

Palestinian Embroidery: An Expression of Identity



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Translated from Arabic
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Centuries ago, Palestinian women began to draw their stories with needles and thread by decorating their dresses with colorful embroidered symbols that reflect their narrative, time, and place. These garments thus document and define the Palestinian identity of these women. As successive catastrophes befell the country, the embroidered dresses remained as statements that attest to the presence of these women and tell the stories of the times during which they lived. For this reason, these embroidered garments have become more than dresses worn by Palestinian women on social occasions. They reflect the identity of their homeland and serve to protect the cultural heritage of those who wear them.

The Palestinian Ministry of Culture has a keen interest in Palestinian cultural heritage as it is a fundamental pillar of Palestinian national identity. The significance of its preservation is enshrined in the Palestinian constitution, and the State of Palestine has signed the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, also known as the 2003 Treaty. Pursuant to various programs included in the Sectoral Plan for the State of Palestine, the state has taken significant measures to protect and institutionalize the country's cultural heritage. First, the Heritage Department was established within the Ministry of Culture and charged with carrying out the necessary measures to safeguard the intangible Palestinian cultural heritage and protect the national identity. Then, the ministry designed a long-term strategy for the protection of cultural heritage. It established the National Heritage Registry and tasked it with facilitating the work necessary for cultural heritage preservation.

The registry started its work through an annual program of collecting, documenting, and archiving cultural heritage elements. In 2017, the ministry published the representative list that contains the national cultural heritage elements most closely related to the culture and heritage of the Palestinian people. Among the twenty cultural elements mentioned, the most important is the art of Palestinian embroidery, including the associated customs, traditions, and rituals. It is worth noting that this list is renewed regularly and that new cultural elements are added to it every year.

The Ministry of Culture is keenly aware of the need for international action to preserve our cultural heritage. Thus, after consulting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and heritage experts, we conducted a case study to detail the most important elements

of cultural heritage currently included or proposed to be added to the list. We found that the art, customs, traditions, and rituals of Palestinian embroidery are among our most important elements of heritage. Embroidery is one of the most widespread and meaningful expressions of national identity and a living cultural element that women have safeguarded for decades, even centuries. Palestinian women and refugees have carried these skills with them to wherever in the world their diaspora journey has led them.

For this reason, the Heritage Department embarked on the process of preparing a file for UNESCO to request that the art of embroidery with its associated customs, traditions, and rituals be included on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The Ministry of Culture prepared a comprehensive file

Celebrating the inclusion of "Palestinian Embroidery: Customs, Traditions, and Rituals" on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, December 2021.



and collected embroidery heritage through field visits to a significant number of women who practice embroidery in villages, cities, and camps. After their consent was obtained, the women were registered as bearers of this element of cultural heritage. The inventory file was drafted and the nomination form filled out and sent to UNESCO. A brief documentary on Palestinian embroidery was prepared under the direction of the artist Walid Mashharawi. Moreover, pictures from an actual Palestinian wedding were taken, showing the connection between embroidery and Palestinian customs and traditions.

In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the completed papers and documents were sent to the Palestinian embassy in Paris, to Mounir Anastas, a strategic expert involved in the drafting of the 2003 Treaty and an advocate for the file in the corridors of UNESCO. The initial response of the evaluation committees at UNESCO was promising. On December 15, the International Committee for the 2003 Treaty announced the unanimous vote to include Palestinian Embroidery: Customs, Traditions, and Rituals on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This step signaled the inauguration of Palestine's first cultural heritage element in international forums, thus protecting Palestine from any international or local attempt at the cultural denial of its national identity.

Following the announcement of inclusion, the country was overjoyed, and Palestinian women walked proudly through the streets wearing their embroidered dresses to celebrate this achievement. The State of Palestine affirmed the importance

Palestinian embroidery has been added to the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

of this cultural element, and the cabinet approved a national day of Palestinian embroidery to be held yearly on December 15. On this day, we celebrate the art of embroidery and honor all women who engage in it as guardians of culture as they cooperate, through their needles and thread, in preserving the identity of the Palestinian nation and creating a brighter future.

Amani Al-Junaidi is a Palestinian novelist and author of ten novels. She works at the Palestinian Ministry of Culture as director of the National Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage. She had the honor to prepare the file on Palestinian embroidery and submit it for inclusion on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.



SCAN
TO SHARE

THE PALESTINIAN THOBE

OUR EMBROIDERED HISTORY



WHITE LINEN DRESS

LOD AND Yafa AREA (BEIT DAJAN AND THE 1948 DEPOPULATED VILLAGES OF BEIT NABALA, DAYR TARIF, KAFR 'ANA, AND AL-'ABBASIYYA)

Exceptionally, women from the Lod and Yafa area fully embroidered this dress for festivities and special occasions using the Bethlehem couching stitch on white linen. Women from Beit Dajan learned this technique from the famous Manneh Hazboun and later developed it to create their own special version. These dresses were distinguished by their rose branches in festive colors that covered the *thobe* like a spring garden.

From the collection of Maha AbuShusheh