

Consuming Qashqai Dress, or Local Iranian Dress, in the 21 Century: Space, Place, and Meanings

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The Qashqai tribe is one of many ethnic groups in Iran with its own culture and traditions. There are more than 250 clans within the tribe, each with its own history and migration story (Ansari, 2013). Different regions of Iran, including Fars Province where the Qashqai tribe is predominantly located, produce and use different Iranian local dress, sometimes interchangeably referred to as traditional dress, local clothes, or Turkish dress. Using mostly regional fabrics, tribe members developed these clothes to reflect the culture and language of their people with distinct patterns and consideration of the surrounding climate (Mohammadi, 2017). Throughout Iran's history, the government has influenced fashion and styles, including prioritizing Western styles over traditional dress for parts of the 20th century (Yari & Hakakbashi, 2009). Yet, these local clothing styles have remained a significant part of the Qashqai tribe members' cultural identity into the 21st century (SB/MQ, 2017; Stone, 1962).

Scant information exists about the meanings of these traditional Iranian garments and ensembles in contemporary society that have persisted throughout the long history of societal influences of allowable fashions and styles (Yari & Hakakbashi, 2009). Thus, we asked the following questions related to Qashqai Iranian tribal members in the 21st century: what does traditional dress negotiate about identities, and how do space and place intersect with identity negotiations through traditional dress? There is a dearth of research dress in this community, yet we narrowed our focus to Qashqai women owing to our research's exploratory nature.

We conducted a qualitative research approach, specifically oral history interviews, to explore the consumption of Qashqai dress in the 21st century and the interactions between space, place, and meanings (Leavy, 2011). We completed 10 oral histories with Qashqai women in Iran to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex ways in which Qashqai women consume dress and form meanings attached to it. We recruited participants from the Qashqai community in Iran who identified as women, actively wore the Qashqai tribe traditional dress, and were over 18 years of age. We conducted the oral history interviews in a semi-structured format and used photo-elicitation to facilitate the interview process (Joy & Numer, 2017). The interview schedule was developed based on past literature on dress and identity, Iranian traditional dress, Qashqai identity, and theories about meaning-making or interactionism. The interviews were conducted in Farsi, audio recorded verbatim, transcribed, and then translated into English. We also then did a back-translation into Farsi to confirm that the meanings had not been lost in translation. We created an oral history repository in alignment with this research method (withheld for anonymity). Data analysis for this study involved a grounded theory approach, utilizing open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). To increase validity, we engaged in member checking and to increase reliability, we developed a codebook during data analysis.

In our study we engaged with the intricate interplay among Qashqai women, their identities, and the significance of traditional attire within diverse sociocultural contexts. We identified the overarching theme of feelings of connectedness, that is, a sense of association within and among numerous and different spaces and places, interrelated to the Qashqai

traditional dress. Numerous scholars have identified connectedness as a theme in relation to ethnic communities and their traditional dress (e.g., Aspelund, 2011; French & Reddy-Best, 2023; Gradén, 2014; Saliklis, 1999; Shukla, 2015). In our study we expand on the nuances and intricate details related to connectedness, examining a more in-depth understanding of how this concept is negotiated within, between, around, and through traditional Qashqai dress. Fostering a sense of connectedness is important from a health perspective because there is significant evidence suggesting the benefits of feeling connected (e.g., Haslam et al., 2015). Thus, we clarify the ways these Qashqai women fostered, experienced, and negotiated connectedness.

When discussing what they negotiated about their identities through traditional dress and how space and place intersected, the participants shared an overwhelming feeling of connectedness. They expressed a profound sense of connection to their Qashqai identity through the symbolic significance of the traditional dress. The dress served as a powerful link to different facets of their identity, including ties to a traditional nomadic lifestyle or different regions where the Qashqai tribe reside now or in the past, with some individuals expressing a desire to retain specific dress characteristics as a tribute to their ancestors. For instance, Nazanin A. stated that, “traditional clothing, for me, is a reminder of unity, a reminder of belonging to a specific group. It signifies camaraderie and belonging to a particular community.”

The women also articulated how the dress connected them to diverse aspects of their identities, such as age and marital status, contributing to a multifaceted sense of self through the dress. Interactions with family members played a crucial role in the participants’ learning about their cultural identity and the significance of traditional dress, thus increasing their feelings of connectedness to family members through the dress traditions. Insights from mothers, grandmothers, and community members, coupled with external sources like books and social media, collectively enriched the participants’ understanding and appreciation of both their cultural heritage and their connectedness. The process of obtaining the traditional dress was multifaceted, with the women mostly acquiring it from traditional markets, evoking a sense of nostalgia and connection to historical trading practices. Additionally, the practice of passing down clothing between generations reinforced the intergenerational ties associated with the dress or the shared practice of creating the ensemble together. Wearing the traditional dress proved a transformative experience for the women—they reported feeling more connected to their authentic selves as members of the Qashqai community when adorned in these garments and accessories. Specific contexts deepened this connection, such as weddings or community events where the physical space became a communal area for shared identity and celebration.

In our work, space and place certainly intersected with culture and identity (De Certeau, 1984; Massey, 2005). In thinking through our work, we theorize the different ways that space, and the multiple possibilities involved in space formation (De Certeau, 1984; Massey, 2005), materialize in and through embodied practices, thus creating “placeful” meanings and memories related to cultural identity (Casey, 1996, p. 14). Here we conceptualize this meaning making through (a) cognitive space between the past and the present, (b) spaces interacting directly with the participants’ family members, (c) space involved in the interactions between themselves and the surrounding built environment, and (d) the space between their fleshy bodies and the tangible Qashqai traditional ensembles. Overall, these findings underscore the intricate web of emotions and connections that traditional dress fosters, influencing individuals’ connections to the self and their communities.

Our work on traditional dress and identity has broad implications in society and contributes to larger philosophical questions. For instance, how do we find connection as humans in society? In what ways do we feel disconnected, and what contributes to those experiences? Overall, the broader world culture, communities, and society can learn from the participants' experiences to find ways to think through, reflect on, and perhaps increase their social connectedness, an important component of well-being. Studying traditional dress is only one way to examine connectedness, and future researchers should continue work in this area for different regions, populations, and fashions.

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