Pearling in the Gulf Explored: The Life of a Pearl Diver

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Trade in the Indian Ocean provided jobs and caused merchants to travel many miles. One of the key commodities abundant in the Indian Ocean and specifically the Persian Gulf is known as “tears of heaven”: pearls. Pearls are considered great treasures and were symbolic of the elite since they were expensive and rare. Pearl diving and fishing, therefore, held an importance to the economy, but were arguably one of the most dangerous activities in the region. An increased number of slaves were required in that region due to the dangerous nature of pearling but overall the activity contributed to successful economic growth, until the discovery of the manmade pearl was introduced by the Japanese at a lower price in the 1900s.

In the Persian Gulf, there were interesting dynamics created between the slaves brought in for pearling and the owners and the whole economy, which was reliant on the success of this industry. This paper focuses in on Bahrain, Julfar and Qatif. Bahrain is comprised of several islands and is about 231 sq. miles in size (Sheldon 1994: 1). The Persian Gulf was among the most desirable spots for pearl fishing because of the warm temperatures of water. What made the Persian Gulf so ideal for pearling was the shallow nature of the water. The average depth is 50 meters, with a maximum depth at 90 meters. In the history of pearls, “the principal oyster beds lay in the Persian Gulf, along the coasts of Indian and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and in the Red Sea” (Ward 1998: 2). It is also important to note that Qatif (one of the most renown places for pearling) was not located close to the densest clusters of pearl banks. This meant that “Instead, the industry was dominated by the two coastal areas which could provide the manpower and resources to equip large pearling fleets” (Carter 2005: 147). Free individuals, who dived for a living, used small wooden boats, but the pearl fleets were the vessels that held large numbers of African and Asian slaves. Depending on the size of the boats the crews would focus on different parts of the Gulf, depending on how wide they needed the opening between coasts to be to
accommodate their ships. We must also take into account the significance of Hormuz at the time the dominant political center in the region.

Hormuz, otherwise known as Ormus, was well known in antiquity. It was also known that, “This was Ormus where treasures of the Orient were gathered in abundance, the half-way house between the East and the West, making it one of the greatest emporia of the world” (“Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center”). Since the pearling industry was so large, the growth of the industry helped the development of Persian Gulf towns and attracted new merchants, groups, and travelers to the area. The pearling industry was so promising that when the Portuguese gained control over the Persian Gulf area, they imposed taxes on the pearl divers. The Portuguese occupied this area 1521-1602 and then it was largely under the control of Persia until 1783. The Portuguese would often say, “if the whole world were a golden ring, Hormuz would be the jeweled signet” (Wilson 1927: 240). Since the area was such a rich source of pearls, it increased the value of controlling the trade and occupying the territory. This allowed the Kingdom of Hormuz to exploit the industry and accumulate revenue. One way Hormuz did this was to require ships to take out a permit in order to engage in pearl diving. In addition, for every 1,000 pearls, a price also had to be paid to the government. This was unfortunate for those who made a living on of pearl diving because these taxes cut into their profits. A cosmopolitan individual, Ibn Battuta recounts, “The sultan takes his fifth and the remainder are bought by the merchants who are there in the boats. Most of them are the creditors of the divers, and they take the pearls in quittance of their debt (of the divers) or so much of it as it their due” (Carter 2005: 146). However, merchants who traveled to the major pearl ports in the Persian Gulf were unaffected by these taxes but still able to obtain the precious commodity for distribution elsewhere.
Pearls held a variety of significances: “Pearling was certainly an established industry by the time of Alexander, which came to be tapped by the Roman market, and subsequently by the Byzantine, Persian (Sasanian) and Early Islamic ruling elite” (Carter 2005: 145). Some of the reasons relate back to religion, specifically Islam and pearls in connection with the idea of paradise. Pearls were also used as decorative pieces in buildings, clothing, and jewelry. The pearls produced in the Gulf were many different sizes and colors, which only added to their splendor. More uses are described as follows, “Pearls from the Arabian (Persian) Gulf were sold for use in crowns and other symbols of royalty, and in jewelry for the wealthy. Tiny pearls were used for embroidery on fine clothing” (“Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center”). While pearling was a poor man’s work, the precious gems were reserved for the wealthy, since they were the only ones able to afford them. There are many early stories about what pearls were thought to be and many of the stories tie in with religion, making pearls even more desirable. Apart from Islam, pearls also held an importance for the Greeks, who honored different gods. For example, “Greeks honoured the antiquity of diving in the form of the deity Glaucus, who was transformed into an undersea being by Dionysus and became the patron spirit of the divers and fishermen” (Frost 1968: 181). This shows how important the task of diving and fishing was in ancient Greek society. Robert Frost describes mainly diving for pearls and sponges in relation to Greek and Roman history. It is clear, whatever the reason for wanting to obtain pearls; seekers did not simply go to one geographical area. The one commonality between the groups of people who bought pearls remains that they were members of the elite class. This is why merchants played such a key role in the pearling industry, since they facilitated the spread and transportation of pearls to areas of the world outside the Persian Gulf.
For many people pearl diving served as an alternative to farming. Pearls were considered to be jewels of the sea and men went to great lengths to gather them. At the time, there were not many technological innovations that aided these fishers in holding their breath. Oysters were found and collected from the ocean floor and the pearl fishers developed their own system for obtaining them. Boats of divers would go out to the waters and the men would cast two large stones attached to ropes into the water. One of the stones would be thrown over the bow and the other at the stern. Once the boat was correctly in place, the men would place sacks around their necks and would have to attach heavy stones to their feet in order to drag them down to the ocean floor. The divers would collect as many oysters as possible and have to release the weight stone while pulling up on one of the ropes in order to surface. This process was repeated many times a day and many little fishing boats would crowd the waters. The wooden sailing vessels with triangular sails that they used are referred to as “dhows.” Pearl fishing required skill because the longer someone was able to hold their breath, the longer they were able to scavenge for oysters. Although a hard task, “The divers of antiquity, as this survey shows, were skillful, courageous and inured to hardship” (Frost, 1968 p. 185). Pearling was undesirable, since it was such a dangerous trade, and usually seen as a poor man’s work. This created an increased need for slaves.

During the height of pearling, many slaves were brought from East Africa and Asian countries. As Leonard recounts, “Thus the Gulf states rely heavily on expatriates, including South Asians, for whom there are opportunities to use their skills for higher pay and in better working conditions than at home” (Leonard 2005: 618). This meant that there were black Africans and Asians forced to work in the Persian Gulf. Beatrice Nicolini explains the two main monsoon directions for the slave trade. The first went from East Africa and the Red Sea to
Arabia, India and parts of Asia. The second went in the reverse direction. Due to the monsoon winds, slaves would be imported annually in large numbers and they would be, “enslaved, and transported to the Arabian Peninsula where they were mainly engaged in fishing pearls in the Persian/Arab Gulf” (Nicolini 2006: 347). As Beatrice Nicolini points out, slaves can originate through birth or captivity, but in both cases were ripped from their homes and brought over on Arab dhows to work hard for their owners. She makes the clear distinction that slavery was not prohibited in Islamic society and the population surrounding the Persian Gulf at the time was largely Muslim. It was highly looked down upon and forbidden to reduce another Muslim to the state of slavery and that is perhaps why the slaves were taken from East Africa and Asia. Also inherent in the Islamic religion is the wonder and importance of pearls, since, “the beauty and value of pearls is attested to in the Holy Qur’an, where they are especially associated with Paradise” (Carter 2005: 145). Here you had the main religious text of Muslims referencing pearls and also saying that slavery was not prohibited, leading to this increased belief that they needed more slaves to engage in pearling. Unfortunately for the slaves, the process of pearling presented many dangers to the divers health and safety.

“Shallow water blackouts” were one of the largest threats to the health and safety of pearl divers and could occur when the divers resurfaced from their dive, this meant that the diver suffered from reduced oxygen to the brain. A shallow water blackout most frequently occurred when divers took too many deep breaths before a dive. This would then cause a diver to pass out and most likely drown. The problem was that divers had to hold their breath for as long as possible to collect a decent amount of oysters and this often required them to take deep breaths before diving down to the pearl beds. Dive time would commonly vary from 2-4 minutes depending on the amount of activity and movement the diver had to engage in to fill his sack
with oysters. As you can see it was a tough situation and the diver had to come up with his own method that worked for him. Also, the divers who were slaves, “were forced to dive forty times a day or more and their mortality was high” (Nicolini 2006: 350). Diving this many times for slaves or for those who chose to make a living out of pearling was tiring and with each new dive holding ones breath became increasingly difficult, causing divers to take more breaths. Since this condition is basically a “black out” in the water, a diver’s lungs could take on water which would internally drowned them from lack of oxygen. There were many ways in which shallow water blackouts led to the deaths of divers and there was no warning that someone would suffer from one. For this reason, shallow water blackouts were common among pearl divers and if the diver was rescued from fainting in the ocean, there was still a high chance they would suffer severe brain damage.

Additional risks to a divers health included loss or impairment of senses such as vision and hearing. All of us can think of a time when our ears have popped even due to a slight change in pressure, and for these divers they were constantly exposed to different levels of pressure. There are still certain fishers and divers today who like to operate without the use of technology and Robert Frost compares their experiences to that of the ancient pearl divers: “Professional divers in primitive societies still burst their own eardrums purposely and permanently in order to shoot to the bottom weighted with a rock without wasting time equalizing the pressure within their ears to the water pressure outside” (Frost 1968: 182). A busted eardrum is not only extremely painful, but as stated above often led to loss of hearing. In ancient times, there would also be a lack of medicine to help treat this condition. Loss of hearing added to the dangers of pearl diving since hearing is one of the senses that allowed a diver to notice surrounding danger. In addition, since goggles were not yet invented, divers would constantly expose divers’ eyes to
the salt water and infection. Robert Frost goes on to discuss the problems of having blurred vision, again in connection with not being able to sense danger as accurately as possible. If a diver did not suffer from these medical conditions, there were other factors connected with nature and the environment that led to so many deaths in the pearling profession.

There are many stories of hostile creatures that lived in the water, and in most cases, there is little defense against them. In fact, Robert Frost, goes as far as to say, “…encounters between man and sea-beast are not only excruciatingly painful, but almost invariably fatal” (Frost 1968: 183). The most obvious threats to divers were sharks, but there were also other threatening animals like stingrays and jellyfish. Divers had to be extremely cautious not to cut themselves on coral and sharp shells in the process of diving since any diver in the area bleeding, would attract sharks. Many ancient legends talk about thin, large creatures that would cover the divers, making it impossible for them to surface. These legends are largely believed to refer to manta rays. Divers only descended to the ocean bottom with a sack attached to their neck to collect the oysters and did not concern themselves with weapons for defense. Any encounter with a sea animal would have been abrupt and hard for the diver to combat.

If animals did not harm the divers, there were other factors that could lead to their demise. Weather conditions like extreme cold and heat proved problematic for the divers as well. Since the conditions were so harsh pearling is often times connect to slavery, “The dark shadow of a form of bondage akin to slavery falls over many pearl divers; heat and cold, hunger and thirst, vermin, pain, sickness and death” (Wilson 1927: 255). This is why the slaves and free men who were engaged in pearl diving would live this lifestyle from April-September, since the water was warmer in these months, therefore, increasing the safety and success of divers. However, while the warm water made for a more comfortable diving scenario, it could also lead to
exhaustion and dehydration during the summer months when temperatures were likely to reach 104 degrees Fahrenheit. In addition, uncontrollable enormous waves also were dangerous and could drag them under unexpectedly. When waves hit, those in the water would be dragged down and sucked towards the bottom. This was dangerous for the divers because if they did not have time to take a large enough breath they could run out of air and drown from not being able to surface in time. Also, there were several cases of head injuries as a result of waves thrashing people under and causing them to hit their head or other body parts against coral and other sharp objects. It did not rain very much in the Persian Gulf and the land areas are characterized as very dry, flat planes. However, they did have to consider the monsoon season and avoid pearling during this time. This was also generally when new owners of large boats would be out recruiting and buying slaves to bring back to the Persian Gulf, from East Africa and Asia after the monsoon winds calmed down.

Even though there were countless dangers associated with pearling, the industry provided an opportunity for men to make money and contributed largely to the economy of Persian Gulf region. It is important to note that, “The Gazetteer shows that not only was the economy of the region almost entirely based on pearling by the end of the early 20th century, but that the industry had been and was still experiencing a period of remarkable growth in the marketplace” (Carter 2005: 153). Pearls were unique and expensive, which is why they were reserved primarily for the elite. However, the Japanese were able to develop manmade pearls, which meant cheaper prices and elimination of the lengthy, dangerous process of pearling. Unfortunately there were negative effects to the Gulf because, “The Japanese introduction of cultured pearls brought about the collapse of the pearl industry, plunging the Gulf economies into crisis” (Leonard 2005: 618). With the emergence of the cultured pearls, middle class people were able to afford this
commodity that had previously only been accessible to the wealthy. Cultured pearls also meant that the gems would have fewer imperfections and there were more color choices available for the buyer. The devastation to the economy of the Persian Gulf reaffirms the significance of pearling in antiquity in the region.

Pearls were desired because of their beauty, ties with religion, and decorative nature. Prior to the introduction of cultured pearls in the 1930s, members of the elite mainly bought pearls since they were sold at a high price. Since the work of pearl divers was so undesirable and there was no technology to aid the process, large shipments of slaves would be transported annually in correspondence with the monsoon winds. Even though pearl fishing had many dangers associated with it, the industry provided a prosperous environment in the Persian Gulf and sparked economic growth. The Japanese negatively affected the economy in the Gulf by introducing cultured pearls, which were cheaper and more uniform than those previously collected from banks in the waters of the Persian Gulf.
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