These Songs Bring Tears to Your Eyes, Or Something Worse
By Daniel Pearl

My eye is crying all the time
Until my eye gets sick.
My eyes. My eyes.
This is my fate
I have to wait for it.
I can't do anything about it.

DOHA, Qatar -- American blues can make you sad. Russian work songs can make you suffer. The fervent belief of many in the Persian Gulf is that pearl-diving songs can make you go blind.

The songs are undergoing a revival, a half-century after crowded pearl boats plied the shallow Gulf waters for the last time. As a new generation in the Gulf rediscovers the wailing old spirituals, they are also rediscovering the special pain of singing them.

"Sometimes I feel like my head is going to explode," 37-year-old soloist Omar Busaqar says after recently singing a few pearling songs with the Qatar National Folkloric Troupe in Doha.

"I get migraines," says another soloist, Monssour Al-Mahannadi, 24. After singing for six years, he concedes, he has gone a bit farsighted and wears glasses. "Ah, you're going to go blind," Mr. Busaqar taunts.

He wouldn't be the first. Soloists, or nahams, were notorious for going blind in decades past, according to Aldulrahman Al-Mannai, a Qatari folklorist. Researchers who recorded the remaining nahams in the 1970s and 1980s say the best ones had poor vision, or none at all: Al Allan, Bahrain's most famous naham, was blind. So was Kuwait's Abu-Mussa'ed, according to one researcher. Rashed Al-Mass, a Qatari singer whose voice was so sweet his nickname was "The Sugar," stopped singing certain songs in the early 1980s after his eyesight deteriorated.

The chief culprit seems to be the fjeri, a haunting type of song filled with wailing improvisation and accompanied by a crescendo of drums and low droning hums. Fjeris were often sung during restful moments and the words are mostly about crying and missing home. The fjeri never made it to Dubai, where pearl divers stuck to more upbeat work songs for raising the boat's anchor, jib, or mainsail. "People were more business-oriented here," singer Omar Sabt Ashoor says after performing with his turban-clad troupe at the Dubai Shopping Festival.

Ethnomusicologists haven't been able to trace the fjeri's origins, except to record a curious tale told by many old pearl-diving hands. One day, according to the story, some sailors looking for a quiet place to sing stumbled upon some half-man, half-donkey genies. They were singing a mesmerizing song, which they taught the sailors, but only after warning them that singing the songs in public would make the singer go blind or die. The songs proved too beautiful to keep bottled up.
The emotion involved in singing these songs makes nahams go blind, contends Khalif Bin Salah Al Mannai, a septuagenarian Qatari naham who learned to sing as a pearl diver in the 1940s and whose eyesight is now starting to fade. "If you really get involved, you get deeply sad, deeply hurt," he says, but if you stop singing the songs you feel even worse. The beginning part of a fjeri is even called jarhan or "hurt." The hurt can get physical, says Feisal Atmimi, the Qatari Troupe's leader. As evidence, he recalls the autopsy of one naham: "His chest was herniated, because he sang with such deep feeling."

It wasn't the emotion, it was the volume of the singing that made nahams go blind, says Nasser Al-Hamadi, a Qatari musician and marine biologist. "The bass drum, it's working, the clapping, the humming -- he has to put his voice first. He has to shout to be the clearest one," Mr. Al-Mahadi says, motioning to a pearl-diving video playing in the Qatar National Museum. "Now there's no need to shout. With just a small mike you can reach 3,000 people."

In truth, it wasn't the volume, it was the sun that made nahams go blind, say doctors at Qatar's Hamad Hospital. Nahams spent the whole day in the sun while divers plunged in and out of the water. Long exposure to the sun's rays can cause cataracts. Those nahams who also dove faced another problem: fast pressure changes can hurt the eyes as well.

Everybody agrees that pearl diving, which dates back hundreds of years, was a brutal way to make a living. Historians and divers say that even up to the 1930s, the job required men to dive all day without oxygen tanks, with only the briefest of air breaks. They got one meal of rice and dates a day for four months at sea. The boat was cramped, and sharks and jellyfish were never far away. A diver who contracted a communicable disease was left on an island to die. And divers got sharecropper's pay that depended on the season's take.

Nahams were paid better. "He was the main figure. He was sort of the maestro on the ship," says Scheherazade Q. Hassan, a researcher who helped to record a troupe with a partially blind naham in 1987. A good naham could attract workers to a boat, keep them motivated by singing through the day, and help them beg Allah for protection, Ms. Hassan says.

Cultured pearls, developed in Japan in the 1890s, and oil, discovered in the Gulf in the 1930s, combined to kill off pearl diving and leave the songs in obscurity. But in the 1970s, Gulf countries started rediscovering their folklore. Pictures of pearls started appearing on business logos, and a statue of a giant pearl was built on Doha's beach walk. Singing troupes sprouted to perform pearl-diving songs at weddings and official state functions. Several compact disks hit the market, and troupes traveled as far as the U.S. and Australia to perform.

Some singers scoff at the tales of blindness. Muhammad Jassim Harban, a young naham in Bahrain, counts seven active groups in that small country, including his own troupe, which includes his four brothers and father. And he doesn't know of a single naham who went blind. True, there was Al Allan, but "he lost his eyes a long time ago, not when he was singing," Mr. Harban says.
Which suggests another theory: maybe blindness actually made the nahams better singers. As an Arab researcher once wrote, "Isn't it said, that if a nightingale's eyes are popped, its singing will improve?"

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