

Pop Culture in Arabian Peninsula Cinema

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Abstract

Culture is characterized as the combination of ideas, values and beliefs, as well as a mixture of traditions, lifestyle of a group of people living together on a piece of land. There is no doubt that the tribal societies formed over the centuries in the Gulf region and the Arabian Peninsula, have succeeded in creating their own culture that is distinctive from others, and today it has begun to reap the fruits of that unique personality in all its cultural and artistic products. The aim of this research is to focus on the Bedouin culture , through analyzing four of the most amazing gulf films THE CRULE SEA- Kuwait 1972 , Theeb 2014 which shaved away its successes until it reached the representation of the entire Arab region in the Oscars for the year 2016, Sea Shadow - UAE 2011-, New Day inOld Sanaa - Yemen 2005 and finally Wadjda - Saudi Arabia 2011The research will concentrate on how these films as a product reflect the role of the local popular culture and its impact on their values, and whether these films succeeded.

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Introduction

Most learned definitions depict culture as a mix of ideas, values and beliefs, combined with traditions, customs and life styles that distinguish a human group living on a particular piece of land. With the historical development of this group's collective life, its culture becomes emblematic of its unique identity, enabling the creation of cultural products that express the group's environment and its shared history.

The tribal communities that arose in the region of the Arabian Gulf and Peninsula were no doubt able to create a very distinctive culture, whose features can be seen today in various artistic and cultural products, with film being a particularly heightened medium of such expression.

For while the road ahead, towards a regionally influential cinematic movement, is still quite long, there can be no question that important steps have been taken along that road.

Why these movies?

Many films were produced – especially in the last few years – which are worthy of study and careful analysis for the aesthetic values they reflect, and the symbolic references they make to the wider culture of the Arabian Peninsula in all its folkloric and popular aspects. So why does our list contain these movies to the exclusion of all others?

In point of fact, our first choice, *The Cruel Sea*, was all but inevitable. This movie is the first feature film to be produced in the Gulf region, dating back to the 1970s. It has the merit of trailblazing, on one hand, but on the other it also has several features that make it emblematic of folk culture in Kuwait and the entire Peninsula. The sea, as sustenance and livelihood to the population, is both the main character and the moving spirit of this film.

Our last choice, *Theeb*, is almost a mirror-image of *The Cruel Sea*; it's the latest to be produced, and the most successful with critics and audiences alike, having reached the Oscars' final list for best foreign-language film. It's also unique on our list in featuring the desert as locale and main character, allowing us to observe its formative role in the emergence of local Arabian cultures.

Similarly, *A New Day in Old Sanaa* was chosen from Yemen (the birthplace of all Arabian tribes) for its different and unique vision of life in the Yemeni capital, through the eyes of an Italian photographer-narrator.

Sea Shadow (UAE) and *Wadjda* (KSA) were chosen as representative of the two most active states in the region in terms of production and support for young filmmakers. While the UAE and Saudi Arabia have both witnessed several cinematic ventures in the past, each of these two films is the first feature made for commercial theaters¹ in its respective country.

¹ During *Wadjda*'s filming, the government of Saudi Arabia had not yet legalized the opening of commercial movie theaters, although the film could be commercially shown in other Arab countries.

Let us now present the synopses of these five films, ordered chronologically from earliest to latest:

1-The Cruel Sea

1972 Drama • 1h 46m

The first feature film to be made by the state of Kuwait. It is a period piece about Kuwait before the discovery of oil when fishing was the predominant occupation. Bas Ya Bahr is the story of a crippled pearl diver who forbids his son Mussaid to go to sea to dive for pearls. Mussaid's father got the 'bends' after resurfacing too fast during a shark attack on his boat. However, the boy cannot see any other way to make enough money to marry Nura, his beloved. Nura is the daughter of a merchant who wants her to marry for money. Finally, his father gives Mussaid permission to go to sea and even gives him his special black diving suit. Mussaid then works with the man to whom his father owes money. While Mussaid is away, Nura is forced by her family to marry a rich, older suitor. During his last dive Mussaid puts his hand inside a huge clam which closes on it. Mussaid is gasping for air and his friend has to amputate his arm in order to 'rescue' him. However Mussaid was dead long before he was brought to the boat. Nura meanwhile is raped by her husband on her wedding night. Mussaid's best friend looks through his cache of oysters and gradually starts opening all of them. Finally when he gets to the last one he finds a huge pearl inside. Maybe Mussaid's death will not be in vain if he can give this to Mussaid's family. When the boat reaches Kuwait, Mussaid's mother is welcomed by the dead body of her son and his prize - the pearl - for which he lost his life. The mother stares at the sea with unbridled rage and flings the pearl into it uttering the phrase: "Bas ya bahr" (enough o sea!)

1- A New Day in Old Sana'a

2005 -Drama/Romance • 1h 26m

A young photographer named Tariq has to choose between his duty to his family -- marry the daughter of a judge -- or follow his heart and marry his lover, an orphan of a lower class.

2- Sea Shadow – 2011- Drama • 1h 38m

Mansoor, a 16 year-old teenager, living in a coastal "freej" (an Emirati neighborhood), has strong feelings for 16 year-old girl Kaltham. But culture and tradition, as well as family hardship, make it difficult for him to express his feelings. A conversation with his "know-it-all" friend convinces him that a gift is the best way to express love, and so, he begins to look for ways to save money for the gift without arousing the suspicion of his family and friends.

3- Wadjda

2012 -Drama/World cinema • 1h 38m

A rebellious Saudi girl (Waad Mohammed) enters a Koran recitation competition at her school and hopes to win enough money to buy her own bicycle.

WADJDA is a 10-year-old girl living in a suburb of Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. Although she lives in a conservative world, Wadjda is fun loving, entrepreneurial and always pushing the boundaries of what she can get away with. After a fight with her friend Abdullah, a neighborhood boy she shouldn't be playing with, Wadjda sees a beautiful green bicycle for sale. She wants the bicycle desperately so that she can beat Abdullah in a race. But Wadjda's mother won't allow it, fearing repercussions from a society that sees bicycles as dangerous to a girl's virtue. So Wadjda decides to try and raise the money herself. At first, Wadjda's mother is too preoccupied with convincing her husband not to take a second wife to realize what's going on. And soon enough Wadjda's plans are thwarted when she is caught running various schemes at school. Just as she is losing hope of raising enough money, she hears of a cash prize for a Quran recitation competition at her school. She devotes herself to the memorization and recitation of Quranic verses, and her teachers begin to see Wadjda as a model pious girl. The competition isn't going to be easy, especially for a troublemaker like Wadjda, but she refuses to give in. She is determined to continue fighting for her dreams.

4- Theeb

2012- Drama/Thriller • 1h 40m

In the Ottoman province of Hijaz during World War I, a young Bedouin boy experiences a greatly hastened coming-of-age as he embarks on a perilous desert journey to guide a British officer to his secret destination.

I- Folk Locales in the Cinema of the Arabian Peninsula

Space is an essential dimension of narrative, interacting as it does with plot, characters and time. And when qualifying narrative space as a "folk" locale, we emphasize those spaces which evoke a folk atmosphere, in distinction to others. In consequence, when reference is made to a certain locale as folk, we are not merely delineating a physical space, but also, and primarily, pointing out its implications for the dramatic arc, its role in the unfolding of the plot, the development of characters, and the determination of opposing forces.

Accordingly, a folk locale is a living space used by a traditional community, stratified into social classes determined by the framework of their folk culture, where a whole fabric of different social articulations is being woven.

Between sand and water

Traditional tribal communities in the Arabian Peninsula have long been pinched between desert and sea. Water is the main attraction here, the vital, sought-after element, mentioned in the Quran ("Out of water We made all that lives" -21:30). In a sea-side community, sea water will be the ubiquitous element around which life revolves, looming large in each consciousness with the possibilities of livelihood, travel and danger. Desert communities, on the other hand, can only thrive in oases, around water wells or natural springs, where a different sort of life is lived, utterly

dependent on water in abundance or scarcity. Social structures will reflect this dependence, with concomitant values and customs.

A- Sea

A community that arises by the sea will be dependent on it for livelihood and travel, a dependence which will in turn be reflected in folk tales and traditional lore, but also in values, traditions and customs.

Perhaps attentive reflection on the sea as a special locale can lead us to a conceptual framework for approaching the human inhabitants of that locale, and open a gateway for interpreting their psychological and emotional formation. For sea people act as if they were created by the sea, absorbing its qualities and identifying with it even while it evokes their anger or their fear. Across numerous cultures, the sea is seen as a perplexing conglomerate of antinomies; never standing still, but always in flux between high tide and low ebb, mighty storms and mirror-like quiet. Standing ashore, you'd yearn to wade into those waves, but board a ship tossed by those very waves and you'd be praying to reach a safe haven. A surface swimmer cannot know what lies beneath, and a diver has no access to what goes on up top. The sea can be an idyll for lovers, or a lure for desperate suicides. In presence of its swell, two persons side by side can harbor diametrically opposed emotions, one gleefully wishing to jump right in, and another trembling in fear at the mighty roar. The sea can provide bountifully for one fisherman, while denying another his livelihood, or even his very life, thus becoming, at once, both life-giver and executioner. We could go on and on, enumerating the sea's mind-boggling contradictions, so let's instead focus on how those contradictions were portrayed in those movies chosen for our study.

In two of our movies, the sea figures almost as a mythical being, its presence encompassing even the titles: *The Cruel Sea* and *Sea Shadow*.

The first film starts and ends with the sea, which overshadows every moment in-between. It opens with a glimpse of two contrasting views of the sea: Mussaid's father (Abdallah, a former pearl diver, who had his arm crippled by a shark attack, thereby turning from family provider to family burden) feels nothing but fear and loathing towards the sea, while his friend sees it as source of life and happiness to all Kuwaitis, who depend upon it for their livelihood.

The sea is also a measure of manliness and courage; the son, Mussaid, rebels against his lowly status in the community, and insists on sailing with the next ship, opposing his father who kept him home out of fear. In the eyes of the community, the home is a woman's place, where no real man should stay.

The sea has also provided the pearl merchant with his fabulous wealth and his lofty social standing, where his word is everybody's command.

If patience is a virtue, the community has the sea to thank for it. Men go out on the sea in trips that can last up to 4 months, in tiny boats with barely enough provisions of food and fresh water; they learn to withstand hunger and thirst, sea-salt pricking their flesh with each dive. They also learn a greater patience, that of the long separation from kith and kin. Women, on the other hand, endure the absence of fathers,

husbands, sons, brothers and lovers, along with a life of grinding hardship, until the boats return with their expected bounty. Their dreams of a better future are also haunted by the sea, as evidenced by Nura, Mussaid's girlfriend: does she encourage him to take up pearl diving, or surrender to her fear of the sea's ferociousness?

It is also from the sea that the characters derive their pride and dignity, and their tough stance in the face of trials, while treating their children with tender loving care. The father opposed the son's decision to go out on the sea, but this opposition turned into prayers, support and advice. Nura, married off to the rich old trader, bows down to her father's will, but refuses to give herself to that husband. And in the final scene, the mother rejects the pearl extracted by Mussaid before his drowning, throwing it back to the sea and demanding that it give her back her son. Surely it was the sea, with its tumult and swell, that gave her such strength.

For a fishing village, the sea is life itself, with all its rituals and vows, as attested in the scene of the kitten being washed in sea water, in the belief that it would quench the evil urges of the waves. Or when a broom was burned and thrown to the surf, in hope that malevolent spirits would be swept away. Even the simple washing of clothes is left to the sea, as seen at one point.

In *Sea Shadow*, the sea seems to be the origin of life and the symbol for all that is good and meaningful about it. It's the spot for heart-to-heart sessions between Omar and his friend, and the place for crab roasting picnics, where reminiscence flows freely around the simple, pure past. The sea becomes an icon of purity and simplicity. And it is the interlocutor to confide in, where Omar goes to unburden himself after the departure of his girlfriend, Kaltham, away from the neighborhood. She had gone to another sea-side town, so maybe, when Omar throws his body in the sea, its very waters can work as a nexus, of sorts?

Thus can water, as an eco-system, become the mainstay of people's lives, in these two films.

B- Desert

Desert is the other frontier in the Arabian Peninsula, and like the sea, it has its share of antinomies that shroud people and seep into their souls, fashioning them out of sand and wind. Desert is limitless sand that fails to retain water or sustain greenery. Those immense dunes that succeed each other in seeming serenity are also capable of hiding terrible storms which can erase those same dunes in searing wind and monsters of stinging sand. Desert is oppressive days and frosty nights, death in water's absence, and Edenic gardens where springs erupt or wells are dug up. It symbolizes strength and survival, while harboring death at every turn.

And *Theeb* is the sole film in this collection which portrayed the desert in all its violent glory and overwhelming presence. You see it in close-ups, lining the characters' faces. The oppressive heat had tanned their skins, while staring at the hazy horizon with kohl-lined eyes. Their choice of clothes was naturally dictated by the desert, opting for light colors to reflect back the heat of the sun, and for loose, flowing robes to allow freedom of movement and bodily ventilation. The desert's hardship had imprinted its inhabitants with superhuman endurance; in their long trips across the

sands, the scarcity of food and water can only make them tougher and stronger. This is perhaps why with some of them toughness sours into cruelty, like those gangs of desert brigands, whose hearts seem hewn out of mountain stones, as shown in the sequence of fighting over loot, or, more cruelly, when they poisoned the water of the well, the only one available for travelers on that route.

With all its quiet, aridity and dread, the desert educates its inhabitants in patience and endurance. Thus we see the lengthy watchful vigil between the band of brigands, on one hand, and the two brothers Hussain and Theeb on the other, through a cold, lonely night, with sporadic shots fired now and again. "Eat or be eaten" was the sage advice of the father, learned from the desert and bequeathed in turn to his son Hussain. Harsh advice, born from a desert of stark desolateness.

Even those sudden upheavals between heat and cold, quiet and storm, are reflected in the band's members shameful betrayals of each other. And Theeb himself, when he finally has power over his brother's killer, does not hesitate to take him down, even after accompanying the man in a long trip, and enjoying his wisdom and protection. Theeb kept his hatred hidden, to be acted upon only at the right moment, when he becomes a true "wolf" of the desert.

The well comes to the fore as a privileged site of the movie's action, for it is as much a necessity for survival in the desert as a bone of contention, even a grave for the dead, as shown in the sequence of discovering how its waters were contaminated with the blood of those slain and buried within. Thus it was charged with its full significance in a desert environment, holding the dichotomy of survival and extinction in creative tension, and adding aesthetically to the film's cinematography, as a dramatic necessity for desert travelers. The well, indeed, is an ideal exemplification of desert locales.

C- City/ Township/ Borough

By its nature, urban life is more complex in most of its aspects. There are more job choices and more specializations in trade and services, consequently different social structures. Trade specialties are no longer confined to basic necessities like food; they branch into jewelry, musical records and toys. And then we have barbers and chauffeurs, and myriads of merchandise to deal in, as shown in *Wadjda* and *Sea Shadow*. To gain a living, some may even sell home-made meals to friends and acquaintances, as did Omar's mother in *Sea Shadow*, helping out a helpless husband. Amal, in *A New Day in Old Sanaa*, gains a meagre living by selling hard-boiled eggs on the streets of Sanaa. Alongside, we observe such different occupations as those of judge, policeman, teacher, photographer, and Inas the henna artist who henna-paints brides preparing for their weddings. A rigid hierarchy holds all of them together, according to the relative weight and social importance of each, and the possibilities of friendship and marriage are delimited by your place on that scale.

All of which can inspire anxiety and rejection, as did the father in *Sea Shadow*. He refused to leave for Abu Dhabi with his son, preferring instead to stay with the memories of his late wife in the home they shared. He chose the traditional borough over the bustling, modern capital.

In urban settings, novel locales arise for social interaction, and chief among those is the coffee-house. The coffee-house is a central space in traditional conurbations, serving as a locus for gathering characters in social occasions. In *The Cruel Sea* we see the coffee-house as a forum for friendly chit-chat, but also as the nodal point for work meetings, trip planning and loan distribution.

Small grocery stores play a similar role, where Omar meets his friend, or demands payment from Kaltham's father, the barber, in *Sea Shadow*. Even in *A New Day in Old Sanaa*, one such store is the site of meetings and acquaintance between characters, depicting a representative scene of urban life in that ancient town.

The school comes to the fore in *Wadjda* as a community in its own right, reflecting the social ills of an extremely conservative society. Contrasting with the diehard insularity of the girls' school, the street outside – in such a large city – becomes a site for openness and intermingling, albeit still furtively and under special circumstances, as with the note carried by Wadjda from her friend to the boy waiting in his car. The movie succeeded in heightening this contrast, by showing both the school's high walls and the wide-openness of the street outside.

II- The *Dramatis Personae* of the folk culture of the Arabian Peninsula

Inevitably, a folk culture produces some distinctive stereotypes that can serve as indicators of deeper meanings and patterns pertinent to the culture in question. And they may naturally appear in films made in the context of a particular culture, as a reflection of that culture's collective consciousness, or sometimes as a dramatic necessity arising from the needs of narrative progression.

A- The Gossipmonger

This is a common stereotype that appears in numerous films, playing the functional role of relaying rumors and secrets, as personified by the water-bearer in *The Cruel Sea* and the egg saleswoman in *A New Day in Old Sanaa*. This latter turned out to be the action mover and the nexus between various characters, which may be considered a limitation of the screenplay, depending as it did on this hackneyed ploy to move the action along. The objective equivalent is real, nonetheless, and enjoys analogous power and influence in real life. In *Wadjda* the same role is played, not by a single character personifying the stereotype, but by several of them who use cell phones to keep the wife abreast of her husband's news, performing an apparently indispensable social function.

B- Patriarchal Authority

A dominant male figure that enjoys enormous power, approaching sanctity in some instances, is still important in Arab societies in general. His power derives from his role as protector, arbiter or sage adviser, as the case may be.

B1- Tribe Elder

This was the elder brother of both Hussain and Theeb in the latter's eponymous movie. He inherited the position from his late father, becoming commander to the

tribe, obeyed in all matters from the hosting of guests to guiding them to the Roman well on the ancient pilgrimage road.

B2- Despotic Father

This appears in most of our films as a tyrant, barring the son Mussaid from joining the fishing trip, before finally allowing it in response to Mussaid's pleas, in *The Cruel Sea*. His authority is absolute and inescapable, according to the traditions imposed by society and the environment, as previously explained. In the same movie, Nura's father marries her off to an old, wealthy merchant. Rebel as she might, she can finally but acquiesce, albeit without surrendering her body to the husband. This is also the father/husband in *Wadjda*, seeking a second wife and running the household with an iron fist, oblivious to the feelings of its members, and even allowing the mother/wife to be ruled by proxy by the Pakistani chauffeur, who dictates the mother's and daughter's movement in his run-down jalopy. In *Sea Shadow* too we see the distant father, disallowing any change in the lives of the two daughters.

B3- Influential Rich Man

This can be seen as a developmental step up from Tribe Elder, coming along with the increased complexity of social structures and economic relations. The Influential Rich Man comes to control who works in what, reflecting the power of capital and its determination of social life and class stratification. In *The Cruel Sea* this figure chooses who leads the pearl diving trip, approves the recruitment of Mussaid, even convincing his reluctant father, and loans everybody against the expected profits from the trip. And when another rich man asks for Nura's hand in marriage, her parents welcome him as a means to enhance the family's status. Money talks and everyone has to listen.

B4- Crippled/Disabled Husband

The halo of sanctity bestowed on the father in traditional societies is swiftly removed if he fails to perform his social role. In both *The Cruel Sea* and *Sea Shadow*, the fathers (Mussaid's and Omar's) fail to provide for their families, and consequently lose some of their powers to the mothers, who replace them as head of the family. The father is also the object of rebellion in *Sea Shadow*, where the brother departs with both sisters (Kaltham and Mariam) in tow, leaving a lonely father in the borough he cannot forsake in his widowhood.

III- Customs and Traditions in Arabian Peninsula Film

A tradition is a belief or behavior passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past. Common examples include holidays or impractical but socially meaningful clothes, but the idea has also been applied to social norms such as greetings.

A custom is defined in several Arabic lexicons as a pattern of conduct or behavior that is so routine as to become almost mechanical in its execution, e.g. the custom of smoking or customary lying. It also pertains to the primitive life of early man, before progress or advancement. [Definition of "custom", www.almaany.com, accessed on 30-06-2018].

Traditions, for their part, are defined as those inherited customs, beliefs, actions and cultures which one generation bequeaths to the next. [Definition of "tradition", www.almaany.com, accessed on 30-06-2018].

Customs are conventions inherited by successive generations to become part of their belief system, lasting as long as they are pertinent to a core belief of the culture. Traditions, on the other hand, are conventions of behavior based on inter-subjective concordance. They derive their power from society, pointing to the accumulation of experience and wisdom throughout this society's history, passed down from one generation to the next. Traditions, in essence, are social customs that had a very long life, passing from past to present and thence to the future, and acting like an internal organization of a particular society. [Faiza Isaad, *Social Customs and Traditions in Urban Contexts, between Convention and Modernity*, www.theses.univ-oran1.dz, accessed on 30-06-2018].

As views of the self and its surroundings, the chosen films reflect on a number of the traditions and customs of the region of the Arabian Peninsula.

A- Women's status and their social perception

It is a well-known fact that women have an inferior status in the folk culture of Arabia, sinking lower the further we move from urban culture towards the more impoverished, Bedouin communities. And *Theeb* is a perfect illustrator of this fact, depicting the life of a nomadic group in the 1900's, across an arid, lifeless desert. Women simply have no place in the action of the movie, and they were mentioned by the male characters only twice: when Hussain told Theeb off and ordered him to go to his mother, and during the caravan's night chat around the campfire with the British soldier, when the subject of women, and Hussain's imminent marriage, came up.

In *The Cruel Sea*, women are represented, on one hand, by the bereaved mother and suffering wife, who has no control over her life, nor chance to affect the slightest change in her fate or that of her loved ones. The other image of women is provided by Nura, Mussaid's girlfriend, seen at the beginning from the window of a room that looks like a prison, and driven at the end to marry against her will. She could only acquiesce, however long she may protest, gaining nothing from protest except humiliating abuse.

A more active image is seen in *Sea Shadow*, where the wife gets to work to support her family, and to have a say in their affairs, but always under suspicion and muted blame from the husband, or not so muted from the son Omar. But the same movie reverts to the egregious stereotype of the man-crazed divorcee, ever waiting for a suitor while endlessly prettifying herself. Klatham cuts a middle figure between those two, and perhaps represents a more realistic example of the urbanized girl in a conservative society; she bows down to most traditions and customs, but finally rebels to escape with her brother towards the modernity of Abu Dhabi.

A New Day in Old Sanaa offers several examples of women and their status, starting with the gypsy-like Inas, the henna artist who dances at dawn in a white dress found by chance, prepares a bride for her wedding, and befriends the egg saleswoman who trades in gossip. She falls in love with young Tariq, the bridegroom preparing for

imminent marriage, and declares her love, but the movie dashes her tender dreams, and dooms her instead to lifelong, lunatic waiting for a lover that will not come. He is seen performing his prayers after standing her up, as though purifying himself from her love, expiating its guilt. Traditions were the governing factor of that relationship, and class differences pronounced it still-born. Those traditions and class differences are the all-powerful undertow, imperceptibly influencing every action, as witnessed in the scramble to attend the judge's daughter's wedding, which confers status in a stratified society where to work in selling eggs or painting henna is to invite additional scorn and disdain, on top of hiding all women behind the burqa. They do not even dare expose their painted hands for the camera, making the Italian photographer resort to painting his own hand and calling on Tariq to take the shot.

Wadjda takes women's dreams as high as they may go, demanding her right to ride a bicycle in a society that denied women – at the time of *Wadjda's* filming – the right to drive cars. She keeps asking why it's not allowed, to receive infuriating answers like bicycle riding is only for boys or it might harm your fertility. The most telling scene comes when she falls off her bicycle screaming "blood!" Her mother comes running, anxious to find the source of bleeding and relaxing only when she discovers it's Wadjda's knee. Viewers can infer that the really important thing is not Wadjda's wellbeing, but her material virginity. It's catastrophic for a girl to lose the integrity of the hymen to a bicycle accident, in a society that keeps her covered, suppressed, negated and excluded. As for the mother, her life is consumed with terror lest her husband take a second wife, which he does by the end of the movie, giving her the determination to adopt Wadjda's cause: she buys her the coveted bicycle, thereby turning it into a symbol for wider and freer horizons for future women.

B- Singing

Performance arts are among a society's most prominent manifestations of its culture, for they are at once more popular and more wide-spread than all other forms. *The Cruel Sea* gave pride of place to such performances, representing – perhaps excessively – many scenes of group signing, at the beginning of a diving trip; with women chanting in propitiation to the sea; and to celebrate the bride during the wedding. The filmmakers were apparently so enamored of traditional singing, it was almost like a night of Kuwaiti folklore.

In *Sea Shadow* we find a unique mix of traditional and modern singing, particularly when the divorcee told Omar how much she likes the songs of Saudi singer AbdulMajeed Abdullah, calling him "the prince of love". Omar goes out to buy all of Abdullah's tapes for her, and it was only her subsequent marriage that came between her and this gift.

Even in *Theeb* we hear some Bedouin chants, when the brigand sang for Theeb around their campfire, a song that was expressive of the ferociousness of the desert and its wolves, whether animal or human.

C- Mythology and Superstition

The Cruel Sea underlines the rituals accompanying the voyage out to sea in one scene where women gather with a kitten and a palm-frond broom. The kitten is dunked in

sea water and the broom is set alight and thrown to the waves. The point of the ritual is for the kitten to absorb the sea's rage while investing it with its own meekness, and for the broom to "sweep" away malevolent spirits, but also, since fire and water are opposing forces, one is supposed to subdue the other. The rituals represent attempts, on the part of folk culture, to tame the sea beast for the sake of the men about to throw themselves in its maw.

A New Day in Old Sanaa is a mythology unto itself, with its unique style and narrative spirit. Starting with Tariq seeing Inas dance at night in a white dress, on to the gossamer style of cinematography that reminds us of magic realism, to the ending that portrays her waiting nightly on the bridge, like a female Sisyphus, it seems like mythologizing Sanaa is the whole point of the movie. Sanaa itself is complicit in this intention, with its spectacular traditional architecture, caught by the camera of the Italian photographer, as if in surrender to an enchanting spell.

The atmosphere of *Theeb*, too, is reminiscent of ancient sagas or pre-historic myths, brimming, in spite of the sparse dialogue, with Bedouin proverbs and traditions, almost a tale out of *The Thousand and One Nights*. The harmony is perfect between the visual backdrop of desert mountains and ravines, the period costumes, and the music that takes us there in place and time.

D- Wedding Celebrations

In an impoverished setting, wedding celebrations become a chance to wrest some joy out of the hard reality: a breathing space, a forum for social interaction, and maybe also a meeting ground to facilitate further marriages. A wedding celebration, too, is an economic locomotive, as many would buy new clothes or gifts, and parents of the bride and groom would lavish food on their guests, and a *trousseau* for the bride, and so on. A great machine of economic and social activity is set in motion as a result of this uniquely social event. Weddings dominated the action of two of our movies, and strongly influenced a third one.

In *A New day in Old Sanaa*, the action revolves around a wedding from the very first shot, showing how invitations are coveted, and how elaborate the preparations can be. The rationale of going through with it was the subject of heated discussions between Tariq and his sister, haunting him all through the movie, and contrasting with the anti-climactic scene of the bride ringed around with women.

In *Wadjda*, the nagging fear of the father's second marriage was the mother's primary concern, driving her to distraction and to tears many times, and determining her stance from Wadjda's demand. Only after her final defeat, when the husband got his second wife, did she realize that her daughter's cause is really hers too: to fight back against customs and traditions that are flagrantly unfair. She bought Wadjda the bicycle, a seemingly small and childish dream, but actually a great leap forward and a *cri-de-coeur* in the face of an unjust society.

Only the wedding in *The Cruel Sea* is left to us now; a wedding that added to the lovers' pains, and greatly hurt Mussaid's parents, before they were stymied by news of his drowning. The scene suffered, perhaps, for being a bit too long, maybe because the filmmakers wanted to display some of Kuwait's pre-oil folklore, and in this they gave us what can be considered a cinematic document.

E- Blood Feuds

The toughness of life in arid Arabia gives its inhabitants a strong sense of self-esteem, for to survive in such a ruthless and forbidding environment takes a tough self indeed. And maybe it is this heightened sense of self that makes it hard to forget and forgive. The slightest provocation can develop into a long blood feud, as evidenced by Arabic folk tales, for example that of the Bassous war.

We should not, then, be startled when we see Theeb, a ten-year old boy, draw a gun to shoot his brother's killer, in spite of their common journey and the killer's exhortations against betrayal. For it is unimaginable for Theeb to live the rest of his life and let his brother's killer off the hook. The desert's values and its ineluctable laws are reflected in this scene, and the glares of mutual defiance, before Theeb releases the lethal bullet. He remains defiant of the authority of the Ottoman force, until they let him go.

Conclusion

Since we're discussing folk culture and its manifestations in film, we can only point out how it overwhelmed *The Cruel Sea*, which gave up a lot of screen time to scenes of folkloric singing and dancing, sacrificing some of its artistic integrity.

In contrast, *Sea Shadow* was overwhelmed by its main theme, the struggle between modernity and traditional values, to such an extent that it sacrificed a chance for visual authenticity. The characters, as an example, never wore traditional Emirati garb, although it is actually cherished in the UAE.

Those were five movies from five countries, unknown to many except as vast deserts, dotted with palms and camels, and swimming over a sea of oil. But a close, intelligent look will reveal the similarities, springing from the common tribal roots, the common language, and the blanketing Arab-Islamic culture.

And they represent different and promising steps on the road towards a modernistic current for cinema in this part of the world. In attempting to reflect the reality of their societies, they managed to unearth some of their folk roots.

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