





Two Deserts
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¹ F. Anton von Schiefner, *Tibetan Tales Derived from Indian Sources*, translated from the German by W. R. S. Ralston (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, and Company, 1906), no. 45, p. 353.

I scooped the moon into a bowl and gave it back to the water

“High in the mountains, a family of gibbons was playing in the trees. While they were playing, one of them looked down into a well and saw the moon at its bottom. He called all his friends to show them the moon in the well. With great concern the gibbons investigated what was in front of their eyes. An older gibbon ran over, looked into the well and said, “Goodness me! The moon really is in the water!” “The moon is supposed to be in the sky, not inside a well.” thought the gibbons. “The moon must have fallen into the well.” “We need to get the moon out of the well”, they decided. They found a bucket and formed a long chain holding onto each other’s tails to reach down into the well”. (fig.1)



² Present in Bahrain between July 2019 and December 2019 for the purpose of an internship.

Part 1

Mirage

At the coastline of North Bahrain lie two islands called 'Nurana' (fig.2). Both of them mainly consist of sand, some dunes and rocks, which get hit by the last rays of sunlight in such a way that a mirage occurs. In my first week in Bahrain² my colleagues took me there for a night swim. The experience was truly magical; upon entering the first island, I felt like we had entered a different world in a different time. The contrast with the city we had just left could not be bigger. There were men riding horses and camels, families were playing in the water and fishermen who returned from the sea were unloading their freshly caught fish. The last sunlight made the landscape glow. We drove across the first island and made our way to the second one which appeared to be completely deserted with the exception of a few fishermen that were repairing their traps. We chose a spot on the West coast, climbed over the rocks and made our way into the seawater.

The water was as warm as the air and as I moved my hands through the water, plankton started to light up. I swam in between two skies filled with stars. The water was so salty that swimming was effortless, for I was almost floating. As I drew further away from the shore, the sound emerging from the city of Manama faded and all I could hear were the gentle breeze and my own breath. It felt like I was dreaming.

³ Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, translated into English by B. Jowett, M.A., New York :Vintage books, 1991, p.253-261

⁴ Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, translated into English by B. Jowett, M.A., New York :Vintage books, 1991, p.253-261

⁵ Magnus, Olaus, *Archbishop of Uppsala*, 1490-1557+


⁶ Granlund, John and Crone, G. R. *The "Carta Marina" of Olaus Magnus*, *Imago Mundi*, Vol. 8 (1951), pp.35-43

Waking up in Plato's cave

As I closed my eyes, I found myself in Plato's cave, where my utopic experience at Nurana turned out to be the shadow on the wall, and not 'the real world.'

Plato's cave allegory³ is a conversation between Socrates and Glaucon. In this conversation Socrates presents the scenario of a group of people who live in a cave and have been chained to its wall for all of their lives. All they can see is the opposing cave wall and the shadows of the people that pass behind them. They hear their footsteps and the echoes of their voices. Socrates then states that should one of the prisoners be dragged out of the cave and into the sunlight, he would not be able to see the world revealed to him at first, for he would be blinded by the sunlight. When his eyes adept, he would not only be able to look at shadows, he would be able to see the things themselves and catch a glimpse of the sun. Socrates and Glaucon wondered whether he would envy those who lived in the cave or whether they would prefer to live on the land above ground? Glaucon thought the latter. They continued to speculate about what would happen if this person were to return to his cave, where his eyes would once again be filled with darkness. Socrates argued that whilst his eyes were getting accustomed to the dark the prisoner would leave a foolish impression on the others; they would think his eyes were damaged in the time he or she spent outside of the cave. Socrates and Glaucon agreed that if he would try to set the others free, they would certainly kill him.

Plato states that this allegory that the human reality is bound to impressions received from the senses, even if these understandings of reality are misinterpretations.⁴ In other words; we often think we know what we see but in reality we see a glimpse, a reflection or a shadow which we translate to our image of reality. One example could be the Carta Marina⁵ made around ±1530 by cartographer Olaus Magnus (fig.3). He made one of the most detailed maps of Scandinavia of that time; however, the sea in his map is illustrated with all kinds of monsters which were believed to be real at that time. He even identified each creature in the maps' key. He constructed the map by relying on previous maps, the descriptions of sailors and his own observations⁶. Similar to the people who were chained in the cave, Magnus could not see all of the ocean, or comprehend it; yet, his observations led him to believe that what was in the sea was bad and dangerous, the map is constructed through fear and conviction. Interesting to see is that some of the creatures drawn by Magnus resemble animals living on land, like swimming pigs and a creature



with a head that resembles the one an owl has. What we can also see is that these huge creatures are mostly seen as dangerous and aggressive since they are drawn attacking ships. Furthermore, the creatures are drawn considerably larger than the ships they attack. In case of the Carta Marina, a lack of knowledge evokes fear and speculation about what the sea could hold. The fact that we now know that these creatures do not exist, does not mean the fear of them in 1530 was not real. Rather than describing the perception of the sea in the 1530's as fake and the land real, or defining the life inside Plato's cave as fake and the life above the ground real, both can be interpreted as co-existing realities which have a consequential relationship that is based on fear. The feeling of fear can be complimented by other emotions such as curiosity or desire.

Paradise

⁷ Koolhaas, Rem, Exodus, The Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture: The Strip, 1972, London. Koolhaas wrote his Architectural Association Thesis with Elia Zenghelis, with Madelon Vriesendorp, and Zoe Zenghelis. Like in West Berlin at the time, the Wall becomes here a condition of freedom by self-imprisonment. Voluntarily segregated, people find shelter within the walls of a prison of metropolitan scale.

⁸ Koolhaas, Rem, Exodus, The Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture: The Strip, 1972, London, p.1

⁹ Germanic languages are a branch of the Indo-European language and include English, German, and Netherlandic, North Germanic, including Danish, Swedish, Icelandic, Norwegian, and Faroese.

¹⁰ Old Persian is one of the two Old-Iranian languages, the other is Avestan, Old Persian appears primarily in the inscriptions, clay tablets and seals of the Achaemenid era (c. 600 BCE to 300 BCE)

¹¹ Athanasius Kircher, priest, scholar and scientist, 1602-1680+

¹² The name The Hague originates from: 'des Graven Haage'(Dutch) and literally translates to "The Count's Wood", with connotations like "The Count's Hedge, Private Enclosure or Hunting Grounds"

¹³ Hanoi in Vietnamese can be separated into; 'Ha' meaning 'river' and 'Noi' meaning 'inner'. Ha noi therefore means "Rivers Inner", or 'In between Rivers'.

Rem Koolhaas describes such a place in his essay 'Exodus'⁷ where he imagines London as an exclusive space for the 'voluntary prisoners of architecture'. (fig.4)

'They built a wall around the good part of the city, making it completely inaccessible to their subjects.'⁸ Koolhaas emphasizes that being an inmate in this prison and a participant in this doctrine is voluntarily and even desired. Koolhaas here, goes beyond the notion of a wall that separates. Instead he refers to the wall as the solution; containing what is 'good' within what is 'bad. Controversial as it may sound, the garden of Eden or paradise, turns out to be a similar thing to what Koolhaas describes.

The word Paradise made its entrance into the West-Germanic language family⁹ through the Greek word παραδεισος [paradeisos] and refers to the image of the Garden of Eden. The Persian origin of the word is more a political concept rather than a religious derivation. In Old-Persian¹⁰ the term pairi-daêzā is composed of two parts; 'pairi' meaning 'around' and 'daêzā' or 'diza' in modern Persian meaning 'fort' or 'enclosure'. To summarize, the word paradise can be translated as 'enclosed estate.' An enclosed estate is not what comes to mind when we think about paradise, which is defined as a place of exceptional happiness and delight. The definition as 'enclosed estate' suggests a wall, a fence or a prison for that matter. A separation for the purpose of defense. To nuance this statement, it needs to be said that pairi-daêzā does not necessarily imply thick and heavy wall, but may also refer to natural or subtle barriers, such as a river, mountains, a hedge or a fence. Looking at this drawing (fig.5) of the garden of Eden by Athanasius Kircher¹¹ we find a clear wall dividing 'good' from 'bad'.

A similar emphasis on the concept of a division can be discovered, when we take a closer look at the names of some well-known cities. For example, 'Paris' comes from the old Celtic word 'Parois', which literally means 'walls'. The city of 'The Hague' means 'the hedge'¹², and the name of the 'Hanoi'¹³ roughly translates to 'surrounded by water'. We find here that they emphasize what divides them from the space surrounding them rather than what they contain.

Another more contemporary linguistic enclosure could be a compound. The word compound is likely to originate from the Malay¹⁴ word 'kampung' or 'kampong', meaning 'enclosure' or 'village', and probably made its way into the English language via Dutch or Portuguese colonialists. In the context of a human habitat, a compound refers to a cluster of enclosed buildings that have a shared or associated purpose, such as houses for extended family or working

¹⁴ The Malay word 'Kampung' meaning 'enclosure' or 'enclosed group' applies to traditional villages, especially of indigenous people, and has also been used to refer to urban slum areas and enclosed developments and neighborhoods within towns and cities in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Christmas Island.

¹⁵ Saudi Aramco is Saudi-Arabias national oil and gas company, formerly Aramco stood for 'Arabian-American Oil Company' in 1978 Saudi-Arabia however decided that they wanted full ownership of Aramco and by 1990 they became full owners of the company.

¹⁶ Yergin, Daniel, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1992, p431,613-630, 758,759

¹⁷ The word Garden has a Germanic origin and reached Old English through Old French and Old Northern French, it translate to 'Yard' which can be understood as 'fenced enclosure'.

¹⁸ The Safavid were a dynasty ruling Iran from 1501 till 1722. They were originally from what we now call Azerbaijan.

¹⁹ Tabriz is a city in the North-West of Iran, a carpet from Tabriz could be determined by the number of knots per cm.

²⁰ Dunn, Eliza, *Rugs In Their Native Land*, Dodd, Mead and Company, 1910, p. 67,68.

Note to the reader: This carpet was unfortunately lost to the world. The Commander-in-chief who found the rug, ordered it to be cut into separate pieces and divided amongst the soldiers.

spaces. The enclosure may take the shape of a wall, a fence, a hedge or the buildings themselves, when they are built around an open area or joined together. An extreme example are the compounds Saudi Aramco¹⁵ build for their foreign employees¹⁶. Within the walls of this residential area different laws and rules apply. Where alcohol is considered illegal Saudi Arabia, it is accepted as the norm inside the walls of these compounds. The compounds imitate U.S. settlements. Going back to the word 'Garden'¹⁷, which in the context of paradise, appears full of plants and trees, has a French orient 'jardin', which comes from old Franconian and means as much as 'to guard' or 'fence off'. The Germanic equivalent 'Tuin' has the same definition. The fence surrounding the garden shows in the history of the Persian carpet; the Ardabil rugs, products of the Safavid¹⁸ textile and manuscript influence. The carpets are typical Tabriz¹⁹ work, with one central medallion and smaller, ornate designs surrounding. Such medallions and shapes were central to the design and reality of Persian gardens which is a common symbol of paradise for an Islam follower. (fig.6)

"The first carpet of which there is any authentic record is the one that was taken by the Arabs in 637 A.D. from the winter palace of the Persian or Sassanian kings at Ctesiphon on the Tigris river about 30km from Bagdad. The exact date of its manufacture is not known, but it was made for Khoaru I who was a contemporary of the Greek emperor Justinian and whose reign lasted from 531 to 579. In the east the gardens are divided in to square and oblong plots surrounded by a wide border. These plots are intersected by paths, some of which serve to carry the water by which the garden is irrigated. Frequently these shallow irrigating ditches are paved with tiles. This earliest of carpets was intended to bring into the winter home of the king the illusion of a Persian garden in the full beauty of springtime. The materials were costly; silk gold silver and precious stones were employed. It was of colossal size. The flowers in the border and plots were in many colors-red, blue, yellow, white and green- and were made of precious stone"²⁰

²¹ Found in 1888-1900 by the University of Pennsylvania in Nippur, Iraq, currently at Penn Museum.

²² Cuneiform is one of the earliest systems of writing, its distinguished by wedge shaped marks on clay tablets.

²³ Bibby, Geoffrey, Looking For Dilmun, Stacy International, 1996.

²⁴ Kuwait, Saudi-Arabia, Qatar, U.A.E, also know as GCC(Gulf Cooperation Council), Which mostly have a desert climate.

²⁵ Baluchis are a semi-nomadic people living in the South-West Pakistan, South-East Iran and the Southern Afghani provinces Nimruz, Helmand and Kandahar.

²⁶ Smith, Sylvia, In pictures: Bahrain's ancient pearl fishing, BBC,2015

Part 2 History of Bahrain

"The land of Dilmun is holy, the land of Dilmun is pure. In Dilmun no cry the raven utters, nor does the bird of ill-omen foretell calamity. The lion kills not, nor does the ravening wolf snatch away the defenseless lamb. Unknown is the wild dog who tears the kid. The dove does not conceal its head. No one here says, "My eyes are sick," No one here says, "My head is sick," No one here says, "I am an old woman," No one here says, "I am an old man." The maiden walks here in innocence. No lustrations need to be poured. The somber death priest walks not here. By Dilmun's walls he has no cause for lamentations."²¹

This poem was first written some 4,000 years ago in the ancient Sumerian city of Nippur near the Euphrates, using cuneiform²² wedge script on a clay tablet (fig.7). The poem tells about the doings of the gods at the dawn of time in a sacred island paradise called Dilmun, a place closely resembling the Garden of Eden, where death and sickness did not exist, and sweet waters flowed. In his book "Looking for Dilmun." Geoffrey Bibby²³ and other archeologists from the Prehistoric Museum in Aarhus, Denmark, identify the island of Bahrain as the lost paradise of Dilmun (1953). One of the reasons being Bahrain's natural freshwater resource, which makes it unique in the comparison with the rest of the region²⁴. The fresh water made it possible for corals and oysters to live on the shores of the islands. The Portuguese used these corals to construct their buildings in the late 15th century. Pearl diving was already practiced at the island but reached its peak in the late 19th century. On the pearling boats the hierarchy was as follows: first came the pilot, then his assistant, divers, pullers, apprentices and servants. The pilot often had a tribal origin and owned the boat, the rest of the crew were southern Persian, Baluchis²⁵ or slaves, few of them were Shia. The divers worked together with the pullers; the divers dove to the bottom of the sea and collected pearl oysters there until they started to run out of breath. They would pull a rope that was tied to their waist and the pullers would pull them back up. Good divers could dive up to a hundred times a day (fig.8). Diving, nonetheless, was considered a dangerous activity. A lot of divers suffered from eardrum rupture and blindness. Only a small fraction of the money yielded by the pearls would go to the divers and the pullers whereas the biggest share went into the pockets of the pilots and the merchants. The divers and pullers would work loan, meaning they were often forced to continue working for the same pilot in order to pay off their debt.²⁶

²⁷ Zubari, Whaleed, Trends in the quality of groundwater in Bahrain with respect to salinity, 1941–1992, *environment international*, volume 20 issue 6, p 739-746.

²⁸ Built by Dutch contractor Ballast Nedam and financed entirely by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

²⁹ Al-Madany, Ismail M., Abdalla, Mohamed A. and Abdu, Anwar S. E. Coastal Zone Management in Bahrain: an Analysis of Social, Economic and Environmental Impacts of Dredging and Reclamation, *Journal of Environmental Management*, 1991, p 336

³⁰ Al-Madany, Ismail M., Abdalla, Mohamed A. and Abdu, Anwar S. E. Coastal Zone Management in Bahrain: an Analysis of Social, Economic and Environmental Impacts of Dredging and Reclamation, *Journal of Environmental Management*, 342-345

³¹ Professor Peter Vilhelm Glob, Bibby's compagnon.

The economy of Bahrain suffered a backlash after Japanese entrepreneur Mikimoto Kokichi found a way to create cultured pearls in 1916. Up until that point pearling, together with palm cultivation and fishing, had been Bahrain's main export product. The economy of Bahrain only recovered when oil was found in 1931. The first well is situated below Jebel Dukhan and was in 1929 the first oil discovery on the Arabian side of the Persian Gulf. In October 1931 the first oil spurted from this well.

The freshwater reserve, source of the Paradise-like nature of Bahrain, has suffered greatly in this past century²⁷. Unplanned and excessive pumping of groundwater for the purpose of urbanization caused a decrease in the levels of groundwater reservoirs. As a result, more than half of the groundwater reserve became polluted. Consequently, irrigation water pumped from the reservoir is turned brackish and is no longer plentiful. It is believed that the building of the King Fahd Causeway,²⁸ the bridge to Saudi-Arabia in the 1980's, had a major impact on the decrease of the water levels of the freshwater reservoirs. For the construction of the causeway, approximately 12km of embankments²⁹ had to be constructed. The construction of solid jetties can, depending on their shape, alter the natural flow of the water and thereby lead to sedimentation in localized areas. The reclamation and dredging in Bahrain has seriously affected the groundwater resources of the island, and have blocked the natural agricultural drains, leading to rising water-tables, intrusion of sea-water, and increasing salinity of agricultural soils and the groundwater itself³⁰.

To draw attention to the rapid ecological change the Kingdom of Bahrain underwent during the last century, Geoffrey Bibby wrote the following passage about the 'hidden gardens' he found in Bahrain in the 50's.

'The wall surrounds a large oval area, anything up to two hundred yards in length, and the other side of the wall drops a sheer a matter of twenty or thirty feet. In the whole area of the enclosure there is no sand. The limestone bedrock, pleasantly broken into low cliffs and smooth curving slabs, is patched here and there with grass and dotted with the score or so of palm-trees which we saw from afar. And in the hollows of the rock there are pools of crystal-clear water, in constant movement from the springs at their lowest depths, spilling over and forming chains of streams, with miniature waterfalls as they glide down over the faults of the rock. Flights of steps led down the inner side of the walls, and P.V.³¹ and I frequently ate our lunch packets in one of these hidden Gardens, lying in the shade of the trees and out of the wind that scoured the

³² A qanat or kariz is a gently sloping underground channel to transport water from an aquifer or water well to surface for irrigation and drinking, acting as an underground aqueduct.

³³ Bibby, Geoffrey, Looking For Dilmun, Stacy International, 1996, p.37,38.

³⁴ Fuccaro, Nelida, Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf; Manama Since 1800, Cambridge, Cambridge University press, 2009

³⁵ Onley, James Britain and the Gulf Sheikdoms, 1820–1971: The Politics of Protection, Center for International and Regional Studies, 2009, p.3-5.

³⁶ Trucial states were located in the present-day United Arab Emirates

³⁷ The British role, initially designed to secure trade routes from piracy and rectify the slave trade, soon extended into moderating internal conflict. This became more concrete upon the application of the Order-in-Council in 1913, which brought Bahrain into the informal empire as an overseas imperial territory. Owen Jones, Marc, A Political History of Bahrain, Regional Surveys of the World: The Middle East and North Africa 2019, 2018

³⁸ Owen Jones, Marc, A Political History of Bahrain, Regional Surveys of the World: The Middle East and North Africa 2019, 2018, p.3 'Including that for more democratic governing institutions. However, the British administration in India did not wish to encourage democracy at this time, and along with the ruling Al Khalifa, rebuffed certain specific demands for reform by offering differential reforms for both Sunni and Shi'a contingents, thus dividing the movement'.

³⁹ Owen Jones, Marc, A Political History of Bahrain, Regional Surveys of the World: The Middle East and North Africa 2019, 2018, p.3

sand of the desert above. These gardens were the springs which once had fed the qanats³². But they feed them no longer. The level of waters has fallen, and the springs today only keep pace with the surface evaporation from the pools.³³

Almost 70 years later the hidden gardens Bibby describes no longer form an oasis. The crystal-clear water he speaks of is no longer there. Neither are the palm trees and the grass.

In order to understand how Bahrain has transformed from an oasis into a desert and the role the authorities have had in this, it is necessary to look at Bahrain's history of colonial interventions and discrimination which has characterised Bahrain since the 16th century by a number of rival regional and European powers, from the Portuguese, the Persian Safavids to the Omanis. Bahrain's most recent era of ruling began in 1783, when the Utub tribe or Al Khalifa family conquered Bahrain -which up until then belonged to the Persian Empire- from their base in what is now Qatar. This conquest led to a feudal society where tribal chiefs³⁴ that supported Al Khalifa were assigned plots of land. Despite these alliances the tribal families regularly engaged in warfare and piracies. In this period the Pax Britannica³⁵ was established: Britain assumed responsibility for the defense of Oman in 1829, the Trucial States³⁶ in 1835, Bahrain in 1861, Kuwait in 1899, and Qatar in 1916. Great Britain was committed to protecting the Gulf area, whilst ensuring the rulers honored their duties and commitments as proteges.³⁷

Conflicts between Al Khalifa and the British began to erupt between the 1920-1930's. British attempts to reform land ownership were not welcomed by Al Khalifa or his feudal chiefs.³⁸ Efforts to change the pearling industry, which still relied on indebted labor relations between the wealthy merchant class and poorer divers, contributed to a growing segregation between the rulers and the ruled. In 1938 Shia and Sunni groups submitted a joint petition³⁹ to the rulers demanding a democratic governing institution. The British as well as Al Khalifa did not respond to these demands, as neither wanted to encourage the development of democracy in Bahrain. This, in turn, evoked protests. Despite the growing job opportunities in the oil sector, reforms within the government of Bahrain were slow-paced. This led to conflicts in 1954, when a group of angry Shia civilians, concerned with the arrest of a fellow Shia, protested in front of the police. During these protests the police killed three civilians. Two years later the police opened fire again after what appeared to be a quarrel over a vegetable stand on a market square, killing five people and injuring seventeen more.

⁴⁰ The National Liberation Front is a clandestine Marxist-Leninist party in Bahrain. It was founded on 15 February 1955, the first left party in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

⁴¹ Arab National Movement a pan-Arab nationalist organization influential in much of the Arab world.

⁴² The fifth fleet of the United States It has been responsible for naval forces in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Arabian Sea, and parts of the Indian Ocean.

⁴³ Known as the Islamic Revolution or the 1979 Revolution, was a series of events that culminated in the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was supported by the United States, and the replacement of his government with an Islamic republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

⁴⁴ Sayyid Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini known in the Western world as Ayatollah Khomeini, 1902–1989+.

⁴⁵ Owen Jones, Marc, Bahrain's Prime Minister and his Role in the Anti-Shia Crackdown of the 1980s, marcowenjones, April,2013

⁴⁶ Owen Jones, Marc, A Political History of Bahrain, Regional Surveys of the World: The Middle East and North Africa 2019, 2018, p.6

⁴⁷ Shehabi, Ala'a, Owen Jones, Marc, Bahrain's Uprising; Resistance and repression in the Gulf, Zedbooks London, 2015, p.207

⁴⁸ Cordenman, Antony, H., Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-First Century: The Political, Foreign Policy, Economic, and Energy Dimensions (Vol 1), Praeger, 2003, p.79-80

In 1956 the National Liberation Front⁴⁰ and the Arab National Movement⁴¹ positioned themselves in opposition to the British and in favor of a new social order. This, amongst other circumstances, led to Bahrain's official independence from Britain in 1971. Bahrain's reliance on protection from foreign powers continued as the US Navy positioned their fifth global fleet base in Bahrain.⁴² Throughout this decade a large number of workers from South Asia emigrated to Bahrain, as a cheap and docile labor force. The Bahraini government believed that trade unionism could be subverted by employing foreign nationals who could be disposed in case of an economic setback. After Bahrain's independence, tension between the Sunni government and the Shia citizens grew. As the protection offered to the Shia population by the British fell away, the situation worsened. The Shia population was more and more targeted and stigmatized by the regime. After the Iranian revolution⁴³ in 1979, the Bahraini authorities feared that Imam Khomeini⁴⁴ desired to spread the revolution to the rest of the Gulf region. In 1981 the Prime Minister, Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, ordered the arrest of 850 Shia's⁴⁵, even though they had never shown any support for Khomeini. After the Shia militant group 'Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB)' attempted a coup in 1982⁴⁶, Bahrain formalized a security pact with Saudi-Arabia. The influence of Saudi's conservatism on Bahrain led to an increase of authoritarianism, shown by the unprecedented deaths in Bahraini prisons. Between 1975 and 1986 six prisoners were believed to have been tortured to death. In the 1990's the violence intensified resulting in bombings and the destruction of multiple Shia mosques.⁴⁷ At that point Bahrain had nearly run out of its oil supplies, and thereby became financially more dependent on Saudi-Arabia. At one point the Saudi government supplied Bahrain with 140000 barrels of raw oil a day to support this dependency.⁴⁸

In 1999 a new chapter began for Bahrain when Shaykh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa became the new ruler after his father Shaykh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa had passed away. He immediately started to implement reforms. Shaykh Hamad promised he would not tolerate discrimination of the Shia community, or favoritism of the country's Sunni population. He ordered the release of 350 political detainees.⁴⁹ Despite reforms, discrimination against Shia's continued, in addition to removing citizenship from Shia citizens that opposed official policy, the authorities created a programme which offers neutralization to Sunni foreigners in exchange for military or police service. Furthermore, in political voting the vote of a



⁴⁹ Department of State, Annual Report on International Religious Freedom 2001, U.S. Government printing office, Washington 2001, p. 419,420.

⁵⁰ Owen Jones, Marc, A Political History of Bahrain, Regional Surveys of the World: The Middle East and North Africa 2019, 2018, p.7,8.

⁵¹ The Arab Spring was a series of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions that spread across much of the Arab world in the early 2010s.

⁵² Shehabi, Ala'a, Owen Jones, Marc, Bahrain's Uprising; Resistance and repression in the Gulf, Zedbooks London, 2015, p. 207-210.

Shia citizen was worth less than that of a Sunni. In the most extreme case, one Sunni vote equaled 21 Shia votes.⁵⁰ Uprisings and protests became frequent until the Bahraini Uprising arose in 2011.

Inspired by the Arab Spring⁵¹ and other protests around the gulf, the Shia opposition in Bahrain started to protest against the (Sunni) government in 2011. Their nonviolent civil disobedience led to daily clashes with the Bahraini government, who repressed the revolt using the Saudi-Arabian Army and UAE troops who entered the country with tanks. The Bahraini protests were initially aimed at receiving greater political freedom and equality for the Shia population. The police force began to intimidate the protesters, to prevent them from protesting. At night they raided houses in Shia neighborhoods and installed checkpoints.⁵² Bahrain still deals with the consequences of the uprising today. Even though protests are less frequent, there is still a lot of hostility, which becomes visible at the checkpoints installed by special forces and the roundabouts filled with police cars to prevent roadblocks.

Nurana

Due to Bahrain's economic and political situation mid 80s, the government decided to invest in real estate and therefore started systematic sea reclamation in 1987.

Between 1987 and 2013, around 80sq kilometer (12000 soccer fields) of land was reclaimed in order to construct artificial islands. This new land was meant for real estate purposes and increased Bahrain's total land area by more than 12,5% by 2013. (fig.9)⁵³

One of these artificial additions to Bahrain's land area is Nurana. The islands were created as part of the 'Northern City' – a residential housing plan drawn in 2000 by the Ministry of Housing. The core of the project involves more than 4,100 housing units, of which 3,110 are social housing. Nurana in the North was designated for more upscale villas, while the middle-class housing resided in the South⁵⁴. The building of the villas was supposed to start in 2012, so before this date the creation of the islands had to be finished. However, to this day the island remains empty. Given the common speed at which housing projects are developed in Bahrain, a delay of 7 years seems very unusual. A partial explanation to this mystery is the Bahraini Uprising in 2011. The only entrance to the Nurana is through 'Jid Al- Haj' or 'Karrana', both Shia villages. After the raids a lot of the people living there have been sanctioned for actively participating in the protests, and as a consequence been ordered a curfew.⁵⁵ Because of these sanctions the main investors and contractors who intended to build the villas on Nurana, pulled back. For this reason, the construction on the islands was put on hold and has not been resumed (fig.10). However, the rest of the 'Northern city' has been built and completed. The second explanation for the condition of Nurana is Bahrain's financial situation. After Bahrain ran out of oil the economy stagnated, as did the healthcare, education and construction sector.⁵⁶ Nurana is no longer seen as a part of the Northern city but does not belong to anything else either. It is neglected by the government and municipality and has therefore become a 'lawless' space. In a way it is at once a safe space and a prison. The islands are amidst water and closed off by the Shia border, creating a space to do things that are considered illegal elsewhere. Fishermen don't pay a harbor fee or tax on their catch; men participate in betting on car or horse races which take place on the island and I swim in my bathing suit while drinking a beer. At the same time the place cannot evolve and there is no control or help available. Should you get stuck with your car in the sand, there is no company or institution you can call for help. If the current gets too strong and you can't get out of the water, there is no lifeguard going to rescue you. There is no possibility to establish anything 'legal' at the islands. Nurana is a space in crisis.

⁵³ Humood A. Naser, Marine Ecosystem Diversity in the Arabian Gulf: Threats and Conservation, Intech, 2014, p. 299-303.

⁵⁴ Al-Nabi, Mohammad Noor, The History of Land use and Development in Bahrain, Information Affairs Authority, 2012, p. 122.

⁵⁵ Al Jazeera, Curfew follows deadly Bahrain crackdown, Al Jazeera, March 2011.

⁵⁶ Albaker, Khaled, Analytical View of Bahrain's Government Schools' Performance: A Quality Perspective, SAGE, 2017.

Part 3 Two Deserts

⁵⁷ Bahrain: Abuse of Migrant Workers Despite Reforms, Human Rights Watch, 2012.

Looking at the fishermen, who have endured a long history of questionable working conditions in Bahrain. Even though they may not have to pay harbor fees in Nurana, their lives are far from utopic. The fishing sector in the Persian Gulf is tragic in many ways. Overfishing, land reclamation and climate change take its toll on both marine life and those who depend on it. According to Bahrain's open data portal, there were 4,251 migrant workers and 157 Bahraini workers registered in the Fishing industry, and a total of 1,637 registered establishments in the fishing sector in 2017. These migrant workers are often working in the Gulf to escape the similar issues (climate change, overfishing) in their home countries. Regulations to prevent overfishing include that a boat can only be at sea for 5 days in a row, and there is a no-fishing-season which can last about four months. Because of low wages and no job security, the fishermen try to get the biggest catch possible in those five days. Because the waters around Bahrain are poor on fish, these fishermen often cross nautical borders, getting them into legal trouble.

At Nurana I met Sanjay, a 28-year-old man from Gujarat, India. He had been recruited to work in construction; he had paid his recruiter upfront for the journey and would have to work some years in construction to pay off his debt with his salary. In the meantime his boss would keep his passport as a guarantee. Construction work was brutal and in order to make enough money he would sometimes work up to four eight-hour shifts in a row. However, after not having been paid for six months, disabling Sanjay to send money home to his family and paying for his living costs in Bahrain, he became desperate. The only way out for him was to leave construction and become a fisherman at Nurana. His income is more unstable than what he would have earned as a construction worker, but at least he gets paid. Sanjay described Bahrain, the word Bahrain means as much as 'two-seas', as 'two deserts', 'because there are no trees on the land and no fish in the sea'. After one of his fishing sessions he did not return to Nurana and after asking around one of his colleagues told me that the boat he was on went into Qatari waters. He suspected that they had been caught and detained there. 'If he gets bailed out by the boss, all his salary will go to him, until that debt is paid off', meaning he will not earn money to send back home for his family or maintain himself for months. His story is not exceptional in Bahrain. Migrant workers, mainly working in construction, fishing or domestic work, are often exploited. (fig.11)⁵⁷

⁵⁸ Benthic zone is the ecological region at the lowest level of a body of water.

⁵⁹ Al-Madany, Ismail M., Abdalla, Mohamed A. and Abdu, Anwar S. E. Coastal Zone Management in Bahrain: an Analysis of Social, Economic and Environmental Impacts of Dredging and Reclamation, Journal of Environmental Management, 1991, p 335-348

⁶⁰ Utu; God of the Sun.

⁶¹ Bibby, Geoffrey, Looking For Dilmun, Stacy International, 1996, p.58.

Trap

The fishermen are disappearing, not just because of the lack of fish and the danger of the sea. They catch fish like Hamour, Sari and Sapi with traditional traps that are called gargoor, they are metal-wire dome shaped traps. (fig12) The standard traps used for fish like hamour are about half a meter high and half a meter wide. Larger traps can be up to almost two meters high. The traps are thrown off the boats and attached to a float before they sink to the bottom. Several days later the fishermen return to collect their catch. Gargoor are very affective for catching large amounts of fish. So effective that they pose a threat to some species. Even abandoned or lost gargoor accidentally trap fish in the sea without being picked up; this is known as 'ghost fishing'. As a result of this overfishing in the Gulf, more and more restrictions are being imposed on fishermen. Fish traps must now be made of eco-friendly materials, traps should contain small halls to help smaller fish escape and the traps need to be at certain distance from the shore. In Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates, gargoor fishing has been completely banned since May 2019 in order to protect fishes like hamour. The fishermen, mostly migrant workers from India, badly informed about why they couldn't fish anymore, had to pack their belongings and return to their country of origin.

Overfishing is not the only threat to the marine environment. The coastal development and land reclamation which started in Bahrain in the 1980's have led to loss in biodiversity, soil contamination, surface water pollution and has placed huge pressure on the countries fishing industries. Reclamation from the sea destroys an underwater habitat by building over or enclosing a body of water. The benthic⁵⁸ ecosystems closest to the shore are damaged the most. These coastal ecosystems, such as mangrove swamps, seagrass beds, coral reefs, and mud and sand flats, contribute to the maintenance of genetic and biological diversity in the marine environment and it's upon these marine life oases that coastal developments are constructed.⁵⁹ The fishermen alone are not responsible for the threat to marine life in the Gulf, yet the consequences of it seems to affect them the most. The wedge script poem, written on a clay tablet around 4000 years ago, continues:

'Let Utu⁶⁰ stationed in heaven

Bring you sweet water from the earth, from the water-sources of the earth;

Let him bring up the water into your large reservoirs

Let him make your city drink from them the water of abundance;

Let him make Dilmun drink from the water of abundance;

Let your wells of bitter water become the wells of sweet water;

Let your furrowed fields and acres yield you their grain;

Let your city become the dock-yard of the inhabited land.⁶¹

I scooped the moon
into a bowl and gave it back to the desert

