

# Azure Blue, Crimson, Indigo, and Scarlet

Embroidery and Intangible Amorite  
Cultural Heritage



By Ali Qleibo

“Embroidery,” explained Iyad, “is commonplace in Palestinian society. Early on, women learn to embroider but for exquisite craftsmanship they commission specialized ladies from Rabud.” The semi-nomadic cave city Rabud, the Amorite “Debir,” has long been recognized for the art of elaborate embroidery and refined aesthetic artistic sense. Over the years the craftsmanship and artistry of the ancient walled city, known in the Bible as the City of the Holy Book of the Canaanites, attracted the villages from the Dura region, from as far away as Idhna, Beit Ummar, and Al Sa’ir, who would commission embroidery with floral and geometric patterns and colors specific to their villages. “Rabud is celebrated for its outstanding craftsmanship and artistry as a center for the manufacture of embroidery akin in fame to the village of Al-Samu’,” he further explained. Al Samu’ is renowned for its homemade rugs, Al-Samu’i kilims, on a par with Al-Majdal’s indigo cloth used in making *al-thobe*, the dress on which the embroidery was applied.

“It hurts me to see the special needlework reserved for the breast panel of *al-thobe* being used as a pattern for slippers.” My friend Yasmine from Ramallah was indignant about the over-commercialization of Palestinian embroidery. “My mother used to proudly wear it on her neck...and now it is used to trample the dusty floors.”



Patterns include themes that abstract striking elements of nature, bearing great resemblance to Byzantine mosaic floral patterns visible in the Dome of the Rock and the Church of the Nativity.

The ethical problematic related to the use and abuse of embroidery as a commercial enterprise does not undermine its privileged, almost sacrosanct status in Palestinian culture which has acquired a political nationalist denotation. Its highly valued status, ubiquity, and present symbolism’s deep roots strike into our primordial history in which Al-Naqab Bedouins and the semi-pastoral settlements in the basin of Mount Hebron play a major role as centers of origin.

Embroidery as intangible heritage invites us to reexamine the traditional rigid tripartite Palestinian social structures – Bedouin, peasant, and urban – as a durational ecological

adaptation to diverse geographic zones and corresponding resources descending from common ancestral origins, i.e., the Amorites. As amply demonstrated in both the ancient colorful pharaonic murals and the sculpted Canaanite religious reliefs revealed by archaeologists, our Amorite ancestors had already set the stage for modern Palestinian embroidery by providing both the inventory of colors and floral geometric patterns. The colors of azure blue, crimson, indigo, and scarlet are depicted to single out the chevron-checked garments of the fair skin with smooth hair Amorite procession of prisoners or, alternately, gift-bearing supplicants



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in homage to the Egyptian pharaohs. Canaanite sculptural reliefs, recovered by archaeologists, reveal an array of patterns whose floral designs (the lily), the wheat shaft, and geometric stars representing Astarte are integral components of the Palestinian repertoire of patterns. Through time, the embroidered motifs further diversified to include decorative patterns that abstract striking elements of nature such as seagulls in coastal villages, mosaic patterns in the Church of the

Nativity in the Bethlehem region, and sundry motifs derived from acute perceptions of Palestinian fauna and flora. Over the past two centuries, the colors of green and golden yellow were added to the spectrum of color used and new patterns were introduced from European embroidery magazines.

The diversity of ensuing floral geometric patterns and the rich set of colors provided a kaleidoscope of infinite patterns to select from and to give each village its own characteristic patterns passed down from one generation to the next which imparted to each village its distinct ethnic identity.

Embroidery reveals a common thread that weaves the fabric of cultural life in the arid desert and pastoral hinterland as two distinct ecological niches sharing one common primordial heritage within the context of a precarious climate and finite ecological resources. In fact, there is no prototype Bedouin. The stereotypical image of the Bedouin as the lonely, rugged nomad with a camel and a tent is merely an adaptation to a particular environment, and the same applies to pastoral and urban socioeconomic formations.



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Ethnographic and archaeological finds reveal that the contiguous Sina and Al-Naqab deserts merge as the backbone of Palestinian culture, and the geographic basin formed by the major valleys in Mount Hebron presents the ecological context for the onset of the process of “sedentarization” of the Semitic nomads throughout time in whose socioeconomic political environment the Palestinian elementary form of cultural identity emerged. This complex lengthy process of acculturation emerged within the internecine tribal context of raids and counter raids (*ghazu*), which entail stealing, pillaging, and usurping land and water wells and expanding into new territories (*diyar*) – itself a form of ecological adaptation creating structural conflict in Bedouin peasant relationships that overshadow the common origin. Modern studies of the Palestinian DNA inherited clusters of alleles point to the fact that Al-Naqab Bedouins, through natural drift and isolation, have preserved a significant cluster of traits inherited from the early Natufian Palestinians whose tribes had built Jericho (12,000 years ago) in juxtaposition to the rural Palestinians whose genetic structure reveals a higher percentage of Amorite phenotypes... including the fair skin, smooth hair, and colored eyes that we notice in the Mount Hebron hinterland!

The Mount Hebron valleys, following the desertification that took place four thousand years ago, provided the environment that has over the past six millennia served as a cultural niche, replenished the early settlements which straddled mountaintops, and infused the mythos of the land with its spiritual tenor. Throughout history, our nomadic predecessors' interaction



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with the environment has been a complex dynamic intellectual process, conditioned by the primordial process of ecological cultural dialectic adaptation within the basin. In the lengthy process of ecological adaptation to the new environment, our ancestors' perception did not merely reflect and react to but also incorporated the new ecological and techno-economic resources, working them into a system that was conducive to the survival of the tribal structure as an integral whole. The complex dynamic process underlies the transformation of the environment into a resource and can be viewed as the origin of the pragmatic adaptability of the Palestinians to the diverse challenges in war and peace, under contemporary occupation and in the diaspora.

Throughout history, Palestinian society has preserved its tribal structure of social solidarity within the clan. Unity within the four-generation family unit is one of its most salient political, economic, and religious structures in which embroidery that had once assumed a prominent position indicating

gender, status of women as virgins, married, or widowed has been revitalized as a nationalist symbol asserting the unrelenting will of the Palestinian people to survive in their homeland.

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## THE PALESTINIAN THOBE OUR EMBROIDERED HISTORY



### A 1940s BEDOUIN DRESS

This cotton dress is designed with bright and colorful embroidery on the sleeves and chest panel, and the rest of the dress is heavily embroidered with blue thread that can be an insinuation of the marital status of the "single" or widowed woman who owns the dress.

From the collection of Bank of Palestine