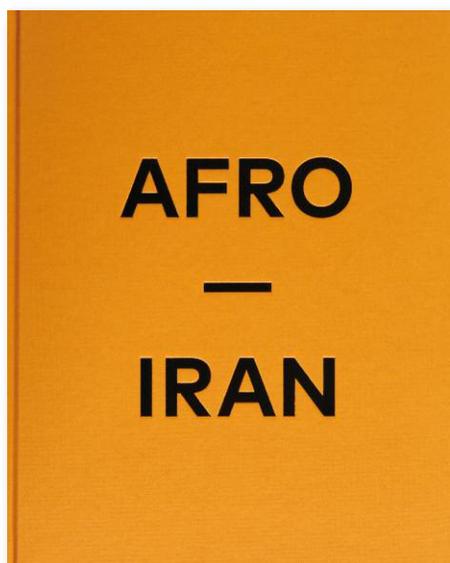




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NEW RELEASE

Mahdi Ehsaei

Afro-Iran

Texts by Joobin Bekhrad, Nahid Mozaffari
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***Afro-Iran* reveals a centuries-long history of a community which is often overlooked in Iran's history**

This photographic series by Mahdi Ehsaei shows a side of Iran, which is widely unknown even to Iranians: a minority of people who influenced the culture of a whole region by continuing their African heritage with their clothing style, their music, their dance and their oral traditions and rituals.

Ehsaei set out to the Hormozgan Province in the Persian Gulf to shed some light on this part of Iran, which is home to the descendants of enslaved people and traders from Africa. The traditional and historical region with one of Iran's most ethnically diverse populations is framed with unique landscapes. In his book Ehsaei shows fascinating portraits which are not typical for the common picture of Iran. Afro-Iran reveals details documenting a centuries-long history of a community, which is often overlooked in Iran's history but which has even shaped the culture in Southern Iran.

In Afro-Iran, Mahdi Ehsaei lifts the aforesaid shroud of mystery that has for so long surrounded the Afro-Iranians. Rather than presenting them as oddities or bizarre specimens to arouse non-Iranians and Iranians alike, he does the opposite, portraying them as, quite simply, Iranians. There is not only frenetic handclapping to the sound of bursting bagpipes or primal Zar exorcism ceremonies in Ehsaei's pictures, which perhaps may come as a disappointment to neo-Orientalists. Children and teenagers in Western clothes and football jerseys stand in alleyways clutching onto plastic balls; grocers proudly pose beside their wares, and elderly women clean and handle herbs, fish, and vegetables.

– **Joobin Bekhrad** / Writer, Founder, and Editor, REORIENT / Canada

Until recently, little attention had been focused on Iranians of African descent from a scholarly or artistic point of view. But a new generation of scholars — historians, anthropologists, ethnographers and photographers — have come to focus with great interest on the history and culture of Iranians of African heritage throughout Iran, particularly, those living in the southern province of Hormozgan on the Persian Gulf.

It is thus with great pleasure that I saw and admired the photographs of Mahdi Ehsaei, who spent intimate time with individuals and communities in Bandar Abbas and smaller towns and villages in Hormozgan, capturing their cultural and individual particularities in his work. To the historian, these photographs present descriptive, contextual, and aesthetic dimensions well beyond common ethnographic portraits.

– **Nahid Mozaffari** / Visiting Associate Professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, New York University / USA

Mahdi Ehsaei (*1989) was born to Iranian parents in Germany and grew up in a bicultural environment with an influence of Persian culture and tradition within the context of German society. For his work on Afro-Iranians, he set out to the Hormozgan Province on the Persian Gulf of Iran to shed some light on and visually document a community of people that, like him, represent the complexities of their own hyphenated identities.

Exhibition

Centro de Estudios Afrodiaspóricos
Universidad Icesi, Cali, Colombia, September 14 – 30, 2015

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