

Element Form

1. Defining the intangible cultural heritage element

- Name of the element as used:

Bisht

- Other name (if any):

Men's abaya, robe

- Domain(s) of heritage manifested by the element:

Social practices, rituals and festive events – Traditional Emirati costumes

- Practitioners and groups concerned:

Men

- Geographical location and range of the element:

All regions of the United Arab Emirates

- Brief description of the element:

Bisht (Men's Outer Robe)

The men's outer robe (*bisht*) is one of the traditional costumes in the countries of the Arabian Gulf, as they are worn by males of all ages above a *thob* or a *dishdasha*. The *bisht* holds a significant place in a man's attire, bestowing upon him dignity and modesty, rendering it indispensable for leaving one's home. However, as society has progressed, the *bisht* has become impractical for daily

tasks and mobility. Consequently, it is now reserved for formal occasions, holidays, and festive gatherings, such as weddings.

Bisht Description

This is an outer robe for men, made of wool with embroidered edges. It is worn over clothes and extends to the feet, open at the front with two openings for the arms, but no sleeves. A bisht has several benefits, especially for travelers on foot in the desert, as it was traditionally used as a blanket or sheet at night. Travelers also used it as a tent in strong winds and as a jacket to conceal items.

Bisht's are traditionally white, but today, colors include dark brown, black, light grey, golden yellow and khaki.^{1 2}

A summer bisht differs from a winter bisht according to the wool's texture — light in summer and heavy in winter.³

Names and Types of Bisht

A bisht is named according to the town or city in which it is made. The countries that are most famous for the weaving and embroidery of handmade bishts are Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Kuwait.

Bishts are categorized according to their origin and quality. The most important are:

- ❖ Najafi Bisht: Imported from the city of Najaf in Iraq. This is considered to be among the best and most luxurious types, due to its softness and the accuracy of the sewing. It is used in summer.

¹ Khaki: Light brown. In Iraq there is an outer robe called *Khakiya*, which comes from the Persian word *khak*, which means sand or soil.

² Sania Khamis Subhi, *Samples of Traditional Costumes in the Arab World and their Relationship to Folklore*, Alam Al Kotob, Cairo, 2007, p. 155-157.

³ Hassan Qayed, *The desert of the UAE*, Al Ittihad Foundation, Abu Dhabi, 1980, p. 120.

- ❖ Hasawi Bisht: This is next to the Najafi in terms of quality. It belongs to the Ahsaa region, from which it takes its name.^{4 5}
- ❖ Shami Bisht: Imported from Damascus in Syria, it is known for its excellent types. However, it can sometimes be of a cheap quality in terms of its textile and embroidery.
- ❖ Doranki Bisht: Imported from Iran, *doranki* is a Persian word that means 'bicolored' because the color of the bisht changes in the sun and the shadow.
- ❖ Nizwani Bisht: Named after the town of Nizwa in Oman. It is made of thick wool and it comes ready-tailored. It is also called the Omani Bisht.
- ❖ Indian Bisht: Known as the *daffat joukh*, it is thick as it is made of joukh.⁶ It was traditionally worn by merchants.⁷

Tailoring the Bisht

In the past, bishts and outer robes used to be handmade by skilled men and women. A bisht is made of camel and goat wool, spun into a textile that can be mixed with cotton or silk threads. If a bisht loses its color, it is dyed again with a mixture of henna, pomegranate and walnut shells. Al-Ahsa, Bahrain, and Sharjah are famous for making bishts in the Gulf.

There are various tailoring methods for making a bisht.

The first is *darbawiya*, which is manual tailoring using original *zari* embroidery.

⁴ Al Ahsaa: The eastern region of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

⁵ Sania Khamis Subhi, previous reference, p. 155-157.

⁶ Joukh: A textile basically made of wool. Joukh is a type of Felt (*libbad*), which is among the oldest textiles used in human history, dating from around 8000 years ago. It was used in the fabrication of tent covers, furniture, carpets and shoes.

⁷ Mustafa Badr, *Amazing Facts about the UAE*, Al Raya Center for Publishing and Media, 2010, pp. 106-108.

Various designs are used in the handmade tailoring and embroidery of the edges and include *mandili*, *malaki*, *makatta'* and *makassar*.⁸

In the past, an Arab man used to have one outer robe to wear in the summer and the winter, and did not change it for five years.⁹

Now, people have many different kinds of outer robes.

2. Features of the Element:

- Concerned practitioners and performers of the element (including name, gender, occupational category, etc.):

Men of all age groups who wear the bisht and women who hand-knit the bisht.

- Other participants whose work relates to the element:

Merchants, vendors who display the bisht at fairs and festivals, craftsmen who restore used bishts by dyeing them using natural materials and expatriate workers who carry out the sewing and embroidery work.

- The language(s) used (in the element):

The local vernacular dialect used in the nomenclature associated with the bisht, in addition to traditional proverbs, sayings, and stories that reference the bisht.

- Tangible elements associated with the practice of the element and its transmission, such as: instruments, equipment, costumes, spaces, and ritual tools (if any):

Raw materials derived from animal sources (fur, hair, wool), needles, spinning tools, scissors, cotton threads, knitting machine.

⁸ Al Dhafra, Issue No. 7, Thursday, 1/11/2007, Al Ghurair Printing & Publishing, Dubai, p.105.

⁹ Hassan Qayed, previous reference, p. 124.

- Other intangible elements related to the practice and transmission of the element in question (if any):

Conversations and stories that take place between women or men as they sew the bisht, in addition to the proverbs, sayings, poems, and other literary art forms that reference the bisht.

- Customary practices governing access to the element or any of its specific aspects:

The bisht is worn within the framework of societal customs and traditions, in terms of its specifications, the method for wearing the costume, and the occasions when it is typically worn. There are no practices restricting access to the element within the framework of these traditions.

- Modes of transmitting the element to others within the group:

- Transmission of experiences from parents to their children.
- Raising awareness about the importance of traditional costumes via the media, educational and community institutions.
- Acquiring knowledge related to the element in exhibitions, festivals, and activities related to national heritage.

- Concerned organizations if any (associations/civil society organizations, etc.):

- Emirates Heritage Club.
- Heritage associations.
- Traditional Handicrafts Festival.
- Entities that promote fashion and traditional clothing.

3. Status of the element: its viability and sustainability

- Threats to the practicing of the element in the context of the relevant community / groups concerned:

The bisht is a traditional costume worn by men within the framework of the prevailing societal customs and traditions.

- Methods of preserving and promoting the element:

- Cooperation among governmental and community institutions in the preservation of national heritage.
- Spreading awareness about the importance of traditional costumes by parents and elders.
- The media through its role in promoting the national dress.
- Including facts about the national dress in school curricula, which contribute to raising awareness about the importance of the national dress.

4. Data: restrictions, and private permissions (collectively and access)

- Group / community approval and involvement in data collection:

The bearers of the element have cooperated with researchers by providing the required information regarding the element. Furthermore, they have expressed their approval towards data collection and documentation.

- Restrictions on data access and use:

There are no restrictions, as the bisht is accessible to everyone across all age groups. It is commonly worn on traditional occasions and special events.

- Experts and narrators (their names, position, and affiliation):

- Dates and locations of data collection:

16/03/2015

5. Sources of information about the element (if any)

- Literature: books, articles, and others:

- Al Dhafra, Issue No. 07, Thursday 01/11/2007, Al Ghurair Printing & Publishing, Dubai, p. 105.
- Badr, Mustafa, *Amazing Facts about the UAE*, Al Raya Center for Publishing and Media, 2010, pp. 106–108.
- Sobhi, Sania Khamis, *Samples of Traditional Costumes in the Arab World and their Relationship to Folklore*, Alam Al Kotob, Cairo, 1st edition, 2007.
- Qayed, Hassan, *The desert of the UAE*, Al Ittihad Foundation, Abu Dhabi, 1980.

- Audio–visual materials, records etc. in archives, museums, and private collections (if any):

Documentary recordings are available through visual media platforms, especially satellite channels specializing in heritage content

- Documentary materials and tools in archives, museums and private collections (if any):

Documentary materials and various publications about the element can be found in the archives.

6. Data about the inventory process

- The person(s) who performed the classification and collection:

- Researcher: Hamda Mohammed Al Shamsi.
- Reviewed by: Dr. Mazyad Nasrawi.

- Date the information was entered into the inventory:

15/08/2019

- Date of information update:

22/10/2020

- Pictures:

