



BU BUMI WIS MARINGI
BUMI DILARANI, IBU
BUMI KANG, IBU
NGADILI

Chronicles for the Future

NAHMA: A GULF POLYPHONY

Edited by Olivier Duport, Alan Marzo, and Carl Åhnebrink, with contributions by 14 authors
Published by Flee, Paris, 2021



Prior to the discovery of oil in the Gulf in the 1930s, fleets of pearling vessels embarked on months-long voyages along the coast of the Arabian Sea. Music always accompanied these expeditions: each boat carried at least one singer (*nahhām*), who would chant frenetically as the laboring sailors clapped and shouted in unison, or who would wail poetic verses as the crew waited for the winds. Initiated by record label and publishing house Flee, *Nahma: A Gulf Polyphony* is a transdisciplinary project that explores the culture of pearl diving in the Arabian Gulf through an Arabic-English book, a double LP with archival recordings and inspired contemporary compositions, as well as art commissions from young artists.

A wealth of essays and photographs in the publication reveal the opaque and overlooked history of pearling. Kuwaiti musician Abou Saleh recounts the songs he sang as he rose from cabin boy to lead singer in a 1978 interview. His testimony

is complemented by musicologist Toufic Kerbage's analysis of the subgenres of pearling music, which he traces back to Arabian mythologies and vocal traditions. The book manages to examine a fabled history comprehensively: erudite theologist Charles Stang probes the pearl's mystical symbolisms in early Syriac Christianity, while historian Mark Hobbs deciphers archives from the British-Raj period to evaluate the rise and wane of what was once the predominant industry of the Gulf.

At the heart of this global trade lie serfdom and slavery: pearl divers were perpetually debt-bonded to their captains, while the rest of the crew were often migrant slaves. The project mourns the impossibility for Arabs born after the oil boom to access these narratives. Lamenting his alienation from this past, Bahraini musician Hasan Hujair proposes a *Fijiri Failure Machine*, a sonic software patch that misinterprets recordings of pearling music. In the chapter "Globules of Mutated Dissonance," artist Monira Al Qadiri remembers her soloist grandfather, who died before she was born, interweaving her own written accounts with fragments from a book by an Australian explorer. The accompanying renderings by Al Qadiri depict mutant pearls merged with oil drills, alluding to the surreal nature of these memories.

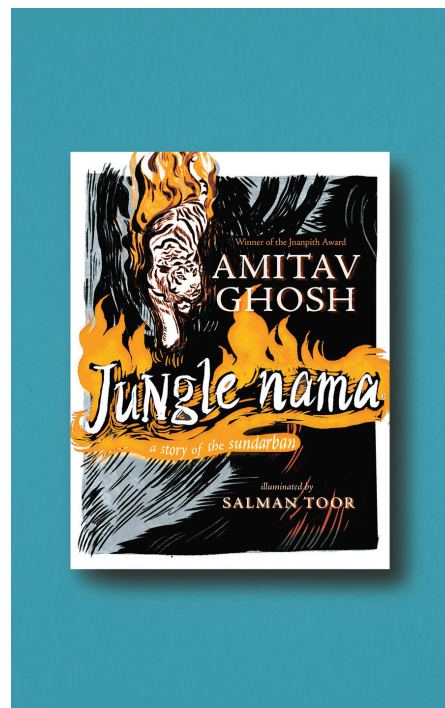
The contemporary evolution of pearling is detailed through interviews with the industry's disparate stakeholders. Whereas Talal Mattar, a descendant of a Bahraini pearl-merchant family, views cultured pearls as being inferior, pearl farmer Abdulla Al Suwaidi sees them as the only sustainable way forward. Here, personal aspirations are brilliantly depicted alongside public concerns: Having witnessed the devastating Gulf-War oil spill, Ali Saqar Al Suweidi (Major Ali) founded the Emirates Marine Environmental Group. Today, he transmits the pearling tradition by organizing pearl-diving summer trips for kids, who learn to x-ray oysters before opening them—a practice that greatly reduces damage to the oyster beds.

Presenting a multitude of materials, *Nahma* reflects the rich themes and plural realities of pearling and its music.

PETER CHUNG

JUNGLE NAMA

Text by Amitav Ghosh, images by Salman Toor
Published by John Murray, London, 2021



Legend has it that when the avaricious demon Dokkhin Rai terrorized the whole Earth, it was the goddess Bon Bibi and her warrior brother Shah Jongoli who banished the ghoul to the Sundarban mangroves in the Bay of Bengal, restoring harmony between non-humans and humans. That peace was short-lived. *Jungle Nama*, written by Amitav Ghosh and illustrated by painter Salman Toor, is an adaptation of the folklore's following episode, which warns against letting greed and desire disrupt the world's balance.

Unfolding in rhyming couplets based on the 24-syllable *dwipodi-poyar* (two-footed) meter, which the Sundarban legends were historically couched in, Ghosh's version of the cautionary tale features Dukhey and his traitorous uncle, Dhona, who strikes a deal with Dokkhin Rai to exchange Dukhey's life for the mangrove's abundant wax, timber, and honey. Sadly, in the age of mass reproduction, Toor's accompanying "illuminations," as the publisher describes

them, are printed in monochrome on rough newsprint paper, unlike the collaboration's inspiration—the richly hued miniatures of the ancient manuscripts from the Indian subcontinent and Iran. Nevertheless, with just black lines, Toor illuminates the story in less literal ways.

A striking example of the images' enchanting effects is the book's first depiction of Dokkhin Rai. The shape-shifter appears as an amorphous mass at the center of a centrifugal whoosh of lines that spin outward into shadowy branches and thickets—a gust of wind that animates the mangrove. The scene succinctly suggests the invisible but felt ways that Dokkhin Rai controls his domain. The corresponding caption, drawn from the text, reads: "The mangroves are home to predators of every kind/Some you'll never see, but they will enter your mind," a warning that Dukhey's mother presses on the unsuspecting boy before he departs with his uncle for the forest.

The book's least compelling features are these captions, which supply alternately forthcoming or earlier lines. Perhaps letting the images stand on their own would have also preserved the text's rhythm. After all, this particular arrangement of syllables has incantational powers, as Dukhey demonstrates when, upon realizing his uncle's betrayal, he prays for help from Bon Bibi.

The book has its own duplicities, facilitated by gaps between the images and the narrative. After Bon Bibi saves Dukhey, she orders Dokkhin Rai to split his wealth with the boy. "'So be it!' said Dokkhin Rai. 'I'll shower him with lakhs/you have my assurance, he'll have riches in stacks.'" The later lines, "Dukhey was seated royally on a crocodile/Behind it came others, carrying all his goods" conjured in my mind a parade of jewels and gold. Yet, appearing six pages later, the drawing visualizing this scene has no glimmering riches. What transpires instead is an aerial view of three crocodiles swimming down a river bend, engulfed in lush greenery, birds swooping overhead, portraying the Earth itself as the greatest possible gift to share.

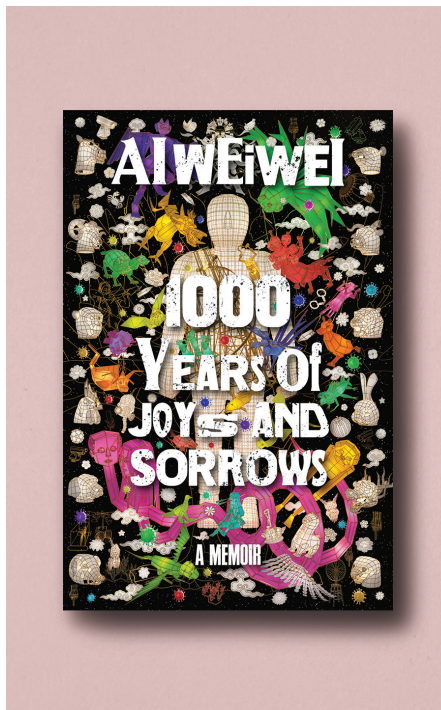
CHLOE CHU

1000 YEARS OF JOYS AND SORROWS: A MEMOIR

By Ai Weiwei

Translated by Allan H. Barr

Published by Crown, New York, 2021



After releasing several documentaries about his activism and forced detention in China, it was only a matter of time for the dissident artist Ai Weiwei to publish his own memoir. While a memoir is usually a record of personal history, Ai's 400-page narrative *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows* (2021) details China's transformation throughout the 20th century from the perspective of the Ai family. As those living under an authoritarian regime often experience a disjointed sense of history, Ai repeatedly examines the concept of memory throughout the book. Growing up, Ai was taught that "memories were a burden" that are "potentially dangerous"; here, memory becomes "a rope" providing a way to reach for the future while anchored in the reality of the past.

The book is roughly divided in two, beginning with Ai's childhood in "Little Siberia" after his father, the famous artist and poet Ai Qing, was targeted as a "rightist" in the 1950s and banished

to a labor camp in Xinjiang to endure heavy labor and public humiliation at weekly assemblies. Under the oil lamp at night, the father recounted his past to Weiwei, and now, we as readers, listen attentively to stories of these tumultuous events: the May 4th movement of 1919, the decades-long wars, the establishment of People's Republic of China, and the traumatic Cultural Revolution. Interchanged with vivid descriptions of Weiwei's childhood and excerpts from the father's well-known poems such as "Dayanhe, My Wet Nurse" and "I Love This Land," the narrative is interwoven with Ai Qing's sensitive observations on Chinese society in the wake of modernization.

Ai Qing's heart was always with those who suffered, a humanitarian concern later inherited by his son, as seen in the second half of the book. Following the family's return to Beijing, the younger Ai studied abroad in New York in the 1980s, and when he returned to China, he engaged in the experimental art scene of the '90s, garnering notoriety for co-organizing the "Fuck Off" group exhibition in 2000 and contributing to the design of the Bird's Nest national stadium. He also investigated the deaths of the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, which later led to his own persecution and exile. At the heart of it all is Ai's quest for an art rooted in reality: "Any discussion of human rights inevitably becomes a political topic, and so I naturally became a political figure. There's nothing wrong with that: living in this era, you need to confront its reality. If art cannot engage with life, it has no future."

1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows captures not only an individual's destiny but also the struggles and disillusionment faced by generations of artists in pursuit of their ideals of a "new China." Amid his awakening to this harsh reality, Ai writes, "freedom is not a goal but a direction, and it comes into being through the very act of resistance." Ai marches on, now with stories for his own son to hear.

PAMELA WONG