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Written by **Banning Eyre**

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FRONT COVER Naturally dyed balls of yarn await weavers' hands in ethnic Azerbaijani Georgia, where the art of making Borchalo carpets is practiced primarily by an older generation.





First Look

The Color of Nubia

As a Saudi photographer with a passion for cultural, human and heritage themes around the world, I strive to make my images windows to the past as well as reflections of the present.

When I came across this guesthouse on a visit to Aswan, Egypt, I was taken back to 3000 BCE to ancient Nubia. There were three buildings surrounding a tree-framed courtyard that overlooked the Nile River from its western shore. The guesthouse paid homage to traditional Nubian architectural elements, including a curved arch, and featured a color palette favored by those living in Aswan today—earthtones and vivid shades—that mixed with geometric patterns. Its high mudbrick walls were adorned with decorations illustrating traditions of a civilization brought back to life.

One building is a restaurant that serves traditional Nubian dishes prepared by those who have stayed true to recipes passed down through generations. The blend of vibrant architecture and authentic cuisine immersed me in some of Africa's earliest kingdoms.

—LATIFA AL AJAJI

📷 @LAAM.PHOTOGRAPHER

Flavors

Batata Chab (Potato Chops)

Recipe by Sarah al-Hamad | Photograph by Sue Atkinson

The Bengalis are famous for their “chops,” or potato croquets eaten as snacks with tea.

These perfect orange potato cakes are delicious and filling. In the Gulf, they go by the Arabized name *batata chab*, and in our family they were unfailingly dished up by my aunt as a snack when family and friends came around for afternoon tea and at my dad’s weekly *diwaniya*.



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 2013 award-winning *Sun Bread and Sticky Toffee*. She recently completed an MA in creative nonfiction at the University of East Anglia.

(Serves 6)

2 tablespoons vegetable oil, plus extra for deep-frying

3 medium onions, finely chopped

255 grams lean lamb or ground beef

2 garlic cloves, crushed

565 grams potatoes (about 4 medium potatoes), peeled and quartered

100 grams basmati rice

Pinch of turmeric

2 eggs, beaten

Breadcrumbs for coating

Salt and pepper to taste

Heat the oil in a large saucepan, then fry the onion and meat. Halfway through, add the garlic. When the meat is cooked, set it aside.

Cook the potatoes in a large pan of boiling water until very tender (15-20 minutes, depending on the variety). Transfer them to a bowl and mash with a fork. In another pan of boiling water, slightly overcook the rice until soft and sticky.

Combine the potatoes with the rice and add the turmeric. Season to taste. Blend the ingredients together either by hand or with a potato masher until the mixture is smooth.

Take up egg-sized portions of the potato mixture in the palm of your hand. Flatten out against the curve of your palm and fill with half a teaspoon of the meat. Gently fold the potato over and around the meat into a round patty. The meat should be enclosed.

Dip the potato cakes into the beaten eggs, then coat with breadcrumbs. Fry in hot oil in batches until they are evenly brown. Drain on paper towels.

Best eaten warm as a snack with sweet black tea or dipped in *daqous*, a Kuwaiti tomato sauce.

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Cardamom and Lime: Recipes From the Arabian Gulf by Sarah al-Hamad. Interlink Books, 2008. InterlinkBooks.com.



Q&A

Silk Roads Exhibition Invites Viewers on Journeys of People, Objects and Ideas

Written by JACKY ROWLAND

Photographs courtesy of BRITISH MUSEUM

The chatter of monkeys and tropical bird-song fills the air. Cart wheels creak along a rough track, accompanied by the clip-clop of horses' hooves, bells jangling from their harnesses. Then the wind picks up, and there are different sounds: the cry of seagulls, the creaking of a wooden sailing ship and the tolling of a bell as the vessel is rocked by the waves.

This evocative soundscape envelops visitors as they enter the *Silk Roads* exhibition at the British Museum in London. Huge screens along one wall project images of landscapes and oceans, while visitors are invited to experience the scents of balsam, musk and incense contained in boxes around the exhibition.

Bringing together more than 300 objects from 29 institutions, the show moves beyond common stereotypes of the Silk Road, such as camel trains laden with silk from China or spices for sale in bazaars in Samarkand, in modern Uzbekistan. Archeological evidence has revealed a host of raw materials on the move: gemstones and precious metals; minerals including jade and crystal; resins such as amber; animal products like ivory, pearls and fur; and food such as fruits, nuts and honey. Manmade objects changed hands, including coins, clothing, tableware and artwork. Animals were also exchanged, notably horses, elephants, hunting dogs and birds of prey.

The misconception of the Silk Road as a single overland route from east to west overlooks important interactions with the North and the South and omits journeys made by sea and river. Only certain groups of people, such as the merchants of Sogdiana, traveled long distances. Rather, the Silk Roads—plural—consisted of regional networks that intersected at key hubs where goods could be traded, from one network to another, creating a chain of journeys that could add up to a voyage across the known world.

Some of the most significant journeys were intangible, involving the spread of knowledge, ideas and technologies. The exhibition demonstrates how interconnected the world became during the period 500-1000 CE.

AramcoWorld spoke to the British Museum's Luk Yu-Ping, one of the co-curators of the *Silk Roads* exhibition.



Luk Yu-Ping, co-curator of the *Silk Roads* exhibition

The first object that the visitor encounters is a tiny, copper-alloy figurine. What is its significance?

We decided to have this as the opening item in the exhibition because it encapsulates the idea of an expanded map of the Silk Roads. The figure was made in what is present-day Pakistan around 600 AD, but it was unearthed nearly 5,000 kilometers [3,100 miles] away on a small island in Sweden during excavations of an archeological site dating to about 800 AD.

We don't know how it traveled this distance, but the journey was most likely completed in stages, involving more than one group of people. Because the object was found in Scandinavia, the Vikings would have been involved in some way. The exhibition as a whole demonstrates that the Vikings' sphere of influence extended well beyond what is widely assumed, with their longboats traveling down rivers into Central Europe, where they interacted with traders from further east.



One of the exhibits on loan from Uzbekistan is a group of chess pieces. What do they tell us about the history of the game?

These seven chess pieces were discovered in Samarkand underneath a mosque dating to the 700s, making them the earliest-known group of chess pieces in the world. Many historians believe that chess originated in India as an aristocratic game and that it was initially used to teach military strategy. The carvings on these ivory chess pieces indicate they are divisions of an army. There are two smaller pieces depicting foot soldiers, much like the pawns of modern-day chess, while there are other figures riding elephants or horses, representing different chess pieces. The game of chess spread along the Silk Roads into Central Asia, across the Islamic world, and then into Europe.

One of the technologies that spread along the Silk Roads was papermaking. What impact did this have on the dissemination of ideas?

Papermaking is thought to have been invented in China around the first century AD. There was a battle between Tang Chinese armies and forces of the Abbasid Empire in 751 AD in what is now the border region between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. According to legend, prisoners captured from the Tang Chi-

nese forces helped bring papermaking to Central and West Asia. However, scholars have now established that this technology had reached Central Asia several decades prior to that battle. By 800 AD, a paper mill had been established in the Abbasid capital, Baghdad, which was a major center of intellectual activity.

Papermaking was a much more efficient way of creating a writing surface compared to papyrus or parchment [dried animal skin], which had previously been

“The breeding of silkworms and the creation of silk threads from unbroken cocoons may have begun in China as early as 2700 BC. ... By 1000 AD there were many centers of silk farming and silk weaving in Eurasia.”

—LUK YU-PING

Q&A

“Our aim in this exhibition is to tell a richer, more complex story of the Silk Roads beyond trade between East and West, highlighting the interconnectedness of Asia, Africa and Europe during the period from 500 to 1000 AD.”

—LUK YU-PING



ABOVE Ivory figures from one of the world's oldest chess sets (8th century CE) excavated in Samarkand (Afrasiab), Uzbekistan.





The Sogdians of Central Asia were great traders. A mural section from the “Hall of the Ambassadors” in Afrasiab (Samarkand), Uzbekistan, 660s CE, shows the local rulers traveling to the shrine of their ancestors to pay their respects. **OPPOSITE** Working with 29 national and international partners to present objects from many regions and cultures with those from current collections, the exhibition offers a unique chance to see objects from the breadth of the Silk Roads.

Oasis cities along desert routes

Dunhuang was situated near the crossroads of two branches of the Silk Roads. From there, travellers in camel caravans could choose either a northern or southern route to circumvent the formidable Taklamakan and Lop Deserts of the Tarim Basin, before reaching Kashgar. Along these arduous routes were oasis kingdoms and cities, where people could rest, drink and replenish. At such sites evidence for the fusion of cultures, religious ideologies and technologies can be found. Among the peoples of this multicultural region were the Uyghurs, one of the Turkic people from the Steppe, and the Khotanese.

used in Central and West Asia. Paper was quicker, cheaper and easier to make, while being lighter to transport. Initially, it was used for bureaucratic documents and other forms of secular writing. But by the 10th century, Qur’ans were starting to be written on paper. That had a huge impact on the spread of religious ideas as well as secular knowledge.

In the exhibition, we use a group of Qur’ans to tell this story. Firstly, we have one of the world’s oldest Qur’ans, which is on loan from the British Library. It dates to the 700s, probably originating in Makkah or Madina, and is written on parchment. Then we have another Qur’an dating to the 800s, which shows a change to the Kufic script, a more horizontal, angular kind of script, which is written on vellum, another form of animal skin. Finally, we have a later Qur’an, dating from 1000-1200 AD, which is written on paper, making it smaller and easier to transport.

Among the many exhibits that illustrate the spread of knowledge, do you have any personal favorites?

There are so many amazing objects. A personal favorite of mine is a wooden panel dating from 600-800, which

depicts the story of the Silk Princess, a popular legend of how silk farming spread from China. According to the story, a princess from the East smuggled silkworm eggs and seeds of the mulberry tree in her headdress when she was sent to marry the king of Khotan, thousands of kilometers to the west [in modern China]. I think this is a great story captured in a small object, which reminds us that women—be they elite women or members of their entourage—also contributed to the spread of objects, technology and ideas.

The breeding of silkworms and the creation of silk threads from unbroken cocoons may have begun in China as early as 2700 BC. The technology started to spread around 100 BC, and by 1000 AD there were many centers of silk farming and silk weaving in Eurasia.

Nevertheless, silk from China remained a valuable commodity and was used as a currency along the Silk Roads. Successive Chinese dynasties collected taxes in the form of silk, while large quantities of the material were sent to military headquarters in frontier regions. The silk could then be used to pay soldiers’ salaries and buy food and equipment.

The soundscape shifts as the visitor enters the corridor at the end of the exhibition. The noises of camel trains and sea voyages give way to those of contemporary connections such as transport and telecommunications. This eases visitors from the past back into the present and invites them to reflect on their own place in the world.

While the ways in which people interact have changed, the overarching message of the exhibition is that the cross-cultural connections forged on the silk roads more than 1,000 years ago remain. These interwoven histories between peoples and cultures will continue to shape the present and the future. **AW**



Based in London and Paris, **Jacky Rowland** is an actor, playwright and broadcaster who writes about art, theater, music and culture. She is a former correspondent for the British Broadcasting Corporation and Al Jazeera English.

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REVAILOOMS





Georgia's Borchalo Carpets Begin a Tentative Comeback

WRITTEN BY ROBIN FORESTIER-WALKER

PHOTOGRAPHED BY PEARLY JACOB



ABOVE Rug sellers in the early 1900s in Tiflis (modern-day Tbilisi), Georgia. **PREVIOUS PAGES** reWoven coordinator Zaur Khalilov measures the final dimensions of a recently completed rug woven by Suraya Memisova at her home.

Zemfira Kajarova was only 16 when she came to the ethnic Azerbaijani village of Kosalar in 1976, in what was then the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Despite hailing from a nearby town and being ethnic Azerbaijani herself, Kajarova was considered an outsider. She soon discovered a community that took great pride in its rug-weaving tradition, brought here centuries ago by its Turkic Muslim forebears.

Kajarova had to learn a new skill. “My mother-in-law taught me how to weave,” she says, smiling at the recollection. “This was how we bonded.”

Today weaving still bonds the older women of Kosalar who, like their ancestors before them, sit together at the loom in humble homesteads and produce Borchalo (or Borchaly) rugs recognized by collectors

for their quality and design.

The carpets are handwoven with a luxuriously soft but thick pile, of wool dyed in a variety of natural colors extracted from plants that include juniper, walnut and madder. Their patterns use simple geometric symbols like the tree of life and medallions known as *guls*.

Despite antique examples fetching high prices at premier auction houses such as Christie’s, contemporary Borchalo rug-weaving faces a bleak future. All of the active weavers in the community are older than 50. Unless more young women learn the craft, it risks disappearing forever. “I’m afraid that this heritage will die,” says Kajarova. “The elderly can’t weave anymore, and the young people don’t want to take this responsibility. They say it’s difficult work.”

Regardless of the challenges, there is a growing recognition of the uniqueness of ethnic Azerbaijani rug-weaving in Georgia, and with new efforts on the way, there is hope that this tradition can be saved.

TRADITION’S HISTORY

Kosalar sits on a grassy plain in southern Georgia, at the foothills of a volcanic mountain range stretching into modern-day Armenia and Türkiye. It is close to the town of Marneuli, formerly known as Borchalo, from which the rugs take their name.

Kosalar’s community forms part of a larger Azerbaijani minority in Georgia of almost 250,000

Steamboat and rail opened the regional rug trade to the wider world, connecting Georgian bazaars to New York and Paris.



ABOVE The mosque is the central attraction in Kosalar, one of the few villages where the ancient craft of Borchalo rug-weaving has been revived thanks to social enterprise reWoven. The very act of weaving in the southern Georgian community harks back to a slower pace of life uncommon in today's world.

people. At the time of Georgia's last census in 2014, ethnic Azerbaijanis in Georgia comprised 6% of the total population. Some sources suggest that number has increased.

Irina Koshoridze, chief curator of oriental collections at the Georgian National Museum, also believes that the Borchalo weavers are direct descendants of nomadic pastoralists from northern Iran who came to what is present-day Georgia during the Safavid dynasty.

"According to legends and historical sources, they were settled by Shah Abaz the Great in the 17th century," says Koshoridze. "The name 'Borchalo' comes from the name of a nomadic Turkmen tribe, who originally lived in the Sulduz region of Iranian Azerbaijan, distinguished by their bravery and fighting skills."

The origins of the Borchalo weavers are still open to debate.

Other historians claim nomadic Turkic tribes brought their culture to the Caucasus as early as the fourth century CE. "They moved from Central Asia. We're talking about a huge territory and symbols from this huge community with different ethnicities," says

Shirin Melikova, former director of the Azerbaijan National Carpet Museum. "If you research patterns and ornaments of all these communities, from Siberia, Altai, Uyghurs, from Central Asia to the Caucasus, you will see this one big picture," she adds.

The region eventually fell into the hands of the Russian Empire and later became part of the Soviet Union. When the Russian Empire created a Caucasian Handicraft Committee in 1899, it aimed to develop weaving centers across the Caucasus to produce rugs for an international market. Steamboat and rail opened the regional rug trade to the wider world, connecting the bazaars of Tiflis (as the capital, Tbilisi, was then known) to tastemakers in New York and Paris.

According to Koshoridze, Borchalo and Karachop rugs (another regional variation) benefited not only from new looms and designs introduced during the Tsarist period but also from preserving their distinctiveness by a later quirk of fate.

Soviet planners chose to develop a carpet-weaving industry in established weaving centers around Baku, in Soviet Azerbaijan. Karachop and Borchalo, which were located in the neighboring Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, were excluded. "They kept their traditions because they never worked for an international market during the Soviet period, and this is why they were so special," Koshoridze says.



BELOW Outside weaver Elmira Ceferova's house, men get ready to drive sheep to pasture.

When Western dealers “discovered” antique Borchalo rugs in the 1990s following the breakup of the Soviet Union, “they were seen as something new, with strong, bold and very individual designs,” says Koshoridze.

By then, though, most looms had fallen silent. Once, the women had woven their bridal dowries from their wool or sold the rugs to merchants in Tbilisi. But the 1990s were desperate times. The wool industry was broken, and cheap machine-produced rugs left the weavers with little incentive to continue their work.

Those who did continue used any materials they could find, including artificial fibers and chemical dyes. Idiosyncratic prayer rugs of vivid colors were woven for local mosques. They possessed their own folk charm, but the 19th-century artistry had been

abandoned. “No one supported these women, and nobody bought these carpets like they used to; that’s why many weavers stopped this tradition,” says Melikova.

REVIVAL

While rug-making has been part of Azerbaijani traditions for centuries, the communities faced losing the craft in recent years.

Then a young American Christian missionary saw an opportunity to jump-start the looms of Kosalar again.

Ryan Smith fell in love with the weaving culture when he lived in Azerbaijan in the early 2000s.

As he traveled in the region and met people, he had a vision: Create a market for new Borchalo rugs made with the luxury and motifs of the finest antiques.

A fluent speaker of Azerbaijani, Smith found buyers, sourced quality wool and natural dyes, and persuaded retired weavers to reproduce the work of their grandmothers. In 2014 he founded a local non-profit organization, reWoven, to restore traditional rug-making.

Ryan, Melikova says, inspired a revival. “This was a big part of his life. It wasn’t just a question of business. He did a lot to revive this tradition in Georgia. And he started to work with the local women.”

reWoven ships about 30 rugs a year. Larger ones cost up to US \$3,000, and the weavers receive a

“It’s super important for the communities in which [the rugs] are woven to understand that people value this incredible cultural production.”

—WILLIAM DUNBAR





competitive price for their work. All the remaining revenue funds community projects.

“The margins are really thin,” says William Dunbar, “but we have been able to increase the cost per square meter, and we will continue to do so.” Dunbar took over reWoven’s management after Smith’s tragic death in 2018. His motivation is to continue Smith’s work and sustain the tradition.

Some of the looms are 100 years old and may even have made rugs that command a \$125,000 price tag at Sotheby’s and Christie’s, Dunbar notes. “It’s super important for the communities in which they are woven to understand that people value this incredible cultural production,” he says.

THE LOOM

Together with a cousin and a neighbor, Kajarova sits on a low bench at the loom. Their work is an act of communion and collaboration, fitted around the rigors of traditional domestic routines—milking the cows, cleaning, cooking and child care. “We understand each other, we help each other when we fall behind, and we weave together,” she says.

The loom holds the vertical threads known as warps under tension. The women interweave weft threads horizontally and tie rows of knots of colored threads to create patterns and form. The loom thrums as they thread and knot then thumps as

their forklike *kirkits* compress the pile.

The weavers are in a state of flow. Their movements are swift. But the rug will take at least a month to render into being. It is the sum total of hundreds of thousands of individual knots threaded together with patience and concentration uncommon in today’s world.

Zaur Khalilov arrives in Kosalar to deliver bags of naturally dyed balls of yarn to Kajarova and her neighbors.

Khalilov coordinates with the weavers in the production of reWoven’s commissioned designs. After a cup of tea sweetened with wild blackberry jam, he points to Kajarova’s current project on the loom. “The name of this pattern is ‘Borchaly stars.’ The blue is the sky, that is, the sky of Borchaly.”

Kajarovanods in agreement. “It’s how our grandmothers saw nature and reflected it in their works.”

Dunbar believes the compositions of the Borchalo rugs reflect ancient nomadism spiritually and

ABOVE Elmira Ceferova, left, and Zemfira Kajarova, right, work together to stretch the horizontal white yarn, called warp, on a loom in preparation to start weaving a rug for social enterprise reWoven at Ceferova’s house in Kosalar.

“We understand each other, we help each other when we fall behind, and we weave together.”

—ZEMFIRA KAJAROVA



ABOVE Older hands teach younger hands to weave at The Tea House in Marneuli. **LEFT** 15-year-old Amina Mehdova, left, and 14-year-old Maya Ziadalieva are among the youngest students learning to weave at the center.

Nowadays, weavers see the tree of life, a common design in their rugs, as representing family, fertility and prosperity, each branch a new child or lineage. According to Melikova, the carpets are a visual encyclopedia of ancient Turkic nomadic symbols.

“We speak of ornaments and composition, but the patterns are *tamgas*, stamps which show a belonging to certain tribes. These are clues, keys to understanding. Even nowadays you see sheep marked by these stamps, which shows the continuation of this tradition,” she says.

A NEW GENERATION

The lack of weavers makes it challenging to keep up with demand for rugs. A solution might not be far off. The Tea House in Marneuli, an education center, provides cultural classes for young people.

Fourteen-year-old Maia Ziadalieva recently became curious about weaving while waiting for her brother to finish his dance classes, though she knew

materially wedded to landscape and the natural world.

Whether through conquest or climate change, humanity has traversed and settled the fertile plains and river canyons that make up southern Georgia for millennia, embedding and evolving their culture and craft. “It’s incredibly difficult to get to the bottom of these symbols,” Dunbar says. “I could take you down to the British Museum and show you the tree of life on a piece of Assyrian stone carving from 700 BC.”



The Tea House is the only place that offers formal classes in Borchalo rug-weaving, the craft traditionally passed down from mother to daughter. With youth at the loom, the artform has a chance of being kept alive.

nothing about the tradition before trying it. “There is a silence here, and I feel relaxed while weaving,” Maia says. “I don’t know what will happen in the future, but I do like the process, and I think others can too. I would like to teach it.”

Twelve students are currently learning to weave. However, Tea House director Emin Akhmedov has a bolder vision: establishing weaving centers in villages where the culture is still alive. “We can see people ready to spread the knowledge,” says Akhmedov. “And we need young people’s knowledge in terms of marketing or branding to see it as a business.”

“We’re never going to be a big business,” says Dunbar. reWoven is instead focused on artistic preservation, sustaining a cottage industry rather than scaling up, though he sees opportunities for “up-skilling” the community.

A reWoven finishing station will soon complete the final cleaning and softening of rugs in Georgia. Currently, the process is outsourced to Azerbaijan. Dunbar explains that the yarn is sourced in Iran and then dyed in Baku, but that, too, could change.

“These carpets were not made with imported yarn 100 years ago. We’ve got a million sheep in Georgia; the wool value chain has collapsed. We can use Georgian wool, and we can pay the shepherds a little bit extra. We can get it dyed here.”

In Kosalar, the women bake their loaves of flatbread together in a small bakery, a shed with a stone oven. The fire blazes with thorny branches of brushwood, and the steaming flatbreads are filled with a local spinach variety. Their shared labor, at the loom or in the fields, ensures a continuity of tradition.

Their exquisite rugs, which can trace their lineage back to the Safavid dynasty, have evolved and adapted. They are guided both by their own aesthetic and by international demand. And though the future is still uncertain, Borchalo rugs’s existence no longer hangs by a thread. **AW**



Robin Forestier-Walker is a British freelance journalist and filmmaker based in Tbilisi, Georgia. He has written and reported extensively for the Al Jazeera Network in the South Caucasus, Eastern Europe and Central Asia. **Pearly Jacob** is a multimedia journalist, photographer and filmmaker. She has traveled widely across Central and

South Asia and Western Europe by bicycle, and has produced stories on a wide variety of environmental, sociocultural and human-interest topics for clients ranging from Al Jazeera, BBC, DW, *National Geographic*, Voice of America and others.





The Legacy of a MANUSCRIPT

How a Polish Nobleman's Exploration of Arabia Helps Preserve Cultural Heritage

WRITTEN BY MATTHEW TELLER, IMAGES COURTESY OF MANUSCRIPTEM PUBLISHING HOUSE

In 1817, the Polish adventurer and poet Wacław Rzewuski (*VATSwav je-VOO-ski*) set out on a journey to Arabia and what we now call the Middle East. His self-declared purpose was to bring purebred Arabian horses to Europe.

Although he was a prolific poet and essayist, translating Arabic, Persian and Turkish texts into French and German, almost 200 years after his death Rzewuski is best known for the monumental three-volume, 500-page work he wrote following his Arabian travels. He completed it in French in about 1830, under the title *Sur les chevaux orientaux et provenants des races orientales* (Concerning Eastern Horses and Those Originating From Eastern Breeds). The manuscript has become central to advancing understanding not only of Arabian horse breeds but also 19th-century Bedouin life and customs.

Researcher Filip Kucera, who has explored Rzewuski's life and works, notes that Rzewuski disappeared, presumed dead, during a military battle in 1831, but the manuscript of *Sur les chevaux* survived, passing from hand to hand among relatives. In 1928 it was acquired by the National Library in Warsaw. Fire destroyed most of the library's collections in 1944, but Rzewuski's manuscript happened to have been moved to a workshop for rebinding, and so it survived.

Yet it remained unpublished, and few knew of Rzewuski or his work. In 2012, in cooperation with the Qatar Museums Authority, the library at last began preparing to publish *Sur les chevaux* in its entirety. Six years later, a scholarly five-volume edition appeared in Polish, English and French, comprising more than 1,800 pages that include extensive notes and commentaries on Rzewuski's text as well as contextual essays.

Cultural diplomacy followed in the Arabian Gulf, as ornate facsimile editions were presented in Doha, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and, most recently, Kuwait City in 2022, accompanied by exhibitions and public education programs to raise awareness of Rzewuski's life and work. More than two centuries after Rzewuski returned from Arabia, his book can now be read worldwide on the Polish National Library website.

Collaborative projects between Arab and European governments on cultural heritage preservation, such as that on the Rzewuski manuscript, are highlighting ongoing shifts over control of historical narratives and knowledge production.

Wacław Rzewuski was known as a poet, explorer, horse aficionado and more. But almost 200 years after his death, his epic three-volume manuscript detailing his Arabian travels—not available to the public until 2018—is his biggest legacy.







ABOVE Born in 1784 in what is today Ukraine, Rzewuski, according to biographers, was awed by the Middle East. **RIGHT** Although the title of Rzewuski's manuscript refers to horses, the 500 pages are filled with much more than notes on different breeds. Combined, the three volumes comprise detailed accounts and illustrations of Bedouin life, customs and culture, poetry and even the weather.

"Qatar's initiative to digitize and publish the Rzewuski manuscript fits into its larger strategy of preserving and promoting cultural heritage through partnerships with global institutions," says Haya Al-Noaimi, a liberal arts professor at Northwestern University in Doha. "The region suffers from a dearth of indigenous [documentation], and manuscripts like this one are a necessary addition to the canon of historical knowledge."

Al-Noaimi regards Rzewuski's manuscript as "a valuable historical and ethnographic source" for understanding Bedouin cultural heritage and the history of the Arabian Peninsula, not least because it fills gaps in knowledge left by the lack of locally produced contemporaneous sources. "The Bedouin revere their oral heritage and take pride in it," affirms Palestinian American scholar Seraj Assi, author of *The History and Politics of the Bedouin* (2018). "Written sources by Rzewuski and others offer a valuable contribution [to] documenting Bedouin history."

As Global South countries build postcolonial nations and redefine their geopolitical relationships, many are also reclaiming their own history. That happens metaphorically, as new perspectives emerge from critical analysis, but also literally. Most primary source material on the Middle East is held in archives in faraway capitals: London, Paris, Warsaw. Only scholars with the resources to secure access in person have been able to study it—and it is they, therefore, who have written the region's history.



Nowadays, Qatar's strategy forms "part of nation-building," says Gerd Nonneman, professor of international relations at Georgetown University in Doha, citing Qatar's 10-year collaboration with the British Library to digitize and publish colonial-era archives.

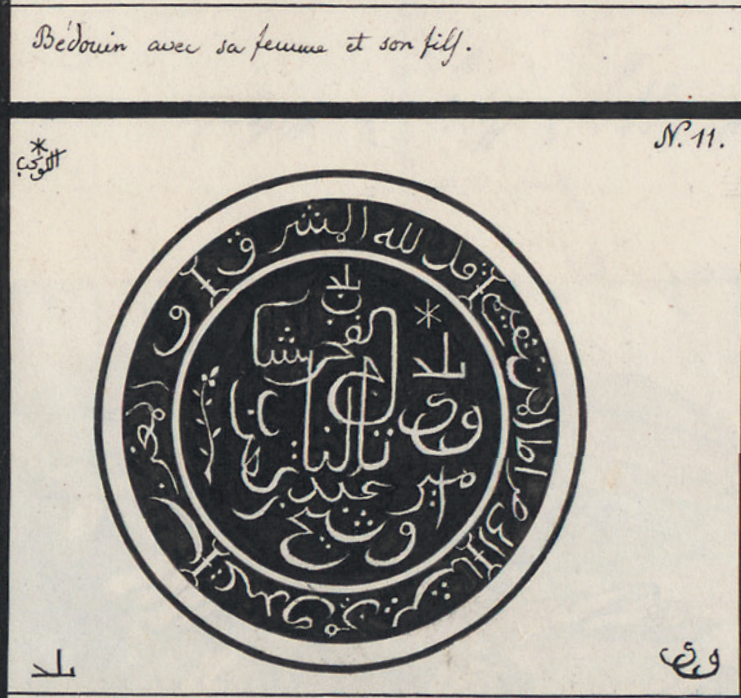
Similar efforts in nation-building and preservation of historical narratives are ongoing in neighboring countries, including Saudi Arabia. Recently, the King Abdullah Foundation for Research and Archives (Darrah) released the complete works of the prominent 19th-century scholar and genealogist Ibrahim bin Saleh bin Issa, whose writings



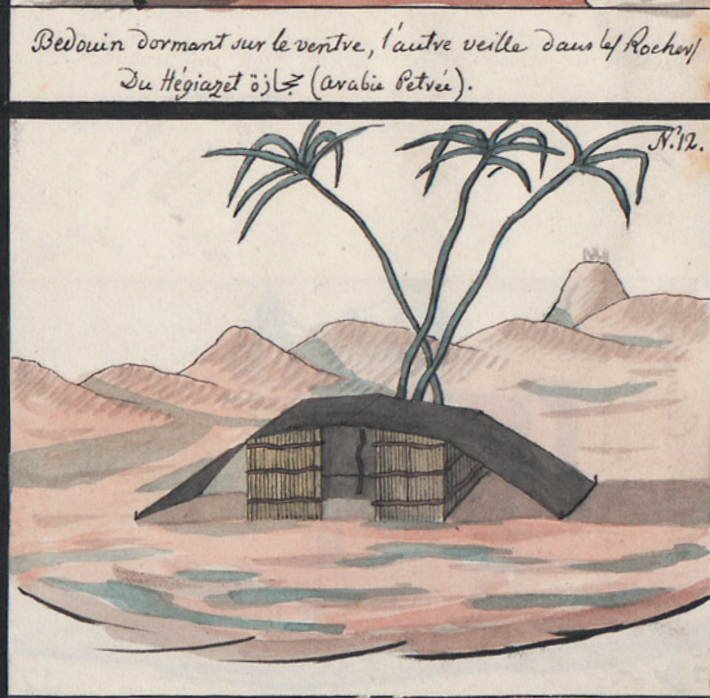
Bedouin avec sa femme et son fils.



Bedouin dormant sur le ventre, l'autre veille dans la Roche/ Du Hegiazet حجازة (Arabie Petrie).



Grand Cachet de Fay-el-Faker Abd-el-Nichaane Emir et Scheik des Awabs Bedouins Anazehs, du Desert.



Tente des Turcmènes dans la Plaine d'Antioche à Hammam حان C'est la tribu de Rihan (رمان) dont le prince est Haydar agha Muxjal oglou.

OPPOSITE TOP: DCOWIEUB/LAMY STOCK PHOTO

shed light on the history and lineage of the Najd region. While regional scholars and writers play a central role in retrieving the history of the peninsula, Rzewuski's manuscript is an essential asset. Digitization and publication of sources such as Rzewuski's manuscript facilitate broad-based challenges to previously accepted historical narratives, says Rosie Bsheer, professor of history at Harvard University. It heralds a realignment of who writes the Middle East's history, "[affording] a crucial resource for students who seek to conduct archival research for which little or no

“Written sources by Rzewuski and others offer a valuable contribution [to] documenting Bedouin history.” —SERAJ ASSI



ABOVE Rzewuski's manuscript is still recognized as an invaluable encyclopedia of the art of breeding Arabian horses: their lineage, history, features and advantages.

funds are available for travel.”

Bsheer adds that such projects “not only break the financial, physical and other barriers of conducting research on the Gulf and its peoples, which have been marginalized from history. But, in reading these digital archives against the grain, it will also allow us to study the politics of knowledge production more broadly.”

WHO WAS RZEWUSKI?

The facts of Rzewuski's life are elusive, but biographers such as Kucera and others note that he was born in 1784 into a noble land-owning family in the Polish city of Lwów—now Lviv in Ukraine. After a privileged childhood in Vienna and graduation from a military academy, he served as a cavalry officer in the imperial Austrian army. Inspired by his uncle, the renowned ethnographer Jan Potocki, Rzewuski developed an interest in Arab and Turkish culture. He learned Arabic, founded the pioneering scholarly



“I ride a horse and wield a spear like a true Bedouin. Heat does not weaken me. I am unafraid of hardships and fatigue.” —WACLAW RZEWUSKI

journal *Fundgruben des Oriens* (Sources of Oriental Studies) and then, in 1817, left to spend three years living and traveling in Syria, Iraq and Arabia.

Sur les chevaux demonstrates Rzewuski’s fascination with everything equestrian. As he became more deeply integrated into the culture and society of the desert-dwelling Bedouin of Najd, in central Arabia, Rzewuski recorded in intimate detail—in words and more than 400 exquisitely precise annotated color drawings—the characteristics of the pure-bred Arabian horses that were, and still are, so highly valued in the region.

In the manuscript Rzewuski described Bedouin customs and lifestyles and compiled an extensive genealogy of tribes. He drew desert landscapes, vernacular architecture, clothing, weaponry, Arabic calligraphy and more. But Rzewuski’s most valuable, and original, contribution was in the form of musical notation, by which he recorded the songs and melodies that he heard.

Rzewuski’s transcription is unique since Bedouin musicians generally learn and perform songs by ear alone. His 200-year-old notation recently enabled modern musicians to reconstruct and perform previously unheard Najdi Bedouin songs.

According to his writings, he was named *Amir* (Prince) and *Taj al-Fahr* (Crown of Glory, a rendering in Arabic of the literal meaning of his given name, Waclaw), among other honorifics.

Rzewuski eventually returned to settle in Savran, a rural area of southern Ukraine. There he established one of Europe’s first Arabian stud farms and created an Islamic garden, using shade and flowing water to encourage contemplation. He dressed in Bedouin-style robes and surrounded himself with books including the Qur’an, although he seems not to have embraced Islam.

CROSS-CULTURAL INFLUENCE AND OUTCOMES

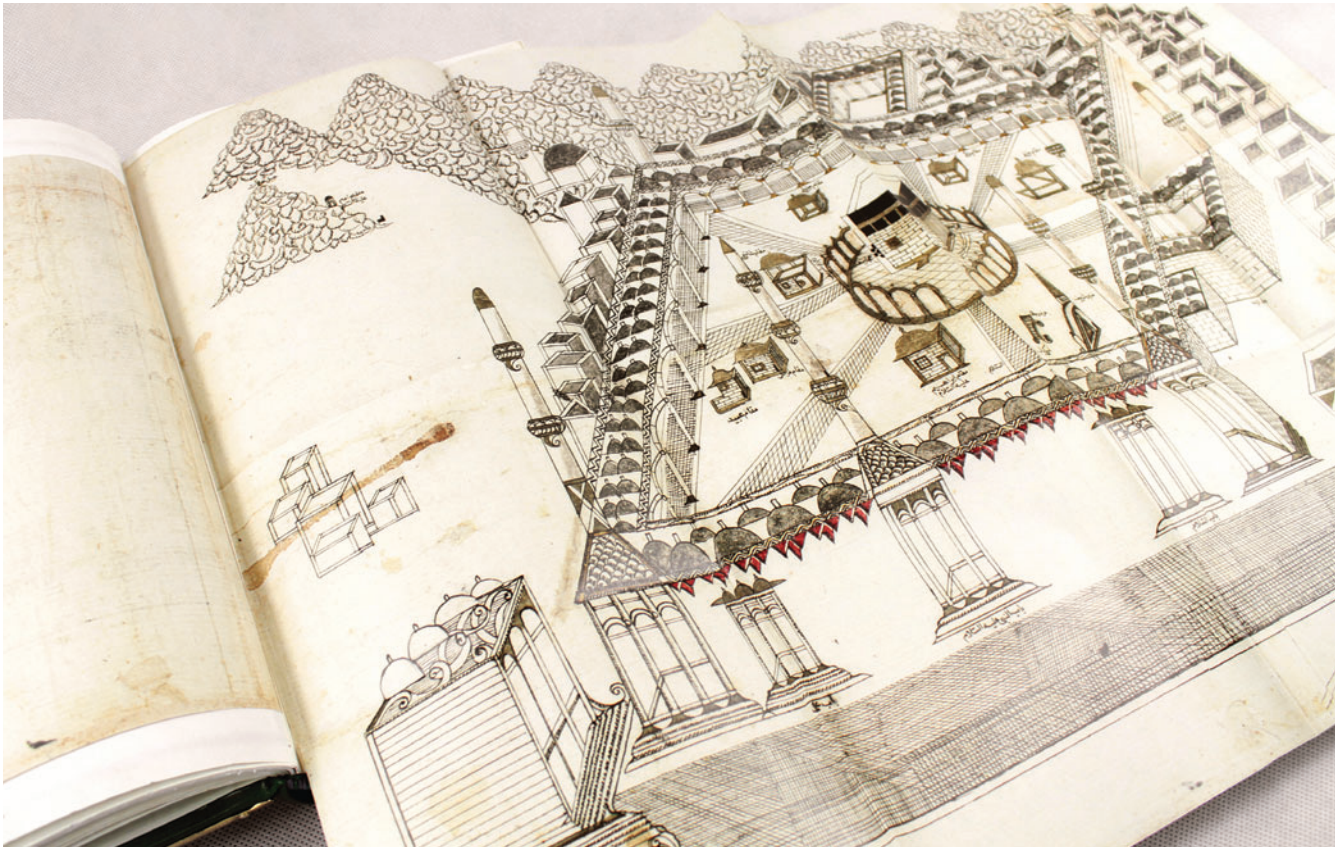
Rzewuski’s motivations for his journey, and for writing in such detail afterward, remain unclear. On the one hand, his attitudes were archetypically orientalist: He went to Arabia because—as he himself wrote—“I sought free people remaining in a natural state.” “I feel at home in the desert,” he boasted later. “I ride a horse and wield a spear like a true Bedouin. Heat does not weaken me. I am unafraid of hardships and fatigue. No kind of danger scares me.”

Scholar Jan Reyman, in his 1972 study *Podróznicy polscy na Bliskim Wschodzie w XIX w* [Polish Travelers in the Middle East in the 19th Century], noted: “In the Bedouin [Rzewuski] saw the dream children of nature, untainted by tyranny or greed. ... Disappointed by Europe, he turned to the East.”

Yet Ewelina Kaczmarczyk, literary researcher and editor of the cultural media site Salam Lab, points out

BELOW The manuscript includes several pages of groundbreaking musical notation that preserves Bedouin songs traditionally passed on orally. Its existence enables modern musicians to reconstruct and perform Bedouin melodies that have been unheard for more than 200 years.







Ornate reproductions of the manuscripts are now touring the Middle East in exhibitions and education programs highlighting the cross-cultural importance of Rzewuski. It's a surprising turn of events since Rzewuski's manuscript narrowly escaped destruction multiple times over the centuries. After his disappearance, it changed hands within his family and among horse enthusiasts, was briefly lost and eventually acquired by the National Library in Warsaw in 1928. The manuscript survived the 1944 Warsaw Uprising during the Nazi occupation of Poland during World War II, having been fortuitously moved to a bookbinder.

that Rzewuski's travels may have had a more prosaic purpose. Horse-breeding across Europe had been in decline since the Napoleonic Wars of 1803-1815. Although he clearly loved horses and was an expert rider, Rzewuski may have used them as leverage to gain aristocratic support for his journey, and then to provide himself with status and wealth on his return.

The Arabian horses he brought back were the first in Europe: Rzewuski was a pioneer breeder and is known to have brokered the sale of purebred Arabians to royal studs from France to imperial Russia.

Whatever his motivations, Rzewuski seems to have interacted with the Bedouin as equals and been accepted by them as such. His writings "situate the Bedouins as active agents, rather than passive subjects of external empires," al-Noaimi notes. That is especially remarkable, considering the prevailing

tone of condescension or hostility colonial officials and traveler accounts took toward Bedouin people—and Arabs of any background—at the time, as many scholars suggest.

Sur les chevaux "enhances notions of national identity and heritage in the Gulf," says al-Noaimi, adding that its fame since publication in 2018 "highlights a shift in thinking [to] embrace narratives from persons who were not necessarily involved in colonial knowledge production."

By contrast, Kaczmarczyk suggests that Rzewuski's newfound fame "is really about going back to Polish roots." She reflects that contemporary Poland "forgets about how the East influenced Polish identity, how we traded with the Arab world, how we were fascinated by Arab and Islamic cultures.

"Rzewuski's manuscript matters for the music he transcribed, for the genealogies he recorded and for his work on horse breeding—but also because it demonstrates our connections and our common interests. It is a light in the dark atmosphere of today." **AW**



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 in 2022. Follow him on X (formerly Twitter) @matthewteller and at matthewteller.com.

Translating the QUR'AN for the DEAF

WRITTEN BY SUNNIYA AHMAD PIRZADA | PHOTOGRAPHED BY ANDREW SHAYLOR

No room for misinterpretation in British Sign Language team's work



aseen Miah, a 25-year-old multimedia executive, was born deaf into a family in which everyone else could hear. Growing up in a hearing world, both at home and at school, posed challenges for him despite his family's support and efforts to learn sign language.

Now he is involved in a project that is close to his heart: a video translation of the Qur'an from Arabic directly into British Sign Language—the first initiative of its kind. As the main deaf signer, he is the face of the BSL Qur'an Project.

"It's a big responsibility and I feel a lot of pressure, but it's good pressure, and I'm proud of being involved in the project," he signs with a smile. "Working out syntax can be quite hard. Translating the Qur'an strictly and accurately is a challenge."

While the holy book is in Arabic, most Muslims around the world, like Miah, do not understand the language, which is a challenge. And for the deaf, it presents an additional obstacle. According to the Pew Research Center, of the 2 billion Muslims in the world, only about 20 percent are native Arabic speakers.

Abdel Haleem, the King Fahd Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of London and the author of *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, understands the

difficulty of getting the translation as close to the original text as possible.

There is only one version of the Qur'an, and Muslims across the globe first read it in its original Classical Arabic. That is the language in which it was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad and what Muslims consider the original message from God—not tampered with nor subjected to human interpretation (unlike translations and explanations).

Haleem says it's difficult to make the Qur'an accessible through translation: "It's a language that goes for precision in pronouncing words as well as in the word flow and syntax, and it has very advanced grammar."

The scholar emphasizes the complexity of Classical Arabic, noting its strict rules regarding gender and numbers, which must be consistently observed throughout a sentence. "This complexity makes it challenging for both nonnative speakers and even some Arabs to fully grasp," he says.

OPPOSITE Yaseen Miah, the face of the BSL-Qur'an Project, signs "In the name of God, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful," which Muslims say before reciting the Qur'an. In translating the Qur'an into British Sign Language, UK charity Al Isharah's video project aims to make the holy book accessible to the deaf.





The complexity of Classical Arabic makes translation of any kind—and sign language even more so—a daunting and tedious task. So far 37 of the shorter *surahs* have been completed, and 14 more are underway.

THE PROJECT AND CHALLENGES

The project was initiated in 2017 by Al Isharah, a UK-based charity serving the deaf. It offers a club for deaf people with weekend supplementary schools and community events.

Through dedicated efforts and a deep understanding of both linguistic and cultural nuances, the team at Al Isharah has been making strides in creating an inclusive and accessible environment for deaf Muslims.

The project is being led by Azad Hussain, the CEO of Al Isharah. He himself is proficient in BSL, having learned it to integrate with the deaf community.

“The Qur’an has a beautiful rhythmic flow, and we want to mimic it for deaf people,” he highlights. The goal is to stay true to the essence of the Qur’an.

So far the translation and publication of 37 of the shorter *surahs* (Qur’anic chapters) have been completed, with 77 remaining.

“We have translated a further 14 chapters. They are currently going through the checking, filming and editing process. This is a very lengthy and tedious process in itself,” Hussain says. “We have to be diligent, as standards for Qur’anic recitation or translation are of utmost importance.

“It can become more challenging as we go along as the chapters get longer.”

It is a slow process and, as Miah puts it, far from straightforward. “You need the right placement when you’re using the signs. You have to remember the verses, every single one of them,” he says, highlighting the importance of facial expressions and body language in BSL. They convey emotions and context, akin to intonation and punctuation in spoken languages.

5%

World’s population with disabling hearing loss

(WHO)

25%

World’s Muslim population

(Pew Research Center)

6.5%

Great Britain’s Muslim population

(Muslim Council of Britain)



“Honestly, it’s intrinsically challenging; you have to be spot on,” he emphasizes. “If there is a slight misplacement of signs, we have to repeat it over and over again.”

He studies and practices the signs before the final filming. In these filming sessions, led by the CEO, the translation team supports Miah with a member on either side of him, enabling him to pick up any cues through his peripheral vision so that, if needed, he can correct himself when signing certain words or lines. While it used to take him multiple sessions to film a *surah*, he can now confidently complete an entire one in a single day.

The team is keen to provide the deaf community, including locals, with a translation that is clear and understandable—and Miah plays a key part. As the main signer, it is important for him to understand what he is conveying; otherwise, he says, “I’d be parroting what is being shown to me without any emotions or expressions. But once I grasp the meaning, I can use appropriate facial expressions, place the signs in keeping with the rhythm of the recitation, and it all marries up.”

In English, additional information can be easily conveyed through captions, but sign language does not afford this luxury. “To address this, we developed a system of footnoting,” Hussain explains. “But footnoting is quite unfamiliar to the deaf community, so we had to find a way to visualize these footnotes as well.”

The translation process is rigorous to ensure accuracy and comprehensibility for everyone, regardless of their academic background. However, Haleem

warns that even with robust protocols in place, there can be a disconnect between the original text and the translation.

“This disconnect is more pronounced for non-Arabic speakers who rely on translations that often fail to capture the nuances of the original text. Translators are literalists,” the academic cautions.

It can take several sessions and hours of discussions to even get to this stage because sometimes they do not have the “right” sign to illustrate certain concepts.

Hussain recalls one such session when discussions involved a *surah* that depicts the development of a fetus and described “a clotted substance.” “We had to try and find an appropriate sign which would encompass as many of these concepts as possible.”

He turned to his translation team—Barry-Alan Davey and Ghislane Seddiki—who realized that simply saying “fetus” in the translation would make it “too obvious and dilute the mystery.” They knew they “needed to create a sign that was ambiguous yet meaningful.”

Davey learned sign language because of his

Moroccan-born Ghislane Seddiki, a fierce advocate for the deaf, is on the BSL Qur’an Project team.

“The Qur’an has a beautiful rhythmic flow, and we want to be able to mimic it for deaf people.”

—AZAD HUSSAIN



From left, Al Isharah translator Barry-Alan Davey, CEO Azad Hussain and sheikh and scholar Mishkat Hassan pose near their workplace in East London, which is home to a significant Muslim immigrant population.

Davey learned sign language because of his childhood selective mutism, a disorder characterized by an inability to speak in certain settings. He is a multireligious interpreter who has worked with Al Isharah since 2007. He has 25 years of experience working with other monotheistic religious organizations' deaf associations. He is currently working with a number of synagogues and churches as well as in mental health settings, media and theater industries.

"Although I'm a linguist," Davey says, "there are times when I read an English translation and still need Ghislaine to clarify it for me. It's then that I realize my understanding of the English text can sometimes be limited."

Because the Qur'an has only one version, which is

in Arabic, it is an advantage that Seddiki is a native speaker. She excels at capturing the nuances and context, which she makes sure to communicate to Miah at the filming stage. Miah works one-on-one with her to learn the necessary elements related to each verse.

She has been working on the BSL Qur'an project as a translator and a deaf consultant since 2017, having held various roles at the charity for the past 10 years.

Born deaf and raised in Morocco by her hearing parents, with one deaf sibling and one hearing, Seddiki received a lot of support both at home and at school and didn't struggle to communicate or make friends.

"My family were very deaf aware, and I didn't have any problems growing up," she says. "They taught me how to integrate into the hearing world. But when I moved to the UK and my daughter was born deaf, I had to immerse myself more in the deaf community and started learning BSL."

Seddiki attended a hearing school in Morocco, with continuous support and education from her parents. She has navigated numerous roadblocks in translating the Qur'an into BSL.

"The Qur'an is rich with metaphors, making it difficult to translate accurately into BSL. English translations often expand on meanings rather than providing a direct translation, which isn't always true to what Allah (God) says," she emphasizes. "I've been fighting to stick to Allah's words as closely as possible."

Seddiki argues that BSL is a proper language like any other, with its own grammar and semantics. "The Qur'an is one; we can't change or misinterpret the tiniest accent or punctuation," she says, advocating for an Islamic sign language that is accessible to people with different levels of understanding.

Hayat Hejjaj, left, and Ghislane Seddiki converse in BSL near the London Muslim Centre in Whitechapel.

THE GOAL

Through its dedicated work, the team has been navigating the intricate world of translation, cultural nuances and the unique needs of the deaf community. The camaraderie and shared laughter lighten the mood, helping its members through challenging discussions and filming sessions that can require up to 50 takes before achieving the perfect version.

“We don’t know of any translations of the Qur’an in any sign language that has been completed. This project is setting a precedent in visual translation of the Qur’an,” Hussain says, beaming with pride. “We now have deaf organizations from other parts of the world contacting us to understand our methodology. We pray our work will have a lasting impact for deaf people, not only in Britain but all around the world for generations to come.”

A translation effort for the deaf has also been in progress in Indonesia since 2017, led by the Quran

“This project is setting a precedent in visual translation of the Qur’an.”

—AZAD HUSSAIN

Indonesia Project. It’s an impressive feat given that Indonesian sign language was only officially recognized by the government in 2016—despite the country being home to the world’s largest Muslim population at more than 242 million.

Deaf Reach, a charity in Pakistan, says there is no provision for the deaf to access the Qur’an in the world’s second-most-populous Muslim country—but there is hope.

“In 2014, Deaf Reach launched the country’s first digital Pakistani Sign Language (PSL) platform, offering free access to over 7,500 words and 250 sentences,” Aaron Awasen, director of research development, explains. Ongoing updates aim to incorporate regional variations of the language.

Deaf Reach also played a key role in advocating for legislation recognizing PSL, signed into law in December 2022, he added.

“In some countries, they think deaf people should be taught the Qur’an through explanation rather than translation,” says Sheikh Abul Barakat, a consultant



imam and Islamic scholar who has been instrumental to the BSL project since its conception in 2017, noting the cultural differences in approaching deaf education within the Muslim world. “We are trying to produce an authoritative BSL version with the help of qualified professionals.”

Miah also believes it will have a profound impact on the lives of the deaf as they will no longer be “excluded” from learning the Qur’an. He says, “It will change them as they’d finally be able to understand it. It is humbling to know that I’m playing a part in making it accessible.” **AW**



Sunniya Ahmad Pirzada is a Peabody Award-winning journalist whose work focuses on the intersection of race, class and gender and how it impacts people and societies around the world. **Andrew Shaylor** is a portrait, documentary and travel photographer based just outside London and has visited 70 countries. He works with a variety of magazines and has published two books, *Rockin’: The Rockabilly Scene* and *Hells Angels Motorcycle Club*.



THE HEART-MOVING
Sound of Za



nzibar

WRITTEN BY BANNING EYRE

A signature of the island's culture, *taarab* music blends African, Arab, Indian and European elements



The Indian Ocean island of Zanzibar is known for its white-sand beaches, cloves and other spices, and its pivotal role in the East African slave trade. It is also the birthplace of one of this region's most fascinating and beautiful musical genres, *taarab*.

On a recent visit to the Dhow Countries Music Academy in Stone Town, I attended an intimate performance by one of Zanzibar's most legendary *taarab* ensembles, Culture Musical Club. In a rehearsal hall, before 40 or so local fans and foreign visitors, a full orchestra took the stage, uniformly dressed, men seated in black jackets over white robes, women with matching shawls over colorful gowns.

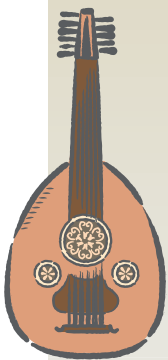
OPPOSITE The late Bi Kidude, center, is often called the "queen of *taarab* music." She performed with the Culture Musical Club for many years. **BELOW** Sultan Barghash bin Said, the last sultan of Zanzibar, helped popularize *taarab* on the island.





ABOVE Chimbeni Kheri is a member of Culture Musical Club, one of the most prolific and successful *taarab* ensembles.

TERMINOLOGY



Oud

Oud: Lutelike string instrument used predominantly in North Africa. Makes deep, round sounds like that of a classical guitar.

Qanun: Middle Eastern and North African string instrument known as “the Piano of the East” and played on the lap like other zithers, usually in ensemble music. Makes bright, uplifting tones.

Dambak: Single-headed “goblet” drum of the Swahili people of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Rested on the leg and played with both hands. Makes full-bodied tones that emphasize resonance.

Takht: Small ensemble of Egyptian origin, usually no more than five musicians, that plays classical and contemporary Middle Eastern music with these and other melodic and percussion instruments, and sometimes vocalists.

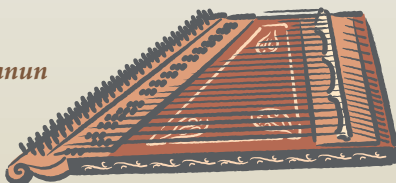
Firqa: Similar to *takht*, but usually numbering eight or more and incorporating Western instruments such as the violin.

Kidumbak: Less refined, upbeat Zanzibari ensemble style performed during celebrations with violin, *sanduku* (a type of washtub bass), bass and two drums.



Dambak

Qanun



Sources: *EthnicMusical.com*, *Oxford University Press*, *ProducerHive.com*, *Amar Foundation*, *Grinnell College Libraries*, *Music in Africa*

The sounds of *oud*, *qanun*, violins, standup bass and various hand-percussion instruments filled the room. The chorus consisted of mostly female singers of which some would step forth to sing a languid, melodious lead for each song. The music’s sensuous sway cast a warm spell. Though the vocal melodies evoked yearning and desire, the music was buoyant, even joyful. From time to time, locals would sashay forth to hand small bills to the singer, a traditional gesture of appreciation.

As I had previously visited Zanzibar, I was well aware that *taarab* music is a signature of the island’s culture, bringing together African, Arabic, Indian and European elements. For over a century, *taarab* has remained deeply woven into the social fabric of Zanzibar. You might not hear it often on the radio or television, but go to a wedding or a street celebration, or drop in for a workshop or performance at the Dhow Countries Music Academy—an institution dedicated to the preservation of *taarab*—and the music’s rolling rhythms, soaring, jangling tonalities and plaintive vocal melodies will soon entrance you.

“By 1970 the group was really about music and theater arts, dramas with traditional dance and acrobatics.”

—CHIMBENI KHERI

Taarab embodies a complex history of settlement, empire and colonial domination. Although it originated in Zanzibar, *taarab* spread throughout the Swahili coast of Africa and the Indian Ocean. It is still performed in the capital, Dar es Salaam, and Tanga in Tanzania, Mombasa and Lamu in Kenya and the Comoros Islands.

In local Swahili, the word *taarab* means “to move the heart.” University of Michigan anthropologist Kelly Askew is the author of *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Culture Politics in Tanzania* (The University of Chicago Press, 2002). Back in a 2005 interview for the “Afropop Worldwide” radio program about her book, she explained that Swahili *taarab* has diverged significantly from its roots in traditional Arab music. “When we speak about Middle Eastern music, we can talk about it as having evoked ‘tarab’ in listeners. But when we speak about *taarab* in East Africa, we are speaking about a very specific form of sung, Swahili poetry that emerged in the late 19th century and became very popular in the 20th century.”

Askew’s analysis stuck with me, and I wanted to explore more. Turns out, the connection between these two forms of *taarab* (or *tarab* in Arab music) lies in the emotion experienced by listeners: While classical Arab music is rather formal concert music, Swahili *taarab* is social. You might say it’s been Africanized to become a communal experience, accommodating influences from this region’s diverse cultural history.



ABOVE Women dance at a wedding reception in Zanzibar. Featuring rolling rhythms, *taarab* is common at both weddings and in street celebrations.

THE ORIGINS

In my travels in East Africa and the Indian Ocean, I've heard various popular and folkloric music styles, but Zanzibar's *taarab* stands apart for its elegance and its welcoming inclusivity. In a recent interview, Askew told me that *taarab* music "draws inspiration from recitatives and the poetic forms associated with Islamic culture in East Africa," such as the melismatic vocals in Qur'anic recitation. Despite those elements, she says, *taarab* does not count as religious music.

History books tell us that the Swahili coast and Zanzibar were inhabited by Bantu peoples until the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century. Omani sultans drove off the Portuguese in the 17th century and achieved control of the region, including trading centers on the African coast. Because of that influence, to this day Zanzibar remains predominantly Muslim, according to government records, while Tanzania is a majority-Christian country.

Sultan Barghash bin Said was the last sultan to rule from Zanzibar before it became a British protectorate in 1890. Barghash was a music lover who brought musicians from Egypt to play in his court. He also dispatched local musicians to Egypt to study and return with *qanuns*, *ouds*, violins and percussion instruments. Askew says that very quickly, the music became "indigenized," with lyrics in Swahili rather than Arabic, African rhythms and even popular Western influences like foxtrots, waltzes and cha-chas.

"The sultan sent musicians to Egypt to learn to play *taarab*. These musicians came back to Zanzibar and formed a group inside the palace," John Kitime, a veteran of the Dar es Salaam music scene



and a friend of mine for more than 20 years, tells me. "But then the rich people outside the palace, the king's friends and comrades, decided to form another *taarab* group. They took one of the guys sent by the king to Egypt and formed a group. And immediately, the two groups started making songs about each other."

Competition—between music groups, politicians and romantic partners—has been a mainstay of *taarab*'s appeal throughout the region and up to the present. Askew says, "Zanzibar *taarab* became dominant in part because of a particular singer by the name of Siti



The Culture Musical Club performs at the Sauti za Busara Festival in Zanzibar. Founded in 1958, the band originally called itself Shime Kuo-koana, a Swahili term that translates as a call to preserve something that is about to be lost.

bint Saad, who became wildly famous throughout East Africa and beyond.” A woman of slave ancestry, Saad recorded in Bombay (Mumbai today) in India in the late 1920s, singing in Swahili and daring to comment on the sultan’s law and later that of the British court, as Askew notes, “both terribly unfair to women.” Saad’s popularity can perhaps be compared only to that of the legendary Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum, who began recording and rose to fame around the same time.

Early *taarab* groups were small, with just four or five musicians, effectively mimicking the era’s Egyptian *takht* ensembles. But as *taarab*’s popularity grew, groups began to form in Zanzibar neighborhoods. With limited access to instruments, these groups featured a vocalist, a single melody instrument, usually a violin, and two *dumbak* drums, one tuned high and the other low; hence the style’s name *kidumbak*, meaning “small *dumbak*.” *Kidumbak* ensembles have long served

as a training ground for future *taarab* musicians.

The first release in the *Zanzibara* CD series (Buda Musique) features the oldest surviving *taarab* ensemble in Zanzibar, Ikhwani-Safaa, literally “the brotherhood of purity.” This group was founded in 1902, the height of sultanic rule, a cosmopolitan era when high culture was officially promoted and nurtured. Its founder, Sheikh Moh’d Ebrahim, was in the sultan’s *takht*. He taught musicians to adapt popular Swahili melodies from Lamu, a Kenyan island.

Over the years, the orchestra grew to the large *firqa* format used in Egyptian film music of the 1930s and ’40s, with multiple violins, *oud*, *qanun* and a mix of Middle Eastern and African percussion. The ensemble included Arabs, Africans and Indians, and earned a loyal following, but the music was reserved for social occasions. It was not commercially recorded or sold.

Culture Musical Club, the other veteran orchestra and the more active one today was officially founded in 1958, but there has been significant evolution to arrive at the group I saw in Zanzibar. Before the concert, group member Chimbeni Kheri told me, “It’s a very long history. Before the 1964 revolution, there were so many small groups in the street, and they played *kidumbak*, the aforementioned Zanzibari music genre. They came together and formed one group. So, by 1970, the group was really about music and theater arts, dramas with traditional dance and acrobatics.”

“I think of the songs as vessels into which many different meanings can be put.”

—KELLY ASKEW



Nearly from the outset, *taarab* became 'indigenized,' with lyrics in Swahili rather than Arabic, African rhythms and Western dance influences.

TAARAB TODAY

Beginning in the 1970s, "modern *taarab*" groups began to form in coastal Tanzanian and Kenyan cities.

Outside Zanzibar, my most satisfying experience of modern *taarab* came in the Mangomeni neighborhood of Dar es Salaam. The capital is a two-hour ferry ride from Zanzibar, which allowed me to go back and forth while in the country.

There I met Abdullah Fereshi who has created a home for the ensemble he founded in 2000, Dar Es Salaam Modern Taarab, probably the city's top modern *taarab* group working today. In this large, florescent-lit hall, suitable both for rehearsals and public performances, Fereshi's musicians were meticulously focused on the vocal rendering of his poetry. Askew notes that vocal improvisation is rare or non-existent in *taarab* music. "Part of the attraction of *taarab* is that you build your fan base. Fans know your songs and will pop up out of the audience to tip during especially beloved songs."

The *taarab* ensemble blends different styles. The Mombassa style showcases *oud* and hews closer to Arab *maqam* music. The Tanga style, central to Askew's research, substitutes acoustic instruments for electric guitars, keyboards and drum machines, and incorporates more African rhythms from *ngoma* ensembles associated with Tanzania's 120 ethnic groups.

In modern *taarab* performances, competition is a major attraction for audiences, with female singers using poetic allegory to playfully skewer one another.

During her fieldwork, Askew was closely attuned to the confrontational undertones between singers and audience members at Tanga's *taarab* performances, an important, if fraught, forum for social interactions. "Choosing to tip the singer at a certain moment," Askew explained, "or who you look at when you tip, or perhaps a nod of the shoulder or any sort of indirect gesture with your hand could send the meaning of a lyric towards somebody in the audience." For all the tension involved, public airings of romantic intrigues serve both as compelling entertainment and a collective bonding experience for the community.

I asked Askew if this could have been going on in *taarab* performances I have attended. She said it was likely. "It is very *sotto voce* [subtle]. It's sublimated by design so that nobody can be accused of inappropriate social behavior." *Taarab* lyrics are not always about rivalry and criticism. "There are occasions where a song is used to affirm a social relationship," says Askew. "It could be friends going up to tip together. I think of the songs as vessels into which many different meanings can be put."

Fereshi has a long history with *taarab* ensembles in Dar es Salaam, but he decided to create his own. At the end of a rigorous rehearsal, he told me, "I started this band with two motives. The first one is passion, and the second one is to promote Tanzanian coastal culture."

He adds, "In Tanzania, there are many *taarab* groups, but if you hear the music of other groups, you will find it very different from ours because we do not run away from tradition. We embed the modern within the traditional." As such, this malleable syncretic music continues to adapt to changing times, without losing sight of its history.

Back at the Dhow Countries Music Academy in Zanzibar, I watched the Culture Musical Club wrap up its lively performance. It concluded with a lively *kidumbak* set, the ensemble's percussive grooves now anchored in the slap and thump of a standup washtub bass called *sanduku*.

And everyone stood up to dance. **AW**



Banning Eyre is senior producer for Public Radio International's Peabody Award-winning "Afropop Worldwide" (afropop.org) and author of a number of books on African music and history.

Author's Corner

At Home in the World: A Conversation with Maryam Hassan

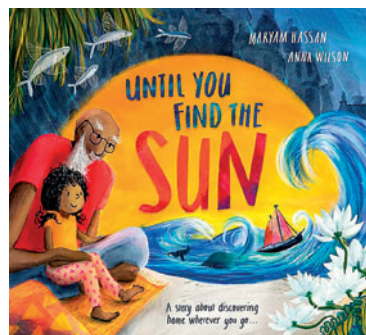
Written by DIANNA WRAY

Growing up in London, at age 13, Maryam Hassan decided she'd move to Chicago one day. The city had glittered in her imagination because she was certain that it bore no resemblance to her hometown. But once she moved to the Windy City in 2017, at 30, Hassan felt unmoored. "I was lucky in a lot of ways. I had family and friends, and I'd been there before," Hassan said. "But I had some very low moments in Chicago."

Despite having a fulfilling job as an early-education teacher at a Montessori school, Hassan couldn't shake a feeling of unease. "I realized I needed to find a space that I could make my own," she said. "Once I had my apartment, I had a home, and that changed everything."

The trick to finding balance in a new place or a new situation, Hassan realized, was to find ways to make oneself feel at home, whether it meant cozying-up an apartment or sporting a bright yellow raincoat.

That experience resulted in *Until You Find the Sun*, about Aminah, a little girl who moves across the world, leaving her warm, sunny home behind. Aminah struggles to adjust until the day she spots a yellow coat in a shop window. "Sometimes a yellow coat can be everything," Hassan said. "A small step that helps us get to the bigger goal of making a new home."



Until You Find the Sun:
A Story About Discovering
Home Wherever You Go

Maryam Hassan.
Illus. by Anna Wilson.
Crocodile Books, 2024.

What gave you the inspiration to write *Until You Find the Sun*?

I had a little girl join my class midyear when I was teaching in Chicago. She had come from South India. We were in the middle of polar vortex winter, and she was having meltdowns every day. One day I came into the classroom, and she was under a table shaking. She was small. She didn't have the language to communicate how she was feeling. Of course she was going to be overwhelmed. It's not easy for anyone to move across the world, especially a little kid.

What is the meaning of the yellow coat?

I gave Aminah a yellow coat because yellow is my favorite color. When I first moved to Chicago, my sister-in-law got me a yellow raincoat, and I wore it constantly. The yellow coat isn't life-changing, but it helps Aminah find some comfort. And that's the beginning. Because she has the coat when it snows, she goes out to play. That's when the place she has moved to goes from being dark and gray to magical.



The coat is still just a coat, but it helps her begin to find a way to make this new, different place her home.

How did your own experience growing up the daughter of Pakistani immigrants in London influence this book?

I am a child of the '90s, and I grew up in an era when we had little to no diversity in music, in movies, even in books. All the books I read when I was growing up—picture books, the tween lit—there were no Pakistani characters. There were mostly just white Americans and white English characters, and in the face of all of that, it was easy to end up trying to bury your Pakistani-ness under English culture and American culture because that's what you're seeing. It's not very healthy, in my opinion. It can lead to a lot of identity issues and guilt and self-doubt.

So, in my writing I've always wanted to have South Asian girls and South Asian women front and center. Representation has gotten better since I've grown up, but I still

feel like there aren't enough strong Muslim, South Asian females in children's literature and literature in general.

The concept of home is a universal one, just as homesickness is. How does the book convey the meaning of home?

Having a place where you can be you, where you can feel grounded and feel safe, is so important. Everybody wants that kind of place and needs that kind of place, and when you're far away from what you know, it's even more important. I've had times when I haven't had that, and looking back, those have been the times when I was very lost. And the times when I have felt a really strong sense of home, no matter where I've been in the world, that's when my mental health, my spiritual self, my sense of purpose have all been at their best.

What do you hope readers take away from this book?

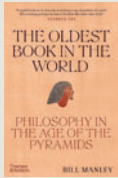
I hope this book will help people remember that whatever change you're going through—



whether you're moving country, moving to a new city or even just moving to a new house—change is hard. Changes can be scary at first: They can be daunting, but if you can find some way to connect with your new home, even something small, it will help ground you. Eventually you'll change how you're feeling, and the new place will begin to become home.

Read more articles like this online at AramcoWorld.com.

Reviews



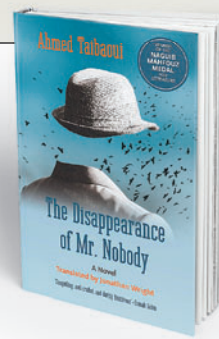
**The Oldest Book in the World:
Philosophy in the Age of the Pyramids**
Bill Manley. Thames & Hudson, 2023.

Socrates and other Greek thinkers admired Egypt for its philosophical tradition, which was far older than their own. With his new translation of *The Teachings of Ptahhatp*, British Egyptologist and Coptic scholar Bill Manley shows us why. Composed around 2400 BCE, Ptahhatp's composition is arguably one of the oldest books ever written—and certainly as old as the pyramids. Its author, Ptahhatp (the name means “the god Ptah is pleased”), was a high-ranking official under the Fifth Dynasty King Izezi. Writing in old age, as this genre of Egyptian literature required, Ptahhatp imparts hard-won wisdom about ethical behavior at work, at home and in society. The book proved so popular that it was read, shared and studied for millennia. Manley traces its history from the Old Kingdom to the 19th-century rediscovery of the text. In the 1840s, French traveler Émile Prisse d'Avennes purchased a papyrus scroll at Luxor, which he donated to the National Library in Paris. Although Egyptology emerged as a field of study at the time, scholars quickly recognized the papyrus as a rare example of Egyptian “teachings,” few of which survive. Manley offers a new translation of the Paris papyrus into clear English, giving readers a chance to appreciate this more than 4,000-year-old book for themselves. He also weighs Ptahhatp's suggestions for leading a virtuous life, including advice for cultivating humility, modesty, integrity and good listening skills. Today's readers, Manley suggests, have much to learn from this unsung philosopher and his Egyptian worldview. —CHRISTINA RIGGS



**Empire Building: The Construction
of British India, 1690–1860**
Rosie Llewellyn-Jones. Hurst Publishers, 2023.

From the first fortified trading post on the Hooghly River, founded in 1690 in what became Calcutta, present-day Kolkata, in northeastern India, historian Rosie Llewellyn-Jones tracks the physical changes wrought by the English East India Company (EIC)—roads, railways and municipal buildings—up to 1860 when the company dissolved. As the title makes clear, the book focuses on infrastructure, especially of the Bengal Presidency, an administrative province that later included northern India up to the Khyber Pass. EIC agents first began ingratiating themselves to the hierarchy established by Aurangzeb, the last great emperor of India's Timurid dynasty. But when the sultanate fragmented after his death in 1707, the company grew more assertive. By 1764 the British captured Bengal after having bested local armies at the fortified town of Buxar, in present-day Bihar. The resulting Treaty of Allahabad a year later yielded Company, and ultimately British government, rule over India. Over time, the EIC evolved from employing merchants to soldiers to administrators, and their buildings mirrored changing European social movements. The Enlightenment of the 18th-century prompted projects such as colleges, hospitals and libraries. In the book Llewellyn-Jones moves the reader briskly through this period, enlivening the narrative with portraits of the leading players in the drama that unfolded between the fall of the sultanate and the rise of modern India. —KYLE PAKKA



**The Disappearance of
Mr. Nobody: A Novel**

Ahmed Taibaoui. Hoopoe Fiction, 2023.

“No one else will be destined to write a life story as squalid as mine, although it's all true,” comments Mr. Nobody, the nameless and elusive protagonist of Algerian author Ahmed Taibaoui's intriguing and suspenseful noir novel. Set in Rouiba, a working-class suburb of Algiers, the story begins sometime in the aftermath of the country's War of Independence from France (1954–1962) and the ensuing 1990s civil war, referred to as the “Black Decade.” Time is as ambiguous in this novel as the visage, age and history of Mr. Nobody, who finds himself unwittingly taking care of Suleiman Bennaoui, a War of Independence veteran with dementia abandoned by his son Mourad. For Mr. Nobody, a homeless wanderer whose past has led him through the dregs of life, caring for the dying man was an act of kindness that restored his sense of humanity. However, once Bennaoui dies, he leaves the body in the apartment and vanishes, launching a police investigation into the veteran's death. Assigned to the case by the local police commissioner, Detective Rafik Nassiri's unsuccessful search for fugitive Mr. Nobody compels Nassiri to examine his own unhappy life. Mr. Nobody's ability to disappear without a trace, asserts the detective, is an act of complete heroism. A fascinating read and winner of the 2023 Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature, this novel gives voice to those socially marginalized in postwar Algeria and leads to the question: What does it mean to exist? —PINEY KESTING

“Nothing in my life has ever been my size: My life is like a patchwork garment. I need a tailor who can reshape my life the way I want it. What do I really want? Maybe to discard life and face death as naked as I was when I came from the void in the first place.”

—From *The Disappearance of Mr. Nobody*

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

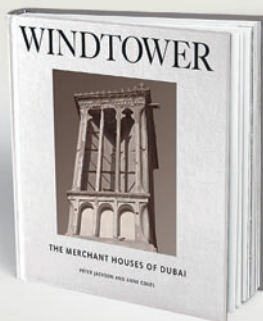
Reviews



Dubai Neighborhood Paves Way for Preservation in Urban Design

Written by KYLE PAKKA

In a book brimming with photos, architectural renderings and maps, Jackson, an architect, and Coles, a social geographer, examine the origins, flowering, decline and restoration of the famed Dubai wind towers, focusing on the homes in the historical al-Bastakiya neighborhood. *Windtower* is both a cautionary tale for cities that heedlessly obliterate their early beginnings in a rush to modernize and a road map on how cities can preserve and revitalize their historical hearts to make the past an essential part of their vibrant future.



Windtower: The Merchant Houses of Dubai

Peter Jackson and Anne Coles.
Medina Publishing, 2021.

Coles became aware of al-Bastakiya in 1969 while studying summer migration patterns in the emirates. Several years later, Jackson, a student architect, arrived in Dubai, and Coles asked him to make a drawing of a wind tower for the Dubai Museum. The single drawing evolved into a monograph, issued in 1975, that detailed the Bukhash family home in al-Bastakiya. When Jackson returned to Dubai in 2002, and with the encouragement of some neighborhood families, the authors produced a book in 2007 on the district, adding chapters on additional homes, the history of the neighborhood, construction techniques and an engineering analysis of how wind towers work.

This update of the 2007 edition adds a chapter on the pre-oil, trading and merchant history of Dubai, expands the engineering analysis to examine how the millennia-old science behind wind towers could spur contemporary applications and considers the legacy and impact of al-Bastakiya on local and regional urban design.

The story of how a traditional home-cooling system became a beloved cultural landmark begins with the arrival of merchant families, primarily from Persia, in the early 20th century. These merchant

families brought the tradition of multidirectional wind towers with them and built a neighborhood of courtyard homes made of sea stone and gypsum, topped by wind towers (often ornate) and featuring glass fanlights, elaborate wooden doors and carved ventilation screens and balustrades.

The core of the book details seven significant wind-tower homes and the multigenerational families who built and lived in them. The families' stories reveal the vanished life of a close-knit community and reflect the social and commercial history of Dubai.

As its economy boomed in the 1970s, Dubai's gaze was fixed on the future, and old-fashioned reminders of its past fell into decline. Even as waves of demolition swept through in the 1980s and 1990s, nascent efforts argued for preservation. The tide turned in 2005, when a program was launched to reconstruct buildings and restore others in the al-Bastakiya and al-Shindagha neighborhoods.

The legacy of al-Bastakiya offers lessons for the renewal of historical neighborhoods. Drawing on the authors' decades of original research, *Windtower* is a love letter to the old heart of Dubai and a substantial achievement.

“Windtowers came to represent power and wealth and also a policy of openness to international commercial activity that has continued for 100 years.”

—From *Windtower*

Find more reviews like this online at AramcoWorld.com.

Events

1,000 Years of Creativity in Multimedia Show

Divine Geometry presents the artistic language of Islamic art through an assemblage of objects that includes floral motifs, geometric patterns and calligraphy. From early Qur'ans to an animated projection, the exhibition spans more than a thousand years of Islamic creativity—featuring a variety of media like manuscripts, tiles, metalwork, glass, textiles and carvings.

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, **Hartford, Connecticut, US**, through April 13.

RIGHT A folio from *Khamsa Quintet or Panj Ganj* book by Nizami (*Laili and Majnon scene*), Afghanistan or Persia, 16th century, ink on paper, 9 1/8 × 5 1/2 in. (23.2 × 13.97 cm).



Current / February

Silk Roads unravels how the journeys of people, objects and ideas that formed the Silk Roads shaped cultures and histories. The exhibition offers a unique chance to see objects from the length and breadth of the Silk Roads, including objects from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan that have never been seen in the UK before, and also underpins the importance of Central Asia to this continent-spanning story. Crossing deserts, mountains, rivers and seas, the Silk Roads tell a story of connection between cultures and continents, centuries before the formation of the globalized world we know today.

British Museum, **London**, through February 23.

Life on Land examines how the study of life on land has driven scientific advancement and how human activities have impacted wildlife, underscoring the importance of protecting these ecosystems. Browse through artworks that depict the mutual relationship between humans and animals, the role of domestication in shaping civilizations, and the historical and current impact of natural disasters on biodiversity and human communities.

Aga Khan Museum, **Toronto**, through February 28.

Current / March

Kazakhstan, Treasures of the Great Steppe offers an overview of the country's history in five sets of masterpieces, shedding light on five major milestones of civilization, since the third millennium BC until the 18th century. These treasures are presented in an innovative scenography, which immerses the works and visitors in the landscapes of Kazakhstan: Projections and sound creations will animate the works and place them poetically in their original context for a moment of culture and a timeless change of scenery.

Musée Guimet, **Paris**, through March 24.

Current / April

Kochi Muziris Biennale is India's first biennial (and the largest) exhibition of internationally acclaimed contemporary art, showcasing a diverse range of artworks, including paintings, sculptures, installations, performances, and multimedia exhibits. The mission of the Kochi Biennale Foundation is to promote artistic and cultural education through engagement and dialogue with exhibitions of diverse and inclusive art practices—aiming to catalyze Kochi and its surroundings with contemporary art and ideas and to work

Highlights from aramcoworld.com Please verify a venue's schedule before visiting.

towards the restoration and conservation of heritage properties and monuments and the revival of traditional forms of art and culture. And the Biennale draws from Kerala's rich multicultural history including Muziris, the port city of the Chera Kingdom, which in as early as 1st century BCE, traded with the Middle East, North Africa and the Mediterranean regions.

Aspinwall House, **Kerala, India**, through April 30.

Coming / November

Ancient Sudan: Enduring Heritage explores the Kushite Kingdom, a fascinating civilization that flourished in Sudan nearly 3,000 years ago. Positioned at a crossroads between Central Africa and the Mediterranean, Ancient Sudan was a nexus for people, cultures and ideas. The Kingdom of Kush (8th century BC-4th century AD) was at its height one of the largest empires in the ancient world, ruling from the Blue Nile to the Levant. This touring exhibition will examine this ancient culture's skilled craftsmanship, distinct religious beliefs, and the important role of women, as well as exploring the rich culture of modern Sudan. Highlights include beautiful examples of ceramics and a carved stone offering table.

The British Museum, **London**, February 1 through November 9.

BELOW Vegetable fibre tabag, Menawashei, Darfur, Sudan, 1970-1980. Courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum.



Morocco's Unique Identity Inspires Qatari Artists

As part of Qatar-Morocco 2024 Year of Culture, the Museum of Islamic Art is featuring numerous exhibitions, such as *Ektashif: Morocco*, which includes 36 pieces by six Qatari artists and designers who drew inspiration from Morocco's rich cultural heritage and distinctive Islamic architecture—creating pieces that capture the spirit and beauty of the country, one of which is featured above. And another exhibition, *Splendours of the Atlas: A Voyage Through Morocco's Heritage*, celebrates Morocco's unique artistic and historical identity by looking at the forces that have shaped the country to what it is today—offering a journey, or *rihla*, through this fascinating country. The exhibition will also feature a selection of contemporary photographs and artworks that capture aspects of the Moroccan landscape and everyday life.

Museum of Islamic Art, **Doha, Qatar**; *Ektashif: Morocco* through February 26 and *Splendours of the Atlas: A Voyage Through Morocco's Heritage*, through March 8.

ABOVE Decorative wooden door inspired from Zouaq, by artist Aljazi Almaadeed.

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

What's Online?



The Endurance of Bosnian Craft

In this small European country, traditional metalworking and woodworking not only survive but thrive in the age of modernization and globalization.

Learning Center: The Alternative World of Abstract Photography

Drawn to skateparks, photographer Amir Zaki has transformed empty slabs of concrete into dynamic landscapes. In this lesson students explore how framed shots can alter perceptions of reality.



Mixed-Media Art Tells Portugal's Layered Story

Sara Domingo's award-winning abstract art invites audiences to explore Portugal's complex history and how Arab traditions are interwoven in the very fabric of the country's modern culture.



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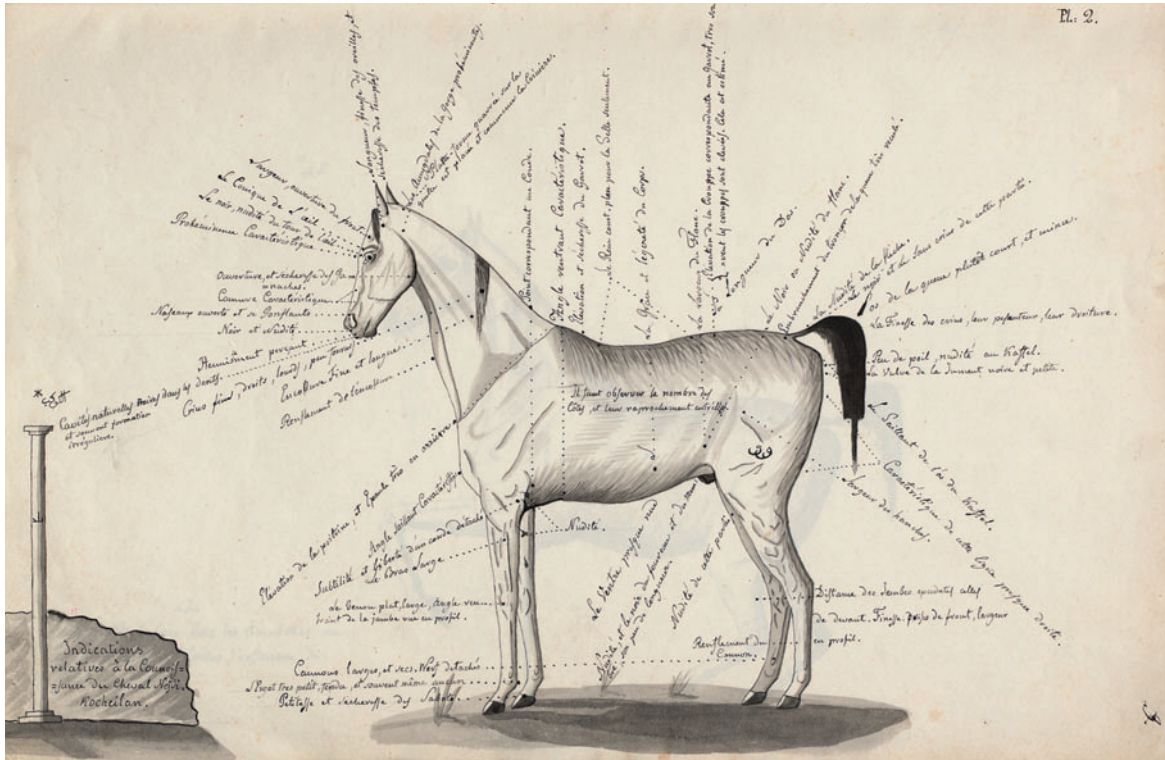
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SCAN ME



ABOVE Polish adventurer Wacław Rzewuski traveled to Arabia to document its horse breeds. His manuscript has led to greater understanding of 19th-century Bedouin life. [Read more on page 18](#)



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