

Ethnography of Ornaments in the Last Hundred Years of Shushtar from a Multicultural Perspective

Mansour Kolahkaj

Associate Professor, Graphic Design Department, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran (Corresponding Author)/ mansor.kolahkaj@gmail.com

Masoumeh Sodeir

M.A. in Art Research, Art Research Department, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz Iran/ sodeirmasoumeh@gmail.com

Zahra Rasti

M.A. in Art Research, Art Research Department, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz Iran/ zahra.rasti1985@gmail.com

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Introduction

Ornaments constitute a broad category of cultural artifacts that serve decorative, luxurious, and occasionally functional purposes. Beyond their material and financial significance, certain types of ornaments fulfill everyday, ritualistic roles, symbolizing the cultural identity, beliefs, and the ideologies of societies while they reflect the craftsmanship and aesthetic sensibilities of artisans across different historical periods. Among these regions, the city of Shushtar, formerly the capital of Khuzestan province, has historically been a significant center for ornament production. Due to the cultural diversity of its inhabitants, the city's ornaments exhibit a distinctly multicultural character. This research seeks to examine the factors contributing to the development of this multicultural perspective in Shushtar's handicrafts. It also explores the nature of the ornaments produced within this context, aiming to identify the decorative elements and shared cultural meanings embedded in Iranian craftsmanship with a particular focus on Khuzestan region, Shushtar, and its surrounding areas over the past century.

Research Method

The present research is categorized as a qualitative and ethnographic study. One characteristic of ethnographic research is the detailed description and analysis of culture in its broadest sense. Among the various approaches to ethnography, this study adopted an interpretive and participatory approach. Data collection methods included listening to conversations—following the communication ethnography model—alongside field observations, visual documentation, interviews, and library research. Furthermore, artificial intelligence tools were employed in line to explain and enhance the theoretical framework with the latest APA style guidelines. Both in-text and external citations adhered strictly to these standards. Analysis of the conversations revealed that multiple factors—such as environmental conditions, the multicultural nature of the region, and the beliefs of its inhabitants—have significantly influenced the development of various types of ornaments in Shushtar. Consequently, relying on multicultural theory, the findings of this research are presented through descriptive and analytical methods, supported by visual evidences and a semiotic analysis of ornaments within their cultural contexts. The sample was selected purposefully, comprising a total of 55 items to ensure a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter.

Research Findings

The city of Shushtar, which served as the center of Khuzestan province until the early 1300s in the Persian calendar, boasts a rich and enduring cultural history alongside its urban legacy. This heritage is exemplified by landmarks such as the Sasanian water management system, the renowned production of exquisite fabrics like silk and brocade, and the city's authentic architecture and traditional urban fabric. Due to its central position and extensive internal and external interactions throughout history, Shushtar has been a hub for the movement of people and the flourishing of various arts and crafts, including handicrafts and ornaments. The trade relationships of Shushtar's inhabitants, particularly with India in earlier centuries, remain prominent in the collective memory of the city's ancestors.

The convergence of diverse ethnic groups, especially Bakhtiari and Arab communities, with their distinct and profound cultural roots has played a pivotal role in shaping the city's cultural and artistic identity. This multicultural environment has led to the creation of ornaments that appeal to the tastes of Shushtari, Bakhtiari, and Arab communities. These ornaments, some of which are introduced in this study, highlight not only the exceptional craftsmanship of Shushtar's jewelers but also the cultural convergence evident in the production and consumption of both durable and decorative goods. This cultural synthesis preserves the intrinsic values of each contributing culture while fostering shared artistic expressions.

The ornaments reflect the dynamic and ongoing interactions between the core and peripheral cultures of the region, which resonate deeply with the inclusive and collaborative spirit of Shushtar's people. These interactions have resulted in the creation of enduring adornments that embody cultural exchange and harmony. Examples of these adornments include the **Ben-nay**, **Chalaab**, and Hand Bracelets specific to the Bakhtiari, Arab, and Shushtari communities, respectively. Additionally, ornaments used jointly by Bakhtiari and Arab communities such as **Zagour** and **Khokhe** as well as other unique items like **Chaf al-Badeh (Abuloozeh)**, **earrings under Shileh-Dala'eh** (crafted in gold or silver with colored beads), **Azmam**, **Gatar**, **Gabkab**, **Shaa'eh (Arun)**, **Tawg**, **Maskereh**, **Qabchi**, and **Zamen**, illustrate the rich tapestry of cultural artistry in Shushtar.

Conclusion

The residents of Shushtar are a blend of diverse cultures, including Shushtari, Bakhtiari, and Arab communities, who have coexisted in the city and in its outskirts through various fluctuations in history. As the center of Khuzestan until approximately a century ago, Shushtar's illustrious history in fabric and garment production and trade significantly influenced its artisans, particularly its ornament makers, establishing their reputation as highly skilled craftsmen. These artisans, adhering to traditional practices, created a variety of decorative items, life necessities, and objects imbued with dualistic or religious significance. These included talismans and evil-repelling artifacts, tailored to the diverse tastes of the city's multicultural populace. This population, shaped by a fusion of cultures partially influenced by the region's geography, embodies what theorists describe as cultural integration. Over time, these communities have cohabited and cultivated shared traditions. In this sociocultural milieu, ornaments like the **Bannai**, **Chelab**, and **Hil bracelets**—used respectively by the Bakhtiari, Arab, and Shushtari people—or shared items like **Zagur** and **Jorkheh**, exemplify the multicultural demands of Shushtar. The production of these ornaments underscores the concept of 'cultural convergence,' highlighting the blending of distinct cultural practices into unified expressions. Beyond their decorative functions, many of these items served as talismans to ward off evil or misfortune. Examples include pins with both aesthetic and protective purposes, handkerchiefs, clip pins, and **tekke bands**. Additionally, body ornaments such as bracelets, earrings, chestpieces, anklets, and rings often carried dual roles, combining decoration with symbolic or protective functions. Ornaments affixed to clothing also demonstrated a remarkable variety. Even seemingly minor and insignificant items were crafted with meticulous

detail by Shushtar's ornament makers. These types of adornments appear to have been primarily used by the urban population of Shushtar. While reflecting the dominant cultural tastes of the Shushtari, Bakhtiari, and Arab tribes within the city or in its surrounding, the individual artistry and stylistic preferences of the ornament makers often prevailed. Some of these ornaments bear names that are less familiar today, a testament to Shushtar's multicultural roots. Furthermore, the presence of ornamental designs on seemingly trivial objects such as footstones or the metal components of fans, attests to the enduring tradition of decoration in Iranian art. This tradition, rooted in the cultural convergence of Shushtar, has ensured the continuous demand for and the appreciation of artistic embellishments in this unique multicultural city.

Keywords: Ornaments, Shushtar, Ethnography, Multicultural, Khuzestan.