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## From Cradle to Grave: A Life Story in Jewelry

Marie-Claire Bakker and Kara McKeown

Jewelry has played a significant social role in the life of the people of the Arabian Gulf for millennia.<sup>1</sup> This is well-evidenced by the 24,000 pieces of Neolithic shell and stone beads found at the al-Buhais 18 site in Sharjah.<sup>2</sup> Burial jewelry comprising of head decorations, earrings, necklaces, pendants, bracelets, anklets, hip and elbow decorations, and upper lip beads found at this site suggest that adornment from head to toe was an important ritual element in death, if not in life. As Roland de Beauclair, Sabah A. Jasim, and Hans-Peter Uerpmann summarise, “[t]he full range of jewellery may have been reserved for special ceremonies, including burial and possibly others such as marriage or coming of age.”<sup>3</sup> In addition to the jewelry found at al-Buhais 18, carnelian beads have been discovered in archaeological sites all over the Arabian Peninsula,<sup>4</sup> such as Umm Al Nar in Abu Dhabi,<sup>5</sup> Saruq Al-Hadid in Dubai,<sup>6</sup> the Dilmun

Burial Mounds in Bahrain,<sup>7</sup> and Failaka Island in Kuwait.<sup>8</sup> Early samples are often complemented by gold or silver elements while later ones display exquisite Sasanian and Hellenistic craftsmanship (fig. 11.1). Surviving examples of jewelry include ornaments from the great Islamic Empires, more notably the Fatimids, and portraits from the Mughal and Safavid era. Besides these discoveries, travelers’ and diplomats’ accounts describe almost unimaginably lavish jewelry and jewel-encrusted thrones, fabrics, tents, parasols, and clothing.<sup>9</sup>

This archeological and historic evidence indicates that jewelry played an important role in the past, just as it continues to be a significant element in the daily lives of women of this region in the present era. The authors of this chapter have drawn on oral history case studies and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the early 1990s in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, and more recent research from 2016–2019 in the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman, to provide insights into the way of life and the importance of jewelry for the people of the region. Bahrain was chosen as the original focus for this research due to its reputation as the centre of the gold and pearl jewelry trade throughout the last century.<sup>10</sup> It was

1 For details, see Daniel Potts, Hassan Al Naboodah, and Peter Hellyer, eds., *Archaeology of the United Arab Emirates: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Archaeology of the U.A.E.* (Abu Dhabi: Trident Press, 2003), 38.

2 Roland de Beauclair, Sabah A. Jasim, and Hans-Peter Uerpmann, “New Results on the Neolithic Jewellery from Al-Buhais 18, U.A.E.,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 36 (2006): 176.

3 *Ibid.*, 183.

4 An De Waele and Ernie Haerinck, “Etched (Carnelian) Beads from Northeast and Southeast Arabia,” *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 17, no. 1 (2006): 31–40.

5 Some of these findings are displayed in the Al Ain Museum, U.A.E.

6 Saruq al-Hadid Archaeology Museum in Dubai contains thousands of beads, as well as fine samples of gold jewelry from the area. For details, see Lloyd Weeks et al., “Recent Archaeological Research at Saruq Al-Hadid, Dubai, U.A.E.,” *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 28, no. 1 (2017): 31–60.

7 Well-preserved samples were found in the royal burial mounds in the village of Aali. They are currently displayed in Bahrain National Museum.

8 Marley Brown, “Bronze Age Bling,” *Archaeology: A Publication of the Archeological Institute of America*, May/June 2017, <https://www.archaeology.org/issues/257-1705/from-the-trenches/5451-trenches-kuwait-failaka-bronze-age-jewelry-workshop>.

9 Cf. Rachel Hasson, *Early Islamic Jewellery* (Jerusalem: L.A. Mayer Memorial Institute for Islamic Art, 1987), 9.

10 Throughout both cycles of research and in all Gulf countries, Bahrain was consistently identified by those interviewed as the source of the best quality gold



FIGURE 11.1 Jewelry from the Tylos (Hellenistic) Period of Bahrain's history (330 B.C.–622 A.D.).

also the first Gulf country to implement guaranteed quality standards with the establishment of the Precious Metals Assay Office in 1979.<sup>11</sup> This earlier fieldwork in Bahrain primarily focused on the extensive jewelry collections of the elite, pearl merchants, and important local jewelry businesses; however, interviews and data were also collected from the larger population. A number of original informants, particularly from the jewelry industry, were again interviewed in recent fieldwork, which provided a longitudinal perspective on consumption patterns. The material researched in Saudi Arabia included the large jewelry collection documented by Heather Colyer-Ross in her book, *The Art of Bedouin Jewellery: A Saudi Arabian*

jewelry. It is a matter of prestige if one's gold jewelry is "Bahraini gold."

11 *Kunūz al-Bahrayn/Treasures of Bahrain* (London: Bahrain Promotions and Marketing Board, 1998), 123.

*Profile*,<sup>12</sup> as well as interviews, predominantly amongst the elite. The multigeneration oral history interviews included here come from more recent fieldwork conducted by students at a federal higher education institution in the U.A.E. These students represent a cross-section of contemporary Emirati society, often with wider regional family connections, and provide a comprehensive overview that has enabled cross-referencing of certain generalized observations. Drawing together over thirty years of ethnographic participant observation, interviews, and research, this chapter provides a descriptive narrative focused on the role of jewelry in articulating every major event in the life of the women from the eastern coastal regions of the Arabian Peninsula in the latter part of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century. As we argue here, jewelry in the Arabian Peninsula is a coded expression of both public and private identity and a status statement layered with subtexts fully accessible only to those within a specific community.<sup>13</sup>

## 1 Social Significance of Jewelry in the Gulf

A passage in Shirley Guthrie's *Arab Social Life in the Middle Ages: An Illustrated Study* depicts an illustration titled "A Complicated Delivery in the Palace" from Al-Hariri's masterpiece, *Al Maqamat*, currently held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.<sup>14</sup> Guthrie observes that "[t]he mother

12 Heather Colyer-Ross, *The Art of Bedouin Jewellery: A Saudi Arabian Profile* (Fribourg: Arabesque, 1985). Also known in the past as the Haifa Faisal Collection of Saudi Arabian Traditional Arts, this is now known as the Art of Heritage Collection and is stored in Riyadh. Marie-Claire Bakker researched and collected additional jewelry for this collection in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s.

13 *Ibid.*, 11.

14 Qāsim ibn 'Alī ibn Mohammad ibn 'Alī al-Hariri al-Basri, *Les Makamat de Hariri* [Assemblies of Hariri] (1236–1237). Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des manuscrits. Arabe 5847. Al-Hariri was an eleventh-century poet and scholar from Basra.

wears a heavy gold necklace, gold bracelets, and gold anklets and her immediate attendant also wears gold anklets.<sup>15</sup> This medieval illustration provides evidence of the form that jewelry took at that time and demonstrates how it was worn, with the invariable pairing of bracelets and anklets. This symmetrical aesthetic has continued to this day, although the costs involved in providing matching pairs not only of earrings but also bracelets, rings, hand ornaments, and anklets is beginning to challenge this norm.<sup>16</sup> It is also important to note that jewelry was not restricted to particular occasions, but it was worn every day, including during childbirth. For this elite woman, jewelry was, of course, a status indicator, differentiating her visually from her attendant, but it was also an everyday adornment which was almost never removed.

For local communities in the Arabian Peninsula, the type and style of jewelry worn by a woman indicates not only her economic and social position but also her age, education, and marital status.<sup>17</sup> A complex matrix of reciprocal exchanges is expressed through jewelry during the major events of a woman's life. In addition, the exchange of jewelry as gifts, both within the family and among families through marriage, creates and reinforces bonds of community and identity in society. As student Shamma Jassem mentioned during her conversations with the authors, jewelry exchange is "a sign of trust and caring which makes the relationships unbreakable."<sup>18</sup> While tastes have evolved with each generation, the social role of jewelry has remained relatively stable, both as an

adornment and an investment:<sup>19</sup> jewelry is wealth that is controlled directly by a woman. Although bank accounts and careers have become the norm nowadays, reliance on these multivalent objects has remained culturally significant for the *Khaliji* women. The relationship of an Arab woman with her jewelry is both public and private and it is an intrinsic part of her identity.<sup>20</sup> For the wearer, her jewelry may embody a treasured relationship with a parent, spouse, sibling, or friend. This contrasts with an equally important practical approach, which is the strategic acquisition and gifting of jewelry. This latter practice is particularly evident in the older generations, for whom the value of a piece lies in the intrinsic worth of the precious metal of which it is composed. While the beauty and workmanship of a piece are highly appreciated, what is most important for the owner is its underlying value. This attitude has a historical motivation. In the past, many women experienced periods of hardship and frequently needed to exchange their gold for necessities.<sup>21</sup> This functional approach means that updating pieces and trading old jewelry for contemporary designs never depletes them of value as they are made of gold. This is why heirloom pieces can only be found in the wealthiest families, who have been able to follow changes in taste without needing to exchange older jewelry pieces to do so.

The women in the Arabian Gulf are high profile and sophisticated consumers of jewelry.<sup>22</sup> What

15 Shirley Guthrie, *Arab Social Life in the Middle Ages: An Illustrated Study* (London: Saqi Books, 1995), 160.

16 See, also, Kuwaiti women wearing matching paired silver bracelets in a 1933 photograph by Dame Violet Dickson in Jehan S. Rajab, *Costumes from the Arab World* (Kuwait: Tareq Rajab Museum, 2002), 25.

17 Sigrid Van Roode, *Desert Silver: Nomadic and Traditional Silver Jewellery from the Middle East and North Africa* (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2010), 47.

18 Shamma Jassem, interviewed by the authors, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E., December 15, 2018.

19 Soraya Altorki and Donald P. Cole, *Arabian Oasis City: The Transformation of 'Unayzah* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 205.

20 Authors' interviews and fieldnotes: Bahrain, 1994–1995 and 2016–2019; Saudi Arabia, 1997; U.A.E., 2016–2019; Kuwait and Oman, 2018–2019.

21 Ibid.

22 World Gold Council statistics for the Middle East in the second quarter of 2019 totaled 1,123 tons of gold, as reported by [www.nationaljeweler.com](http://www.nationaljeweler.com). For details, see "Gold Jewellery Demand Was Up Slightly in the Second Quarter, Aided by the United States and the Middle East," VOD Dubai, August 7, 2019, <https://www.jewelleryshow.com/component/zoo/top-news-homepage/>

may appear as excessive and conspicuous consumption of luxury goods by the wealthy actually conceals an underlying network of social forces which act to promote and perpetuate the significant role that jewelry plays in the lives of these women. Having an extensive jewelry collection is by no means the prerogative of the upper echelons of society.<sup>23</sup> Women of every social level buy jewelry on a regular basis;<sup>24</sup> today, such pieces tend to be almost exclusively made of gold and are designer gem-set pieces. Perhaps the most enduring reason for this practice is that gold acts as an insurance policy. Gold is relatively safe from depreciation and, in the form of jewelry, it is both accessible and transportable by the woman herself. In times of financial hardship, a woman will sell her jewelry just as she will methodically add to it in times of prosperity.<sup>25</sup> Despite modern forms of financial investment, such as shares and real estate, gold jewelry remains a convenient and relatively safe way

to save for women, a form of wealth that they have direct access to and can easily control. Jewelry is also a cushion against potential divorce or abandonment. While elaborate designer gem-set jewelry is popular, and the intrinsic value of the stones is more widely recognized and accepted today than thirty years ago,<sup>26</sup> gold remains the default currency. Every mother will make sure that her daughter is well provisioned with sufficient gold jewelry to ensure her financial security. As Reem Saeed's grandmother mentioned during a conversation with her granddaughter, "[g]old is your best friend: keep it with you even if you don't wear it. A piece of gold can save you one day."<sup>27</sup>

Prior to the discovery of oil, life was extremely uncertain for women in the Arabian Peninsula. During the pearling season men were absent, fishing or trading, for months at a time, and women had no certainty that they would return. Divers, especially, were engaged in high-risk activities during which death or serious injury could occur.<sup>28</sup> Jewelry, therefore, assumed an important role as an investment for the women left behind, in the event of their husbands' death or permanent disablement. It was also both transportable and easy to wear in a society that was mostly nomadic or migrating seasonally between coast and oasis. While more modern forms of savings and insurance policies have augmented the practice of keeping wealth in jewelry, there is still a strong psychological need for a woman to maintain a reserve of gold. An often repeated saying throughout the Arabian Peninsula is, "with gold, a girl has a future."<sup>29</sup> Although rapid changes have occurred in all areas of society, it is still the case in much of

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gold-jewelry-demand-was-up-slightly-in-the-second-quarter-aided-by-the-united-states-and-middle-east?Itemid=416.

23 Marjorie Ransom notes that one of the Yemeni women she interviewed in 2005 in Hadhramout had received over 10 kilograms of silver at her wedding, around fifty years earlier. Silver has largely been replaced by gold throughout the entire Gulf region since that time. For details, see Marjorie Ransom, *Silver Treasures from the Land of Sheba: Regional Yemeni Jewelry* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2014), 12.

24 In 2018, the three top products traded in the U.A.E. were gold (\$40 billion), jewellery (\$29 billion), and diamonds (\$26 billion), according to Juma Al Kait, Assistant under Secretary at the U.A.E. Ministry of Economy. For details, see Michael Fahy, "Head of Dubai's Gold Trade Body Calls for More Support from Government, Industry," April 24, 2019, *Zawya*, [https://www.zawya.com/uae/en/markets/story/Head\\_of\\_Dubais\\_gold\\_trade\\_body\\_calls\\_for\\_more\\_support\\_from\\_government\\_industry-ZAWYA20190424032104/](https://www.zawya.com/uae/en/markets/story/Head_of_Dubais_gold_trade_body_calls_for_more_support_from_government_industry-ZAWYA20190424032104/).

25 Numerous oral histories collected in both research cycles have recounted the need to dispose of jewelry collections to rescue families facing financial hardship, as well as the drive to replace and rebuild those collections as soon as it was financially possible.

26 Authors' interviews and fieldnotes: Bahrain, 1994–1995 and 2016–2019; Saudi Arabia, 1997; U.A.E., 2016–2019; Kuwait and Oman, 2018–2019.

27 Reem Saeed, interviewed by the authors, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E., December 15, 2018.

28 Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates* (Dubai: Motivate Publishing, 2004), 233–37.

29 Zayed University students in conversation with the authors, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E., 2016–2019. The students frequently reported that their mothers and grandmothers

the region that mostly men control the financial affairs of their families. Therefore, a woman's jewelry remains an investment that is directly within her control: it is hers to trade, exchange, alter, or cash in.

In addition to its role as an important form of investment and life insurance, jewelry is a much loved indulgence. Part of being a woman in this region (and, indeed, many others) is a deep appreciation for jewelry. As Shamma Jassem mentioned during her conversation with the authors, "I've come to the conclusion that the traditional jewelry of the U.A.E. has its own social effect on our culture and Emirati women. Gold jewelry is the identity of the Emirati woman that she will never stop passing down through generations."<sup>30</sup> Women spend a long time in jewelry shops, trying on rings and necklaces and discussing merits and faults in design and workmanship with their female friends and relatives. Jewelry shopping is as much a cultural pastime as it is a shopping expedition. The quoted price, possible discount, and real value are all debated with the seller and all those present. And, despite all this social and commercial interaction, women may leave without a purchase and move on to repeat the process in the next showroom.

The pressure to be seen wearing a new piece of jewelry at every important social occasion and the desire to keep pace with the latest trends has led to a relatively high turnover of pieces within a woman's collection.<sup>31</sup> If she cannot afford to buy a piece outright, she will bring an old piece and trade it in based on the value of the gold. When any piece of jewelry is bought, it is the price of the gold that is paid for, in addition to the value of the stones and the workmanship. When jewelry is sold, however,

only the weight of the gold is taken into account. Today, gemstones are also accorded a value, but unless this value is extremely high and the gems' authenticity is documented, gold continues to be the most significant factor. A majority of the multi-generational oral histories recorded to date suggest that women who can afford to do so will buy a piece of jewelry about once a month, even if this is just a small item, such as a ring or a pair of earrings. Other women limit themselves to acquiring new jewelry only on special occasions, such as weddings, birthdays, and Eids. A woman also receives jewelry from her husband on the birth of a child, especially if she delivers a boy. Nowadays, however, the mother will also receive jewelry if she delivers a girl.<sup>32</sup>

How, when, and where a woman wears her jewelry, as well as the type, quantity, and quality of these items, is used by those around her to infer her social and economic status. Obvious differences may be noticed by the larger society while more subtle nuances may only be apparent to those within a particular social group. The jewelry a woman wears every day is mainly restricted to earrings, rings, and, more recently, watches and smaller necklaces or pendants, often with Qur'anic inscriptions, such as the protective "Throne Verse," or "Aya Al Kursi" (fig. 11.2). Rings have perhaps been the most popular items for daily wear. Many women who wear head coverings have had little use for earrings and necklaces, except at weddings and social occasions, where head scarves can be removed. Although today this seems to be a matter of personal preference, some women will always wear earrings in, while others will not.<sup>33</sup> Prior to the contemporary era, when a majority of women in the Arabian Gulf adopted the *abaya* (a loose over-garment) and *shayla* (a long head scarf)<sup>34</sup>

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reminded them of the importance of a substantial jewelry collection.

30 Shamma Jassem, interviewed by the authors, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E., December 15, 2018.

31 Authors' interviews and fieldnotes: Bahrain, 1994–1995 and 2016–2019; Saudi Arabia, 1997; U.A.E., 2016–2019; Kuwait and Oman, 2018–2019.

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32 Zayed University students in conversation with the authors, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E., April 14, 2019.

33 Ibid.

34 In the Gulf area, a *shayla* is worn either loosely draped and covering most but not all hair, or tightly wrapped and covering all hair, like a *hijab*. A *hijab* is more widely

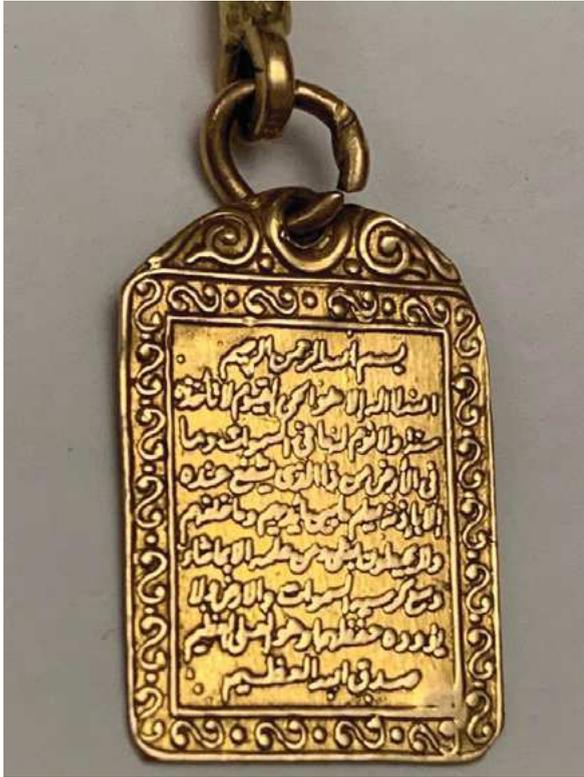


FIGURE 11.2 Protective verse on a tiny plaque hanging from a key chain dating from 1976.



FIGURE 11.3 Woman wearing traditional clothing at Qasr Al Hosn Festival, Abu Dhabi, 2016.

as everyday wear, women along the eastern shore of the Arabian Gulf wore the burnished indigo *burqa* or *batoola* (face mask)<sup>35</sup> to cover their face, a brightly patterned dress with *sirwal* trousers, and a transparent gauzy veil embroidered with silver threads (fig. 11.3). Examining historical photographs,<sup>36</sup> one can notice that women were veiled in such a way that their earrings were visible

understood as a head scarf covering the hair for religious reasons.

35 Today it is mainly the older generation who are seen in the traditional mask-like *burqa*. Younger women who cover their face use the *niqab* (a black fabric face-veil).

36 See, for instance, the photographs published by Ronald Codrai in *Abu Dhabi: A Collection of Mid-Twentieth Century Photographs. An Arabian Album* (Dubai: Motivate Publishing, 1992) and *Dubai: A Collection of Mid-Twentieth Century Photographs. An Arabian Album* (Dubai: Motivate Publishing, 1993); and Gertrude Dyck, *The Oasis: Al Ain Memoirs of "Doctor Latifa"* (Dubai: Motivate Publishing, 2010).

and that they also used to wear a small amulet case in leather around their neck,<sup>37</sup> along with gold necklaces (such as *murta'asha* or *mareya*). The spiky *huyul bu showq* or *banjeri* bangle is the most common item of jewelry seen in archival images, along with rings, which are often worn on all fingers. Rings remain very popular gifts today as they are relatively small and, therefore, comparatively inexpensive. For all these reasons, rings are often offered at birthdays, dinners, and parties to the female hosts. During the 1980s and 1990s, fewer women wore the *abaya* and *shayla*, especially in Bahrain and Kuwait;<sup>38</sup> however, today they are more commonly covered, and in the U.A.E. such modes of dress are ubiquitous. Covering trends, whether culturally or religiously motivated, do have an impact on how and when jewelry is worn.

37 These amulets would most commonly have contained Qur'anic verses.

38 Marie-Claire Bakker, fieldnotes, Bahrain, 1994–1995.



FIGURE 11.4A–B  
Van Cleef and Arpels  
Sweet Alhambra Set.

Whether or not a woman wears a pendant or a necklace depends on how she wears her *hijab* and the extent to which she is covered. Some women will wear jewelry that is visible over their clothes, while others will wear jewelry even if it is not visible.

The type and style of jewelry that a woman wears are governed not only by her economic and social status but also by her age and education. For example, nose piercing has almost died out.<sup>39</sup> The *zmam* floral nose stud<sup>40</sup> and especially the much larger nose ring *khazama* are rarely worn, even by the older generation. Women of this older generation are more likely to wear traditional style gold jewelry for both everyday and special occasions, and they are also more likely to wear pearls. Younger women tend to wear more elaborate jewelry only on special occasions and simpler, more subtle pieces for everyday use.<sup>41</sup> The latter ones often come from fashionable designer brands, such as bracelets from the currently popular Van Cleef and Arpels “Alhambra” collections (figs. 11.4a–b).

39 Interestingly, some young women today have nose studs, but this is largely an adoption of what they perceive as a facet of the Western youth culture rather than an extension of their own cultural traditions.

40 An example can be seen in Rajab, *Costumes from the Arab World*, 22. The photograph shows a woman in the mountains around Wadi Bani Khalid, Oman.

41 Authors’ interviews and fieldnotes, Bahrain and U.A.E., 2016–2019.

This is also most likely due to their wearing Western-style clothes under their *abaya*, for which a different style of jewelry is deemed appropriate. When choosing to wear a *kandoura* (a traditional long dress), more old-style pieces of jewelry can be worn.

While the style of jewelry may be changing, the underlying social compulsion to wear jewelry and its symbolic significance in the lives of women persists.<sup>42</sup> Given the historical and cultural importance of jewelry and the large quantities owned by the Gulf women, it is not surprising that the ownership of jewelry is also governed by religious duty. The guidelines about how much *zakat*, or charity, must be given for gold and silver that is owned vary depending on different schools of interpretation.<sup>43</sup> Platinum, palladium, gems, and pearls are not subject to *zakat*. In her notes, Rachel Hasson mentions “the interesting *hadith* of Malik ibn Anas” (b. 716 CE), founder of one of the four schools of Islam, which clarifies when *zakat* is owed: “*zakat* is not paid on jewellery being worn and used, and thus they are considered household effects and utilitarian articles; but if they are not being worn or if they are broken—that is,

42 Ibid.

43 “Zakat on Gold, Silver & Jewellery,” The National Zakat Foundation, April 12, 2018, <https://help.nzf.org.uk/en/article/zakat-on-gold-silver-and-jewelry-1hkm5v4/>.

unusable—then *zakat* must be paid.”<sup>44</sup> The fact that this condition exists is significant since it indicates the propensity of the women in the Arabian Peninsula to acquire large collections of gold and silver.

## 2 A Life Cycle through Jewelry

Jewelry plays a significant role in every major event in a woman’s life and is an important marker for all rites of passage<sup>45</sup> as she matures from daughter to wife and mother.<sup>46</sup> From birth to childhood birthdays and religious celebrations, such as Eid, to engagement, marriage and motherhood, every occasion is marked by an exchange of jewellery. The display of jewellery during these events clarifies and reinforces a girl’s or a woman’s status in society. This is how Ayesha AlMarrar describes the role of jewelry in celebrating a birth:

“When a boy is born and named after a person with a [good] moral reputation, this person is known as their *smei*. The *smei* will prepare a feast of camel meat known as *hwar*. However, if a girl is born, two or three goats are enough for the feast, in addition to gifting a piece of jewelry to the newborn girl. Thus, the person after whom the child is named is called *smei* or *smiyah* and the gifts given by them to the child are called *smowh*. Indeed, my grandmother and mother were named after their grandmother, while I was named after my grandmother’s best friend. Each one of us has received a piece of jewelry from our *smiyah* and mine is the first piece of jewelry that I was given.”<sup>47</sup>

As with jewelry throughout the world, in every age, there are some items that have amuletic significance. Through the use of a symbol, material, or a religious verse, amulets are meant to ensure protection from unseen misfortune. Of particular concern in the Middle East is the covetous or admiring glance, “the evil eye,” which is of particular danger to infants, young children, and women, who are viewed as vulnerable due to their desirability. A newborn baby, for instance, would have had an alum crystal covered in gold pinned to its clothes, together with a lion’s claw in a gold case and a wolf’s tooth pinned on its cap.<sup>48</sup> A pregnant woman and children would also wear amulets to ward off evil, such as a small piece of iron wrapped with strips of gold,<sup>49</sup> or small containers of silver, gold, or leather, known as *yam’a*, *hirz*, or *tabla*,<sup>50</sup> which are worn as pendants.<sup>51</sup> These may have originally contained protective Qur’anic verses such as the “Aya al Kursi”; however, the form of the piece is often enough to denote its purpose and intended effect. Today, at traditional heritage festivals, such as Qasr al Hosn in Abu Dhabi, children dressed in their best traditional clothes are seen wearing small amuletic necklaces (fig. 11.5).

Young children will often wear a protective amulet pendant. Baby girls have their ears pierced and, when dressed up to go out, they will usually be adorned with small gold bangles and a *hirz* pendant. Nowadays, gold or gold-plated necklaces with the child’s name in calligraphic script are very popular (fig. 11.6). On birthdays and Eids, girls will also receive small pieces of gold jewelry, such as bangles, to add to their collection. During Eid, gold jewelry and *kandouras* are usually worn, which

44 Hasson, *Early Islamic Jewellery*, 11. Note 16 mentions the work of Ibn al Salam ‘Abd al-Qasim, *Kitab al-Amwal* [Book of revenue], where he discusses the various rulings in different *hadiths* regarding jewelry.

45 See Arnold Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

46 Marie-Claire Bakker, “The Arabian Woman Adorned,” *Linacre Journal* 1 (1997): 56.

47 Ayesha AlMarrar interviewed by the authors, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E., December 15, 2018.

48 Marie-Claire Bakker, “Amuletic Jewellery in the Middle East” (Master of Philosophy thesis, Oxford University, 1996).

49 Bakker, “The Arabian Woman Adorned,” 57.

50 Rafia Obaid Ghubash and Maryam Sultan Lootah, eds., *Traditional Emirati Jewels* (Dubai: Women’s Museum, Hamdan Bin Mohammed Heritage Center, 2015), 76.

51 See images in Dyck, *The Oasis*, 28, 33, and 35, respectively.



FIGURE 11.5 Children in traditional clothing at Qasr Al Hosn Festival, Abu Dhabi, 2016.

suggests that for religious celebrations, when more traditional attire is the norm, more traditional styles of jewelry are also preferred to match the occasion (fig. 11.7).

In the course of collecting oral histories over the past thirty years, it has become clear to the authors that there is a generational divide regarding when these pieces of jewelry are first received. We believe this is due to the change in economic circumstances for large parts of the population of the eastern Gulf after the discovery of oil. In the past, a girl's first jewelry, other than a protective amulet, may not have been received until her engagement or wedding.<sup>52</sup> According to Noora Bint Nasser Al Thani, "[i]f a young woman uses beauty accessories during ordinary days, her mother would

52 In conversations between Zayed University students and the authors from 2016 to 2019, many students who had interviewed their grandmothers, now aged between 65 and 80, reported that they had received their first gold jewelry at the time of their marriage.



FIGURE 11.6 As Maha AlHosani explains, "my grandfather had a sister called Maryam, and he loved her so much. He gave her this gift the day before she died. Just days later, God blessed him with a child and he named her Maryam. He gave this necklace to his daughter, Maryam. This was a gift from Maryam to Maryam."



FIGURE 11.7 Young girl dressed up for Eid Al Adha wearing *murta'asha* choker and a large necklace with a central *hilal* (crescent) element, known in the U.A.E. as *almajlis*.

admonish her: 'It is a shame to use *kohl* and perfumes, you are not married and these are for married women.'" Girls and unmarried young women would be allowed to use henna and perfumes and wear some of their mother's gold only on special occasions, such as Eid.<sup>53</sup>

Today, it is more common for female children to receive bangles and other small pieces of jewelry at a young age. As Fatima AlShehhi explains, "My mother got her first piece of jewelry when she was four years old from her father. One day he came back home from his trip to Oman and he bought for all of his ten daughters the same bracelet, which was named *huyul* or *mada'ad*.<sup>54</sup> But she does not have it anymore because one day my mom's father had a financial crisis, so she and all her sisters helped him and they gave him all of their gold."<sup>55</sup> Another occasion when young girls wear traditional gold jewelry over an embroidered *kandoura* and *serwal* is Hag al Layla, or the middle of the Islamic month of Sha'ban. During this holiday, children wear new clothes and walk through the neighborhood receiving sweets. Girls wear traditional jewelry, such as *shnaaf* (a triangular



FIGURE 11.8  
'Iraq Zayed Perfume draped with a pearl necklace featuring the image of the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahayan, set with pearls and rubies.

forehead ornament),<sup>56</sup> *murta'asha* (a gold choker with long rows of dangling elements), *mareya* (a gold necklace, often with a large central crescent shaped element), *huyul bu shook* (a spikey bangle), and gold earrings.

On religious and national holidays, dress, ornament, and event combine to reinforce a sense of community and national identity. In the rapidly modernizing societies around the Gulf, anxiety about loss of their traditional culture is pervasive. Therefore, the performative nature of religious and national holidays, when dress and jewelry are used as core signifiers binding the community together and providing tangible proof of a common identity, should not be underestimated. The ultimate expression of national pride culminates in the production of jewelry pieces that depict the founder of the U.A.E., the late Sheikh Zayed (fig. 11.8) and jewel-encrusted falcon pendants.<sup>57</sup> National Day in all countries around the Gulf sees girls in dresses reflecting the colours of the national flag and adorned with traditional jewelry (figs. 11.9 and 11.10). As Maather AlSaaidi explains:

"I remember wearing traditional jewelry like *taasa* (circular head ornament), *murta'asha* and *kaf* (bracelet connecting to rings with chains across the back of the hand) on U.A.E. National Day with a flag dress in elementary school, from first grade until fifth grade. I remember loving them and

53 Noora Bint Nasser Al Thani, *Marriage in Qatar: Its Regulations, Customs and Traditions in Qatari Society* (Doha: State of Qatar Ministry of Culture and Sports, 2016), 51.

54 These are golden or silver bracelets, used as a group of six to twelve similar pieces on one hand.

55 Fatima AlShehhi, interviewed by the authors, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E., December 15, 2018.

56 Asma Saeed Obaid Ghubash tells the story of a 1992 photograph of her husband's sister, who was wearing a large gold triangular *shnaaf* for National Day: "Her mother took this photo just before Aisha went to school for her fourth grade National celebration. At the time, children wore their mother's and grandmother's real gold to school on National Day. I really love this photo and I wish we still had the gold in our family. But my mother-in-law sold it when wearing traditional gold jewelry went out of fashion." Michele Bambling, ed., *Emirati Adornment: Tangible/Intangible* (Abu Dhabi: Lest We Forget, 2017), 27.

57 Bambling, *Emirati Adornment*, 59.



FIGURE 11.9 Sisters dressed up in their flag dresses for the U.A.E. National Day, 2 December 2018.

getting excited the night before National Day, although they were annoying and not easy to manage, especially the *taasa*, because as you play and run it starts to fall down. Ever since I cannot think of any other time I had to wear *taasa* or any of the traditional jewelry except for henna nights.”<sup>58</sup>

58 Maather AlSaaidi, interviewed by the authors, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E., December 15, 2018.

Another event during which pieces of jewelry are gifted is Tomina, the celebration held when a child has memorized sections of the Holy Qur’an. Depending on the economic status of the family, during this ceremony the child receives a small gift. For wealthier families, this may be a piece of jewelry like the large forehead ornament *shnaaf*<sup>59</sup> shown in

59 “Occasionally known as *hayar* or *al dinar* ... it is usually worn by brides in their weddings, or young girls during



FIGURE 11.10 Shamma Ahmad Al Ketbi wearing a short *murta'asha* (sometimes known as a *manthura*), dressed up for the U.A.E. National Day, 2 December 2018.

figure 11.11. Soraya Altorki and Donald P. Cole describe the celebration in Saudi Arabia in the following terms: "When she had memorized a certain part of the Holy Qur'ān, a *zaffah*, or a 'procession,' was held. The girl was dressed up for the occasion in gold and fancy clothes and passed in the *zaffah* from the house of her teacher through the nearby streets accompanied by singing. The procession led to her parents' home where a reception was held in the women's quarters of the house."<sup>60</sup>

Tomina ceremony." Gubash and Lootah, *Traditional Emirati Jewels*, 26.

60 Soraya Altorki and Donald P. Cole, *Arabian Oasis City: The Transformation of 'Unayzah* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 95.

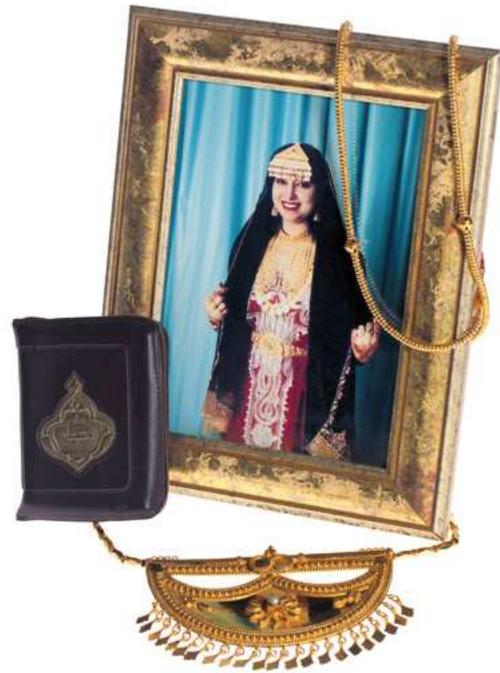


FIGURE 11.11 As Mariam Al Qubaisi explains: "Al Tomina is a small celebration during which young children dress up and walk through the neighborhood chanting, so everyone would know that these children were proud and were being acknowledged that they memorized our Holy Book, the Qur'ān. My grandmother was one of those children once upon a time, and in the foreground of this photo is the Qur'ān and *tafrooga* (*mareya*) she gifted to my mother, Laila Al Qubaisi, for her wedding. Here she is wearing the triangular gold *shnaaf* on her forehead, a *habat al sha'eer* (*murta'asha* choker), *seytemi* coin necklaces, and a gold belt set (*hugub*) with a central turquoise element."

These days, during her childhood, a young girl continues to be gifted jewelry by parents, grandparents, relatives, and friends for her birthdays and at Eids. However, it is at her engagement that her jewelry collection increases

significantly.<sup>61</sup> Her husband-to-be will present her with a wedding set, or *shabka*. This consists of a necklace with a matching bracelet, ring, and earrings. More recently, it has become usual for the bride to also be given a matching jewel-encrusted watch. There are sets designed for every taste and income level. At the lower end, there are small, plain, gold sets in a variety of styles which may be studded with pearls or semi-precious stones or gems. Further up the scale, there are wedding sets made of gold or platinum with precious stones and diamonds. In the early 1990s in Bahrain, the *shabka* was a relatively new addition to the list of essential jewelry. Traditionally made of gold, these days the *shabka* can also incorporate diamonds or other precious gems and may be designed by leading international jewelry houses. With the advent of oil and increased income, watches have become an essential part of the jewelry gift sets offered by the groom to his bride. In a conversation with the authors, student Shereena AlHameli explained the custom as follows:

“My mother was married to my father at the age of twenty-four. She was given seven jewelry sets; some were gifts from guests and were all diamonds, pearls, and stones. She requested no gold due to ‘being young and not knowing the worth of gold.’ She said she’s regretting it now because gold is more durable, valuable, and beautiful. The idea of collecting gold jewelry was like an investment for women back then. They would sell it when the value of gold rises and buy new pieces when it lowers. Although diamonds are luxurious and mesmerizing, it was not the same as gold, it would not sell with the same price.”<sup>62</sup>

The groom is still expected to either gift both a diamond necklace or earrings and a set of traditional

gold jewelry. If he does not gift both sets to the bride, then he is obligated to provide sufficient money so that she can purchase both sets. Today, brides can expect to receive up to ten complete sets of jewelry. As Shereena pointed out, “while interviewing my grandfather to ask about his opinion on getting my grandmother jewelry for their wedding, he said, ‘It was important to me to make sure your grandmother never felt that I could not provide her with whatever she needed.’ ‘Jewelry,’ he said, ‘might have cost a lot; however, money is not as important to me as her happiness.’”<sup>63</sup>

Before the wedding, the bride’s trousseau, or *zihba*, is displayed at the *miksar*, the viewing of the wedding jewelry, together with other trousseau gifts such as perfume, *kandouras*, and fabric. In the past, the contents of the *zihba* were paraded through the streets, from the bride’s house to the groom’s, by young girls wearing the bride’s wedding jewelry.<sup>64</sup> The groom or his family may also buy the bride more traditional gold jewelry to wear on her henna night, or she may wear her own family heirloom pieces or borrowed pieces from wealthier members of the extended family. Marriage brokers or match-makers around the Gulf often have a significant jewelry collection that they can rent out on the occasion of a henna night,<sup>65</sup> as do some jewelry shops. It is common to borrow or rent jewelry on these occasions since a good outward show is mandatory: the bride must be adorned in gold from head to toe. Guests may know that a particular piece is borrowed, but this is not acknowledged.

Despite the rapid social changes in the Arabian Peninsula, the transitional periods when a girl becomes a woman, then a wife and a mother, are still culturally and socially the most significant times

61 Authors’ interviews and fieldnotes: Bahrain, 2016–2019; U.A.E., 2016–2019; Kuwait and Oman, 2018–2019.

62 Shereena AlHameli, interviewed by the authors, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E., December 15, 2018.

63 Ibid.

64 Zayed University student who had interviewed her 90-year-old grandmother in conversation with the authors, Abu Dhabi, 2016.

65 Ziad Rajab, son of collectors Tareq and Jehan S. Rajab, in conversation with the authors, Kuwait, November 8, 2018.

in her life. It is not surprising, therefore, that jewelry has an important role as a central secular component during these rites of passage. The exchange and display of jewelry indicates the transactional nature of this reciprocal exchange system: it simultaneously forges and reinforces community relationships, signifies social status, and extends this reciprocal network of exchange to a new generation. Mothers of the bride record carefully what gifts are received and from whom and are extremely careful to ensure that they gift a piece of jewelry of approximately the same value when their friend's daughter marries. Personal loyalties and friendships are continuously articulated through the exchange of small jewelry gifts, and the value of these friendships is further reinforced during the exchange of higher value gifts at weddings.

Jewelry, whether borrowed or owned, plays a central role on a bride's henna night. During this occasion, the beauty of the bride is assessed based on how much gold jewelry she is wearing. In recent years, it has become usual for the bride and her close relatives to have their hands and feet hennaed at a salon on the previous day.<sup>66</sup> Only twenty or thirty years ago, the henna party was a more private affair.<sup>67</sup> Henna artists would decorate the guests during the event.<sup>68</sup> If one looks at earlier times, the majority of the wedding celebrations, including the decoration of the bride, occurred after the marriage had been formalized. The henna night party is usually held between a few days to a week before the wedding celebration. In the U.A.E. today, it is usual to hold it at a different venue than the wedding party. Guests are mostly family, close relatives, and personal friends, but it can still be a fairly large affair, with several hundred guests. The format of the henna night varies depending on the social and cultural background of the family (i.e., if

they are from coastal or Bedouin origins, from Ajam or Huwla, or from Yemen).<sup>69</sup> Important variations are seen along the length of the Peninsula, from Kuwait to the Northern Emirates. While the type of dress that the bride will wear may differ quite considerably, it is most often green or (less commonly) red. Originally, these celebrations would have lasted more than one night and the bride would have had to wear a different color on each night.<sup>70</sup> However, the one aspect that unites these varying ceremonial occasions is jewelry. All the jewelry worn by the bride on the henna night are traditional gold pieces, sometimes set with pearls and sometimes with gem stones. The bride will wear one of the various head pieces from the region. In the U.A.E., most often this is a circular *hama* or *taasa* with dangling strands of *talaat*. In Bahrain, the bride would often wear the lozenge-shaped *gubgub*, so named because it resembles the back of a crab (fig. 11.12).

Today, the bride's hair is often worn loose, but in the past it would have been plaited into strands with bunches of sweet basil (*mishmum*) and jasmine. Gold hair elements, such as *sararih*, or gold versions of the basil bunches (also called *mishmum*) are woven into her plaits. Gold hair clips finish the hair decoration. Several layers of necklaces adorn her throat and chest, particularly the spectacular, multi-stranded *murtahish*, which may extend almost to her knees. Almost every bride, particularly in the U.A.E., wears the choker known as *murta'asha*<sup>71</sup> (fig. 11.13) with articulated square elements, often set with a small central gem from which stream rows of small, flat, stamped elements, forming an almost chain-mail effect. The length of the dangling elements depends on the value of the piece.

Another important necklace will be a version of the *mareya*, most commonly with a large crescent

66 Authors' interviews and fieldnotes: Bahrain, 2016–2019; U.A.E., 2016–2019; Kuwait and Oman, 2018–2019.

67 Bakker, fieldnotes, Bahrain, 1994–1995.

68 Ebrahim Sanad, *Bahraini Customs and Traditions* (Bahrain: Ministry of Culture, 2011), 11.

69 Jehan S. Rajab, *Silver Jewellery of Oman* (Kuwait: Tareq Rajab Museum, 1997), 61.

70 Bakker, fieldnotes, Bahrain, 1994–1995.

71 Zayed University students in conversation with the authors, Abu Dhabi, 2016–2019.



FIGURE 11.12 A Bahraini bride in traditional green *thobe*. She wears a circular gold plate (*hama* or *taasa*) on her head, with the chains of discs *talaat* suspended from the rim. Sweet basil (*mishmun*), jasmine, and rosebuds adorn her hair. Around her wrists she wears gold bangles, including the *shmelat*, studded with turquoise and pink glass. She wears a *murta'asha* choker and a long *murtahish* necklace ending in a crescent element.

central element. As seen in figure 11.11, a *seytemi* may be added to this; it can be identified by the row of gold coins running up the chain and “it is among the most sought after pieces of jewellery by women in the U.A.E.”<sup>72</sup> All these pieces may vary in size and weight. At her waist, the bride will wear a

gold belt (*hizam*), which is usually composed of articulated square or round elements with smaller dangling bells or tassels. On her hands, she will often have rings on each finger, especially the *shahida* ring, worn on both forefingers, and the *marami* on the middle finger. The back of her hand may be covered in the *kaf* or *chef* ornament, which runs from rings and is anchored to a bracelet. She also

72 Gubash and Lootah, *Traditional Emirati Jewels*, 62.



FIGURE 11.13 Wedding *murta'asha*.

wears matching bangles, the popular spikey *huyul bu showq* in a single or double row of spikes (fig. 11.14), or an arm band covering half of her forearm known as *glass*. What the bride chooses to wear on her feet and ankles nowadays depends on the type of dress and shoes she wears for her henna night, but in the past matching anklets (*khulkhal*), along with toe rings (*fitakh*), would have completed her henna night jewelry collection. The guests to the henna night party also wear their finest traditional jewelry for the occasion, although it is often combined with more contemporary gem set pieces.<sup>73</sup> The night is recalled in great detail by those who attend and the events are carefully transmitted to



FIGURE 11.14 *Huyul bu showq* (also known as *banjeri*), in a single and double row of spikes.

the younger generation. Here is how Mahra Alkhajha recalls her grandmother's story of the two nights of her wedding:

"The first night was called 'the green night,' where she had henna on her hands and legs besides wearing a green dress. On the green night, my grandmother had a head piece called *tasa*, a necklace covering the whole chest called *murta'asha*, and a wrist jewelry that was given to her by her loved ones called *huyul*. In addition, she wore an anklet called *khulkhal* and a toe jewelry called *fitakh*. On her second night, the red night, she wore a red *badla* (decoration around the cuff of her *serwal* trousers) and a red top. She had her hair braided with gold clips hanging on the end. She had a *mar-eya* hanging from her neck and a *shahida* on her second finger and different types of rings on each finger. Her most precious gifts were two hair clips, *reesh*, given to her by my grandfather, and a *mar-eya* necklace she received from my uncle, God bless his soul."<sup>74</sup>

The full wedding celebration used to take place over two or three nights. During the first and most significant night, only relatives and important guests would be invited. Today, it is more common for celebrations to concentrate on the henna night and one larger wedding night party for women. The groom has a separate reception for male guests usually earlier in the afternoon, on the same night as the female wedding party or the night before. Each woman wears her most exquisite jewelry and most elaborate evening gown. At large weddings, a spectacular array of gold, diamonds,

73 Authors' interviews and fieldnotes: Bahrain, 1994–1995 and 2016–2019; Saudi Arabia, 1997; U.A.E., 2016–2019; Kuwait and Oman, 2018–2019.

74 Mahra Alkhajha interviewed by the authors, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E., December 15, 2018.

rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and pearls competes with a sea of silk, chiffon, brocade, and velvet designer dresses. The bride wears a white wedding dress with a veil and jewelry that has been carefully chosen to complement the dress.<sup>75</sup> This is not necessarily her *shabka*; while relatively simple in comparison with the display of gold at the henna night, it often consists of a high-quality diamond and a white gold set. She will also have received a wedding ring called *dbliah*, which is not part of her *shabka* sets. The form that these wedding parties take, while definitely a post-oil wealth phenomenon, has remained stable over the last thirty or forty years. They are held at wedding halls or large hotel ballrooms decorated in a theme that complements the bride's taste and vision. Today, wedding planners organize a spectacular and well-coordinated event and the groom may or may not attend the women's wedding party. The jewelry worn by the bride reflects the current changes in fashion and style, as explained by Shereena Al-Hameli in her conversation with the authors<sup>76</sup>:

"When my sister got married two years ago, she was given three diamond sets, four gold sets, and some pieces of jewelry from brands that were gifts from her friends. I have noticed the change in customs when I saw that people got her jewelry from well-known brands. If it was my grandmother who received such gifts, she would be offended and see it as a useless piece of jewelry that she would not wear."<sup>76</sup>

On the morning after her wedding night, it was traditional for the bride to receive a further gift from her husband, a *sbaha* or *sabahiya*.<sup>77</sup> This piece of jewelry had a great sentimental value in the past: it

was usually gold or pearls, and a woman would try never to part with it, no matter how dire her circumstances.<sup>78</sup> However, by the early 1990s, this gift was no longer necessarily gold; it might have been, instead, a new car. The current younger generation does not identify with this particular practice anymore.<sup>79</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s, on her return from honeymoon, the bride would let it be known that she was ready to receive well-wishers. Her friends and relatives would visit, usually bringing gifts of gold jewelry. The most extravagant gift was expected to come from the groom's parents; the bride's parents would only give a gift if they could afford it. In more recent times, this part of the wedding ceremony has mostly disappeared. Many young people nowadays prefer to have an extended honeymoon and gifts before the wedding.<sup>80</sup>

The bride also receives *mahar*, or bride price, from her husband.<sup>81</sup> On occasion, in the past, the bride's father would keep some or all of the *mahar* as recompense for raising his daughter. This, however, was generally frowned upon. In some parts of the Gulf, the *mahar* is nominal; in others, it is substantial. It may be set by the bride's family or by the groom himself; however, in each instance, this is the bride's money and she can do with it as she wishes. Generally, it is a significant sum that a woman invests in protecting her future. Traditionally, most brides put it toward gold jewelry for their collection, using it as a practical and pleasing way to keep their wealth. Given the huge costs of today's weddings, the *mahar* may be used to help prepare for such events.<sup>82</sup>

75 Both authors have attended numerous henna nights and weddings in Bahrain and the U.A.E. in the past thirty years.

76 Shereena AlHameli interviewed by the authors, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E., December 15, 2018.

77 For more details, see Bakker, "The Arabian Woman Adorned," 57.

78 It is this piece that would be sold to buy a woman's burial shroud.

79 Zayed University students in conversation with the authors, Abu Dhabi, 2016–2019.

80 Ibid.

81 Roode, *Desert Silver*, 42–44.

82 For details, see Jane Bristol-Rhys, "Weddings, Marriage and Money in the United Arab Emirates," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 2, no. 1 (2007): 20–36, and Thani, *Marriage in Qatar*, 142–46.



FIGURE 11.15 Tefla Al Mazrouie's family acquired this pearl in its oyster shell from Qatar in the 1980s. As she tells the story, the family had four beautiful pearls hidden in a safe place covered with silk cloth for more than forty years. She claims that they got the pearls as a gift from her cousin, Hassan Bin Otaiba Al Mazrouie, who was a wealthy pearl diver. He had collected more than fourteen large pearls from the deep sea of Qatar; four of them were gifted to her grandparents and the rest were given as a gift to his Highness Sheikh Zayed Al Nahayan. This is part of the tradition of Khswa, whereby wealthy people gift each other things of value without a specific reason. The gift is meant as a symbol and not as a material to exchange.

And so, the cycle begins again: the bride becomes a mother and receives jewelry as a gift upon the birth of her baby who, in turn, receives her first jewelry at the same time. Adult children with an independent income continue to gift their mother with jewelry or watches on special occasions.

A mother loans her jewelry to her daughters on important occasions or gifts some of her jewelry to her daughters or granddaughters. However, she is just as likely to buy them new pieces or to trade in her older pieces in order to buy them new ones. In many cases, the older generation seems to have

the least sentimental attachment to jewelry. In the past, jewelry was equivalent to financial security, so many of the collected oral histories mention particular pieces and on occasion whole jewelry collections having to be sold when the family experienced a financial crisis.<sup>83</sup>

It would seem that women from the older generation who consider jewelry as both financial security and personal property are more likely to alter or update their pieces.<sup>84</sup> Their gold is something that is truly their own to do with as they please. For them, the weight and quantity of the gold is paramount. This is one of the reasons why finding very old heirloom jewelry pieces is so difficult.<sup>85</sup> The middle generation appears to value the cultural heritage of traditional jewelry but does not like to wear it, preferring jewelry from high-end jewelry houses. However, they will wear it when attending henna night celebrations. In the youngest generation, one can observe a genuine appreciation of traditional jewelry pieces and an increasing desire to ensure that this cultural legacy does not disappear (fig. 11.15).<sup>86</sup> The establishment of museums in the region, in addition to the recent revival of interest in traditional jewelry forms, will hopefully ensure their survival.

### 3 Conclusion

From cradle to grave, jewelry is an intrinsic part of the life and identity of the women in the Arabian Peninsula. Jewelry is embedded in *Khaliji* women's culture to such an extent that it becomes the catalyst at the heart of the most significant events in their lives. It is an agent that embodies the network

of reciprocal exchanges between families and the larger community in which they live and reinforces bonds of friendship and obligation amongst individuals.<sup>87</sup>

Jewelry first acts to protect them as infants from "the evil eye" in the form of amulets. As they move through their childhood, every birthday or festival is an occasion for a gift of jewelry to be bestowed upon them. However, it is during the ceremonies of betrothal and marriage that women receive the most significant additions to their jewelry collection. A woman's jewelry is rarely handed down and reused by the next generation. In the past, just one piece, the bride's wedding morning gift, the *sabahiya*, would be sold to buy her burial shroud.<sup>88</sup> The rest of her gold or silver would be taken to the jeweler and reworked in the new designs preferred by the younger generation. A funeral is the only occasion when no jewelry may be worn by the mourners or those visiting to offer condolences. The absence of jewelry in this context is made more powerful by its necessity on every other occasion.

This chapter has focused primarily on gold jewelry from the late 1800s to the present day, whose forms are identified throughout the eastern Gulf as *Bahraini*.<sup>89</sup> The reality is, of course, a complex web of trade routes stretching back millennia and connecting the Arabian Peninsula with other centers of jewelry production, especially India, but also Oman and Yemen to the South, Iran to the East, and Iraq and Syria to the North.<sup>90</sup> Jewelry is a conveniently mobile commodity so, while shapes, patterns, and tastes may vary over time and geography, the intrinsic value of the gold or silver

83 Zayed University students in conversation with the authors, Abu Dhabi, 2016–2019.

84 Authors' interviews and fieldnotes: Bahrain, 1994–1995 and 2016–2019; Saudi Arabia, 1997; U.A.E., 2016–2019.

85 Ransom, *Silver Treasures from the Land of Sheba*, 12.

86 Zayed University students in conversation with the authors, Abu Dhabi, 2016–2019.

87 Authors' interviews and fieldnotes: Bahrain, 1994–1995 and 2016–2019; Saudi Arabia, 1997; U.A.E., 2016–2019.

88 On occasion, a woman may sell the *sabahiya* herself and put aside the proceeds for that purpose. For details, see Bakker, "The Arabian Woman Adorned," 57.

89 A recurrent theme in many conversations and interviews around the Gulf during the course of this research (1994–2019) was that gold came from Bahrain.

90 Colyer-Ross, *The Art of Bedouin Jewellery*, 17–23.

allows it to be traded and exchanged across continents. Although silver jewelry was extensively used in this region in the past, it was almost entirely displaced over the course of the twentieth century by gold, primarily due to the economic success of the Gulf states.<sup>91</sup> Today, old silver jew-

elry is disappearing fast, as are the stories and names associated with it. However, although the rapid economic development and resultant social transformations in the Gulf region have led to significant changes in tastes and styles, jewelry continues to be an integral part of women's identity in the Arabian Gulf.

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91 Ransom, *Silver Treasures from the Land of Sheba*, 12.