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Jeni Allenby

*Palestine Costume Archive, Canberra*

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# Re-inventing cultural heritage: Palestinian traditional costume and embroidery since 1948

Jeni Allenby  
Palestine Costume Archive, Canberra



**IMAGE 1: Traditional costume as political symbol: a PLO postcard from the 1970s showing a re-imagined pre 1948 Palestinian village woman, the embroidery motifs of her dress replaced with political calligraphy (Palestine Costume Archive Research Library).**

Prior to 1948, when the State of Israel was declared, Arab society in Palestine consisted of three main groups - the townspeople, a small percentage of nomadic or semi-nomadic *bedouin* tribes, and the villagers or "people of the land" who made up three quarters of the population. Over eight hundred villages were scattered from the coastal plains to the Jordan River. While costume in the urban regions historically reflected the current occupiers of the country (for example, Turkish styles during the Ottoman period, and European fashions under the British Mandate) Palestine's many villages were economically and socially independent, and difficulties in communication and environment produced strong individualistic traits within the communities: different dialects, different crops and food, and different clothing. From these villages developed the traditional styles of Palestinian dress that form the background of my paper today.

Before the events of 1948, traditional costume for village women in Palestine was regionally and stylistically diverse, with great emphasis placed on ornamentation. Designed from the finest of fabrics, both locally woven and imported, Palestinian costume was traditionally embroidered and appliqued, each garment becoming an individual work of art. Women's costume also contained an intricate communication system expressing the wearer's status, wealth and geographic origin by means of their style and decorative elements.

To fully appreciate the exquisite costumes worn in the first half of the twentieth century I must refer you to seminal publications such as Shelagh Weir's 1989 [Palestinian costume](#) (British Museum) and to the website and travelling exhibitions of the Palestine Costume Archive. Very briefly (and drawing primarily from Weir) historically both Palestinian *bedouin* and village *fellahin* women made their own costumes, learning to embroider as early as the age of eight. Embroidery played an important part in village life, and was thought to reveal a woman's character and personality as well as reflecting her economic status. Embroidery colour preference was primarily linked to regional identity, with Palestinian embroidery possessing a complex colour language. The main embroidery stitches used were cross stitch and couching, worked with floss silk. Each embroidery pattern was named, with geometric and abstract designs being supplemented by curvilinear and representational motifs introduced by European missionaries and educationalists after the 1930s. Embroidery motifs also reflected the political environment of the time. For example, the Pasha's Tent pattern first appeared at the time when the region was ruled from the Ottoman Court, while the Officer's Pips pattern was adopted during the British Mandate, imitating British military symbols of rank. Thus embroidery acted as a symbol of evolving Palestinian identity by historically recording individual interpretations of the political and cultural events that touched the lives of Palestinian village women.



**IMAGE 2: Palestinian village mother and child, Hebron hills region, c.1930s (Cha'ad Ra'ad, Institute for Palestine Studies)**

Although the style of clothing was established by regional preferences and local social factors, many of the basic garments maintained an over all similarity in design, if not in decoration. Village costume consisted of the basic dress, worn with trousers, a jacket and/or coat, together with some style of coined headdress and embroidered veil (unlike *bedouin* women, village women did not veil their face except on their wedding day). All of these garments were intricately decorated and indicated marital and economic status and regional identity.

The main garment, the dress *thob*, as with male costume, was generally a loose fitting robe with sleeves, with the actual cut of the garment varied by region. As Shelagh Weir's research has so brilliantly illustrated, certain "grammatical" rules governed the placement of embroidery on a Palestinian village dress, with decoration concentrated mainly on the square chest panel, the cuffs and top of the sleeves, and vertical panels running down the dress from waist level. Some regions decorated a lower back panel of the dress. Within these sections embroidery placement, stitches and patterns varied regionally. This diversity of structure and pattern was of great significance to village women, who could identify the regional or village origins of a woman from her dress.

Traditional Palestinian life was severely disrupted by the establishment of the state of Israel in northern, western and parts of southern Palestine in 1948. As a result of these hostilities, according to United Nations documents, over half the rural population became refugees, with over five hundred villages being completely destroyed.

With the destruction of traditional Palestinian society, the majority of Palestine's cultural heritage ceased to exist. As the 10<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama wrote of Tibet in his 1962 Petition to the Government of China, "...if the language, clothes, ornaments and customs of a nationality disappear within a short period of time, then that nationality also disappears with it, or changes into a different nationality...". Costume and textile traditions have been vastly changed by these events.



**IMAGE 3: Palestinian village woman sits watching her home, unable to return, 1949 (UNRWA)**

There is little documentation available on Palestinian costume in the 1950s, a period of great upheaval as many Palestinian families adapted to their refugee status. Palestinian women no longer had the time nor the finances to embroider luxury garments for themselves. Ornate accessories such as embroidered

head veils and coined headdresses became things of the past, and the distinction between festive and everyday wear was lost. By the 1970s the moving of mass populations into refugee centres and camps had broken down the long traditions of highly evolved regional styles, and very little remained to be seen of either Palestinian traditional costume or the Palestinian weaving industry.

However the destruction of a country does not automatically equate in timing with the destruction of its people. And by the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Palestinian costume and Palestinian embroidery had become again a powerful expression of Palestinian material culture - although in a very different form than at the end of the previous century. How did this happen?

Lets look at first at Palestinian traditional costume. The styles of clothing worn today in the Palestinian Territories and in Palestinian refugee camps throughout the Middle East include Western dress and Islamic modesty dress as well as various forms of "traditional" embroidered dresses - but what is now identified as "traditional" is a much simpler garment in terms of construction and decoration, and is usually worn with a simple white cotton headveil. As embroidered costume slowly began to reappear in the 1960s it did so in a greatly differing form, the spareness of the (now) cotton embroidery and the cheap, functional fabrics reflecting the social and economic realities of occupied or refugee life. Some dresses produced during this time, now in the collection of the Palestine Costume Archive, feature machine embroidery or even rows of European braid in the traditionally embroidered areas.

In the late 1960s and 1970s the '6 branch dress' developed, based on a pre 1948 style found in the Ramallah region and named after the six vertical bands of embroidery that ran

from waist to hem. The beauty of the "6 branch" was that the design structure allowed one to embroider the "branches" to reflect one's own economic necessities: very thin if times were hard, broadening if a little more money was available for small luxuries.



**IMAGE 4: Palestinian refugees in Kerak, Jordan, 1996, wearing examples of Islamic dress and a machine embroidered "6 branch" dress (detail) (Michelle Woodward, Baltimore, USA)**

The '6 branch' is characterized by its primarily European embroidery patterns, including curvilinear foliage and flower designs and various double bird and mythological beast designs. Cotton was now the preferred thread for embroidery, again for economic reasons, with multicoloured shaded threads becoming very popular in the 1970s.

During the 1980s, the establishment and development of various women's handicraft projects within many Palestinian refugee camps, as a way of supplementing income (as many women were now their family's primary income earner), produced the *shawal* style, seen on the child in the centre. The *shawal* was first produced in the camps in a pre-embroidered uncut form, assembled by the purchaser. Made of heavy linen with the cross stitch embroidery executed directly onto the main fabric, it was sold with a fringed shawl worked in the same manner. Embroidery placement reflected perceived Western styles, with slim bands in the front and back joined by a single band at the bottom on both front and back. Western influence was also apparent in the modified slim line of the garment and the addition of bust darts. Embroidery motifs were usually geometric, with colours often favouring shaded cottons or pastels. Cypress trees *saru* and 'Pashar's Tent' designs were common. Although originally developed for the foreign market the *shawal* became very popular amongst young Palestinian women in Jordan and the Palestinian Territories who wore it to represent an up market 'traditional' look - a sort of Palestinian *haute couture*.

Palestinian traditional costume underwent a significant revival in the late 1980s, at the time of the *intifada* uprising in the late 1980s, when the embroidered dress became identified in the Occupied Territories as a statement of national and social consciousness.

The *intifada* was a popular uprising in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, a mass resistance co-ordinated within a direct policy to refrain from the use of weapons, which took the

form of strikes, demonstrations, embargos on Israeli products, and the non payment of taxes, with the aim of stripping Israel of the financial benefits of occupation. As daily life in the Occupied Territories became increasingly involved with the politics of resistance, so too changed the content and emphasis of cultural life. Palestinian language, music, literature, art and costume all now reflect modern political situations and are symbols of political consciousness.

The increasing popular emphasis by contemporary Palestinians on the use of pre 1948 village life to articulate Palestinian national identity, together with the changing role of women during this period, produced an extraordinary creative time for Palestinian women as they began to move beyond their traditionally supportive roles. In the opinion of one woman, wearing a traditional dress *thob*, in any of its new styles, was a demonstration of nationalist pride: "[Palestinian] women of the new generation who are at universities wear *thobs* full of embroidery because it is their heritage - even educated people are turning to their heritage".



**IMAGE 5: Palestinian grandmother wearing "6 branch" dress, with Israeli soldiers, East Jerusalem, 1993 (detail) (Michelle Woodward, Baltimore, USA)**

This national pride was taken a step further with the creation of a new style of *shawal* dress designed specifically to promote the *intifada*. Prior to the late 1980s the primary symbol of Palestinian nationalism remained the *kaffiya* headscarf, with its distinctive checked patterning, and *kaffiya* garments turned up during the 1970s and early 1980s as individual political statements. However, the new *intifada* linkage of traditional costume with nationalism now produced, for a limited period in the late 1980s and early 1990s, evocative "flag dresses" featuring embroidery predominantly in the colours of the (then) banned Palestinian flag, with embroidered nationalist motifs such as the Dome of the Rock mosque, the patterns of the checked *kaffiya*, and maps of Palestine, Arabic and English calligraphy, all worked into the structure of the chest panel and vertical skirt side panels. As one woman from Beit Omar explained: "people were being imprisoned for carrying the flag, so we women would embroider it on our [dresses] *thobs*".

While the Palestine Costume Archive holds examples of politically embroidered dresses from the 1970s onwards (then known as "Fatah" or "PLO" dresses) these new *intifada* "flag" dresses developed stylistically from fairly simple, political designs to symbolically complex examples, utilizing not only political events but Palestinian folklore and mythology as a source of inspiration. One dress currently on loan to the Palestine Costume Archive depicts the dove of peace as the mythological phoenix rising from the ashes, the Palestinian flag carried in her mouth as coloured streamers, while another draws inspiration from a Palestinian folksong, the Jama Muel al Hawa, and is embroidered with Arabic calligraphy as well as with pre 1948 traditional patterns arranged to "protect" the dress.

.In village society in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, traditional costume and embroidery had symbolized important facets of a woman's village, family and sexual identity. Now, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Palestinian women adapted and reinvented cultural symbolic elements to invest traditional costume and embroidery with a new meaning specific to contemporary national discourse. At a time when Palestinian costume had almost completely fragmented as a communication device, it again at this time assumed an important role as an expression of national identity, of symbolic defiance without violence.



**IMAGE 6: Detail of embroidered lower back panel of *intifada* "flag" dress, c.1989, featuring political imagery and calligraphy (Widad Kawar Collection, Amman) (Jeni Allenby)**

Stylistic innovations in dress continued into the late 1980s and 1990s, with the production of more Western style garments, such as jackets and coats, for both the Western and home markets. Embroidered dresses were now often

worn with thin belts (sometimes leather or plastic, sometimes embroidered - a style originally made in the refugee camp projects for sale), often now tied across the lower part of the embroidered chest panel. Pre 1948 dresses were worn only by older women still living in the Palestinian Territories on (increasingly rare) festive occasions. Meanwhile, within the new design structure of the "6 branch" or the *shawal*, modern interpretations of pre 1948 styles - such as the Bethlehem "royal" dress began to appear, with cheap velour and lurex thread replacing the luxury fabrics and intricate metallic and silk floss couching of the past. Some refugee embroidery projects, such as the Family Care Society in Amman, began offering a service to "replicate" surviving traditional (pre 1948) garments "to keep Palestinian costume lively and vibrant [maintaining] a bright image for present and future generations" as well as offering "modernized dresses...that carry the Palestinian characteristics in the form and shape of the motifs as well as the patterns". The message now being communicated through the language of contemporary Palestinian costume is that we must not forget the past, but equally we must move forward in terms of design and culture.

The other important cause of the revival in traditional costume and embroidery was the establishment of embroidery projects within many refugee camps in the Palestinian region. The events of 1948 created almost 750,000 Palestinian refugees, according to the United Nations documents. In the year 2000 there were 3 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza living in United Nations refugee camps, and of course there are many other refugee camps in the surrounding Palestinian region.

Embroidery projects set up to assist Palestinian refugee women with income and promote traditional Palestinian culture, appeared as early as the 1950s. Most, however, were

established in the mid 1980s, when the need for such projects was finally recognised by the international aid community. There are several different categories of embroidery project: those established and maintained by foreign aid organizations, those that were established by foreign aid but are now locally run, and those set up by the various Palestinian women's organizations and societies. The latter has a long history in Palestine, where the women's movement began in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mainly social and charitable organizations with humanitarian objectives were established at that time, which contributed greatly in promoting the role of Palestinian women in the educational, social, economic and political spheres. By the 1980s many women had become more involved with political and national issues through these various Women's Committees. These days the societies focus more on the promoting and preserving of Palestinian cultural heritage, and the production of contemporary embroidery. In the words of one young woman from the UNRWA *Sulafa* Embroidery Project in Gaza: "[although] we no longer embroider in the style of our towns, we embroider for our houses and for our work. We embroider cushions, clocks and maps of Palestine. Embroidery is our heritage. We love embroidery...and we are proud of it".



**IMAGE 7: Deaf Palestinian refugees embroidering furniture covers at the Palestine Red Crescent Society's Al Amal Rehabilitation Centre embroidery project, Khan Younis, Gaza Strip, 2000 (Jeni Allenby)**

The fact that these projects produce items designed specifically for sale on the Western markets means that these products are therefore not bound by the "traditional" rules of decoration or style that formally created the language of Palestinian dress. Palestinian embroidery from the 1980s therefore began to develop for the first time as a significant cultural form separate to Palestinian costume.

The original product produced by all the embroidery projects from the 1980s onwards was the square embroidered cushion, in small and "jumbo" (floor cushion) sizes, their surface completely covered with intricate (silk or cotton) multicoloured cross stitch. However the fact that the Western market was flooded with cheap embroidery from India and South America made it difficult for these luxury products to acquire an international market. As a result many refugee projects began to design new products that featured less embroidery (thus reducing production time and costs) while maintaining a distinctive "Palestinian" and "Middle Eastern" feel.

Each refugee camp or aid organization has over time developed certain stylistic characteristics. For example, Christian imagery, such as stars, mangers and Christmas trees, are common design on products from aid agencies such as *Sunbula* (formally Craft Aid) which has United Kingdom church funding, while several projects maintain a reputation for more traditional styles, such as *Al Badia* refugee project in Lebanon, renowned for their high quality cross stitch in silk thread featuring traditional designs. Embroidery projects without access to external funding produce more simply constructed



goods, often made from embroidered panels cut from old dresses. Many of the projects are currently producing dolls dressed in the more famous regional styles of Palestine (such as Bethlehem, Ramallah and Hebron) which has become an excellent way of transmitting accurate costume details and cultural iconography to the next generation.

Embroidered products remain an important item for contemporary Palestinians wherever they now are. The Palestinian *diaspora* is now estimated at about 5 million, with 650,000 living in Israel and 1,400,000 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Of those who moved away from the Palestinian region, most continue to preserve their national identity and identify with their original towns or villages. Perhaps the most important visual key they have, in maintaining that separate identity and creating an enduring culturally recognisable symbol, is Palestinian traditional dress and embroidery. Whether bought from refugee camp projects, or embroidered by relatives, embroidered products hold pride of place in homes worldwide, with Palestinian costume and embroidery also now featuring in the works of modern Palestinian poets, artists and writers.

While Palestinian costume and embroidery today may have none of the material wealth and complexity of ornamentation of earlier examples, in no sense are contemporary costumes or modern embroideries inferior to historical, pre 1948 examples. No traditional costume tradition is ever completely static, and through its ornamentation and design Palestinian costume has always reflected the social and economic situations of the times.



**IMAGE 8: Back view of contemporary design based on a pre 1948 Galilee village style, designed by the ANAT Workshop, Yarmouk Refugee Camp, Syria (ANAT Workshop)**

However, in order to read the language of contemporary Palestinian costume we must change our historical perspective. The role of embroidery on costume is still tied to social status when worn, but the shift to profession production now marks it as a sign of wealth in a different sense. While the regional identification of the embroiderer may still be revealed in finer details, distinct regional stylistic criteria has been replaced by a more general characterisations, while non regional styles, such as the “6 branch” and the *shawal* are now recognised by Palestinian women as equally well established and “traditional” examples of Palestinian costume. Contemporary Palestinian costume still carries practical and symbolic functions of social status, and thus strongly

signals the ability of Palestinian women to adapt their culture to changing economic and political situations. The language of costume has been redefined.

And embroidery? During the early 1980s an embroidered narrative panel known as the Palestinian Wedding first appeared. It is now sold by many Palestinian refugee camp projects (many of whom also claim ownership of the original design) and is extremely popular with Palestinians in the *diaspora*. What makes this panel particularly interesting

is its depiction of the most important of all pre 1948 Palestinian rituals - the wedding. It shows several different parts of the celebrations, thus presenting the purchaser (whether a foreign buyer or a Palestinian from the international *diaspora*) with an evocative series of re-imaged scenes from village life, now so central a signifier in Palestinian nationalism.

The Palestinian Wedding was the first in a series of embroidered narratives that years later would culminate in a series of embroidered panels designed in response to the *intifada*, which stand as extraordinarily evocative statements encompassing cultural identification, loss of homeland and inter cultural communication. In one of these, again on loan to the Palestine Costume Archive from the project that designed it, the Biblical tale of David and Goliath takes on a subtle Palestinian twist, as a Palestinian youth fights against two large mythological beasts. In another, designed by the Anat Workshop (Yarmouk Refugee Camp, Syria), the dove of peace is shown in the (Jaffa) orange tree, carrying the Palestinian flag. The orange tree is defended by the Palestinian people, the women in traditional dress carrying stones to the young fighters, who kneel with their sling shots. Beneath the embroidery a single blue bead protects them all from evil.



**IMAGE 9: Detail from "The Martyr" embroidered panel, designed by the ANAT Workshop, Yarmouk Refugee Camp, Syria, featuring allegorical figures holding symbols of lost Palestine (Jeni Allenby)**

In perhaps the most important narrative panel a contemporary Palestinian funeral is embroidered in an almost Egyptian structure, re-imaged in the pre 1948 traditional village life style. The grieving family walk behind the bier (the grandfather carrying the tools of his trade - carpenter - showing how once men were employed) while allegorical figures (in traditional dress representing the Palestinian people and bearing images of the Jaffa orange tree and the key to the lost homes of Palestine) lead the Palestinian dead home from exile. Thus has an unbearable contemporary reality been embroidered and transfigured into an evocative memory of cultural loss.

The capacity to enrich itself from external and new internal sources is an index of the vitality of any culture, rather than its decline. In the current revival of Palestinian cultural heritage - in the text of Palestinian poets and the textiles of Palestinian refugees - a lost cultural language has been redefined. To say that Palestinian costume and embroidery are now re-establishing themselves is not to say that the problems facing the Palestinian people are in any way resolved. It is simply to announce that the new millennium may provide the means to promote the talents of a people who refuse to allow their traditions and culture to fade with the passing of the last century.



**IMAGE 10: Palestinian refugees in traditional and Western dress, Amman, Jordan, 1996 (detail) (Michelle Woodward, Baltimore, USA)**

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