



MASKS THAT SPEAK IN IRAN

In southern Iran, many Bandari women still wear on a daily basis the « boregheh », an intriguing face mask. The traditional accessory has given them a mysterious air for centuries. Through patience, diplomacy and the drinking of liters of tea, I was able to break the secrets of these adornments and their significance as I visited villages along the Persian Gulf and on the island of Qeshm. The masks are worn both by Shias and Sunnis .



Ameneh is one of the three Sunni seamstresses who make masks in the village. While her husband was sailing from port to port with names reminiscent of Sinbad's adventures (Muscat, Mukala, Mogadishu, Berbera, Zanzibar, Lamu...), she learned how to sew and make the Boreghehs.



The mask is a game of foldings made from sheets of cotton and indigo. These sheets are made specially for boreghehs in Mumbai and have been imported for generations to the Gulf.



The woman cuts the blue sheets with scissors, tans them vigorously with a pebble stone to make them shine, inserts the wooden sticks, and then sews the various elements together. The masks will be sold 5 euros each, slightly more when they are to be exported to the Emirates where demand remains strong.



The vertical salient frontal ridge is made from a stick that is used by doctors to examine the throats of patients. If they are out of stock at the pharmacy, an ice cream stick will make a good substitute.



The masks are always made to measure. The seamstresses keep the patterns of their most loyal customers. The two holes in the mask must fit the eyes perfectly in order to offer a clear view. The forehead and the nose are covered, while the mouth is often concealed with the addition of a veil.



Women's hands are covered with indigo. They not wash them because, they say, the blue pigments soothe and protect the skin.



For a long time, the women have embroidered them by hand. But now, sewing machines have taken over.

For Nowruz, the Persian new year celebrated in Iran, dolls are made by the women of Qeshm for families to give as presents.





Nowadays, young people wear the masks less and less on Qeshm Island. Only elderly Bandari women carry on the tradition by wearing masks covering most of their faces, unlike the young who wear thinner masks. "It's to hide our wrinkles. We are not a pretty sight," a grandmother says.



The mask is said to help women keep a pale complexion by acting like a sunshade in the summer. On the coast, the temperature easily exceeds an average of 45 degrees for several months out of the year. Southern men prefer pale complexions. Black skin is a reminder of the slaves who came from Africa by way of Sudan and ended up in Arabia.



Old women never remove their mask in the presence of strangers, whether in her house or when taking a walk. The mask does not prevent women from socializing and speaking to men – Iran is not Arabistan, as Saudi Arabia is known among Persians.



Peyposht village. Here, most women are no longer wearing the boregheh but the niqab, a black veil that shows only their eyes. "The masks are disappearing. Women are buying veils because they are cheaper. In 5 years, there will be no more boregheh left here," they tell me ..



The Qeshm mask is astonishingly similar to big mustaches, calling to mind Thomson and Thompson from the Tintin books. It was allegedly designed several centuries ago in order to deceive invaders by passing their women off as men during battles!



Although the masks make them look like women from another century, Bandari women have adopted Instagram and Viber, which are not censored in Iran.



"The first time, my parents did force me to wear it. But now, it's my choice. I never go out without my mask. It would be shameful to be out in the street with my face uncovered!"



"I like my wife better with the mask. She is more beautiful... and also, it's our religious rules. » Men associate masks to religion, while women associate them with modesty..



“Don't take my picture. I don't want to be famous! » says this woman clad in a bright red boregheh.

Following the local custom, it is required that permission be asked before taking pictures, whether of a man or a woman. Stealing a picture is considered an insult.

Women who refuse to let their picture be taken tell me that they fear being mocked. Foreigners do not understand their culture.



Qeshm Island is home to several styles of masks with very specific shapes. The locals can immediately recognize which village the owner of a mask is from.



The masks are worn both by Shias – who wear oblong red masks – and Sunnis – who wear black or golden masks with indigo reflections and more rounded shapes. The embroidery style also indicates the ethnicity of the mask's owner.



In Minab region, wearing a mask is mandatory. Especially among the Baluch people, a conservative ethnic group to be found in Iran , Pakistan and Afghanistan.



Clash of generations at a wedding in Qeshm: the grandchildren who live in Dubai have arrived wearing Light-Up Sneakers and BOY caps while their grandmother is proudly wearing her mask.



Another type of mask has also appeared everywhere in Iran: the one that protects from pollution and, in the South East, the one that protects from the H1N1 flu that is wreaking havoc in the country.



The bride keeps the boregheh on when entering the wedding chamber called the Hejleh, which is overdecorated with mirrors, garlands, balls, plastic flowers, colorful cushions, and verses from the Koran. She will stay in this windowless room for seven days with her new husband. It is the opportunity for them to discover each other intimately for the first time – arranged marriages are often the norm in remote villages.



The golden ornaments on the veils and the masks are reserved for weddings, as they are meant to heighten the bride's radiance during the ceremony. It is also a sign of good financial health for those who, like on this picture, wear them in their daily lives as it is a local luxury item.



In Kushkenar, at a wedding, a masked woman climbs on the roof of the house of the newly weds and throws candies to children who try to catch them in a joyful scramble.



In Bandar Abbas area, The black mask is for little girls, who have to follow the custom as soon as they turn 9. The orange mask is for girls who are engaged, the red one is worn by married women. Prices vary according to the color. Orange is expensive, black is cheap.



In Qeshm, during a Zar ceremony – Zar is a magical wind that grabs you and may be good or evil –, the woman goes into a trance, is covered with a sheet, takes her mask off, and allows herself to be possessed by the spirits. This is one of the rare moments when the mask is removed in public.



The women who don't wear the mask on a daily basis make sure to put it back on when they visit a place where they don't know anybody, or in bazaars.



The young women in Qeshm have recently been encouraged to create works of art. The mask often features in their paintings.



On the mainland, the Panjshambe bazaar (the Thursday market) in Minab is the meeting place for women who have come to buy and sell masks, belts and shalwars, the beautiful multicolored embroidered pants. Few visitors venture into this region of Iran, away from the tourist tracks.

On the Panjshambe bazaar in Minab, many masked women are also selling multicolored bras that offer a stark contrast with the rigorism of their outfits. It is also a place of socialization – women pause and share a narghile while exchanging the latest news.





A father, his son and his second wife, in her 20s. Polygamy is very common among the Baluch people, who are very conservative.



Zinat, from Qeshm island, was the first woman who dared going out without a mask. She took classes to obtain a nurse certificate in Bandar Abbas, on the mainland. When she returned to the island, she had a different perception of women's status. She decided to stop wearing the boregheh. She was banned by her society for 10 years.

During an art performance, Zinat affixes an iron mask on a young girl to represent the oppression she suffered in her youth, when she would be forced to wear the mask in her village of Salakh.





Zinat is aware that things are not changing as fast as they might appear. In a society rooted in its traditions and its silence, many children born out of wedlock are still killed at birth in Qeshm. Zinat is now fighting to stop this barbaric tradition.



The masks give an enigmatic and severe appearance, but when they are taken off, they reveal genial faces.



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