

‘Mère et enfants,’ by **Safia Farhat**. 1972. Tapestry, 151 x 124 cm, Image courtesy of Almarsa Gallery and Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.

Arabic **Treasures:**

‘Doha ya Doha
And the Ka’aba they built it
And the Zamzam water they drank it
My grandfather traveled to Makkah
He brought me a basket of cake…
The cake is in the storehouse
And the storehouse needs a key…
And the key is with the carpenter…’

So begins one of the most memorable lullabies in Saudi Arabia. Lullabies are familial treasures that get passed down the generations. And while the specific words of the one above might shift from family to family and region to region, we would be hard-pressed to imagine a more emblematic Hijazi (or even Saudi) lullaby than Doha ya Doha. Its origins are a mystery, but its impact on children over generations remains strong. Still, lullabies are a strange collection. While it is always used to soothe and sedate a child, it is not generally a song about them or reflecting their feelings, but more reflecting the thoughts and emotions of the parent singing their hopes and fears about what will happen to their little one. The earliest recorded lullabies of human history—during the times of the Sumerians—covered all these points. In them, were the familiar hopes of a mother that her son sleep well, grow strong, get married and have children of his own.

In my ururu chant may he grow big, In my ururu chant may he grow large... Put to sleep his restless eyes, Put your hand on his painted eyes, And as for his babbling tongue, Let not the babbling tongue shut out his sleep... May the wife be your support, May the son be your lot...

There was also some warrior-like advice towards the end, for good measure. *Seize the enemy's mouth, Bind his arms like reed bundles! Make the enemy cower before you, lest he rip open your back like a sack.* Four thousand years on and we still sing to our little ones (more of the former verses, less of the latter). What is unique about Doha ya Doha is the sense that it's more of a sequential stream of thoughts type of lullaby. Less hopes and fears and more a melodic quasi-improv-styled series of events, as if each verse were made up on the spot to the delight of both parent and child. For this author, this Saudi children's song will always have a special place, as it was a song my father used to sing to us, passed down the years from his father and grandfather before him. Roughly translated, it goes:

God is nice
raw is rice
we sat to eat
nothing in sight

With your child lying on your legs, holding his hands as you lift them up and down to the rhythm of this short, bittersweet spiritual song, one can't imagine a more valuable treasure.