Representing the Emirati Nation through *Burquʿ*: Local Identity or Imagined Community?[1]

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I. Introduction

Today, tangible material cultural artefacts like the face mask, also known in the Arabian Peninsula as the *burquʿ* (or *burgaʿ* in some dialects), are often portrayed in relation to local identity or heritage and are understood to represent a certain people and a defined space and time. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the government has played an important role in defining the face mask and its various representations ever since its emergence as a nation-state. This has not only shaped the public discourse toward masking as a past tradition but also controlled and limited the uses of the mask and its associated meanings through the implementation of policies, regulations, and misleading narratives. By engaging with narratives of heritage and national identity, this article considers how the face mask is seen and represented in official discourse, arguing that this discourse has specific socio-political implications for the use of the *burquʿ* by *Khaleeji* (Gulf) women.

The fact that the face mask has been a significant part of women's daily attire in the Arabian Peninsula for many centuries undermines the argument that wearing it is a newly-invented tradition [Kanafani 1983; El Mutwalli 2015; Al Shomely 2016]. However, this is not to say that the face mask has always represented the national identity of the UAE: to be acknowledged as part of the local heritage requires either the endorsement of the state or some other authorities. Drawing on Hobsbawm's theory of invented tradition [2013: 1], it could be argued that the symbolic meanings of the face mask and its associated customs that appear to endorse national identity and heritage are in fact invented, constructed, and administered by the government. This includes defining the *burquʿ* as a cultural signifier for the Islamic tradition. Indeed state and local authorities have attempted to 'establish continuity with a suitable historical past' for political reasons [Hobsbawm 2013: 1], including the promotion of desired or ideal images of women's bodies. Such invented traditions represent means of 'formalisation', 'ritualisation', and 'continuous repetition' [Hobsbawm 2013: 4], being enacted, as by establishing museums or monuments, organising cultural events and festivals, and producing cultural artefacts and souvenirs.

As manifested in these invented traditions, heritage also helps to construct the political institutions

of an 'imagined community' [Anderson 2006: 24]. Heritage refers, then, less to a thing and more to a relationship with selected objects, places, and practices that embody the past [Harrison 2013: 14]. While the *official* heritage is often formed and presented according to the values and perspectives implied by ruling officials and the nation state, the *unofficial* heritage is associated with specific local values. In the Arabian Peninsula, however, particular circumstances are often ignored and under-represented by the state [Harrison 2013: 15]. Local customs and traditions are frequently erased or replaced with newly-invented traditions with the purpose of rewriting history as a form of 'self-definition' and 'resistance against the homogenising forces of twentieth-century modernity' [AlSayyad 2001: 2–3]. As Ketu H. Katrak [2006: 161] points out, '[b]oth nation and tradition have imagined dimensions' which face challenges from historical validation.

In the UAE, face masks are presented as part of a heritage meant to unify the Emirati community and construct a national cultural identity which embeds values, themes, symbols, and memories of an imagined community. Not only does this custom bring together citizens who share the same historical and cultural past within this 'imagined political community' [Anderson 2006: 5], but it also helps distinguish them from non-Emiratis both within and outside the country. According to Gellner, this is a modern manifestation of 'nationalism'. In his opinion:

> [...] the nationalist principle requires that the political unit and the ethnic one be congruent. In other words, given that ethnicity is basically defined in terms of shared cultures, it demands that everyone, or nearly everyone, within the political unit be of the same culture and that all those of the same culture be within the same political unit. Simply put: one culture, one state. [Gellner 1998: 45]

In the case of the UAE and other Gulf Arab states, territorial boundaries were decided on the basis of 'British interests rather than local traditions and histories in an area characterised by fluid territorial claims and shifting alliances' [Lootah 1999: 99; Al-Rasheed 2005: 4; Freer 2018]. The seven emirates that were unified as the UAE were a political creation intended to 'deal with foreign invasions' [Fox, Mourtada-Sabbah, and al-Mutawa 2006: 267]. Thus, upon the establishment of the nation-state, it became necessary to construct a homogeneous national/ethnic identity to ensure the loyalty of different tribes and ethnicities to the nation and its central authority [Kanna 2010: 104; AlMutawa 2016: 10]. This identity formation became even more important when the state's rapid economic development started to attract migrant workers, causing non-citizens came to outnumber its citizens. Accordingly, the purpose of identity construction has shifted to a reaffirmation of the '"ownership" of the state' [Koch 2015: 522]. The state has thus drawn a clear distinction between Emirati citizens (who are 'owners' of Emirati heritage and the historical narrative) and non-citizens, who are only 'guests' [Freer 2018].

In this respect, some critics have argued that the UAE government has sought to propagate new cultural traditions or used its people's traditions to create new national narratives [Khalaf 2005: 261]. These include traditional sports, such as camel racing [Khalaf 2000] and falconry [Wakefield 2012;

Koch 2015: 2018], and economic activities such as pearling [Hightower 2014; Simpson 2014] and *dhaw* (traditional sailing vessel) seafaring [Gilbert 2011; Rab 2011: 44]. These national identifiers also extend to landscape and architecture, such as the Bastakiya (or *al-Fahidi*) district [Haggag and Rashed 2003: 256–58][2] in Dubai and its Islamic domes [Fox, Mourtada-Sabbah, and al-Mutawa 2006: 284], and further comprise other material culture elements such as national dress [Khalaf 2005; Ledstrup 2019] and the face mask, as discussed below.

The first part of this article addresses the UAE government's use of the face mask as a representation of national identity and tangible heritage. Drawing on Hobsbawm's theory of 'invented traditions' [2013: 1], I argue that the UAE government has articulated a narrative of 'Emiratiness', reframing the pre-existing face mask custom for the purpose of nation-building and construction of a homogeneous identity. To illustrate this, I examine how state-defined symbolic meanings embedded within the face mask have been repeatedly promoted in various spaces and mediums, including museums, cultural events, television shows, educational materials for children, and souvenirs. In the second part, I analyse the influence of government narratives on the current public discourse on the face mask. Recently, some Emiratis, especially men, have criticised a contemporary version of the Emirati face mask, the *burquʿ bushanab*, which consists of a narrower frame and does not conceal the face as more traditional models do.[3] These critics have argued that the contemporary mask does not fulfil the actual purpose of the mask, that is, to represent an 'appropriate' image of Emirati women and their identity. Through observations of online discussions on Instagram, I aim to contextualise what is considered the 'appropriate' Emirati face mask and define public expectations and representations of the ideal Emirati woman in relation to it.

Because these online discussions and the state discourse regarding the face mask often ignore the narratives and perspectives of masked women, the third part of this article explores the perspectives of both Emirati women who have adopted the contemporary Emirati face mask and young Emiratis who promote the face mask as an integral part of their national identity in various ways.

II. The UAE Government's Attitudes toward Masking

The construction of national identity has been one of the most strongly promoted projects in the UAE's process of nation-building. To cultivate a sense of history among the populace, the state has used customary and traditional materials from pre-oil and pre-industrial societies and re-invented them as 'Emirati' cultural traditions and heritage. In this manner, these customs were depicted as embodying an appropriate historical past [Blau 1995: 124; Bristol-Rhys 2009: 116].

In the official narrative, 'history', which includes heritage, is conceptualised as the time before 1960 when oil was discovered and the nation started to become independent [Caton and Ardalan 2010: 50]. The face mask worn by married women in the pre-oil UAE has become one of the most common elements of material culture in heritage construction, especially since the 1990s. In order to closely examine the shifting role of the face mask from daily attire to a cultural symbol of Emirati identity and

heritage, I divide my analysis into two historical periods: from the late 1960s to the 1980s and post 1990.

1. From the Late 1960s to the 1980s

The influx of oil revenue in the 1960s and 1970s affected every aspect of Emirati people's life, including their attire [El Mutwalli 2015: 88–95]. During this period, the government discouraged the use of the face mask as part of women's daily attire, especially among the younger generations, seeking to depict it as traditional dress of the pre-oil period: a relic belonging to state museums.

During the modernisation of Emirati society in the 1960s and 1970s, the younger generations, particularly men who had received a modern education and were influenced by Egyptian cinema and Western social movements, such as the hippie movement, adopted Western-style clothes and started to view pre-oil dress, such as the *kandūra* (robe) and *ghutra* (headdress), negatively, as insignia of the past [Crocetti 1999: 126; Khalaf 2005: 252]. Although the majority of women continued to wear evolved versions of the pre-oil attire, such as the *shaila* (head veil) and *kandūra*, the face mask began to disappear [El Mutwalli 2015: 105]. The first to remove the mask were the settled (*haḍar*) educated women in Dubai and Sharjah, followed by others in Abu Dhabi, Ajman, and Ras al-Khaimah [Soffan 1980: 37]. This process was catalysed by school policies that deregulated the use of the face mask and imposed school uniforms [El Mutwalli 2015: 289–90]. During that time, many educated women started to go out in public without concealing their face.[4]

The unpopularity and declining use of the face mask further accelerated during the Islamic revival, which began in the Gulf region in the late 1970s [Khalaf 2005: 251]. Contrary to the 1960s and 1970s fashion trends, many women began to dress more conservatively and modestly in accordance with the 'Islamic' dress code, adopting a more concealing headscarf (*sheila*) and black-cloak (*ʿabā* or *abaya*) [Khalaf 2005: 251; El Mutwalli 2015: 107]. Moreover, some women began to conceal their face with a black face veil called the *niqab* [El Mutwalli 2015: 105–6]. As this religious-inspired form of dress became more widely adopted in society, the face mask came to be defined as non-Islamic and was no longer publicly considered a necessary piece of daily attire [Soffan 1980: 37; El Mutwalli 2015: 292].

Thus, as a result of the introduction of both school uniforms and more conservative Islamic dress codes, the face mask, which had previously been obligatory for married women, lost its traditional function in Emirati society. However, the government still recognised its cultural value and began to preserve the masking custom as part of its pre-oil tradition, using it to construct an Emirati national identity. This was mainly achieved through the establishment of state museums that introduced visitors to Emirati cultural traditions and the lifestyle of the pre-oil period.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the UAE, along with several other states of the Arabian Peninsula, established state museums that 'intended to legitimise the rulers of the newly independent Gulf states and to cohere [*sic*] a new form of identity—the national—drawing on shared traditions and activities' [Exell 2018]. For example, the Al Ain National Museum, the first museum in the country, was established in 1969 under the guidance of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan. Initially, it only had archaeological and

ethnographic displays that introduced 'the life of the people before a couple of decades',[5] these traditional objects included cooking utensils, decorative ornaments, and daily livelihood tools. In this section of the museum, the face mask was presented as part of the traditional attire of the pre-oil period and was displayed on wax figures placed in various social landscapes (Fig. 1). As such, the face mask was given a new symbolic meaning, proudly embodying the nation's past and a unified 'Emirati' identity.[6] This new function of the mask assumed greater importance during the state's heritage development projects that began in the 1990s and should be considered in the wider context of a large demographic imbalance between nationals and non-nationals [Lootah 1999: 97].

Figure 1. *A female wax figure exhibiting the traditional 'Emirati' bridal costume in Al Ain National Museum*

(Source) Photograph by the author, March 2018.

2. Post-1990

The impact of the sudden economic, demographic, and cultural transformation occasioned by oil wealth was clearly visible in Emirati society during this time [Bristol-Rhys 2009: 108]. These changes were particularly conspicuous when considering the growing non-national population, who accounted for approximately 71 percent of the total population in 1993 [Khalaf and Alkobaisi 1999: 272]. The UAE government viewed this as a threat that could lead to cultural disorder or a loss of national identity [Al-Rasheed 2005: 10; Khalaf 2005; Picton 2010: 69; Hertog 2016: 348; Koch 2018]. This perceived threat motivated the government to shift their focus to legitimising the ruling power and uniting the

nationals by investing in a national heritage [Khalaf 2000: 259; Prager 2015: 30–31]. By cultivating a strong sense of 'Emiratiness' rooted in the cultural history of Bedouin Arabs, the 'original' and 'authentic' inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula, the UAE government established the basis for a clear distinction between nationals and non-nationals [Khalaf 2005: 259; Hawker 2002; Akinci 2018]. A state-derived sense of ownership and belonging was cultivated among nationals [Hawker 2002], culminating in the invention of a national dress that became 'a significant boundary marker for maintaining their distinct national identity' [Khalaf 2005: 265].

Simultaneously, individual emirates, such as the emirates of Dubai and Sharjah, strategically intensified their heritage development as tourist attractions for economic benefit [Hawker 2002: 6; Fox, Mourtada-Sabbah, and al-Mutawa 2006: 268–69]. Khalid bin Sulayem, the Director General of Dubai's Development of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, sought to explain these elements in the official heritage discourse by stating that 'the UAE's culture and heritage are among the keys to successful future growth of the tourism industry. Our heritage and cultural assets will help in the development of a sustainable tourism program' [Gulf News 1999: 2]. In other words, this government-led strategy of reconstructing and preserving heritage was intended to reshape 'both self-identity and outside perceptions' in the UAE [Hawker 2002: 7]. In this context, the face mask was redefined as an 'Emirati' face mask, attesting to a monolithic historical past and social value. This can be seen, for example, on the official website of the Department of Culture and Tourism of Abu Dhabi, which introduces the face mask as a traditional handicraft.[7] By repeatedly presenting the 'Emirati' face mask in the context of the Emirati heritage, the state transformed it into 'one of the most important heritage icons of the Emirates' [AlMoughanni 2018: 39] and promoted it through various mediums.

The face mask has thus played a significant role in state-owned cultural institutions, providing a distinctive visual representation of Emirati women. Today, all state museums of the seven emirates display wax figures of Emirati women with face masks or old photographs of masked women as a means of documenting the 'traditional' ways of life in the pre-oil period (Figs. 2, 3, and 4).[8] In these displays, the face mask is rendered as part of women's traditional costume and a symbol of female modesty. In the Fujairah Museum, for instance, where a replica of a masked woman is showcased in a glass cabinet, the label states: 'They [women] also put the "Burqua" [sic] to hide their faces when they go outside the house. Hence, the UAE women look respectful and beautiful'.[9] Another example is the Sharjah Heritage Museum, which allocates a whole section to masking that showcases the materials and tools used to make masks and states that masks are worn for modesty.[10] The same museum also held an exhibition entitled "The Emirati Burqa: An Intimate Object", organised by Karima Al Shomaly between November 15, 2017, and June 4, 2018 (Fig. 5). In the introduction to the exhibition, Al Shomaly defined the Emirati burquʿ as 'a specific type of face covering worn by Muslim women in the United Arab Emirates', common until the late 1960s.[11] This exhibition, consisting of Al Shomaly's personal collections, included masks, fabrics, and metal tins, as well as her artwork in the form of photographs, watercolours, and mixed-media pieces. This display reinforced the idea of an 'Emirati' face mask through material artefacts

Figure 2. *Wax figures in traditional dress and face masks representing traditional ways of living in the Ajman National Museum*

(Source) Photograph by the author, March 2017.

Figures 3–4. *Left: A masked mannequin in the Fujairah Museum*
Right: A masked wax figure in the Women's Handicraft Centre in Abu Dhabi

(Source) Photographs by the author, March 2017.

and scholarly contributions.

Additionally, other individual emirates' state museums aim to cultivate their own local identity distinctive from the national one by exhibiting specific ethnographic and archaeological materials

Figure 5. *The entrance to the exhibition 'The Emirati Burqa: An Intimate Object', in the Sharjah Heritage Museum*

(Source) Photograph by the author, March 2018.

belonging to the respective emirate [Blau 1995: 120; Prager 2015: 24; Hightower 2014: 71]. As for the face mask, the museum curators, who are mostly 'indigenous' people [Hightower 2014: 71], demonstrate these local identities by emphasising the particular cuts and designs of the mask.[12]

More audience-oriented heritage villages and festivals provide another example of the face mask's role in imagining the 'traditional' life of the pre-oil UAE Heritage villages. Examples such as Dubai Heritage Village and Abu Dhabi Heritage Village, are, as Ian Simpson observes, 'one of the most recognisable forms of officially sanctioned heritage' [2014: 38]. Unlike museums, these events include living persons acting as the inhabitants of particular settings [Prager 2015: 31]. Most are elderly women who demonstrate traditional handicrafts, offer traditional food to visitors, and perform 'folk' dance and rituals. They appear in traditional dress and wear face masks to enact ways of life from the pre-oil period (Figs. 6 and 7).[13] These visual representations and performances provide audiences with experiential impressions of past traditions and local cultural identities. The impact of these representations is sizeable: approximately 275,000 people visit these heritage sites annually, of whom 40 percent are Emirati nationals [Hobbs 2017: 69]. These sites are also used as educational tools for the younger generation, mostly university students [Caton and Ardalan 2010: 51]. The presentation of 'traditional' dress in these sites is closely connected to the tourist economy: objects adopting face mask designs are sold at local markets and airports, for instance, as cultural souvenirs from the UAE (Figs. 8 and 9).

Currently, as a result of the government's encouragement of local women's engagement in heritage preservation, many of them have begun to take part in performative activities at cultural events.

Figure 6. *A masked woman demonstrating making local food in front of tourists at the Heritage Village in Dubai*

(Source) Photograph by the author, August 2010.

Figure 7. *A masked woman demonstrating traditional handicrafts in front of tourists in a cultural institution in Dubai*

(Source) Photograph by the author, March 2017.

Figures 8–9. *Left: Decorative objects in the design of masked women, sold as cultural souvenirs for 50 dirhams each at Dubai International Airport*
Right: Pens designed as masked women sold for 15 dirhams each at Dubai International Airport

(Source) Photographs by the author, June 2017.

Interestingly, however, until recently, many of the hired performers were non-Emiratis: a large number came from Oman or from Baluchistan in Iran.[14] During my field research in the UAE, I encountered several non-Emirati performers officially employed to work in these heritage villages and perform 'Emirati' traditional activities. In order to represent 'traditional' Emirati women, these performers wore Emirati face masks different from those of their home regions, consisting of a wider frame and covering more of the face. In such contexts, the Emirati face mask makes the wearer 'Emirati' and not vice-versa. Indeed, as Daniel Miller argues, 'objects make people' [2010: 53]: in such representations, '[t]he clothes were not superficial, they actually were what made us what we think we are' [2010: 13]. This use of the Emirati face mask suggests its politically constructed symbolic meaning and defines it as belonging to an invented past.

Cultural authorities also promote the face mask as a symbol of Emirati heritage by providing visitors, especially foreigners, with a more direct form of heritage experience. This is done, for example, at locations such as the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding in Dubai and at events such as international book fairs in Sao Paulo and Paris, where the Sharjah government was invited to present Emirati and Arab culture in 2018 [Gulf News, August 27, 2018]. At these events, masked Emirati

women dressed visitors in traditional Emirati attire and masks, explaining that these garments were closely connected to their lifestyle and culture [Khaleej Times, March 20, 2018].[15] Cultural events for children held in 2018 as part of the 47th National Day celebrations in the Kings' School Nad Al Sheba in Dubai included a handicraft workshop organised by the Irthi Contemporary Crafts Council[16] where the participating children made keychains with traditional motifs of an Emirati man and woman. Participants were provided with boxes of materials to construct their keychains: the boxes given to girls contained a face mask, a black veil, and items representing eyes and mouths. This activity emphasised the role of the face mask as a cultural identity marker for Emirati women. Through such tactile experiences, the visitors are familiarised with a state-authorised imagined past that reinforces the idea of 'local' heritage.

Heritage construction and preservation using the face mask not only takes place in cultural institutions and during such events but also in everyday life. For example, a masked woman is used as a sign for the women's reception room at the Oasis Hospital in Al Ain. This image also appears as part of a 600-metre-long mural at the Al Raha Beach Club in Abu Dhabi (Fig. 10). Special stamps issued in 2004 depicting the traditional fashions of Emirati women also featured the masked woman motif. In television dramas and cultural programms, the face mask is used to portray Emirati women of the pre-oil period or contemporary elderly Emirati women. One weekly cooking program on the state-owned channel Dubai Media features masked Emirati women demonstrating traditional Emirati cuisine, clearly linking the face mask with a state-imposed cultural heritage. Furthermore, in 2006, *Freej*, the first Emirati animated television series, portrayed the everyday lives of four masked Emirati women

Figure 10. *A 600-metre long mural including paintings of masked women located in Abu Dhabi*

(Source) Photograph by the author, September 2019.

in modern-day Dubai [Freej 2018]. In January 2019, this animation became the first Arab-produced animation on Japanese television [Newbould 2018]. Animated characters of masked women are also used in flydubai's safety video, which employs local cultural elements to promote the government-owned airline. Consequently, the face mask plays a significant role as a cultural symbol both domestically and internationally, informing dispersed audiences about Emirati national heritage and identity.

Schools are also an important platform for cultivating Emirati national identity and a sense of cultural belonging, as reflected by the UAE's Ministry of Education vision and school curricula, which include subjects related to Emirati customs and traditions [Godwin 2006: 10; Ministry of Education 2017]. Some of my respondents during my fieldwork in the UAE were invited to their communities' public schools to demonstrate mask-making or exhibit traditional Emirati attire using wooden dolls dressed in traditional robes and masks. One respondent who worked as a primary school teacher in Ajman explained that some English textbooks use examples related to Emirati society that reference the face mask (i.e. 'My mother always wears her *burquʿ* [face mask]'). Although younger generations might not have opportunities to personally experience masking customs, the face mask and its associated traditions are repeatedly promoted in classrooms as a symbol of the UAE's national identity and heritage.

These examples show how the state's cultural authorities have strategically used the face mask and masking custom as Emirati cultural heritage to construct a national identity and history and to disseminate this narrative both inside and outside the UAE. However, these heritage practices mobilise masking customs selectively, drawing on certain aspects or values while downplaying others to serve the narratives promoted by the state. For example, the transnational aspect of the custom—specifically, that women on both sides of the Persian Gulf have historically practised masking—is often disregarded by the Emirati narrative. Some of the diverse meanings and functions of the mask are also excluded or denied. Instead, the state advocates a particular type of face mask,[17] asserting that it is the traditional 'Emirati' face mask, and emphasises the role of masking as a means of preserving modesty.

This government-promoted narrative of the 'Emirati' face mask has been solidified and successfully shared among nationals, having been turned into a symbol of national identity and heritage. This narrative, however, has created sensitivities around the 'appropriate' representation of the Emirati face mask. In recent years, a contemporary version of the face mask called the *burquʿ bushanab*, a moustache-style mask consisting of a narrower frame which does not conceal the face like 'traditional' masks, has become popular. It is worn by both middle-aged women, who start wearing adorned forms of the mask from their marriage day, and younger women, who wear it on special occasions. However, this contemporary face mask has been criticised by local people, particularly by men; their main argument is that it does not fulfil the original purpose of the Emirati mask, which is to provide modesty by covering the face. Thus, the contemporary face mask is not considered an 'appropriate' image of Emirati women and their identity. The following section provides more context to this debate, investigating perceptions of the 'Emirati' face mask by engaging with online discussions on the contemporary version of the face mask.

III. Public Attitudes toward the Face Mask: Online Discussions

As social media have become an increasingly popular tool of everyday communication [Wally and Koshy 2014: 7; Marzouki 2018: 67], they have also become an important part of the UAE's heritage construction and promotion. In addition to cultural authorities such as the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority, the Sharjah Department of Culture and Information, the Sharjah Institute for Heritage, and the Department of Culture and Tourism of Abu Dhabi, which use official accounts to advertise events or share information about Emirati cultural traditions, many Emiratis have created accounts where they post historical and cultural images of the UAE [el-Aswad 2014: 150; AlMutawa 2016: 5]. Instagram is one of the most frequently used social media platforms for sharing and commenting upon pictures, allowing users to interact with each other [Marzouki 2018: 73]. A survey conducted by the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Authority of the UAE in 2017 reported that 78 per cent of the national population used Instagram [Khaleej Times 2017]. In contrast to state cultural institutions, such as museums, where objects and their associated meanings are controlled and re-framed based on the state's authorised heritage discourse, this social media platform provides a space for individuals to share their own interpretations and constructions of Emirati heritage.

While many of the cultural imaginaries that individuals depict as symbols and representations of Emirati heritage align with those promoted by the government, they also tend to include historical imaginaries (i.e. photographs of people and objects of the pre-oil period) and contemporary representations of cultural traditions. On Instagram, the face mask is among the most illustrated symbols and is generally viewed as representing Emirati heritage. However, a debate over the 'appropriate' representation of the Emirati face mask is ongoing, exemplified by the negative comments directed toward images of the contemporary *burquʿ bushanab*. This controversy was first brought to my attention by Reem El Mutwalli, who has published extensively on Emirati dress in local magazines and has 279,000 followers on her Instagram account.[18] During my interview with El Mutwalli, she mentioned that she usually receives many positive comments on the images of Emirati traditional dress and objects she posted; however, when she posted the image of an Emirati woman, Umm Saʿīd, wearing a contemporary Emirati face mask, the post received many negative comments. Her explanation was as follows:

> The reactions of people, especially men, were surprising. People were angry, accusing her [Umm Saʿīd] of not representing *proper* or *real* Emirati cultural heritage. When I posted old pictures of women wearing bigger face masks, nobody said anything. Or even [when posting] women without veiling! But when it comes to current Emirati women trying to preserve their national, traditional, dress, and culture, if it is not what they [the audience] believe is a *proper* Emirati representation of culture—they would go against them. [emphasis added]

Although El Mutwalli responded to negative comments by suggesting that every person is free to choose

what he or she wants to wear and reminded contributors of the need to respect personal decisions, she continued to receive negative comments about the 'inappropriate' representation of the Emirati face mask.

It is not only this particular image that has given rise to criticism, but also any images of the contemporary Emirati face mask. Comments provided in response to three images of the contemporary Emirati face mask have helped identify particular issues raised by contributors [El Mutwalli 2017a; 2017b; Umm Saʿīd, 2017]. Although many did not use their real names, it was clear from the context of their comments and the information provided on their personal pages that they were Emiratis and included both men and women. Their criticisms can be broadly categorised into three themes (with individual criticisms sometimes involving more than one): the function of the mask, its relationship with Emirati heritage, and the wearer as a representative of the Emirati heritage. To start with, comments criticising the contemporary face mask's design often claimed that the mask fails to fulfil its 'authentic' purpose of hiding the wearer's face and ensuring modesty. These criticisms were expressed in the following terms: 'The central [purpose] of [wearing] the face mask is concealing the woman's face and not showing [her] eyebrows or lips' [@mozah 72536o]. 'Seriously, this face mask is neither concealing [the face] nor leading to modesty. If they don't wear it for modesty, then it is better that they don't wear it at all' [@isvs_511]. Finally, one user stated, 'The face mask that our mothers wore was for modesty and not for embellishment. This face mask that you wear should be thrown away' [@dubai_jory] .

As these comments indicate, many Emiratis perceive the face mask as a 'fixed' object of the past with a specific design and function, rather than as an object that can evolve and be modified according to social change and wearers' preferences. These perspectives, especially those of men, seem to have been shaped by the state's promotion of forms of heritage preservation meant to enhance feelings of national belonging.

Second, the contemporary face mask has been frequently criticised on the grounds of being an 'inappropriate' representation of Emirati heritage. One comment read: 'May God guide the one who wears this type of a face mask and conceal them [their faces]. This [face mask] should be called a mask, not the Emirati or *Khalīji* [Gulf] face mask' [@baby_face]. Another commentator reacted strongly to the proposition that the contemporary face mask was indebted to the style of masks from the city of Al Ain, stating that '[t] his is a distorted image of the face mask. It is worn by some women who don't want to wear the [traditional] face mask or think it does not suit them or makes their appearance ugly. This [contemporary face mask] doesn't belong to the Emirati society where the purpose of [wearing] the face mask is for modesty and showing the women's beauty in a modest way' [@Saifaalhemeiri]. These comments reflect these contributors' view of the face mask as a symbol of Emirati heritage. In its original form, it conveys national identity and pride, so it is no longer simply part of what was once women's daily attire in the pre-oil period. This newly-constructed idea of 'Emiratiness', primarily embodied in the state narrative, also leads to the idea of national belonging, as other comments demonstrated.

Finally, the comments also included negative remarks on the women wearing the contemporary

Emirati face mask. For example, Umm Saʿīd, who is a well-known Emirati social media influencer with over 85,800 followers [@um_saeed176, September 29, 2018], wears the contemporary mask on a daily basis and attends various television shows and cultural events, both inside and outside the UAE where she represents Emirati culture and traditions. While some people criticise her mask as not 'traditional' or 'authentic' in its representation of Emirati heritage, others have suggested that her personal background was the reason for her wearing this 'inappropriate' face mask. These comments included: 'Neither the indigenous Emirati woman [*al-marāʾ al-imārātīya al-aṣlīya*] [nor] the girls of this country wear such a face mask' [@shamsiia55]; 'Umm Saʿīd is not from the country [the UAE]' [@n6_007]; and 'Umm Saʿīd is from the Arab Republic of Egypt' [@alia3040]. In accusing her of being 'non-Emirati' despite her Emirati passport, these comments attempt to explain her 'error' on the grounds that the wearer is foreign and, by virtue of this fact, lacks knowledge of the 'authentic' meaning of the masking custom. These attitudes not only reflect the public discourse on the ideal image of an Emirati woman and the 'appropriate' Emirati face mask but also raise the issue of belonging by reaffirming that 'indigenous' Emiratis are the 'rightful owners' of the Emirati heritage [Koch 2015: 531].

These three types of negative comments on the contemporary Emirati face mask demonstrate the sensitivity around the representation of the face mask arising from the current public recognition of the mask as a symbol of Emirati national heritage and identity. These perspectives are also informed by a state narrative that creates the impression that the face mask has a fixed design and a monolithic function. Such perspectives are often held by men who have a less direct connection with masking. Nevertheless, these state and public narratives do not consider the views expressed by women, who have an intimate relationship with the face mask. The next part of the discussion, therefore, investigates the various forms of masking that Emirati women currently employ to convey their personal views and identities.

IV. Individual Women's Practices of the Face Mask Tradition

As illustrated above, the state has re-invented the masking custom and constructed the idea of the 'Emirati' face mask to enhance feelings of national belonging and convey knowledge about the UAE's past. In one respect, this state narrative has limited women's freedom to practice masking by enforcing a certain idea about the 'appropriate' mask; conversely, however, it has also encouraged younger generations to appreciate and preserve this custom as part of Emirati identity and heritage. Yet, in both cases, women have continued to build their own relationships with the face mask and contribute to the current heritage production. For example, despite negative attitudes toward the contemporary Emirati face mask, some Emirati women have made a conscious decision to wear it as an everyday practice.

Salama, a 53-year-old woman from Ajman, adopted the contemporary mask upon her marriage and currently wears it both inside and outside the house. During my interview, she mentioned that some people, including her husband and neighbours, criticised her for wearing a revealing type of mask, and her husband even suggested that she remove it and wear no mask at all. The attitude of Salama's

husband indicates that Emirati women's act of unmasking is not what people are concerned about, but rather the issue of modification or 'modernisation' of the traditional face mask, which changes the mask's 'authentic' meaning and function. In other words, a change of 'tradition' is perceived as a loss of identity. Moreover, in their view, the contemporary face mask fails to fulfil its purpose of concealing, thus negating the need for the wearer to use such a mask. Yet, for Salama, the contemporary face mask plays an important role in expressing her sense of belonging and self-confidence. According to Salama, older women were traditionally expected to conceal wider parts of their faces by adopting a large-framed mask to hide the signs of ageing. By wearing a narrow-framed face mask that shows the wearer's age, Salama attempts to resist this practice. In her words, '[w]earing the contemporary mask makes me feel younger. And it is my public statement that I am not old yet!'[19] By wearing a contemporary face mask, Salama aims at showcasing her Emirati identity while also expressing her self-confidence and showing that she is beautiful and youthful despite her age.

Luluwa, another Emirati woman from Al Ain in her late 30s, also wears the contemporary face mask daily. When I visited her for an interview, she was wearing a contemporary mask and explained that she always keeps her mask on, even inside her house, as her extended family lived in the same compound. Although she wears the contemporary mask when walking around the neighbourhood, she wears a black face veil when visiting a traditional market (*sūq*) to avoid people's gaze. Unlike Salama's husband, Luluwa's husband likes to see her wearing the contemporary mask because, she explained, he believes it beautifies her face. At the same time, she is also aware that some people hold negative views toward the contemporary mask, rejecting her reasoning that it is a means of beautification. As she admitted, 'I know my *burquʿ* is not the authentic one, and I know some people criticise it, but I am wearing it to beautify myself and I choose to wear this one'.[20] In a similar manner to Salama, Luluwa believes that masking provides a sense of belonging to and preserving the Emirati tradition, which has declined in the face of changing dress codes. However, from her perspective, *burquʿ* also provides a way of fashioning herself and pleasing her husband.

It is important to note that Salama and Luluwa are both Emirati and know the historical and social contexts of the face mask; however, they choose to wear a contemporary face mask for their own reasons. Although both referred to a sense of belonging (i.e. being Emirati) as their motivation for continuing to mask, their method of preserving the custom does not simply entail following the practices of the pre-oil period. For them, the face mask is not a fixed object, but a traditional means of expressing identities and reflecting modern fashions. In their opinion, adopting the contemporary face mask does not make them less Emirati. As Hessa, an Emirati face mask seamstress, explained during her interview, 'The face mask changes': it is a living tradition which continues to evolve.[21] Therefore, imposing standards of appropriateness on the face mask not only prevents this living tradition from being practised or passed down but also limits its evolution, a feature that reflects and represents the current values and attitudes of Emirati women.

Meanwhile, Emirati women not accustomed to masking have also taken part in preserving and

reviving the face mask in order to promote Emirati identity and heritage. One example is Abeer Mohammed, a Canadian-born Emirati who was raised between Abu Dhabi and Canada and works as a contemporary face mask designer. Through her work, she aims to salvage the face mask from extinction in order to preserve her culture and correct the misconceptions that the mask is purely Islamic or a symbol of oppression. In her opinion, the face mask represents a traditional fashion object of the Gulf region, particularly the UAE. However, initially, her uniquely-designed face masks were viewed as an 'insult', despite her intention being the exact opposite. During our personal conversations, she recalled how people's attitudes toward her work gradually changed:

> Back in 2010 when I started wearing my *burqa* designs to fashion events, I was laughed at by most people. However, when I launched my brand in 2011, I received mixed responses. On [the] one hand, I was harshly criticised not only by people from [the] UAE but [also] people from the [G]ulf. They were angry because I was 'playing' with the culture. And they were afraid I'd 'ruin' the elderly women by making them want to wear my modern *burqa* designs. On the other hand, I was celebrated and applauded for trying to revive the *burq*a from extinction, as, back in 2010, only [a] few elderly women continued to wear it. Young women saw the *burqa* as outdated and 'grandma-style' and you wouldn't see a single young woman wearing it. The *burqa* was associated with elderly women and was not fashionable.[22]

Abeer's approach to preserving the masking custom differs from that of the UAE government: she did not seek to reproduce the 'traditional' face mask and revive it as a 'past' tradition; on the contrary, she sought to re-invent the *burqu'* as a fashion item that would enable young women to wear a mask in modern society. As she confessed:

> I knew that by making the *burqa* fashionable, and by presenting a new way of wearing it (my way of wearing the *burqa* reveals the lips and eyebrows, the traditional way of wearing the *burqa* covers the lips and eyebrows), that [*sic*] I will make the *burqa* appealing and attractive for younger women and young girls as well, and therefore I'd be able to revive this iconic piece from extinction, and I was right.[23]

By intentionally modifying the design and introducing a new way of wearing the mask, she turned her masks into iconic fashion items of Emirati culture for both domestic and international fashion industries. Her work has also become popular among the women of the Gulf, the UAE in particular, many of whom have started to purchase her masks, despite the fact that they cost more than traditional versions (Fig. 11).[24] She emphasised that her intention in designing more fashionable masks was that they would be worn at celebrations and personal events and suit the fashion tastes of the wearers. She did not intend these highly stylised masks to be worn regularly in public or as a way of attracting men's gaze, although

Figure 11. *A photograph of Abeer Mohammed with a face mask of her own design featured on her business homepage*

(Source) Courtesy of Abeer Mohammed, https://www.burqaabori.com/.

she has been criticised for this by some.

Another Emirati woman, Maitha Al Khayat, is one of the best-known authors of children's books and illustrators in the UAE. Although she spent most of her childhood in the UK and the US, the *burquʿ* has had a great impact on her personal identity and work, as she clarified during her conversations with me: 'As a child being brought up in the West, I found it [the face mask] very fascinating when I saw my grandmother wearing it every time we visited her in the UAE during the summer. To me, it looked like a crown and gave her authority, as if she was a legendary chieftess. That image still stayed in my mind till I grew up. Maybe that's why I chose to cover my face'.[25] Maitha covers her face with a black face veil, not the mask, mainly for practical reasons. However, she views the mask as a representation of Emirati culture and tradition, and she often depicts it in her books (Fig. 12). She gave me one example:

My second book, *Grandma Moody in Venice*, was about a traditional Emirati grandmother whose hobby is crafting traditional *borqas* and decides to take her grandchildren to Venice to enjoy Italian culture. She gets lost in a Mardi Gras party and wins a mask competition, which in the end teaches an Italian salesman how to make an Emirati *borqa* [...] To sum up, my stories do not preach or lecture about the attire—the stories completely have other motives yet present our culture in the context to engage more local children to [read] books and promote reading, which is a struggle with the new gadgets that are rep[l]acing books for entertainment.[26]

Figure 12. *Maitha giving a reading of Grandma Moody in Venice to children*

(Source) @maithaalkhayat, December 19, 2018.

While framing the face mask as a representation of Emirati identity, Maitha also conveys her pride in the masking custom in her illustrations, which depict the masked woman as strong, open-minded, and acknowledged for her mask-making skills. By placing her story in a global context, Maitha aims to revive the custom within contemporary society and teach children about this vanishing custom as a means of preservation.

Much like Maitha, Fatma Lootah expresses her intimate relationships with masks through visual arts. Fatma is an Emirati artist whose paintings have contributed greatly to presenting the Emirati culture and heritage both inside and outside the country. In her work, the image of a masked woman is often included to represent Emirati identity and heritage. Several of her iconic paintings of masked women have been displayed in the Sultan bin Ali Al Owais Cultural Foundation in Dubai and on the façade of the tower of the NASDAQ MarketSite in Times Square, New York. During our conversations, she explained her reason for drawing masked women in the following terms:

The beauty that can't been [*sic*] seen but reflected under a copper colour mask which reflects the golden desert sun. Eyes that shows the depth of our mother's souls. A concentration of beauty of a land where women had and has [*sic*] words of wisdom that must be heard [...] for me [...] it is a

must memory [...] that colour [*sic*] our heart and keep [*sic*] it warm.[27]

Although she does not wear a mask, her memory of seeing her masked mother built her relationship with the custom and was the inspiration for many of her artworks. Some of her paintings include a young woman wearing the contemporary face mask; thus, they document both the past and the present Emirati heritage.

These examples illustrate unofficial, or bottom-up, heritage practices of the face mask, with Emirati women articulating their individual perspectives and interpretations as forms of cultural belonging. Contrary to the state narrative and public perceptions, which focus on a particular symbolic meaning and ascribe a monolithic function to the face mask, the mask continues to be modified, fashioned, and used by some women who seek to keep the custom alive. Although these practices are performed in a flexible and personalised way, it should be noted that the association of Emirati national identity and heritage with the face mask is in fact also perpetuated by the state. Thus, despite its varied perceptions, the mask is closely connected to the narrative of Emirati identity, which in turn enhances individuals' sense of belonging to this largely imagined community.

V. Conclusion

This article addresses the impact of state attitudes on the use of the face mask in the UAE. The modernisation and development of Emirati society has discouraged the use of the face mask as daily attire, leading to the masking custom becoming unpopular among women. However, at the same time, the emirates have gradually become aware that they can use the face mask tradition to achieve specific socio-political goals and, as a result, have started to acknowledge its importance and preserve it in the form of heritage. Thus, the state has used the mask to construct a unified identity and cultivate a sense of belonging among its citizens. In this process, the face mask has been reinvented as the 'Emirati' face mask, embodying the distinctive cultural and historical past of an 'imagined community' [Anderson 2006: 24]. Such a state narrative has shaped the current perspectives of women and the community at large toward the mask and has impacted their engagement with this tradition.

Many Emirati women, both young and old, are actively engaged in preserving the face mask tradition, thus contributing to the creation of an 'Emirati' identity and heritage preservation. Yet the associated meanings and functions that individual women employ through the face mask often differ from those of the official discourse, which seeks to valorise a specific mask form as authentically Emirati. In addition, as the online comments attest, it is important to acknowledge a gendered approach to the *burquʿ*, with men being more closely aligned with the state narrative. This aspect is particularly important because it has implications for what is considered the 'authentic' or 'correct' image of Emirati women.

Notes ————————————————————

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2 The district previously known as *Bastakiya* (the name of an Iranian town) was recently Arabized and renamed *Al-fahidi* [Sindelar 2018].

3 Manami Goto, field notes. The field research on which this article is based was conducted at various times between 2016 and 2019, and includes personal interviews with 71 women in the UAE.

4 Manami Goto, field notes.

5 This description comes from a caption in the Al Ain National Museum.

6 In reality, however, local variations of masks existed; for example, according to Al Shomely (2016: 102) approximately 30 different designs have been identified since the 1950s.

7 One example is under the category of 'Handicraft', which introduces the 'Burqa' with the claim that '[i]n the United Arab Emirates, the Burqa'a [face mask] is a traditional form of modesty'. See Abu Dhabi Culture, https://abudhabiculture.ae/en/discover/handicraft/burqa (accessed 15 January 2020).

8 Manami Goto, field notes.

9 See the folkloric clothes section in the Fujairah Museum (1 April 2017).

10 See the panel entitled 'Al Burga' in the Sharjah Heritage Museum (28 March 2018).

11 See the panel entitled 'The Emirati *Burqa*: An Intimate Object' in the Sharjah Heritage Museum (28 March 2018).

12 Manami Goto, field notes.

13 Manami Goto, field notes.

14 Manami Goto, field notes.

15 Manami Goto, field notes.

16 The Irthi Contemporary Crafts Council was established under the patronage of Sheikha Jawaher bint Mohammed Al Qasimi, the wife of the ruler of Sharjah. See its official website at https://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/organisations/irthi/.

17 This consists of a wider frame, covering the eyebrows, lips, and most of the cheeks.

18 On this account, she shares images and knowledge of different types of Emirati dress, jewelry, and ornaments on a daily basis.

19 Salama, interviewed by the author, Ajman, February 2018.

20 Lulwa, interviewed by the author, Al Ain, March 2018.

21 Hessa, interviewed by the author, Al Ain, March 2018.

22 Abeer Mohammed, direct message on social media by the author, June 2018.

23 Abeer Mohammed, direct message on social media by the author, June 2018.

24 Her masks sell online for between 300 and 700 dirhams, equivalent to 60 and 140 British pounds, respectively.

25 Maitha Al Khayat, email to the author, January 2019.

26 Maitha Al Khayat, email to the author, January 2019.

27 Fatma Lootah, direct message on social media, January 2019.

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