

In 1964, Bahraini photographer Abdulla Mohammad Alkhan embarked on a four-day voyage with around 30 pearl divers. It was the last official excursion by a professional pearl diving ship and exclusive images from that historic event are included in a new book that has just been released. **MANDEEP SINGH** reports...

RARE photographs that date back 48 years offer a unique glimpse into the life of Bahrain's pearl divers.

They are included in a new book by photographer Abdulla Mohammad Alkhan, who was lucky enough to be onboard the last official voyage of a pearl diving ship in Bahrain.

That four-day voyage consisted of around 30 men including the ship captain, divers, crew and a media team.

It was actually commissioned by Bapco, which organised the excursion with the purpose of filming a documentary for its archives.

Images from the voyage are now included in *The Book of Pearls*, which was compiled by Husain Al Mahroos and is a treasure trove of colour and black and white photographs from that 60-mile trip in 1964.

However, it also offers an insight into the brave men who put their lives on the line diving for oysters for rich pearl merchants, the culture surrounding the profession and the language divers used.

For instance, it describes how names were given to different types of pearls depending on their shape – such as “lovers’ tears” pearls and “fish eye” pearls.

It also recounts how many divers of African origin lived in bamboo huts along the seashore.

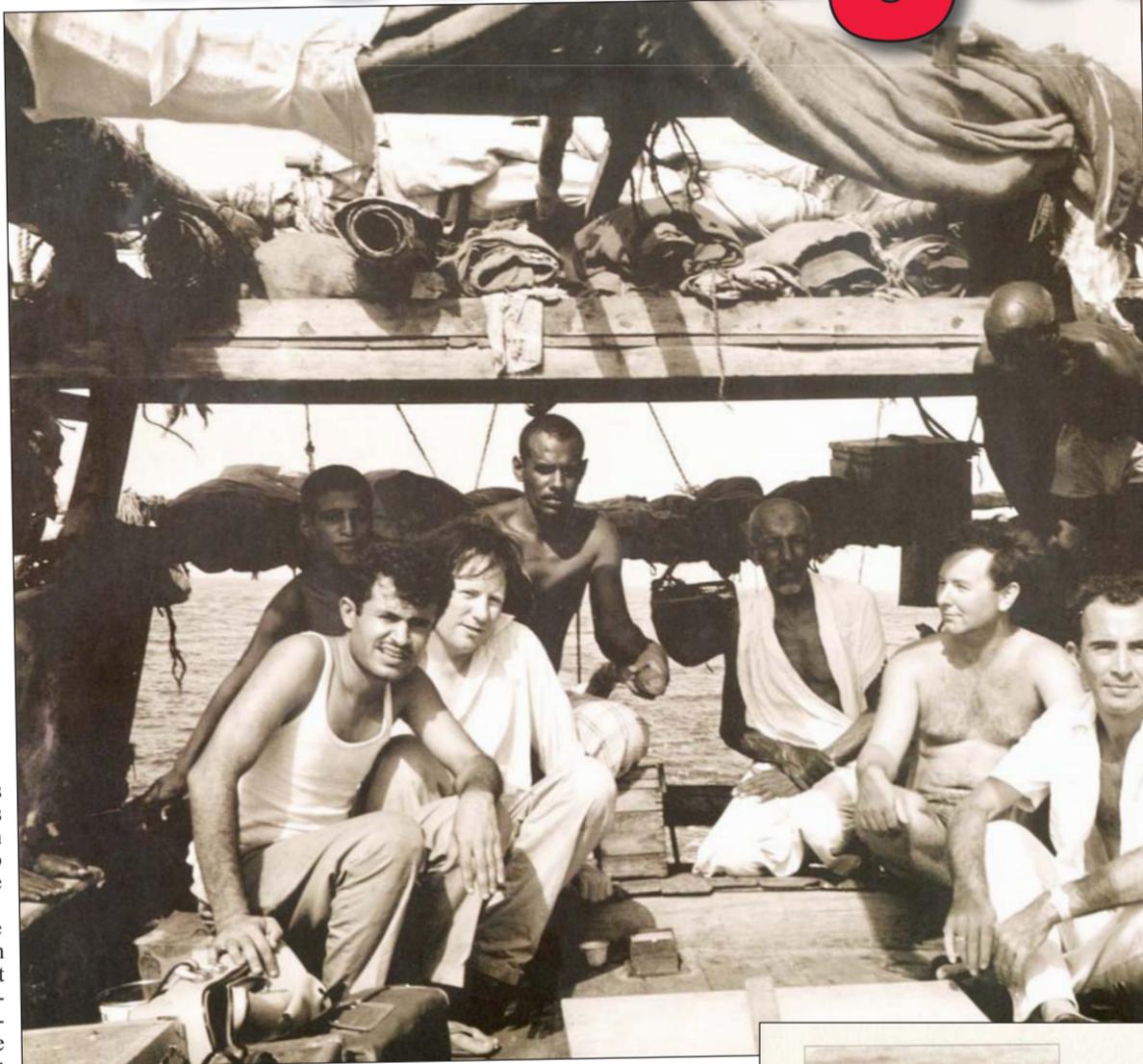
But while divers spent much of their lives at sea, their innocence was highlighted by the response of one diver who was asked how pearls were formed.

“When it rains, the split shells are thrown back into the sea and float to the surface, after which raindrops that enter it transform into pearls,” he answered.

Little known facts about traditions of pearl divers and their families are highlighted in the book, which says there were more than 15,000 active divers and 5,000 others working in the pearling industry in Bahrain during the 1950s.

It describes how divers went to sea for months during the summer, from June to October, when the water was warm – only making one or two trips back to shore to stock up on provisions.

Gem of a heritage...



■ Mr Alkhan, left, with the documentary team charged with filming the voyage and some of the crew

Each boat normally carried 60 men and around 2,700 diving vessels set sail from Bahrain every year.

One anecdote describes how women carried stones from a graveyard, heated them and then threw them into the sea as they sang traditional songs and waited for divers to return at the end of the diving season.

It says another tradition involved a new mother dropping breast milk into the sea to create friendly winds, which were thought to speed up a diving boat's return.

Facts about divers wearing wooden clothes pegs on their noses to plug their nostrils and surviving on one meal a day for four months – with a limited

supply of rice, fish, dates and coffee – are also included.

However, it says divers never even knew oysters were edible.

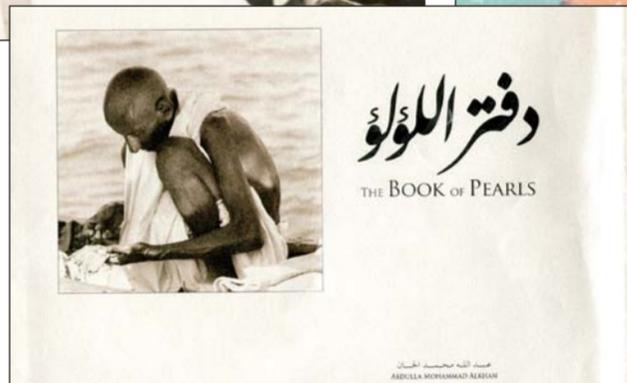
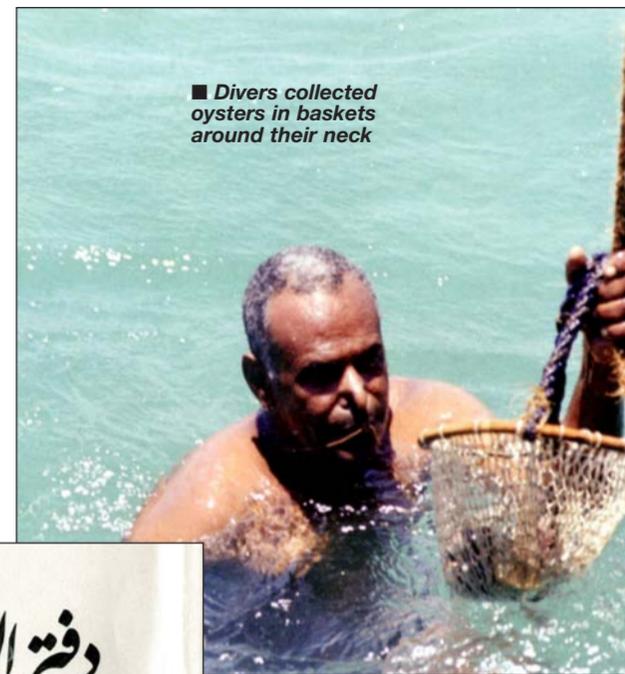
The book also describes the physical effects of the profession on pearl divers, saying almost 80 per cent of them were actually deaf due to the pressure on their ears and most were bald because of constant exposure to salt water.

Sharks were another occupational hazard, along with burst veins, and when a diver died the book tells how his body was wrapped in a piece of cloth and, after prayers, his feet were tied to a weight before he was buried at sea.

It contains information on



■ Divers collected oysters in baskets around their neck



■ The cover of the book

how divers had lead or stone weights tied to their legs to enable a quick descent to the seabed, where they could remain underwater collecting oysters for up to 10 minutes at a time before being pulled back up to the surface to deposit their haul – only to descend

again wearing only a loin cloth.

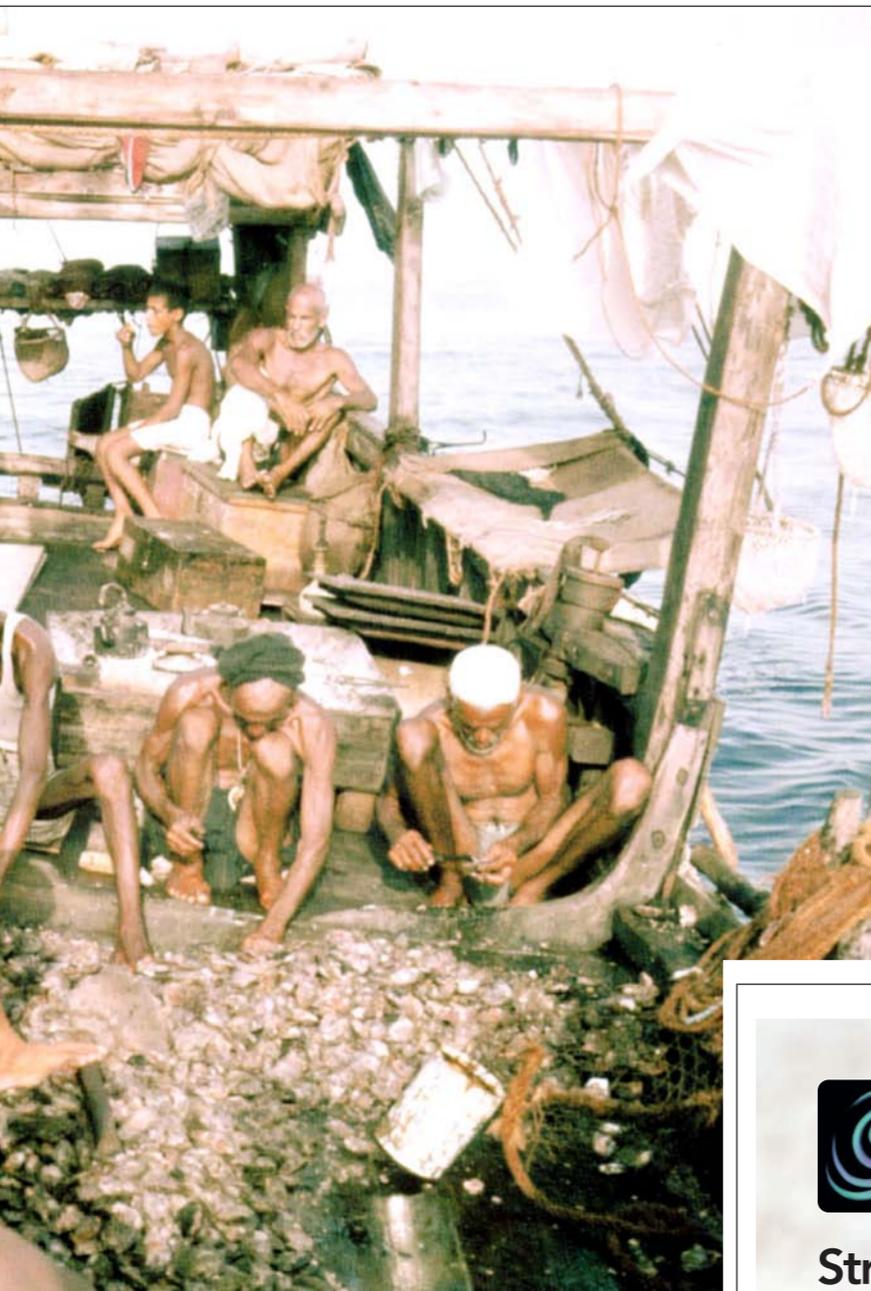
However, the book goes on to describe the decline of the pearling industry after advances in technology led to the creation of artificial – or cultured – pearls, accompanied by a reduction in the number of oysters in Bahraini waters.

In fact, it says before the profession was phased out many divers were increasingly plunged into debt – forcing them to push younger members of families into the job just to pay off their fathers' loans.

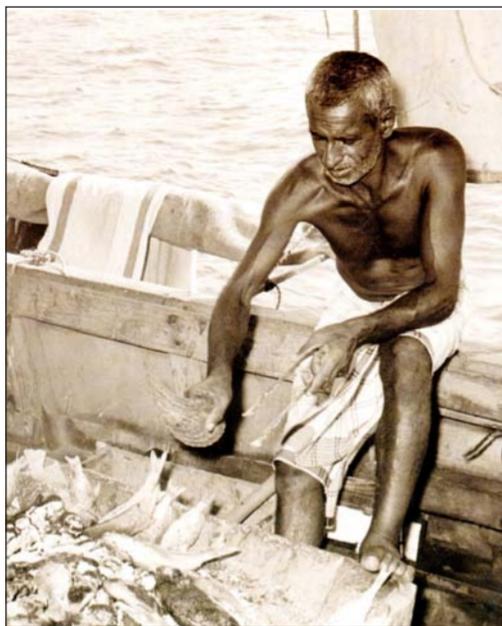
Harsh critics might point to some errors in the English text contained in the book, but the fact remains that this is a unique and historic publication that documents a key part of Bahrain's heritage that is too often forgotten.

Published by Bahrain House of Photography, *The Book of Pearls* is available from Bahrain's leading bookstores priced at BD30.

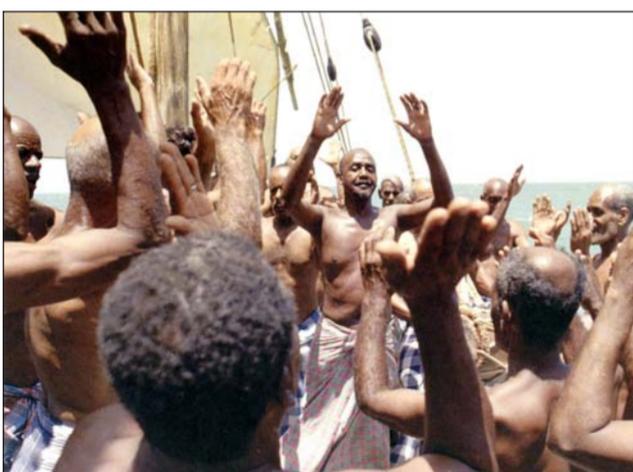
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■ A vessel sets out on a pearl diving mission. Left, divers sit together and break open oysters at the end of the day



■ One of the divers cooks fish onboard the boat



■ Sailors sing and chant while pulling the anchor

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