

The Emirati Burqa from a Cultural, Historical and Contemporary Art Perspective

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البرقع الإماراتي من منظور ثقافي وتاريخي وفني معاصر

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المخلص

البرقع الإماراتي، على وجه التخصيص، هو نمط محدد من غطاء الوجه ترتديه النساء في الإمارات العربية المتحدة حتى نهاية الستينات من القرن العشرين، ويتألف من قطعة تغطي الوجه مع كشف العينين ولا تغطي الشعر والجسم. يربط مخرجات ونتائج هذا البحث، تم إنتاج عدة أعمال فنية وعرضت في معرض لندن 2014 بعنوان (الشيء الحميمي)، والذي يعيد تصوير البرقع كقطعة حية بتاريخها ومعانيها الحديثة والمعاصرة. بالتركيز على أهمية الجسد والأحاسيس في الإنتاج العلمي، والممارسة الفنية، والجانب الفني أظهر أن البرقع لديه (صوت) في المحادثات المتعلقة بالعادات القديمة. إنه يعتبر وسيلة للحماية وغرض شخصي وقيم. البرقع يتكلم، وصبغة النيل الموجودة فيه تتسرب منه كشاهد حي لماضيه الذي فات. كما أنها جزء من إعادة اكتشاف أو إبقاء الماضي المتعلق بالبرقع نفسه حيا من خلال ممارسة الفن التشكيلي المعاصر كاستراتيجية جمالية وسياسية. في هذه الورقة البحثية، تم استخدام واختبار أدوات حرفة البرقع التقليدية، وطرق النقش، والأفلام والتصوير الفوتوغرافي والعمل التركيبي. والممارسة الشخصية والمشاركة مع عرض وأداء وتمثيل ثقافة البرقع النسائي كاستجابة لاختفاء ممارسته وندرة التاريخ المسجل سابقا. بالتركيز على أهمية الجسد والمعرفة، تمنح ممارسة البرقع (صوتاً) في المحادثة التي تتعلق بالتقاليد القديمة التي تشير إلى الحماية وقيمة البرقع كشيء شخصي وثمين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: البرقع، ثقافة المادة، الأداء،

الحميمية، الذاكرة.

Abstract

The Emirati burqa or 'mask' is a face cover that reveals the eyes without covering the hair or the body, and it used to be worn by the majority of Emirati women in the United Arab Emirates until the late 1960s. Linking the research to the findings, some art works have been added from London exhibition 'An Intimate Object' on 2014 which re-animates the burqa as a living object with its own history and new contemporary meanings. The art practices shows the burqa has 'a voice' referencing to its protection and value as a personal and precious object in the documented traditions. The artworks help on keeping burqa as alive material object and rediscover it through contemporary art practice as an aesthetic and political strategy. In this research paper methods of the traditional craft materials, inscription methods, film, photography and installation were used and experimented. The personal practices and engagements of the researcher on performing artworks and experiences is a response to burqa's disappearing practice and due to the lack of sources that documented the burqa over time. Focusing on the significance of the body and knowledge, the practice will refer to protect the traditions and burqa's value as a personal and precious object.

Keywords: Burqa, Material Culture, Performance, Intimate, Memory.

Introduction

Burqa is a traditional face mask covers the face wholly or partially with revealing the eyes and it is made of burnished cotton cloth saturated with indigo dye. The literal meaning of burqa in Arabic (burqu') is 'content is covered', so the term is used variously in the Arabian Peninsula beyond its prevalent association with women's face cover. The falcon burqa is ne of the oldest and most well known burqas which had been used for animals in various parts of the world covering the eyes of the bird to limit its vision or force it to sleep. Similar to what was mentioned earlier, the camel burqa used in modern Yemen for camels grinding sesame in mills to extract the purest sesame seed oil. The term burqa is also used to describe the highly decorated piece of cloth that is hung in front of the 'Kabba door' in Mecca, the most holy shrine in Islam, in Saudi Arabia.

This paper discusses the rituals and beliefs associated with the burqa, the craft of making burqa, the embodied experiences and social practices, the intimate object for wearing and making burqa, and the local, regional and national identity deduced from previous studies.

Literature review

The information was documented about the burqa in its early presence in the Arabian Peninsula was mainly by Western writers and oftenly referred to them as orientalists (Figure 1). Figure (1, A) shows a documented photo for Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890) wearing the pilgrimage clothes and standing infront of a woman wearing white clothes with a mask covering her face. In Mabel Bent's diary (1847-1929), the wife of James Theodore Bent (1852-1897), there were hand drawing of Omani burqa as on figure (1, B). Harold Richard Patrick Dickson (1881-1959) drew a face cover in Kuwait figure (1, C).

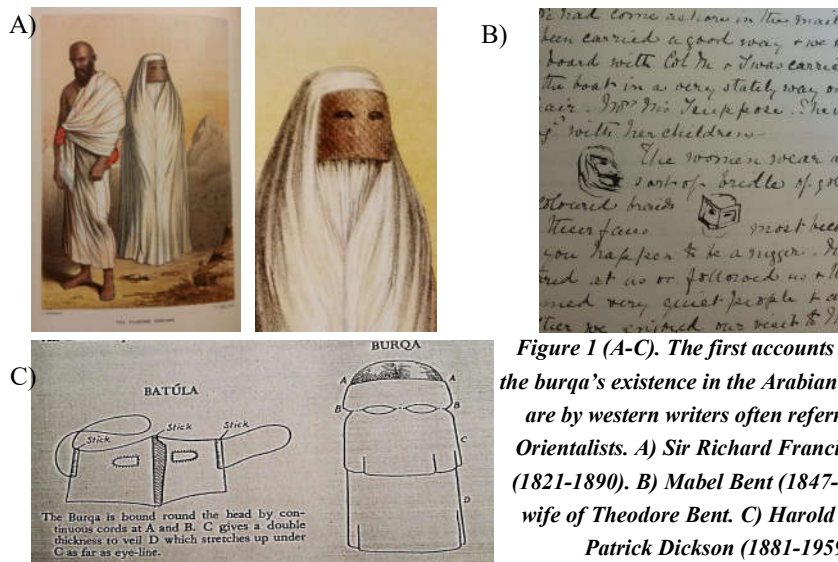


Figure 1 (A-C). The first accounts recorded the burqa's existence in the Arabian Peninsula are by western writers often referred to as Orientalists. A) Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890). B) Mabel Bent (1847-1929) the wife of Theodore Bent. C) Harold Richard Patrick Dickson (1881-1959)

Scholars agrees that the burqa was introduced into the Arabian Peninsula in the early eighteenth century by the Baluchis who mainly inhabited Baluchistan, an area lies between between Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. The Baluchis were in Arabian Peninsula since the 16th and 17th centuries, especially the significant migrations of the Baluchi to Oman (Al Maazmi, 2012). The Baluchi settled first in Oman and gradually moved into the surrounding Gulf areas, including the UAE. The researcher Najlah Al Azzi (1995) indicates that Baluchi's women brought new traditions to the area including wearing the burqa face cover due to their work for local families as domestic servants and

to their marriage from local slaves, who also worked for wealthy Omani families in their palaces. Al Azzi argues that the Omani women who lives in these palaces adopted the burqa, but with more elaborations and decorative embroideries to emphasize on their higher social status.

Some photos of the Omani burqa were documented as a visual evidence at the begging of the twentieth century. The earliest dated photo was taken by Emile Allemann on 1898 under the title of ‘Arab Woman, Muscat’. A few years later on 1901, several photographs by A. R. Fernandez produced as postcards and showed the highly decorative Omani burqa under the title of “Arab Woman” Muscat and ‘Baluch Woman, Muscat’.

The British Museum collection of “burqas from the Arabian Peninsula” was established on 2010 having two Omani burqas worth mentioning: The first one dated from the late nineteenth century and referred to as the ‘Burqa Oman’, and the second one from 1920s and referred to as on ‘Burqa Zanzibar’ (Faliq, 2010). These two examples are further evidence of the burqa in the region. Figure 2 illustrates the first photos of Emirati burqa was taken by Ronald Codrai on 1951 (Codrai, 1992).



Figure 2 (A-C). The first photos of Emirati burqa was taken by Ronald Codrai on 1951. (Codrai, 1992)

To clarify the confusion in western resources between forms of face covers, figure 3 (A-C) is self-portrait photo clarifies the differences between the veil, niqab, and burqa in UAE. The veil covers a woman’s head and neck down to her shoulders and back. The niqab is a black fabric that women wears over their nose to cover the face to the top of the chest with leaving a gap for the eyes. The burqa is a women mask covering the face.

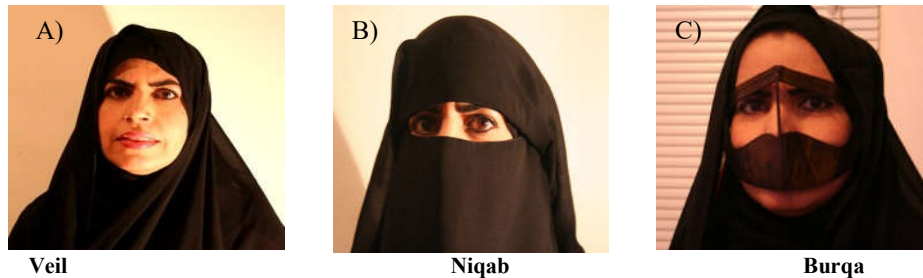


Figure 3 (A-C). Photographic self-portrait clarifies the differences between the different forms of face covers in the UAE

The most important question here is “why women are wearing the burqa?” which were answered throughout the conducted personal interviews. In the interview with the burqa makers, they have pointed out that wearing the burqa is a sign of modesty and a part of the UAE tradition and culture, but it is not related to Islam religion or the practices required by the Quran or the Prophet Mohammed. The second reason, burqa provides protection from the weather elements as it protects the woman’s delicate skin from the wind, the sand and the sun. The third reason, women had to wear the burqa in the presence of men outside the family as a tradition. According to the researcher Fatimah Al

Mughanni in her book [Traditional Adornment and Woman’s Fashion in the United Arab Emirates] (2012), some women did not take off the burqa in front of their husbands until having the third child then to allow their husbands to see their face for the first time.

Methodology

Through studying burqa's history and its manufacturing, some methods were taken from ethnography, interviews with women make and wear burqas, artworks used burqa as a subject for the art, and manufacturers who produced burqa fabric. In addition, the researcher made observations, conducted workshops with students of fine art in Kingston University and Sharjah University, and did questionnaires alongside the empirical research. The interviews were done with women making and wearing burqa, men, artists, and manufactures from UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Mumbai. Moreover, as part of this paper enquiry the researcher wore a burqa for the first time and looked at the mirror to realize how the burqa enhanced the eyes look and the feelings. The researcher Spoke while wearing the burqa and realized changing in the timbre of voice and muffling in speech. The researcher felt that there was a barrier between the outside world and himself; this helped to consider how the burqa affect who wears it. It was as if the burqa was controlling the person who wears. This experiment provoked a great deal of curiosity and fostered to understand Emirati women’s actual experience of wearing the burqa. The experiments done on the burqa include testing the perceptions of the quality of the burqa fabric.

Discussion and Artwork: How is this research materialized through the practice?

To enhance the knowledge about different types and usages of Emirati burqa, the researcher visited souks where women typically gather, and attended occasions such as weddings and funerals to ask women about their knowledge of different burqa forms. The researcher made a map of the UAE represents the historical sites associated with specific burqa forms and the areas where the different burqas are still worn until today based upon the discussions, in-depth interviews, photos had taken for the women interviewed while wearing burqa, images drawn from the publications and the documentary films, and the old burqas donated by interviewees as on (Figure 4). Having designed this map of burqa types, the final visualization makes it clear that the larger burqas can be seen solely in the desert areas where arguably women needed to protect their faces from harsh weather and they maybe less exposed to modernising influences. The concentration of burqa’s wearing practices aligns with the density of populations in the major Emirates cities overlooks the coast of Arabian Gulf.



Figure 4. Map of the UAE that represents the historical sites associated with specific burqa forms and the areas where the different burqas are still worn today. The map was constructed based on the collected info from the conducted personal interviews throughout the research.

Embodying Memory: Loss and Recovery of the Burqa

The artwork “Embodying Memory: Loss and Recovery of the Burqa” indirectly

indicates the importance of Burqa for Emirati women and their attachment to its fabric as an embodiment of their culture, history and lived customs, and its association with memory and rituals. The main aim is to identify the feelings of women who wears and makes burqa, how they experience the burqa, when they wear it, and what meanings does this intimate object carries for them.

The first experiment was prompted by a personal childhood memory of seeing women washing their clothes in the sea and leaving their burqas on the beach to keep it safe. This memory inspired me to think about how it would be if a burqa was immersed in the sea. To test this out, the researcher went early morning to the beach in Sharjah carrying his camera and throw some burqas into the sea to observe if the indigo colour seeping from the fabric would be visible in the seawater. The indigo dye color was not visible, and the burqa was not changed even when it had been in the salty water for some time. The waves carried a burqa away and buried it in the sand, meanwhile another one floated out to sea and the rest of them had been collected before drifting off. Figure 5 shows some photos of the burqa that was buried by the sea on the sand like an abandoned or discarded object in paralleling the disappearance of the Emirati burqa. These photos inspired the researcher to think about his work for the first time as a form of performance or enactment.



Figure 5.
Photographs of the
“Embodying Memory:
Loss and Recovery of
the Burqa”, of burqas
thrown in the beach,
by Karima Alshomely,
2013

The second experiment was done in order to capture the visible effects of indigo seeping from the burqa (Figure 6). Where the survived burqas were re-submerged in a large glass basin of mineral water and recorded the process of seepage on film. When submerged, the indigo started to seep immediately as if the fabric was bleeding stimulating mixed emotions. On one hand, the indigo drifted with the waves was like the burqa disappearing or fading. On the other hand, it was enjoyable to watch the dye drifting as the effect was visually stunning. In the produced video entitled ‘Neel’ (Indigo) the indigo disperses in the water in a mesmerizing way. This visual dispersal with silence could be seen as a metaphor for the disappearance of the burqa and the loss of the personal and collective identity associated with it in the rapidly changing society of the UAE. ‘Neel’ could be re-presenting the burqa as an active witness to its lost past and playing a part in rediscovery or keeping this material object alive through re-activation.

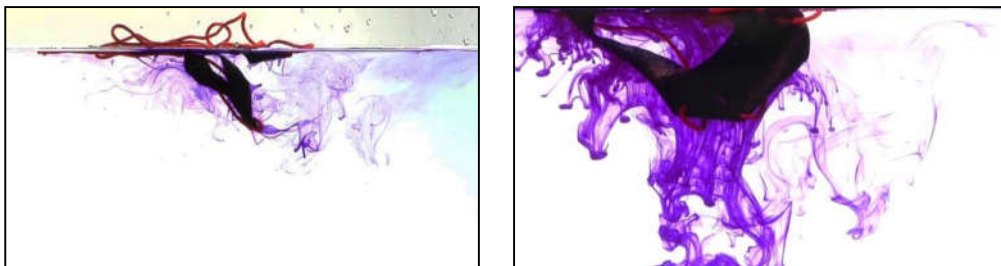


Figure 6. Shots from the film of the “Embodying Memory: Loss and Recovery of the Burqa”,
of burqa submerged into water, by Karima Alshomely, 2013.

The Film Zeena (2013)

The wedding traditions demand isolating the bride from her family for three days before the wedding. The bride's mother, her close female relatives or her close friends are responsible to prepare her for the groom by applying indigo dye with herbs and aromatic oils on to her entire body, and applying mixture of oils on her hair to soften it. Some of the interviewed women shared their experience of this custom saying that the dye contained the light of the Prophet Yusuf and they wanted it to lighten their face.

'Zeena' (Adornment) was filmed on 2013 in an old building in Sharjah as in Figure 7. This location was chosen because of being a domestic dwelling previously and having a highly textured interior walls provided a striking colour contrast with the white clothes which the researcher had chosen to wear. The researcher placed metal tins containing burqas on the floor to symbolize a woman's personal life and her treasured belongings then observed applying the indigo dye which had been taken from the burqa fabric on the face using a mirror to live the bride experience. As a form of female embodied enactment, the researcher wanted to experience what a bride might feel just before her marriage, so the dye have been applied by fingers as in painting a portrait, and focused on shifting from an area to another on the face in order to enhance the color. During the process, the fingers touched the burqa and alternated to touch the skin creating an intimacy between the burqa and the body.



Figure 7. Shots from the film "Zeena", by Karima Alshomely, 2013.

This film helped to understand the experience of applying the indigo dye to someone's body. Using the mirror helped to enhance the value of wedding rituals and to reveal emotions as a main goal of the work. While performing this ritual, the researcher saw his face turning in blue color which created a strange unforgettable feeling. Contradicting with what the researcher did, the bride will not be able to see herself during or after these wedding ceremonials, so imagining an isolated woman without a sense of time for three days before her wedding is an uncomfortable experience.

The "Bride Reflecting" Tradition (2014)

One of the rituals and traditional customs related to the burqa practice is "bride reflecting" when the bride and groom see each other for the first time at the night of the wedding. Another ritual is called 'Revealing the burqa' which takes place when the groom give money to the bride in order to remove her burqa.

The researcher experienced the "bride reflecting" tradition by taking photos to imagine the bride's emotions and thoughts while waiting the groom at the matrimonial room. What questions did the bride ask herself and what feelings did she experienced in this particular moment before the groom arrived? Was she afraid, excited, or uncertain about her marital life? The bride wears a burqa decorated with crystals and wears the white traditional garment. Figure 8 is a photo of 'Bride Reflecting' tradition with black background symbolising to the night and creating maximum contrast. A three of self-images within a single frame captured using motion methods and created an imagined

internal dialogue about the unknown husband in the ‘form’ of a conversation. The photo expresses a female having an internal dialogue with herself to symbolize the bride with two other voices thinking in her mind. Two of the figures are facing each other and the one in the middle inviting the observer to share this private moment and to reflect on her inner conversation as an embodied female subject.



*Figure 8. The “Bride Reflecting”
portray, by Karima Alshomely, 2014*

The Intimate performance (2018)

Figure 9 is a live example of using the burqa fabric as a tool to make an Emirati women burqa painting. The indigo dye within the burqa fabric was used as a paint and the fabric was used as a brush to create the artwork. Interacting with the burqa fabric and the performer created an intimate feeling through touching, folding, compressing, squeezing and moving around different parts of canvas. The main goal of this artwork is to transfer the light of Prophet Yusuf from burqa fabric to exist on the canvas.



*Figure 9. A Shot of the “Intimate
Performance” artwork in Abu Dhabi Arts Fair,
by Karima Alshomely, 2018.*

The Burqas Awning (2019)

The Burqas Awning is a public art project constructed in Hatta Public Park, Dubai (Figure 10). This art installation highlights an important Emirati cultural element using contemporary art towards representational and functional work. It aims to link the park visitors to burqa as a cultural element and to remind them about the identity of Emirati women. The burqua form varies in the UAE regions, so the Burqa form in this artwork is from Dubai and it is called “Bulafah”. The artwork consists of gathering small burqas to form a shape of large burqa with dimensions of 4m x 6m. The project adopted one burqa unit to calculate the total number of sheets required to compose the awning. The selected material is opaque off-white acrylic sheets cut by laser machines, assembled by Wires, and suspended as an awning for shade. Lights were incorporated to form a different visual effects at night.



Figure 10. The Burqa Awning artwork in Hatta Public Park, Dubai, by Karima Alshomely, 2019.

A Few of their Stories (2021)

The researcher conducted some interviews and communicated with Emirati women to know their point of view toward burqa. Miss Mariam was forced to wear the Burqa on her wedding despite of her refusal and crying (Abduallah, M. (2014, June). Miss Aisha refused to wear burqa and tore many of them until she was convinced that her husband will give her money in return to remove the burqa to see her face for the first time (Naqbi, A. (2012, August). Miss Tarifa wore burqa when she was young to imitate her mother, and wore it without knowing how to tie it properly at the age of 15 (Alshehi, T. (2013, August). The artwork in figure 11 shows figures made of clay and presents different forms of burqa. It is communicating women's emotions, feelings, and stories embodying their wordless conversations.



Figure 11. Clay sculpture of "A few of their stories", by Karima Alshomeily, 2021.

Conclusion

The research studied the history of the Emirati burqa and its relationship with rituals and the value of the embodied material object that is made of and worn by Emirati women. In order to studying burqa and understanding it deeply, four methods which are: ethnography, workshops, participation and observation were used, applied, and experimented. Several artworks and videos were created embodying the stories, beliefs, and rituals of the burqa. This research brought burqa into life with its own history and new contemporary meanings through the performativity of embodied material culture.

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