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# Invisible No More: The Embellished Abaya in Qatar

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**INVISIBLE NO MORE: THE EMBELLISHED ABAYA IN QATAR**

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In order to understand Arab dress in the Persian Gulf region, a little background information on Qatar is necessary. Qatar is a tiny country jutting into the Persian Gulf off of the Arabian Peninsula. About the size of Connecticut, it is a barren limestone shelf with an inhospitable climate and little in the way of natural or manmade attraction. For centuries the inhabitants were either wandering Bedouin tribes or impoverished fishermen eking out a subsistence lifestyle by diving for pearls. The pearls were bought and sold through the nearby country of Bahrain, so few Qatari realized any profit. The 1920s twin events of the development of the Japanese cultured pearl and the Wall Street stock market crash destroyed the demand for natural pearls. Already the poorest Persian Gulf nation, Qatar was plunged into destitution and, faced with starvation, many of the 26,000-27,000 residents were forced to leave the country seeking work in India and the extended region.

Few Westerners ventured into Qatar in the pre-oil era and even fewer knew of its existence. Unwin reports that ‘...nearly all European maps prior to the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century failed to show its existence.’<sup>1</sup> The first mention of Qatar in a European newspaper was a completely fabricated account of the wealth and beauty of the country published in 1935 in the British *Daily Express*.<sup>2</sup> Nothing could be further from the truth.

In the late 1930s oil was discovered, although exploitation and the accompanying profits did not occur until after World War II. The oil industry attracted large numbers of workers and by the early 1960s, the population in Qatar had rebounded from a low of 16,000 in the 1930s to 28,000, with about 40% expatriates. The population continued to increase to an estimated 60,000 with 60% expatriate representation by 1969.<sup>3</sup>

**Impact of wealth**

In addition to the oil industry, in 2002 the Qatari government announced the discovery of a reserve of natural gas large enough to fuel the planet for 200 years. Qatar quickly rose to become among the wealthiest countries per capita in the world. The income has changed their country and their lifestyles dramatically, including the construction of schools and hospitals, and the development of infrastructure such as roads, public utilities and communications operations. The first radio and television stations were launched in the 1970s and now the external world is largely available via the Internet. In the last decade, Qatar has burst into global notice by participating in international education, Asian relief efforts, especially after the tsunami, and women’s rights. The oil and natural gas industry wealth has permitted Qataris the luxury of international travel and has attracted an enormous population of expatriate guest workers rendering Qataris a minority of a reported 250,000 in the more than 1½ million current population. Where once Qatar was invisible to most of the world, its citizens now are now engaged in international affairs and world events. The Qatar government has invested in European businesses such as Porche and Harrod’s department store and Qatar is well represented in Persian Gulf political affairs.

**Cultural and religious dictates**

Nearly all Qatari citizens practice Wahabi Islam, a conservative sect that adheres to the early interpretations of the Prophet Mohammed. This includes obedience to Sura 23:31 of the Qur’an which directs women to dress modestly. This is accomplished in the Persian Gulf region by means of an all

<sup>1</sup> P.T.H. Unwin, *Qatar*, World Bibliographic Series (Oxford: Clio Press, 1982). p xv.

<sup>2</sup> Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar* (London: Croom Helm, 1979). p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Unwin, p. ix.

encompassing black outer cloak, the *abaya*, and the *shayla*, a long rectangular scarf worn wrapped around the head. These ubiquitous garments swathe a woman from head to foot, covering her completely and have traditionally rendered her invisible whilst in public places. Thus, on the rare occasion when she has needed to be out of the protection of her home, the *abaya* and *shayla* permit her to slip through public quietly without attracting the unwanted attention of male strangers. Beyond protecting a woman's privacy, the *abaya* identifies her as an observant Muslim. In *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning* Barnes and Eicher state,

*Dress as a cultural phenomenon has several essential attributes. First, a person's identity is defined geographically and historically, and the individual is linked to a specific community. Dress serves as a sign that the individual belongs to a certain group.*<sup>4</sup>

The traditional garment worn in Qatar before the oil boom was the *r'as abaya*, a black cloth cloak that is worn on the head, such as one would put a coat over one's head when running through the rain, and held closed by hand. Al-Wahabi describes this *abaya* as roughly a double square 60" in width and length consisting of two lengths seamed together at approximately the hipline. There are no side seams and it wraps around the body with the selvages sewn together at the shoulder line. It may be decorated with narrow black cord at the edges, the shoulder line and around the wrist, commonly with black soutache braid. Only the most special *abayas* displayed decoration, usually in the form of gold *zari* embroidery depicting stylized foliage or moon and stars around the neck and partially down the front openings.<sup>5</sup> This embroidery style originated in India and is made of gold or silver metal beaten very thin and wrapped around a thread. Cloth is stretched taut on a frame, then an outline pattern is applied to the cloth, using a small hook to draw the *zari* thread up from below the cloth to create a chain stitch on the surface. The outline is then filled in for solid designs. This was done by hand in Qatar by Indian men until machines were imported in the 1970s. Modern *zari* threads are seldom real gold or silver and frequently shiny synthetic thread rather than metal. Qatari women also traditionally wore the *batula*, an indigo dyed cloth face mask that is pounded to give it a shiny, metallic appearance. Currently women may wear a cloth facial veil, the *niqab*, or cover only their hair, leaving their faces exposed.

*Abayas* were briefly abandoned in the 1980s, however a wave of Islamism in the late 1980s- early 1990s engendered the adoption of the garment in a more modern form. The new rendition resembles an outer dress or light coat. Although almost all Qatari women wear the *shayla* and *abaya* now whilst in the Persian Gulf region, many do remove it in Europe, Asia and America citing that it attracts too much attention. This is counter to the *abaya's* intent of modesty and privacy.

### **The modern *abaya***

The modern *abaya* has more in common with trendy Western dress than with the traditional *r'as abaya*. Like fashionable women all over the world, Qatari women wish to express their individuality, modernity and fashion sense. Many have enormous wealth, are well-educated, widely travelled and highly sophisticated. They do not necessarily desire to be Western, so choose to continue the traditional practice of wearing concealing and modest clothes, but now on their own terms. The *abaya* has become a palette for individual style and expression of status.

The basic *abaya* comes in many forms. It is constructed from a drapery fabric with a soft hand and generally made from silk or polyester, most often in a crepe weave. The garment is always black, providing a platform for embellishment. The silhouette has changed dramatically from the traditional square cloak of the *r'as abaya* to an outer robe worn over another complete set of clothing (Fig. 1). The current most basic *abaya* is cut in a T-shape with a round neckline. The neckline requires a small slit

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<sup>4</sup> Ruth Barnes and Joanne Eicher, eds., *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning* (Oxford: Berg, 1992). p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Najla Ismail al-Izzi Al-Wahabi, *Qatari Costume* (London: The Islamic Art Society, 2003).



*Figure 1. R'as abaya worn with batula face mask  
Photo courtesy of Richard Harris*

opening at center front that is approximately 4" long and closed with either a snap or a small plain black button and loop. The sleeves are cut as one with the body and taper to fit closely around the wrist. The *abaya* will have a seam from neck to wrist along the top of the sleeve and another from wrist to hem closing up the underarm and the side seam. The garment is loose over the bust and wider at the hem giving it an A-line shape. Several variations of the basic *abaya* are popular. The garment may have a squared neckline, a V-neck or an asymmetric slit, usually opening on the left. It may open all the way to the hem and have a 3"-4" under-lap panel with snaps closing it to the hem so nothing can be seen underneath, or the front edges may barely meet with snaps extending only down to the waist so that the *abaya* will flap open when the wearer walks and expose the dress, skirt or trousers and footwear worn underneath. A slightly more elaborate variation of the basic *abaya* is an asymmetric model where the left front closes with two snaps at the right shoulder and the right front crosses over on top of the left and snaps at the left shoulder. Although the garment is technically open to the hem, nothing is seen of the interior garments because of the wide overlap. The 'butterfly' *abaya* is a style harkening back to the

square shape of the traditional *r'as abaya* (Fig. 2). The modern version is still cut in a square, but is worn as a caftan rather than as a cloak worn atop the head. The newest and somewhat controversial *abaya* is one which by means of either internal or external ties pulls the cloth in close to the body and delineates the body. (Fig. 3).



*Figure 2, left. Butterfly abaya  
Photo courtesy of Richard Harris*



*Figure 3, right. Modern abaya with ties  
Photo courtesy of Richard Harris*

Sleeves have become an important feature of the fashion *abaya*. Diverging from the basic *abaya*, sleeves may be gathered into a long cuff or gathered into a full puff at the wrist. Note the modern zari embroidery on Figure 4. Sleeves may also be cut in extremely long kimono style as in Figure 5.



*Figure 4. Gold embroidery on abaya sleeve  
photo courtesy of Richard Harris*



*Figure 5. Kimono style abaya  
Photo courtesy of Richard Harris*

*Abaya* shops abound in Qatar and *abayas* may be bought inexpensively ready made or, more often, made to measure. With a legion of mostly Nepalese tailors, there is no limit to *abaya* style. Women visit the shop, and either select an existing model or come in armed with their own ideas. Conservative women tend to limit their adornment to understated black on black details so that if one looks closely, the *abaya* is not entirely plain, but the embellishment does not necessarily demand attention. More adventurous women gravitate to various silhouettes (Fig. 6) and employ generous use of color and techniques such as appliqué, embroidery, beading, and crystals. Many shops claim to use Swarovski crystals, but the modest cost of many of the *abayas* would contradict this. Decorations have expanded from merely the front neckline to the entire chest area, the back and often the sleeves and hems. Embroidery and beading are often used in conjunction for dramatic effect.



*Figure 6. Abaya with lace 'wings'*  
Photo courtesy of Laurence Koltys

Logos, particularly of European or American designers confer status and fashion savvy and are much sought after. Copyright laws are not yet enforced in Qatar so several local *abaya* shops have made use of the famous Chanel interlocking Cs, the Fendi Fs, or many other international couture brand logos. Other local businesses have responded to the demand for brands by developing their own Persian Gulf designer brands. These *abaya* shops offers only their own styles. The sole changes they make are for size, much as a Western retailer will alter for fit. These shops are found in the newer Western style shopping malls and even display discreet logos.

Some international couture fashion houses have begun to recognize the lucrative Middle East market and are now engaged in designing and selling *abayas* through the Saks 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue stores in Saudi Arabia. These garments were introduced at a fashion show at the Paris George V hotel in June 2009 and cost \$2200-\$2500. The most expensive *abaya* to date is the diamond-encrusted *abaya* from British designer Bruce Oldfield costing about \$350,000.

Increased Western presence in the Persian Gulf, tourism, and media in the forms of magazines, radio, television and the Internet have brought images of Euro-American lifestyles into Arab homes. Higher education for women has resulted in increased female opportunity and independence. Many Qatari women now frequently travel abroad and every year more complete advanced education in foreign countries, interacting with cultures other than their own. These influences are the seeds of a quiet, but colorful rebellion.

The new fashion *abaya* is now subject to seasonal change and trend, rendering obsolete the plain *abaya* that was worn until worn out. Where Qatari women once owned one or two *abayas*, they now have a wardrobe consisting of anywhere from 5 or 10 to unlimited numbers. The meteoric rise of Qatar's fortunes have allowed women the means and freedom to express themselves through their dress and they do so exuberantly and fashionably on their own terms.

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