



Historical significance of Lenj construction in Iran

Iranica Desk

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) refers to a collection of traditions, customs, knowledge, skills, and ways of life that are transmitted from one generation to another, carrying cultural identity and significance for various communities. Unlike tangible cultural heritage, which includes artifacts and historical monuments, ICH exists in an intangible form through experiences, behaviors, and social interactions within communities. This type of heritage is continuously evolving, responding to the cultural, social, and economic conditions of the society to which it belongs; thus, it cannot be confined to static objects.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines intangible cultural heritage as part of the living culture of people, encompassing music, dance, indigenous languages, rituals, and traditional knowledge about nature. This heritage plays a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion, identity formation, and fostering creativity. However, in an age of globalization, it faces threats that can lead to its neglect or alteration. Therefore, preservation through education, awareness-raising, and community participation is essential. Maintaining intangible cultural heritage contributes to cultural diversity, sustainable development, and strengthens relationships among cultures, IRNA wrote.

The Persian Gulf is not only a strategic body of water but also a cradle of Iran's maritime civilizations. Among the traditional skills in this region, *Lenj* (a type of ship) building is one of the most important crafts, preserved and passed down through generations. The wooden *Lenjs*, handcrafted by skilled Iranian artisans, have been sailing in the Persian Gulf for centuries and are recognized as symbols of cultural identity and global heritage for Iranians. However, this authentic art form faces challenges today, including the replacement of fiberglass vessels, high construction costs, reduced demand, and the decline of traditional skills. The knowledge associated with the construction and navigation of these ships was registered as intangible cultural heritage of Iran on UNESCO's list in 2011.

What is Lenj?

Lenjs are traditional wooden boats, either sailing or motorized,

that have been used since ancient times for transporting goods, fishing, and long sea voyages in the Persian Gulf. In Iran, particularly in cities such as Bandar Abbas, Qeshm, Bushehr, artisans utilize teak wood, mangrove wood, and local materials to construct durable *Lenjs*.

The process of building *Lenjs* is entirely traditional and conducted by hand. Artisans draw on knowledge passed down through generations to create sturdy *Lenjs* without the use of engineering blueprints. Their expertise enables these boats to withstand the powerful waves of the Persian Gulf.

Skills related to the construction, repair, and navigation of *Lenjs* are transmitted from generation to generation among sailors and craftsmen. Oral literature, songs, and specific nautical terminologies form an integral part of this cultural heritage. Iran's maritime culture includes unique terms, poems, sailing songs, and stories that together constitute a significant portion of the oral literature and traditional music of the southern Iranian people.

Lenj building is an essential aspect of Iran's identity and maritime culture, preserved for centuries by the coastal communities of the Persian Gulf. This industry not only reflects the traditional knowledge and indigenous skills of Iranians but also symbolizes their long-standing relationship with the sea and maritime trade.

The construction of wooden *Lenjs* is based entirely on traditional knowledge, with artisans relying solely on their experience and indigenous expertise, without modern blueprints, to create robust vessels suited to the region's maritime conditions.

From the past to the present, *Lenjs* have played a significant role in maritime trade, cargo transport, fishing, and sea voyages. Occupations related to *Lenj* building, fishing, and sea-related trade are vital to the local populace. Additionally, traditional *Lenjs* now hold great potential for attracting tourists. Some older *Lenjs* in coastal cities have transformed into living museums, contributing to the sustainable development of the maritime tourism industry in Iran.

History

According to historical documents, Iranians have engaged in navigation and the construction

of maritime vessels for thousands of years. Darius the Great noted the establishment of waterways and the creation of a naval fleet in his inscriptions, indicating that Iranians had mastered navigation as early as the Achaemenid era. Records regarding Iranian ships highlight the long-standing tradition of shipbuilding in Iran.

During the pre-Islamic era, particularly in the Sassanid period and later during the Islamic period, Iran's trade relations with India, China, and Arab countries expanded significantly. During this time, Iranian *Lenjs* were utilized for trading spices, textiles, timber, and other goods. Historical texts reference the skills of Iranians in *Lenj* building and navigation.

In the Safavid era, the kings' emphasis on expanding maritime trade led to a peak in the construction of *Lenjs* in Bandar Abbas, Qeshm, Bushehr, and Chabahar. During this period, Iranians built large wooden sailing vessels capable of carrying heavy loads.

In the Qajar period and the early Pahlavi era, traditional sailing *Lenjs* remained common. However, with the introduction of diesel engines, some *Lenjs* became motorized, making sea voyages faster and more cost-effective. Nevertheless, traditional wooden *Lenjs* continued to be constructed and used in the southern islands and ports.

In recent decades, the rise of fiberglass boats and industrial ships has resulted in a decline in the construction of traditional wooden *Lenjs*. Today, only a limited number of artisans in areas such as Bandar Kong, Bandar Lengeh, Qeshm, and Bushehr are still engaged in this profession. Iranians have played a significant role in navigation, trade, and the construction of wooden vessels since ancient times. Inscriptions from the Achaemenid period, historical texts, and reports by Greek and Arab historians reference the presence of Iranians in the Persian Gulf and their maritime superiority. *Lenj* building, which has been prevalent in this region for centuries, reflects the continuous presence and civilization of Iranians along the shores of the Persian Gulf.

The term *Lenj*, referring to a type of large wooden boat, has its roots in the Persian language and signifies the maritime culture of Iranians. This word,

along with other traditional Iranian nautical terms, constitutes a sign of the cultural and linguistic presence of Iran in the Persian Gulf.

In ancient documents related to navigation and the construction of *Lenjs*, the name Persian Gulf is mentioned as the primary body of water utilized by Iranians. Renowned historians and geographers such as Strabo, Ptolemy, Ibn Khaldun, and Al-Masudi have referenced the maritime trade of Iranians and the use of wooden *Lenjs* in the Persian Gulf in their works.

Lenj building in the Persian Gulf serves as a living document illustrating the antiquity, cultural influence, and historical presence of Iranians in this region. Since this maritime industry has existed continuously along the southern shores of Iran since ancient times and has historical and global documentation, it can be regarded as one of the key pieces of evidence to underscore the name "Persian Gulf."

Heritage in peril

With advancements in technology and the introduction of fiberglass boats, the use of wooden *Lenjs* has declined, leading to the closure of many traditional *Lenj*-building workshops. Furthermore, the high costs associated with constructing and maintaining wooden *Lenjs* have diminished interest in continuing this craft. Consequently, UNESCO has placed this valuable heritage on its list of "urgently needed protection."

To safeguard this invaluable art form, various initiatives have been proposed, including organizing *Lenj*-building festivals, documenting the skills of artisans, providing training for young people, and offering financial support for traditional workshops. Additionally, some coastal cities are promoting *Lenj* building as a tourist attraction to further support the industry.

Lenj building is not just a facet of Iran's history and culture; it also embodies the ancient relationship between Iranians and the sea as well as maritime trade. Protecting this intangible heritage necessitates collaboration among government entities, the public, and cultural institutions to ensure that this invaluable art form endures for future generations.

