

Ethnological Museum of Bandar-e Kong: a collection of living maritime cultural heritage and oral history

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ABSTRACT

Bandar-e Kong is a port-town located in the Iranian coasts of the Persian Gulf, which flourished in the 17th century CE with the presence of the Portuguese. Since then, Bandar-e Kong has been a departure point for Iranian ships sailing the triangle trade to India, Africa, and the Persian Gulf. The topic of this paper fits best within the **Session: Collections-Based Research** because this paper aims to introduce Bandar-e Kong’s living maritime heritage through the Ethnological Museum’s collections.

The Ethnological Museum collections were donated by the town residents. It was founded in 2011 by retired captains and mariners of Bandar-e Kong, sailors themselves to Africa and India. These sailors turned curators preserve the UNESCO’s intangible heritage of *Traditional Skills of Building and Sailing Iranian Lenj Boats in the Persian Gulf*. In 2020 the authors were funded by the Municipality of Kong to document the objects curated at this museum.

Our holistic approach recorded all vessels and related tools. All objects underwent morphological analysis, and each sailor-curator was interviewed to amass oral histories on the construction and use of the objects. These details together ultimately produced an oral history of the port-town of Bandar-e Kong during August and September of 2020.

*All letters and wording not in Latin alphabet are Persian.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage, maritime ethnography, Persian Gulf, Bandar-e Kong

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INTRODUCTION

The Ethnological Museum of Bandar-e Kong is a public effort to safeguard the national intangible heritage of navigation and ship/boat building in Iran. Objects are donated, entrance is free and curators volunteer. These curators are retired mariners from the triangle trade between the Persian Gulf, India, and Africa. Their presence and conversation play integral roles in the museum collections.

In 2020 the authorities of the Municipality of Kong funded the authors to create an inventory form and accession each object in the museum collection. The outcome resulted in eight overarching categories. This process of collections management and the ensuing discussion on our select objects is why our paper fits best within the **Collections-Based Research Session**.

Of the 491 objects recorded, we narrow our discussion to four. We selected the four objects as examples of the richness of intangible heritage in our recording process. Following is a short introduction to the port-town of Kong, the creation of the Ethnological Museum of Bandar-e Kong, our inventory framework and results, and discussion of four objects from the collection.

BANDAR-E KONG

Bandar-e Kong or “Kong Port” (بندر کنگ), is a town in the west of Hormozgan province, on the Iranian coast of the Persian Gulf. Today, Kong is approximately 6.5 Km² with a +20,000 population.

The Portuguese had their main port on the island of Hormuz until 1622 when Iranians repossessed it (Lorimer 1915, 23-27; Al-Salimi and Jansen 2015, 223-235; Vosuqi and Khayrandish 2005). Subsequently, the Portuguese attacked Iranian coasts to recoup their losses. In response, Iran’s king, Shah Abbas the Great, agreed the Portuguese could settle along the coast (pointedly not on an island) (Floor 2006, 238-239) (1625 CE). The Portuguese chose Kong and remained there until 1721-22 CE (Stiffe 1899, 297; Floor 2006, 429-439; Habibi and Vosuqi 2008, 13-16). The Portuguese presence is still visible with the castle ruins (picture 1 top) with more likely to the east, based on geomagnetic survey (Mohammadkhani 2020, 95-99).

Aside from the Portuguese, Kong remained an active port for Iranian ships sailing to Africa, India and west of the Persian Gulf (Tavernier 1678, 94-95; L’Estrang 1686, 157; Lorimer 1908, 1041; Noorbakhsh 1996; Hassannia and Bahri 2018). This continues to the present day; the *Mihandūst* (میهن دوست) voyage from Dubai to Mombasa that Kaplan reported is a good instance (trip completed in 1974 Kaplan 2015). There is still an active traditional (wood) boat-building yard (picture 1 bottom), at 33 hectares (calculated in Google Earth) possibly the largest along the Persian Gulf. The wooden ships, known as *lanj/lenj* in Iran, are still built, repaired, and sailed thus continuing nautical traditions.



Picture 1: top: the Portuguese remains on the coast of Kong (copyright permission by Ayub Zarei); bottom: boatyard of Kong looking to the east (recorded by Shadi Kalantar).

The living knowledge and practice of *lanj* building, in addition to the high number of old and retired mariners concentrated in this little town, characterises Kong as a centre for traditional maritime heritage. So, naturally the Ethnological Museum of Bandar-e Kong's collection of ship and boat related objects and traded goods were gathered by retired sailors, captains and boatbuilders. These mariners continue to carry their maritime cultural knowledge. Some ethnographic and oral history studies have been previously done, which attempted to record the oral maritime history and intangible maritime heritage of Bandar-e Kong, specifically the terminology and function of maritime and navigational tools curated in the museum (Noorbakhsh 1996; Parsa 2013; Hassannia and Bahri 2018; Hassannia and Zarei 2020).

ETHNOLOGICAL MUSEUM OF BANDAR-E KONG

History of the building

The Ethnological Museum of Bandar-e Kong (موزه مردم شناسی بندر کنگ) is in a building located on the property of Hadj Mohammad Rashedan (حاج محمد راشدان) and descendants. This building was a trade-house of goods from Africa, India, and the southern countries of the Persian Gulf. After decades of abandonment, in 2011, captain Ali Bahri (علی بحری), better known as Nakhoda Hamūd (ناخدا حمود) attempted to establish the museum. Serendipitously, *Traditional Skills of Building and Sailing Iranian Lenj Boats in the Persian Gulf* was inscribed on the UNESCO's "List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding" (Nomination file No. 00534). So, through the public attempt to safeguard national maritime heritage the Ethnological Museum of Bandar-e Kong came into existence.

Nakhoda Hamūd, along with the former mayor of the town Ayoub Zarei (ایوب زارعی), worked to support our project funded by the Municipality of Bandar-e Kong. In 2020 the authors documented the museum collections and recorded oral history of maritime Bandar-e Kong in interviews with the retired sailors who now volunteer as curators at the museum.

THE PROJECT OF DOCUMENTATION

Our project saw the value of the storytelling of the sailor/shipbuilder-curators. They gather together every evening for tea or coffee and share stories from their travels to India and Africa. Bystanders, including researchers or visitors, can listen to their experiences and guidance on the use of the museum collections. The collections were donated and include a variety of everyday-life objects to maritime and navigation tools.

Framework

The aim of our project was to document the museum collections for scholarly use and to create an inventory list for authorities and curators of the museum. This project was carried out from 15 August 2020 to the end of September 2020 on site, over four weeks, and an additional +two weeks to digitise and edit the pictures. In total 491 objects were measured, photographed and described in the inventory forms we created; in some cases, drawings were also made.

The utility of many objects, especially boat and ship related objects, were unknown to the authors, therefore, interviews with the mariners-curators were carried out to figure out the utility as well as terminology of maritime objects and other unknown elements. Here, the challenge was that these maritime terms are in the local dialect of Hormozgan which is called *bandari* (Pelevin 2010) and they mostly have no synonym in standard Persian. So, it was decided to document the objects with their *bandari* terms in the inventory list and define them. As mentioned, *bandari* maritime terms have been studied before (Eqtedari 1963; Mohebbi 1996; Noorbakhsh 1996, 86-106; Tabibnezhad 2011; Parsa 2013, 145-150; Hassannia and Bahri 2018, 111-118), however, the terms that were previously undocumented are now written in the inventory list. In addition, the name of the donator, where available, is recorded in the inventory list with the accession number.

To record the objects' function Ali Bahri /Nakhoda Hamūd (picture 2 left) and Mohammad Hasanazade (محمد حسن زاده) (picture 2 right), better known as Sarhang (سر هنگ) were interviewed.

Ali Bahri, on the one hand, is a retired captain and his father, whose nickname was Hamūd, was a captain too. Nakhoda (ناخدا), could be translated as both captain and shipowner in the past (Tibbetts 1971, 58; Agius 2008, 415), however, today it only refers to captain. In this article, Ali Bahri, who is referred to in this article by his reputation as Nakhoda Hamūd, was born in 1936 in Kong. Since his

father was a well-known *nakhoda* as well, he always kept his father's company onboard as a child. He soon started to work on a fishing craft and later became a *nakhoda* himself.



Picture 2: left: Nakhoda Ḥamūd (copyright permission by Ali Bahri); right: Sarhang (copyright permission by Mohammad Ḥasanzade).

Mohammad Ḥasanzade, on the other hand, used to be a *sarhang* onboard. *Sarhang*, which is also known as *mojaddami* (مجدمی) and *moqaddami* (مقدمی), oversees all the sailing tasks onboard such as landing and docking (Tibbetts 1971, 58; Agius 2008, 419, 178-181). Ḥasanzade, himself, says: ‘sarhang gets orders directly from *nakhoda* and he should know everything about a sailing ship, every piece of it. He supervises sails, docking, landing, rising, lowering and changing the directions of the sails’. He is thus referred to, in this article, as Sarhang. He was born in 1945 in Kong and when he was eleven or twelve years old, he went on his first sea voyage on a sailing ship with his father. They travelled to Abadan on the west of the Iranian coast of the Persian Gulf and then to Tanzania in Africa and back to Kong. Sarhang started working on a ship as an unpaid young trainee and slowly, over time, advanced to the position of being a *sarhang*.

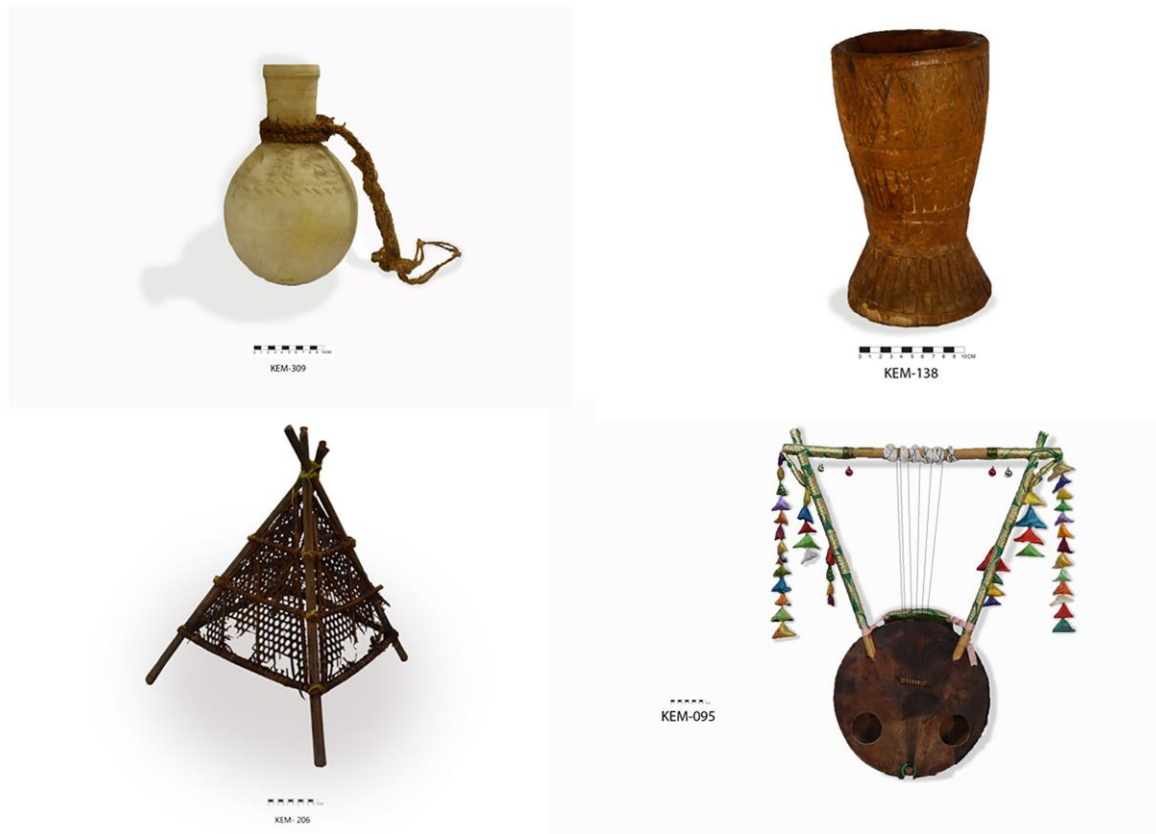
Now that we’ve introduced our main interviewees, we will explain how we documented oral histories. The authors posed questions to these sailor-curators, amongst others, at their daily gathering. The authors followed the conversation amongst them in relation to the question. The questions sometimes led to disagreements so, different opinions and points of views on a subject were compared. In this article, where information is provided by Sarhang or Nakhoda Ḥamūd, it is quoted by their names and where the information is gained from a group’s conversation, it is mentioned as “group-discussion”.

Collections and Objects

The museum’s collections were categorised into seven classifications: Boat and Ship Related (اجزاء و الحاقات قایق و کشتی), Boat and Ship Models (مدل قایق و کشتی), Handicrafts (صنایع دستی), Vessels (ظروف), Modern Items (اشیاء مدرن), Musical Instruments (آلات موسیقی) and Others (متفرقه) for those that could not be categorised to any of the above mentioned ones.

The Boat and Ship Related Collection includes paddles and oars, sailing affiliations, navigational tools, crew’s personal boxes and other tools such as glass buoys (picture 4 bottom left). Boat and Ship Models is a small collection of few locally made dhow models and some made in India. Vessels

Collection has a variety of locally produced potteries (picture 3 top left), to Chinese and European fine ceramics and glasses, jars for carrying Indian pickles, and African mortars (picture 3 top right) that have been traded around the Indian Ocean in the 20th century. Handicrafts Collection has a variety of locally produced items to Indian and African items that sailors brought as souvenirs from their voyages (picture 3 bottom left), with handicrafts, such as baskets, that mariners made onboard during sail. Modern Item Collection includes radios, televisions, phones and clocks that mostly are bought and brought from Dubai and Kuwait in the second half of the 20th century. The Musical Instruments Collection mostly has local drums and one *tambūre* (تمبوره) or *tanbūn* (تنبون) which is a string ceremonial instrument (picture 3 bottom right). We selected four objects from the Boat and Ship Related Collection to narrow our discussion.



Picture 3: top left: a *jahle*, a jar which is also used as a drum (accession number KEM-309); top right: a wooden mortar made in Africa (KEM-138); bottom left: a fragrance burner for cloths, probably made in India (KEM- 206); a *tambūre* or *tanbūn* which is used in spiritual ceremonies (KEM-095). All images recorded by authors.

Paddles and Oars

Three pairs of wooden oars, one pair of wooden paddles and one single paddle are available in the Boat and Ship Related Collection. All the three paddles are the same type, but the oars are two different types. Sarhang and Nakhoda Ḥamūd recalled their names as following and other mariners in the group-discussion confirmed them: paddles are called *qādūf* (قادوف) (picture 4 top left) or African paddle (پاروی افریقای), one pair of oars are called Indian oar (پاروی هندی) (picture 4 top middle) and the other two pairs are *mīdāf* (میداف) (picture 4 top right).

The shafts of *qādūfs* vary from 170 to 172 cm among the three *qādūfs* and the widest part of the blade is 60-61 cm. This type of paddle has an arrowhead shaped blade and in the top of the shaft has a handle to hold the paddle (grip). The paddles are carved out of wood in one piece and there is no joint

in them. We were informed in a group-discussion that this kind of paddle was purchased in African ports such as Mombasa. Sarhang remembers that *qādūf*, or the African paddle, was only used for paddling on a canoe. The Indian oars, as *qādūfs*, are carved from the trunk in one piece and the only joint part is the grip. The shaft is 140 cm and the blade, which is round, is 30 cm. *Mīdāf*, from which two pairs are available, has a longer shaft, approximately 200-220 cm, and the blade, unlike the previous ones, is attached to it with iron nails.

This study brought up a contradiction with previous terminological studies over the terms *mīdāf* and *qādūf*. In Parsa's glossary for Bandari maritime terms (2013, 234) *mīdāf* is mentioned as an equivalent for *jaddāf* which refers to the wooden structure which is built out of water for ships to stay still when they are not in the water. *Ghādūf* or *ghādīf* (*qādūf*), on the other hand, according to Agius (2008, 183-184, 406) means sailor (lit. rower). In addition to that, we faced another controversy, this time among the mariners in the group-discussion, about the usage of the Indian oars. Some described the objects as oars, while others described the objects used both as oars for small boats and as paddles for canoes. *Mīdāfs*, however, are certainly oars, as Sarhang recalled a song that they used to chant while rowing with *mīdāfs* to synch the rhythm of rowing, which is the repetition of two words: 'hele, yāmāl' (in Persian هله، یامال).



Picture 4: top left: *qādūfs* (accession number KEM- 22-23); top middle: Indian oars (KEM- 24-25); top right: *mīdāf* (KEM- 35); bottom left: a glass buoy (KEM- 71); bottom right: *mokassar* (KEM- 26). All images recorded by authors.

Mokassar

Mokassar (مکسر) (picture 4 bottom right) is a tool which, according to Sarhang, is for making ropes from date palm's fibres or coconuts' husks. The Arabic word means broken so maybe it refers to the shape of this tool which has four grooves on the four sides. Linguistic analysis of these words' etymology requires further study and was not intended for our current study.

Mokassar is 70 cm high and has a quadrangular shape and its lower part is wider than its upper part like a pyramid with a flat top; the lower part is 15 cm wide, and the upper part is 10 cm. There are four grooves on the four corners in which fibres cross and there is a hole on the upper part from which this tool is hung and spun. Rope is made from the spinning fibres. To make thicker ropes, thinner ropes would be spun together.

CONCLUSION

Cultural heritage belongs to nations and people. They are the best guardians of one's heritage, especially intangible heritage. The Ethnological Museum of Kong is a good example of how people, in a public effort, can preserve their own heritage and without much money for support. Unlike many great ethnological museums that exhibit collections from locations at a great distance from their heritage, the Ethnological Museum of Bandar-a Kong is located in its local context and has the capability of providing close interaction for visitors with the living carrier of intangible maritime heritage - the knowledge-keepers of traditional sailors and ship-builders. This project is an attempt to conserve the traditional maritime knowledge and contribute to the body of maritime oral histories.

Acknowledgement

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