster creative exchange between the two countries, while Saudi enthusiasm for Japanese pop culture shows no sign of waning. Jeddah and Riyadh host regular screenings and live performances, alongside the annual Saudi Anime Expo. In 2022 and 2023, Manga Productions announced new partnerships to develop two of Japan's best-known anime franchises for global audiences: *Grendizer*—the space robot introduced in 1975, still with dedicated followings in Europe and the Middle East—and *Captain Tsubasa*.

"There are so many ways now to approach the market, and these stories carry such strong moral lessons," says Manga Productions development executive Alshaye. He speaks of a tide of Japanese creators eager to develop content for Arab audiences, and notes that that is starting to have an impact. "Directors are becoming more aware of Arab cultural influences, writing Arab characters and even hiring Arab voice actors in original Japanese productions."

As *The Journey* producer Shinji Shimizu remarks with a twinkle: "The journey has just begun."

The writer thanks Tokyo-based journalist Makiko Segawa for her help in research and interpreting.

Matthew Teller is a UK-based writer and journalist. His latest book, *Nine Quarters of Jerusalem: A New Biography of the Old City*, was published last year. Follow him on X (formerly Twitter) @matthewteller and at matthewteller.com.

Related articles at aramcoworld.com
A conversation with Saudi filmmakers: Jul / Aug 2018
Falconry in Japan: Nov / Dec 2016

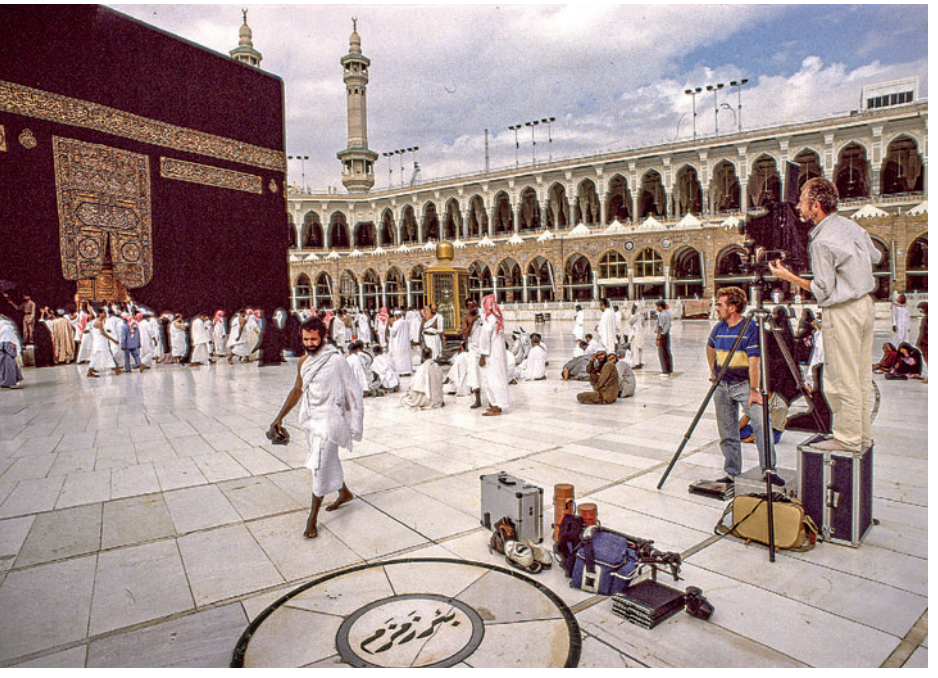
WHEN THE MOUNTAINS TRUST YOU: THE PHOTOGRAPHIC LIFE OF PETER SANDERS

Written by MATTHEW TELLER

British photographer Peter Sanders was born in 1946. He rose to prominence in the "Swinging London" of the late 1960s, when he photographed rock musicians including Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, The Who and the Grateful Dead. He became a Muslim in 1971, and was one of the first Westerners to be granted permission to photograph the Hajj pilgrimage in Makkah, where only Muslims are allowed to enter. More than 40 years of travel followed, as Sanders photographed communities across the Islamic world. He has exhibited widely and published several books, including *In The Shade of the Tree* (2007), *The Art of Integration* (2008)—which *The Guardian* praised—*Meetings With Mountains* (2019) and the nine-book box set *Exemplars for Our Time* (2022). *Arab News* called his work "a breath of fresh air," and in 2013 he was awarded a prize in Islamic art by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, ruler of Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Sanders directs the Art of Seeing collective, which runs photographic workshops around the world, and in June, Sanders presented a retrospective of his career during the Bradford Literature Festival in England.

***AramcoWorld* spoke with Sanders in Chesham, outside London, where he lives with his family, about his impactful career. Answers have been edited for clarity.**

ABOVE Peter Sanders shot "We Teach All Hearts to Break" in 1969 in London. He credits the photo with sparking his spiritual awakening. **TOP RIGHT** Sanders gazes at the Prophet's Mosque from a since-closed favorite tea shop in Madinah. The photo is by his friend John Gulliver. **BOTTOM RIGHT** At dusk, the Hijrah, the route taken by the Prophet Muhammad from Makkah to Madinah in western Saudi Arabia, captured Sanders' interest in 2012.



What was your childhood like?

We were a generation born just after World War II. There was a spiritual fog—Britain was very gray, and people were anxious that World War III might happen. My parents were believers, in their own way, and I realize now, looking back, that my grandfather was nurturing me. He would sit me down and show me his collection of stamps from around the world, introducing me to the wonder of travel, and the wonder of images. I was always putting a frame around things with my fingers: Excluding everything outside the frame let me see the object inside for what it really is.

How did that early interest in images develop?

I always knew I would work with pictures. I was a music DJ, I did a bit of modeling and acting, then I was lucky to get a tax refund, which meant I could buy a camera. By chance, I also inherited darkroom equipment and just started taking pictures. I knew a lot of people in the music industry, so that was the next step. I went to them and they commissioned me to shoot gigs. It happened very organically. I've never studied photography. Everything I do is by intuition.

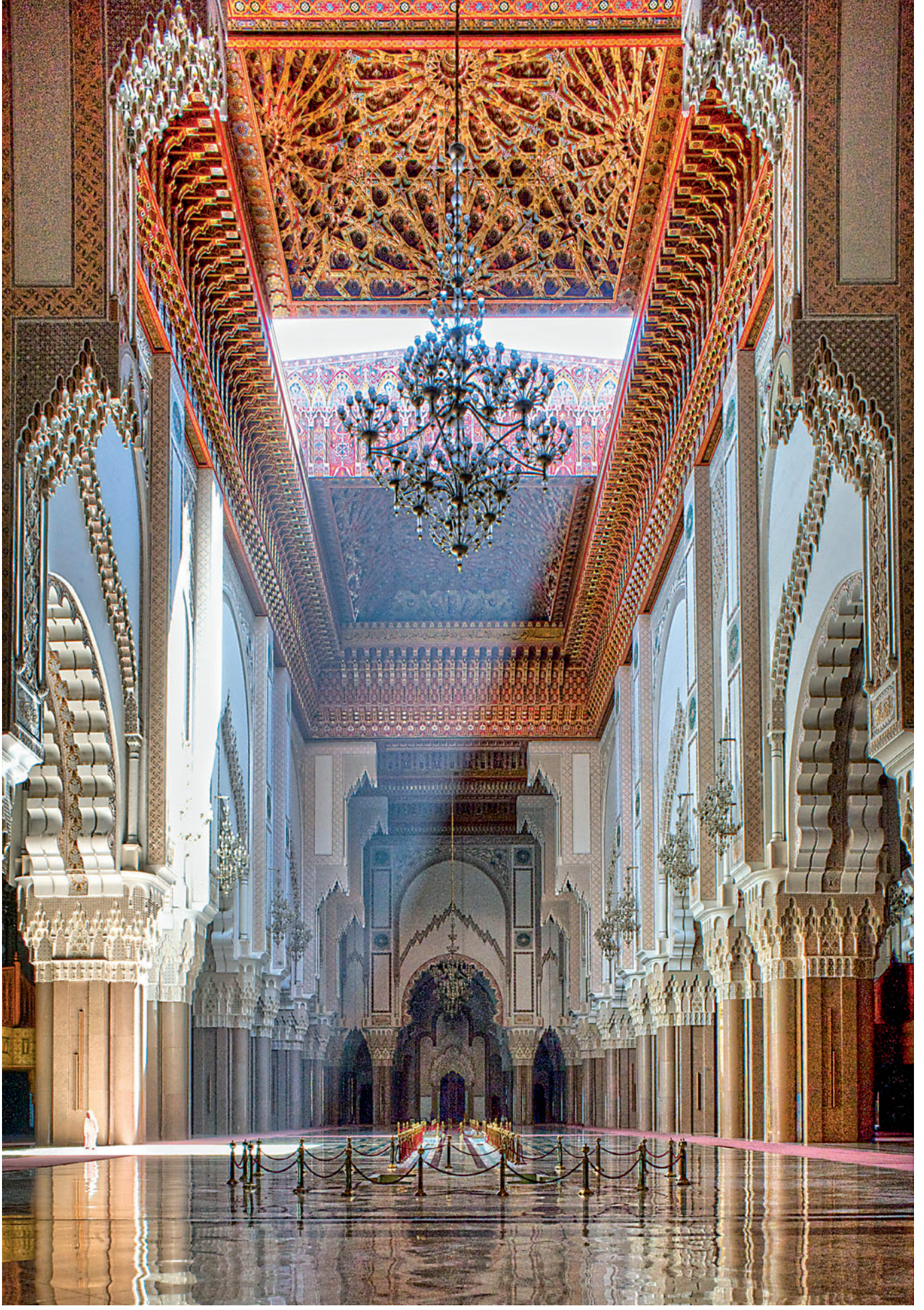
What was London like in the 1960s?

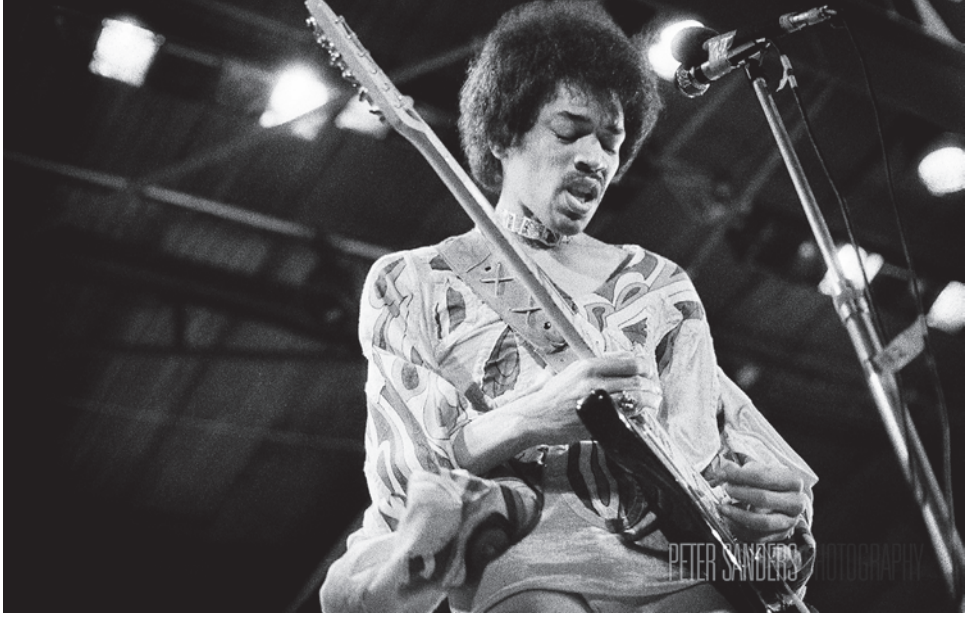
It was a really interesting time, quite spiritual. As the sixties progressed into a cultural revolution of peace and love, the fog began to clear. We'd seen the effects of war and wanted no part of it. We just wanted to be free, to escape the heaviness. That set me off on my own quest.

Around 1967, I was sharing a house with the legendary radio DJ John Peel. There were always people coming and going, and one day this guy—Artie Ripp, the head of Buddah Records—turned up, handed me a silver box full of lenses and cameras and said, "I don't need this right now. You keep it and give it back to me later." That's when my work started seriously.

A few years ago, I did a retrospective show in Istanbul, which forced me to make sense of my journey from music photography to photographing the Islamic world. Back then, Bob Dylan and The Beatles were heroes, the poets and sages of the time. Photographing them was a way for me to see them one to one. When you put a lens on someone, you see them as they really are; you're stripping away

TOP LEFT This high-quality image on the Kiswa covering the Ka'bah in Makkah came from an 8x10 Swiss Sinar large-format architectural camera that Peter Sanders, **BOTTOM LEFT**, used one day in 1995 to capture the morning light. **OPPOSITE** Sanders snapped this photograph of Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca, Morocco, in April 2012. It took two weeks to organize; the carpets were removed, the 100-foot titanium doors and sliding roof were opened, tourists and worshipers were vacated. The photo itself took an eighth of a second to shoot.





Peter Sanders began his career photographing music icons. He shot the Isle of Wight festival performances of Jimi Hendrix, **ABOVE**, in 1970 and Bob Dylan, **LEFT**, in 1969.

all extraneous details, and you're just concentrating on this one person in front of you. Then I realized it's the exact same process photographing the sages of Islam. They are teaching the culture in the same way musicians in the sixties were teaching us the culture. Spirituality is what links it together.

After a while, as I got more successful, I met Artie Ripp again and was able to thank him and give him his box of cameras back.

But then you turned away from popular culture. What happened?

I can explain it through one of my pictures. In 1969, I discovered a street of derelict houses in London that had been painted black, where someone had graffitied "We Teach All Hearts to Break." While I wondered what it meant, I lifted my camera and took the shot, just as a boy ran in front. From then, for the next two years, my life completely changed.

I started reading Emerson, and then I found *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda, an Indian spiritual master who brought meditation to America. Not long afterward, I photographed Jimi Hendrix a week or two before he died. Selling those pictures meant I could travel to India. I accepted Islam, I spent Ramadan in Morocco learning from Sheikh Muhammad ibn al-Habib, then I arrived in Makkah for the Hajj in January 1972.

Looking back, that slogan was a sign to me that I was going to go through some huge upheaval, that my heart was going to break open to accept bigger things. Sometimes you are shown signs and you don't register the deeper meaning until later.

Now the world has changed, and everyone has a camera. Photography has become a universal language, like music was a universal language in the sixties.

Since then you've traveled widely and have been called the pre-eminent photographer of the Muslim world. What does that mean to you?

I always hoped I could be a bridge. In my early years, very little was known in the West about Muslims and Islam. I went to places that were not well known about—Mauritania, Sudan—wanting to find a pure, natural version of these traditional societies. It feels like God sent me around the world to capture pictures before the beauty vanished. Part of it was about seeking fusion. I remember being at the old mosque in Xi'an, China. The "moon gate" there has an inscription in Arabic—it's a meeting of two worlds. Those worlds are so different, but there is fusion. That is so beautiful. It really inspires me.

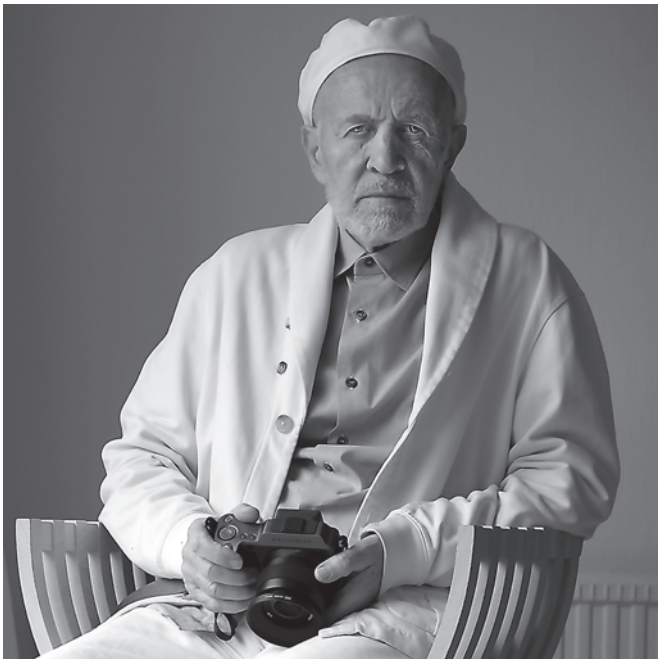
My book *The Art of Integration* tried to do the same thing, showing ordinary Muslim people integrated into British society. That came out of respect, and respect for who's in front of the lens is one way the great war photographer Don McCullin influenced me. I met him the first time in Iran, in 1979, and he's taught me so much. I sent him *Meetings With Mountains*, my book about Muslim scholars and sages, which I'd been working on since Yogananda's book planted the idea in my head that on a spiritual journey you need a teacher. Many of these people had never been photographed before, and Don's first question to me when he saw it was, "Are you Muslim?" It's so important in photography that the person needs to feel they can trust you. Don understood that and saw that trust in my pictures.

LEFT Preacher Moss of American standup-comedy troupe Allah Made Me Funny poses in Peter Sanders' London studio in 2014. **RIGHT** Sanders fondly describes Muhammad Ali of Mauritania as "gifted with incredible knowledge of astronomy… . When I asked him if I could take his portrait, he adopted the pose you see without any direction from me. I never forgot him, and he never forgot me." **BELOW** A portrait of Sanders taken in 2021 by Khalil Mitchell.

Who are some other influences?

[Henri] Cartier-Bresson was very important. Irving Penn, Platon, Jimmy Nelson. The great cinematographer Vittorio Storaro, with his philosophy of light and color influenced by Rembrandt.

But Roland Michaud was the sheikh of photography for me. He and his wife, Sabrina, both Muslims, photographed in Afghanistan before the wars. His work is so painterly. I love it. I met him not long before he died in 2020. We talked about his early realization that photography takes time. Every trip, they would spend months living very humbly with the people. One picture would take hours.



Islam definitely teaches about patience, taking your time. As a photographer, it also teaches you empathy, which I think is essential.

What do you think your legacy will be?

I have no idea! I'm waiting for someone to tell me. Meanwhile, I still feel I'm on a journey. I've spent decades as a loner, hiding behind my camera, trying to show people as authentically as I can. We live in a time when it's all about selfies, but the spiritual people I've photographed don't put on a second face for the camera. When they're in front of you, there's no ego. They are just themselves.

There's a heron in my local park. He just sits quietly, observing everything. When anyone gets too close, he flies away. I really relate to him.

Matthew Teller is a UK-based writer and journalist. His latest book, *Nine Quarters of Jerusalem: A New Biography of the Old City*, was published last year. Follow him on X (formerly Twitter) @matthewteller and at matthewteller.com.

Related articles at aramcoworld.com
The Middle East's first female photographers: Mar / Apr 2019
Tor Eigeland – 50 years behind the lens: May / Jun 2016

A Land and a Camera:

THE LEGEND OF

SAMI KAFATI

Written by ALIA YUNIS *Photographed by* MERIDITH KOHUT

OPPOSITE Palestinian-born Sami Kafati's body of work shaped Honduran cinema by tackling often unspoken societal issues. **ABOVE** Filmmaker Darwin Yaney Mendoza hosts a screening of Kafati's first film, *Mi Amigo Ángel*, in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. The film, which follows a 10-year-old shoeshine boy and was shot in the capital, kept the young audience, **LEFT**, engrossed—especially because much of the city looks the same today.

"Sami Kafati has been my most important teacher," says Honduran filmmaker Darwin Yaney Mendoza. "I still learn from him every day. We are in conversation in so many ways."

Mendoza has never actually met Honduras' first filmmaker, who died in 1996, years before Mendoza began making his own films. But the ghost of Kafati, who was born in Palestine, is present in Mendoza's aspirations—and throughout the story of Honduran cinema.

Kafati's body of work includes many Honduran firsts. His masterpiece, *No hay tierra sin dueño (There Is No Land Without an Owner),* is considered Honduras' first feature film. It is the only Honduran film to have had significant play outside Latin America, debuting at the Cannes Director's Fortnight. But copies have deteriorated—which is why it also is the first film a new archive has chosen to restore. Saving it for future generations.

No hay tierra sin dueño centers around a ruthless rancher, Don Calixto, who kills or otherwise destroys anyone who questions his authority over the land. The film took 22 years to make, and eventually released posthumously. It tackles often unspoken issues, including agricultural practices (Honduras' most important industry), class, race, religion and gender. "When it was released in the cinema here in 2003, it played for two weeks, and I kept coming back to watch it every day," recalls Mendoza, who has seen the film some 75 times. "It was in black and white and set in the 1980s, but it was very relevant to the time, and it is still about us today. Every time, I still discover something new. I have understood since I first saw it that Sami was a grandmaster of cinema—and of Honduran society."

At Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras (UNAH), in the capital city of Tegucigalpa, Mendoza co-founded Honduras'

Sami Kafati's old friend Rene Pauk, left, and archival technician Marxis Lenin Hernández inspect a copy of Kafati's masterpiece, *No hay tierra sin dueño* (*There Is No Land Without an Owner*), at the Cinemateca Enrique Ponce Garay. Pauk and the film archive's manager, Luis Griffin, are personally overseeing the restoration of Kafati's films.

first film program. The campus is also home to the new Cinemateca Enrique Ponce Garay, the film archive that safeguards Kafati's surviving work. A poster of Kafati behind the camera is the first thing one sees upon climbing the three flights to the cinemateca. That poster is also the cover of the first book the cinemateca has published, a collection of essays about Kafati in 2018. The cinemateca's founder is Rene Pauck, a jovial French documentary filmmaker who was Kafati's friend. He and cinemateca manager Luis Griffin are overseeing the restoration, which could take years. In the meantime, they excitedly share other work from Kafati, including rare documentary footage he shot in Managua, Nicaragua, after the 1972 earthquake that nearly wiped out the city. "Sami was drawn to those suffering," says Pauck.

The subjects of the cinemateca's next two books are Honduras' other two film pioneers, Jorge Asfura and Fosi Bendek. The two share one more thing with Kafati: They, too, are of Palestinian descent. Arab Hondurans comprise less than 2 percent of the population, but most Hondurans know their family names because of their pioneering success in business.

"Asfura opened the first film lab in Honduras in the 1940s," says Griffin. "The Asfura family was also hired by the government and private companies to make documentaries and commercials—or they filmed just because they liked to. So, they have provided a very important historical memory for Honduras."

Bendek was one of Kafati's closest friends. Beloved in local lore, Bendek often hosted screenings at his ice-cream shop, sometimes delighting attendees with his footage of the neighborhood, including people in the audience. He directed *El reyecito (The Little King),* shot by Kafati in 1979. As a soliloquy, the film addresses the wrongs and hardships of the world, including in Palestine.

Kafati's work focused on Honduras—with subtle odes to his heritage and hope that the "turcos," a derogatory name for Arabs, be seen as part of Honduran society. Midway through *No hay tierra sin dueño,* Don Calixto visits a general-store owner, the Arab stereotype, played by Bendek. In a comedic Arab accent, Bendek's character shares news of his wayward adult children and then cradles the belly of his new Honduran wife, saying, "This is the future." It is a touching scene, a rare light moment in the film.

"This was Sami's way of showing his wish to merge his two identities, Palestinian and Honduran, as one," says Katia Lara, a Honduran filmmaker whose first documentary, *Corazon Abierto* (*Open Heart*), made in 2005, was about the making of *No hay tierra sin dueño*. "My conscious interest in Honduran cinema began while I was studying film in Buenos Aires [Argentina]. The first name that came up was, of course, that of Sami. I felt proud but also sad I would not meet him. But he came back from death

Besides Sami Kafati's original films and rare documentary footage from a devastating 1972 earthquake in Nicaragua, the archive houses original scripts, movie posters and other memorabilia. **BELOW** *No hay tierra sin dueño* is considered Honduras' first feature film.

transformed into energy, impulse, spirit—whatever you want to call it—to see the film completed."

Indeed, *No hay tierra sin dueño* was released in 2003, seven years after Kafati passed away. The saga of the making of the film, which he began writing in the mid-1980s, is as dramatic as the film itself. There are many milestones on the way to that story, starting with his first 10 years in Palestine.

Soon after Kafati was born in 1936, his father, Jacob, set out for Honduras to seek

work "At the beginning of the 20th century, there were less than a million people in Honduras. The government welcomed immigrants, promising them good futures, because there was a labor demand," says Jorge Amaya, professor of Iberia American history at UNAH and author of *Palestinians and Arabs of Honduras*. "Arabs were particularly welcome, as they had a reputation for being hard workers. Today we are 10 million people, about 175,000 of whom are of Palestinian descent."

But before Jacob reached Honduras, World War II started, and he got stuck in Italy until immigration resumed. His wife, Maria, stayed in Palestine with her two toddler sons, the elder of whom was Sami. During that time, rheumatic fever damaged Sami's heart. This would shape the course of his life.

Parts of the Kafati clan, like other Palestinian families, grew wealthy in Honduras. A branch of the Kafati family owns the upscale café chain Espresso Americano, with franchises across Honduras, Costa Rica and Guatemala, and, most famously:

> "Today we are 10 million people, about 175,000 of whom are of Palestinian descent."
>
> — JORGE AMAYA

They own Café el Indio. "We all grew up drinking Café el Indio. This brand of coffee is consumed in every house in Honduras," says Amaya.

But not all Kafatis had such financial cachet. "My father used to say my grandfather was irresponsible," Samia Kafati, Sami's daughter, says with a smile. "His favorite business was a musical-instrument store…And he used to lend money to anyone who asked. He didn't care about saving."

Jacob for a time also owned two cinemas. "My father and his brother would go from one cinema to the other on their bikes, delivering reels and watching films," says Samia. "My grandfather later gave my father a camera, and that's when he started filming. Before he passed away, when my father was a teenager, my grandfather gave him a projector." Samia still has the projector, the rare piece of equipment the family did not have to sell for financial reasons when Kafati died. "My grandmother did not want her son to become a filmmaker because she did not see how he would make money."

Eight of Kafati's siblings were born in Honduras, many of them providing the music for his films, but all would heed their mother and study engineering and chemistry, among

TOP Snapshots of Sami Kafati's relatives in Palestine line the walls of the family home in Tegucigalpa. Soon after Kafati was born in 1936, his father, Jacob, set out for Honduras to seek work. Parts of the Kafati clan went into prominent businesses and grew wealthy in their adopted country. **LEFT** Sami's daughter, Samia, her mother, Norma, and Honduran filmmaker and friend Darwin Yaney Mendoza enjoy each other's company. The Kafati home is deeply imbued with the memory of Sami Kafati: It's the one Norma and Sami moved into when they married (and mortgaged to finance *No hay tierra sin dueño*).

Samia Kafati points out a photo of her father filming a documentary with prized Chilean poet Pablo Neruda in Santiago, Chile.

other things, while Kafati pursued his dream.

"He was like a bohemian when he was young…he used to smoke a lot," says Samia. "His health deteriorated quickly. The relatives who owned Café el Indio helped my grandmother to take him to Philadelphia, where he a received a mitral valve transplant. It was a successful surgery, and he became very disciplined after that. Like an American."

Kafati, then 23, started to make money producing commercials and documentaries for hire. He used his earnings to buy equipment that couldn't be found in the country, most notably a Moviola, the world's first movie-editing machine. In 1964, he completed Honduras' first narrative film, *Mi Amigo Ángel*. The 32-minute black-and-white film follows a 10-year-old shoeshine boy, Ángel, as he searches for his alcoholic father and witnesses a violent attack on his mother. Shot in downtown Tegucigalpa, it opens with the first-ever aerial shot of the city. Ángel's walk through the streets is also a walk through the city's social and ethnic groups. Like all of Kafati's films, it stars amateur actors, including his youngest brother playing Ángel's Arab friend, and a man playing the owner of a fabric store, another stereotypical Arab business.

> "No one understood taking such a dark look at the plight of children in our country."
>
> — ROBERTO BUDE

One afternoon last summer, Mendoza showed the film to his students as well as 15 middle school students, the age of Ángel. All were mesmerized to see their city critically observed. They marveled at what still looked the same—the busy town square, the cathedral, the bridge across the river. Also in the audience, in a Jimi Hendrix T-shirt and beaded necklaces, was Roberto Bude, a journalist and close friend of Kafati who had a small role in *No hay tierra sin dueño.*

"Sami asked a relative to screen *Mi Amigo Ángel* in one of his theaters. But no one understood taking such a dark look at the plight of children in our country," Bude told the students.

At this point, Kafati had met his future bride, Norma, whose Palestinian family owned a store. *Mi Amigo Ángel* was essentially Kafati's portfolio piece to apply to Rome International Film School to formally study Italian Neorealism, the style his filmmaking already resembled. He worked at an auto-sales shop to pay for his travel—and a ring for Norma. "Her photo is the only thing he took to Rome," says Samia.

Today, Norma and Samia still live in the house the couple moved into when they married, which Kafati mortgaged to make *No*

Sami Kafati used the capital of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, as the backdrop for his films. His 1964 short *Mi Amigo Ángel*, for example, opens with the first-ever aerial shot of the city. Many of its landmarks and severe poverty highlighted in the film still exist today.

hay tierra sin dueño. Kafati planted most of its small, lush garden. Missing now is his olive tree, the symbol of Palestine, not native to Honduras. "The olive tree died right after he did," says Samia.

A kitchen refrigerator is where Kafati stored his films. The living room appears untouched from when it served as Don Calixto's living room. The house feels like a photo museum, including a shot of Kafati filming a documentary with Pablo Neruda in Chile. Samia pointed out family memorabilia, sometimes laughing at what she came across, like a note in her mother's handwriting: *Dear teachers, I am begging you to excuse my daughter Samia Valezca Kafati for not attending class on Monday and Tuesday because her father is making a movie and she has to perform in some of the scenes.*

In *No hay tierra sin dueño,* Samia, then 9, played a child whose suicidal father kills her after his life falls into ruins because of Don Calixto. "It was kind of traumatic," she shrugs now. "I didn't really know how death worked."

Mendoza and Samia were able to coax Norma out of her room. She was drawn to knowing this writer works in film and speaks Arabic, the sound of which made her smile, though her knowledge of it is limited.

"Did my dad teach you how to use the Nagra [sound recorder]?" Samia asks.

"Oh, the Nagra, of course," Norma nods.

ABOVE Sami Kafati's influence is still felt in Tegucigalpa's tight-knit film community, including the Tercer independent film organization, which regularly hosts screenings. **RIGHT** Documentarian Laura Bermúdez, who co-founded the Honduran Women's Film Cooperative in 2018, greatly admires his work but says she finds fault with his depiction of brutality against women.

"I was telling them that you used to cook for everyone on set and at production meetings," Samia says.

Norma turns to her guests. "Oh, I miss those days. I loved cinema a lot. When Sami passed away, I wanted to keep doing that, but there was no one to support me. I'm envious of you because you're still making films."

"But Mom, you have never been back to a cinema. We no longer watch movies as much as we did before," Samia says.

Norma sighs. "There is no good filmmaking now."

Norma has refused to accept the acknowledgement many people think she deserves, "Honduras' first female filmmaker."

"We hear about Sami, but we don't hear about Norma," says Laura Bermúdez, a documentary filmmaker who in 2018 co-founded the Honduran Women's Film Cooperative. "When

> "We revere Sami, but it's also important to be critical."
>
> — LAURA BERMÚDEZ

Sami Kafati films *No hay tierra sin dueño*, which centers around a ruthless cattle rancher, Don Calixto, who destroys anyone who questions his authority or ownership of the land. The film unflinchingly takes on agricultural practices.

I learned Norma did the sound on his films and was essentially producing, I wanted to recognize her. Everyone told me, 'Don't bother. She won't allow it.'"

In all his films, Kafati taught everyone everything—acting, camera operations, lighting, set design. With *No hay tierra sin dueño*, everyone volunteered their time over three years of periodic filming.

"Sami even did my makeup," recalls Marisela Bustillo, who played a woman trying to hide she has been beaten. Bustillo was a student while Kafati was preparing to shoot and met with him several times for career advice. He offered her the position of executive producer, a job she learned along the way. The acting happened because they couldn't find any other woman willing to play such a role. "He was a perfectionist, very demanding. But he was patient. For my scene, he waited until I would naturally cry rather than have fake crying," she says at UNAH, where she now heads the communications department. "I named my second son Ángel in honor of Sami."

"We revere Sami, but it's also important to be critical," Bermudéz says. "For example, while the violence against women here is very real, it does not have to be shown so graphically."

Kafati's heart began to tire during shooting. He died two years after completing filming, leaving behind only a rough cut. As Lara chronicles in her documentary, his loved ones thought that was the end of *No hay tierra sin dueño*. Samia, who, like her brother, Ramses, is a full-time engineer—despite a passion for animation and music—says her father did not want his children to become filmmakers because it was too difficult. But two years later, coming out of their grief, Ramses, Samia and Norma decided they would finish it. They reached out to Carmen Brito, a Chilean editor and friend of Kafati. She agreed to take his film reels, but Norma and Ramses did not hear from her for two years. That is because Brito could not find the original footage in the cans.

"One night, Carmen yelled out to Sami," says Lara. "She said, 'If you don't want us to finish your work, then I leave it as is.'

"One night, Carmen yelled out to Sami. She said, 'If you don't want us to finish your work, then I leave it as is.' The next day, a miracle occurred."

— KATIA LARA

OPPOSITE: CINEMATECA ENRIQUE PONCE GARAY

ABOVE José Enamorado herds cattle as they graze near Comayagua, Honduras. Agriculture is the country's most important industry. **LEFT** Much of Kafati's recognition was granted posthumously. This award is displayed in his family's home in Tegucigalpa.

The next day a miracle occurred." Brito opened one of the cans called "unexposed film," and there was the original footage. No one knows why Kafati put the footage in a can with that label, but Ramses went on to oversee the editing, rejecting any change that did not match his father's rough cut. The rest is legend.

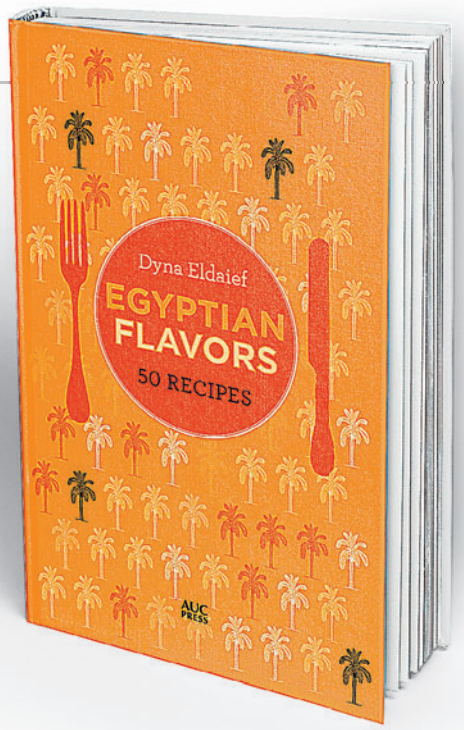
It's hard to imagine how Honduran film would be defined today without Kafati. Norma has given Mendoza Kafati's book collection, in which he wrote extensive notes. "These books are my opportunity to keep talking with Sami," says Mendoza. "I write little notes from his notes...One day we will make a film that exceeds his work, but that hasn't happened yet."

Alia Yunis, a writer and filmmaker based in Abu Dhabi, recently completed the documentary *The Golden Harvest*. **Meridith Kohut** is a photojournalist based in Houston, Texas, who has documented humanitarian and cultural issues in Latin America since 2007. She earned a Courage in Journalism award for her decade of work covering the region and was a finalist for the 2018 Pulitzer Prize in Feature Photography.

Related articles at aramcoworld.com
Making Lawrence of Arabia: Jan / Feb 2020
Morocco's cinema city: Sep / Oct 2017

REVIEWS

"It is amazing to think that we are still eating some of the same dishes that Egyptians ate thousands of years ago." —From *Egyptian Flavors*



Egyptian Flavors: 50 Recipes

Dyna Eldaief. AUC Press, 2021.

Offering a broad range of dishes, this slim volume by Egyptian cooking blogger and YouTuber Dyna Eldaief manages to include the classics anyone familiar with Egyptian cuisine will expect. Thus, you'll find recipes for koshari (lentils and noodles in tomato sauce), roast chicken stuffed with fireek (green, durum wheat grains), shar'riya bi-l-laban (sweet noodle pudding, like kugel) alongside instructions for baklava, falafel, stuffed grape leaves, baba ghanouj and other options that share a wider Middle Eastern provenance. On top of that, Eldaief also features less well-known Egyptian dishes, from Egyptian *petit fours* (pettifore, traditional jam-stuffed butter cookies dipped in chocolate, often served during holidays) to the thin-sliced, breaded and fried cuts of lamb or veal known as *bané* or Egyptian schnitzel. All told, the variety of dishes and easy-to-follow instructions make for a good basic cookbook, perfect for those looking to expand their culinary horizons. —TOM VERDE

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

Ashia's Table: Family Recipes from India and beyond

Ashia Ismail-Singer. Interlink Publishing, 2021.

The Memon Muslim community of ancient northwestern India and the Sindh region of modern southeastern Pakistan traces its ancestry to 15th-century Hindu merchants who converted to Islam. (Memon comes from *mumin*, Arabic for "believer.") Trafficking in spices originated in the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, as these men journeyed from their homelands to trade in Africa, the Middle East and beyond, where their native Indian cuisine blended with those of other cultures. This collection of recipes by Ashia Ismail-Singer, a Memon mother and home cook, reflects that rich diversity. While featuring Indian standards such as mango chutney and paratha (fried bread), the inclusion of lamb kebabs in pita, kofta (meatballs) with eggs, or carrot halva with mascarpone (pudding similar to Italian panna cotta) brings Middle Eastern, Central Asian and European elements to the table. The single-page recipes provide an accessible introduction to an otherwise exotic cuisine. —TOM VERDE

Bilhana: Wholefood Recipes from Egypt, Lebanon and Morocco

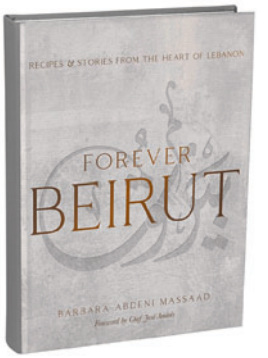
Yasmine Elgharably and Shewekar Elgharably. Photo. Yehia El-Alaily. AUC Press, 2021.

While Middle Eastern cuisine is, by and large, inherently healthful, there is always room for improvement, innovation and adaptation. This creative cookbook of soups and salads, roasts and grills, seafood and sweets, and drinks and more, acknowledges and adopts many current dietary trends and methods, "swapping … quinoa for rice," for instance, or "baking rather than frying" falafel while folding in classic flavors and spices, "from Lebanon to Morocco." Cauliflower rice (florets ground into bits), like quinoa, offers a gluten-free alternative to rice, dressed with olive oil, lime juice, garlic and parsley. Cardamom and mastic, a distinctive, resiny Arab ingredient "redolent of sunbaked hillsides," localizes a Gwyneth Paltrow-inspired recipe of creamy broccoli soup. Old methods (smoldering charcoal in the oven for seasoned kofta) blend with hip, new flavors (hibiscus popsicles anyone?) in this tempting reimagining of a traditional cuisine. —TOM VERDE

Veganistan: A Vegan Tour of the Middle East & Beyond

Sally Butcher. Interlink Books, 2023.

Although London-based food writer and cookbook author Sally Butcher has mainly focused on Middle Eastern and Mediterranean vegetable dishes throughout her oeuvre, only here has she gone full vegan. However, in Butcher's hands a vegan approach translates to a remarkable cookbook that offers an array of enticing dishes, whether you're vegan or not. With each recipe, Butcher (also owner of the Persian deli Persepolis) explains she has aimed to strike the balance between hot and cold flavors considered crucial in traditional Middle Eastern kitchens. Drawing inspiration from her restaurant, Butcher keeps these dishes simple while still offering inventive takes on everything from mezze (the carrots in mint syrup is a standout), stews (including a delectable Afghan chili) and baked dishes (don't miss the plum, pistachio and kohlrabi tagine) to dessert (including a revelatory halva). The result? A must-have vegan cookbook you'll savor. —DIANNA WRAY



Forever Beirut: Recipes and Stories from the Heart of Lebanon

Barbara Abdeni Massaad. Interlink Books, 2022.

Nourishing Hope: A Conversation With Barbara Abdeni Massaad

by PINEY KESTING

On August 4, 2020, an explosion destroyed the port of Beirut, killing more than 200, injuring thousands and damaging half of the city with the most powerful non-nuclear blast ever recorded. The explosion left death, destruction, food insecurity and homelessness in its wake—and shook Barbara Abdeni Massaad, an award-winning author of Lebanese cookbooks, to her core.

Stunned, Massaad watched the aftermath unfold from her home in Hazmieh, a town about six kilometers southeast of the capital. Driven to document the disaster firsthand, a few days later Massaad walked through the rubble photographing obliterated buildings including a restaurant her family once owned. But it wasn't enough.

"I had to find a way to help," recalls Massaad, who was born in Beirut. She decided to write another cookbook, one focused entirely on her hometown.

Forever Beirut—a collection of 100 traditional Lebanese dishes, each accompanied by a personal story—is her way of processing her own grief in the wake of the explosion while preserving cherished customs and recipes and helping in recovery efforts. (A portion of proceeds go to the Lebanese Food Bank.)

AramcoWorld recently spoke with Massaad about her most recent book and how her ongoing determination to safeguard Lebanon's culinary history has shaped her work.

***Forever Beirut* is your fifth cookbook and the fourth to focus on Lebanese food. When did you discover your passion for traditional Lebanese cuisine?**
Food was a big part of our family life; it was the center of everything. My family immigrated to the US when I was young and we had a restaurant in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, called Kebab and Things. I worked in the kitchen, served customers, and I would always talk to them about Lebanon. That experience formed everything I would become in the future.

After my third child went off to preschool, I didn't want to go back to advertising. So, I asked myself, what is my real passion? I decided it was working in a restaurant again. I started by training in Italian and French restaurants in Lebanon, but when I interned at Abdel Wahab, renowned for its Lebanese cuisine, everything came together. I'm Lebanese, I live in Lebanon, this is the best food in the world, and I decided that was what I would focus on.

You have anecdotes and memories attached to each recipe in *Forever Beirut*. Does that make it more personal than your prior cookbooks?
All my cookbooks are personal. Writing cookbooks is a type of therapy for me—it's like having children. Each one is different and has a life of its own. I always tell myself that writing a book is about the journey, not the destination. When it's finished, I get the baby blues because I no longer wake up in the morning and think about the book.

What makes *Forever Beirut* different is that it tells readers that, in the aftermath of a devastating explosion, we are still here. We still exist, and even out of chaos we can make beautiful things.

How soon after the August explosion did you begin working on the book? Was it hard given the chaotic situation in Lebanon?
I started within days, and I deliberately went to parts of Beirut where the explosion had the biggest impact. In the book, there is a picture of a clock lying on top of rubble. It shows the exact time of the explosion, and I needed to include that.

After the blast, we Lebanese were affected to our core, and we were walking around like zombies. This cookbook came from pain. Ironically, I gave the manuscript to Interlink Books exactly one year after the explosion.

The forward by Chef Jose Andres describes Lebanon as a country resembling a bowl of tabbouleh with "diverse ingredients, distinguishable but never separable." How would you say this comes through in the national cuisine?
Lebanon is a country … [where] you can go from one street to another and feel like you are in a different country. However, the common denominator for all Lebanese is food. You can disarm and befriend people anywhere in Lebanon just by talking about food.

I am very grateful for the beautiful foreword Chef Andres wrote. He came immediately after the blast with his team (from nonprofit World Central Kitchen) and experienced what we were living through.

What do you like the most about writing cookbooks that share Lebanon's rich culinary history?
My books show a different side of Lebanon, from the local cuisine to its relationship to nature and the diversity of its people. But at its core, my work all comes back to what I love most, which is to feed people … in doing so you are nurturing them. These collections also share stories of our culinary history. These books are a way of connecting and that has more value than just talking.

This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for length and clarity.

Read more articles like this online at aramcoworld.com.

EVENTS

Highlights from aramcoworld.com

Please verify a venue's schedule before visiting.

CURRENT / FEBRUARY

The Quran: Form, Fragrance & Feeling is inspired by the pages of a manuscript of the Qur'an. The patterns and motifs around the space are reminiscent of decorative divisions often used to adorn copies of the Qur'an and these are perfectly represented in the work of artist Mobeen Akhtar. Gold lines travel across the gallery walls, as a nod to those seen in the pages of illuminated manuscripts of the Qur'an. Aga Khan Centre, **London**, through February 4.

CURRENT / MAY

Shezad Dawood: Night in the Garden of Love Inspired by and Featuring Yusef Lateef is a multisensory exhibition by British artist Shezad Dawood, inspired by African-American Muslim musician, composer and polymath Dr. Yusef Lateef. In this multilayered exhibition, the garden serves as the starting point for a creative futuristic and intercultural conversation in which art and music can help transform the individual and the environment. Dawood sparks a transformational mindset as audiences are guided through VR, textile works, music, scent and imagined plants that respond to digital algorithms. Aga Khan Museum, **Toronto**, through May 5.

CURRENT / JUNE

Net Zero provides a creative and educational platform to drive awareness of and engagement around sustainability and global environmental challenges. Showcasing the works of 16 international and two Saudi contemporary artists, the works include curatorial elements developed or procured responsibly, with the redesign, repair, renew and recovery of materials, ensuring optimal utility and value. The exhibit will include workshops and sessions on recycling, and will provide practical tips for people to apply in their everyday lives. Ithra, **Dhahran**, through June 30.

CURRENT / ONGOING

The Legacy of Timbuktu: Wonders of the Written Word highlights the extraordinary richness of historical manuscripts dating back to the 13th century, particularly flourishing in the city of Timbuktu for more than 700 years in present-day Mali. In partnership with the Mamma Haidara Memorial Library in Timbuktu, the feature attraction of this exhibit is 25 of the estimated 1 million manuscripts recently rediscovered in Mali, containing finely articulated calligraphy and colorful illustrations and covering a wide variety of subjects. This is only the second time these manuscripts have left Africa and been on display in the US. International Museum of Muslim Cultures, **Jackson, MS**, through December 28.

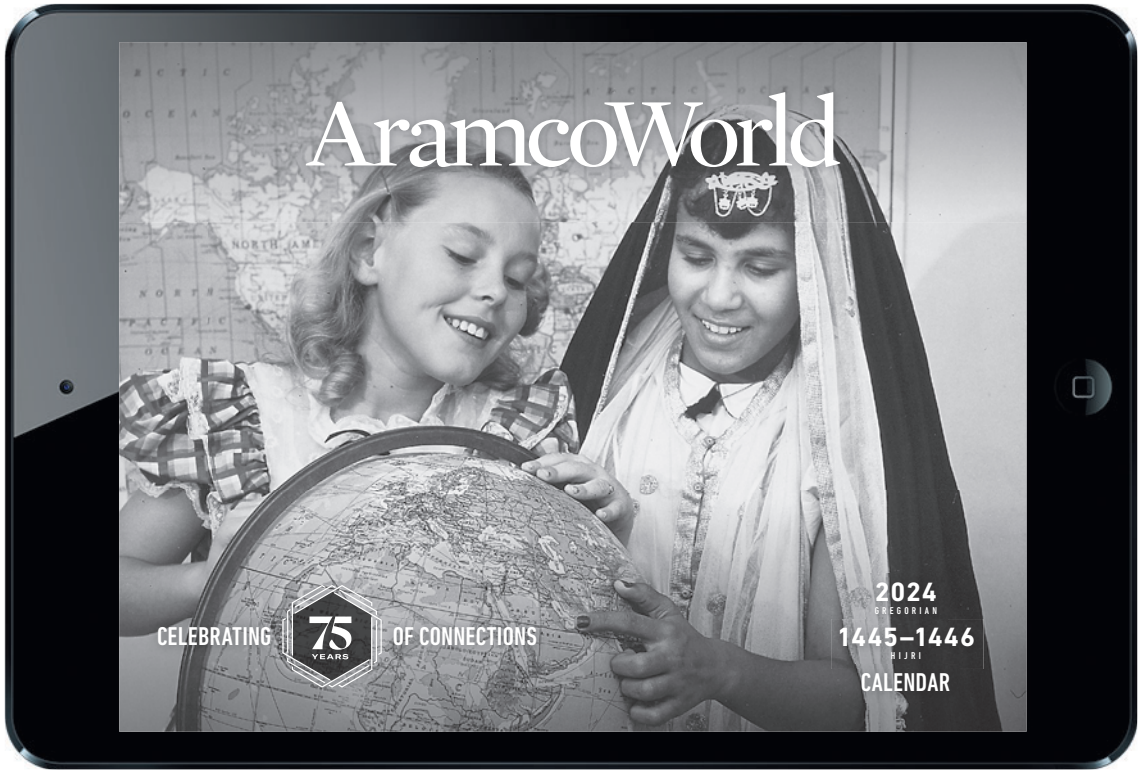
Readers are welcome to submit event information for possible inclusion to proposals@aramcoamericas.com, subject line "Events."

Proof: Maxime Du Camp's Photographs of the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa is the first exhibition to focus on The Met's rare collection of photographs made by French writer and photographer Maxime Du Camp in advance of his landmark 1852 book, *Egypte, Nubie, Palestine et Syrie*. This work, the first photographically illustrated book published in France, arguably established an aesthetic standard for documentary photography: Its salted paper prints are noteworthy for their surprising range of warm colors, handwork, and a luminescence that recalls their Mediterranean origin. Unlike the book's focus on monuments and ancient ruins, they also provide evidence of modern civilization in unfamiliar, arid landscapes. The Met, **New York City**, through January 21.

Maxime Du Camp, "Pyramid of Chephren (Khafre)," 1849, salted paper print from paper negative.

COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, ROBERT O. DOUGAN COLLECTION

2024 CALENDAR



SCAN ME

The 2024 *AramcoWorld* calendar is also online at aramcoworld.com.

Follow us on Facebook, Instagram.

Download our free mobile app.

***AramcoWorld* is a bimonthly publication available in print, web and mobile editions, and an email newsletter is published biweekly.**
Two-year (12-issue) renewable subscriptions to the print edition are available without charge to a limited number of readers worldwide.

To subscribe to the email newsletter: aramcoworld.com → Subscribe → Newsletter.

To subscribe to the print edition: aramcoworld.com → Subscribe → Print Edition.

Change of address: aramcoworld.com → Subscribe → Print Edition. Have your mailing label with you in order to enter your alphanumeric Subscriber Account Number.

Back issues, from 1960 onward, can be read in full online and downloaded from aramcoworld.com.

Article Proposals: aramcoworld.com → About → Guidelines for Contributors.

Permissions:

Texts of articles may be reprinted without specific permission provided that the text be neither edited nor abridged, that the magazine and author be credited, and that a copy of the reprinted article or a link to it be provided to the editors.

Photographs and illustrations: Much of our photo archive is available on our website. Image licensing for approved uses is royalty free.

No spam: Contact us with confidence. You will receive no unsolicited marketing email or postal mail as a result of your subscription or inquiry.

Privacy: aramcoworld.com → Privacy Policy

***AramcoWorld* (ISSN 2376-1083) is published bimonthly by Aramco Americas, Two Allen Center, 1200 Smith Street, Houston TX 77002, USA.**
 Volume 74, Number 6. Periodicals postage paid at Houston, Texas, and at additional mailing offices.
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *AramcoWorld*, P.O. Box 292348, Kettering, Ohio 45429.

AramcoWorld

aramcoworld.com