

# Our Heritage, Our Future

A Journey of Protecting and  
Promoting Palestinian Heritage



By Maha Saca

**M**y journey in documenting, reviving, and promoting Palestinian heritage began more than thirty years ago. I felt strongly, especially in the late 1980s, that all Palestinians had a patriotic duty to serve their country in their own capacity and within their own expertise and interest. Very intrigued by the unique beauty of our heritage, I embarked on field studies in various villages and refugee camps to document this knowledge directly through the men and women who lived this heritage. I wanted to hear firsthand about their experience because I consider this to be the truest form of knowledge. The field research made me realize that the most important aspect of our heritage, especially for Palestinian women, is women's traditional dress, the *thobe*.

Why the traditional Palestinian dress? This is the dress that girls used to learn to embroider, starting at the very young age of seven years; it is a woman's traditional wedding dress, the dress of the village from which she was forcefully displaced, and the dress she will wear when she undeniably returns to her home.

My first Palestinian fashion show was held in 1991. The public's reaction was more than positive, and all visitors showed deep enthusiasm and great interest in learning more about the beauty, richness, and diversity of our Palestinian dresses. Armed with such a realization, and with the great encouragement and support of my family, I established the Palestinian Heritage Center (PHC) in Bethlehem, which was officially registered as a heritage center in 1991 by the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.



Map of historical Palestine with traditional dresses, connecting the traditional dress with the various Palestinian cities and villages. Produced in 2003 by the Palestinian Heritage Center.



Three generations of Palestinian women wearing the traditional Bethlehem wedding dress (the *malak thobe*) and traditional headdress, adorned with traditional jewelry. © Maha Saca

The PHC receives visitors that include school children, university students, and those interested in the field of heritage, and it has produced and printed more than 200 posters and postcards that document historical, religious, and archaeological sites in various cities and villages in Palestine. All these documents are accompanied by images of the Palestinian dress, highlighting the identity of each place and affirming our presence in each village and town throughout Palestine. The crown jewel of these images is the Map of Historic Palestine, produced in 2003, that demonstrates the clear linkages between the geographic locations, their historic monuments, and their traditional dresses.

I have also participated, and had the honor of presenting our heritage, in more than 40 related events, both in Palestine and internationally. These events varied from exhibitions of embroidery to fashion shows, shows focused on posters and postcards, lectures, workshops, and museum

exhibits. Among the most important events was our participation in the Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People at the United Nations Headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, and a curated exhibit at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute Museum. The curated exhibit at the museum lasted for six months. I have also participated in various events in the United States, Spain, Germany, Tunisia, Algeria, the Gulf countries, and others. Audiences consistently react with amazement at the beauty, variety, and richness of our Palestinian dresses and the Palestinian art of embroidery. In the homeland, I have organized many exhibitions and fashion shows in a variety of places, including Nazareth, various universities and institutions, the two diaspora conventions in Ramallah and Bethlehem, and the Young Presidents' Organization (YPO) event. Indeed, the beauty of our heritage has always been enthusiastically received and highly appreciated by any audience, nationally or internationally.

During travels for international events abroad, I made it a habit to visit the museums and libraries of the host city to learn about its heritage and buy a book or two that represented that country's heritage. These books are on display at the PHC as well.

In 1992, I was invited to organize an exhibition on Palestinian traditional dresses in the state of Michigan. During my time there, I visited the library of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. While looking through some books, I was surprised to see my grandmother's dress, the Bethlehem iconic traditional dress, identified as the traditional dress of Israel. I made copies of the encyclopedia and upon my return to Palestine, I repeatedly sent letters to the publisher explaining that this dress is the traditional dress of Palestine, not of Israel, and I included various items of documentation to support my claims. The strongest evidence I sent came in 2007. Together with sixty countries, Palestine participated in an international competition for the World Tourism Organization (ALECSO) entitled "Women and Heritage." Palestine entered the competition with a poster I had produced at the PHC. The image showcased all our Palestinian dresses, with the Bethlehem traditional dress at the center. Palestine won first place and received the highest number of votes; three thousand more votes than the second place winner. I was honored for my work at a large ALECSO celebratory event in Madrid.

With this win, I wrote again to the encyclopedia's publisher to share the news of this victory and the international recognition of our traditional Palestinian dress. I felt a sense of accomplishment when I



Maha Saca with Pope Francis during his visit to Bethlehem in 2014. The pope is wearing the stole designed and embroidered by Maha Saca. We can see here the key of return.



The postage stamp produced by the State of Palestine to commemorate Pope Francis' visit to Bethlehem. The pope is wearing the stole designed and embroidered by Maha Saca.

saw that the falsely identified image had been removed from the 2008 edition. The struggle should continue to add the dress with the correct identification.



The largest Palestinian *thobe* embroidered with the most important motifs. The 400 square meter dress was designed by Maha Saca and produced by the Palestinian Child's Home Club in Hebron. This dress set a new Guinness world record in 2010.

Another proud moment in promoting and celebrating our heritage was when our office of the president asked me to design and embroider a papal stole for Pope Benedict XVI, who visited Bethlehem in 2009, and again for Pope Francis, who visited Bethlehem in 2014. Both stoles were embroidered with traditional Palestinian embroidery patterns, beautified with Palestinian symbols such as the key of return, the olive tree, and other Palestinian symbols. Pope Francis wore it during his visit and carried the stole home as a gift from the Palestinian people. That same year, the Ministry of Telecom and Information Technology approved the embroidered image of the key of return that was on the stole together with the image of Pope Francis as the official postage stamp of the State of Palestine. This image has become our best ambassador, traveling the world and representing the Palestinian people.

Theft and appropriation attempts are ongoing, which is why we must stay diligent. When an Israeli flight attendant, who was wearing a Palestinian dress on an El Al flight, challenged us by saying, "If this embroidery belonged to you and your ancestors, you would wear it at your universities and in the streets," we were provoked and pushed to think of ways to respond. In 2010, in cooperation with the House of

the Palestinian Child in Hebron, we designed the largest Palestinian dress (400 square meters in size). Tasked with designing the dress's embroidered motifs, I selected all of them from the rich variety that is embroidered on our traditional dresses from various cities and villages of Palestine. This dress won the Guinness title of world's largest embroidered Palestinian dress in 2010\* in yet another effort to document our embroidery and protect it from the ongoing attempts at theft and appropriation.

Sadly, the theft and appropriation of our heritage continues until today, most recently using a world event as a vehicle for appropriation. In December 2021, the Miss Universe Pageant took place in the city of Eilat in Israel. Photos were circulated of the contestants wearing Palestinian traditional dresses and preparing Palestinian dishes as part of an activity organized by the Israeli Ministry of Tourism for the contestants. They also visited the Naqab and participated in what they called a day in the life of a Bedouin settlement in Israel. During that visit there was no mention of the fact that these Bedouins are Palestinian and that what the visitors were experiencing is an integral part of Palestinian culture and heritage. To make matters worse, there was no mention of the displacement



The poster shows Palestinian women wearing traditional dresses representing all Palestinian villages and cities. This image won first place at the ALECSO competition in 2007.

and constant threat to the Bedouin way of life and livelihood. Israel used this international event to yet again appropriate our heritage, our identity, and our Palestinian dress, an undisputable symbol of our identity.

Palestinians yet again fought back! The continued efforts of many Palestinians, especially the thousands of Palestinian women who continue to practice this amazing art, were not in vain. Last year, we the people were able to assert our will and protect our dress and our art of embroidery. With the international support of more than 194 countries at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) meeting, "The art of embroidery in Palestine, practices, skills, knowledge and rituals" was added to the UNESCO List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in December 2021.

This was a great cultural victory for the Palestinian people. Indeed, a right is seldom lost if it is pursued by the people.

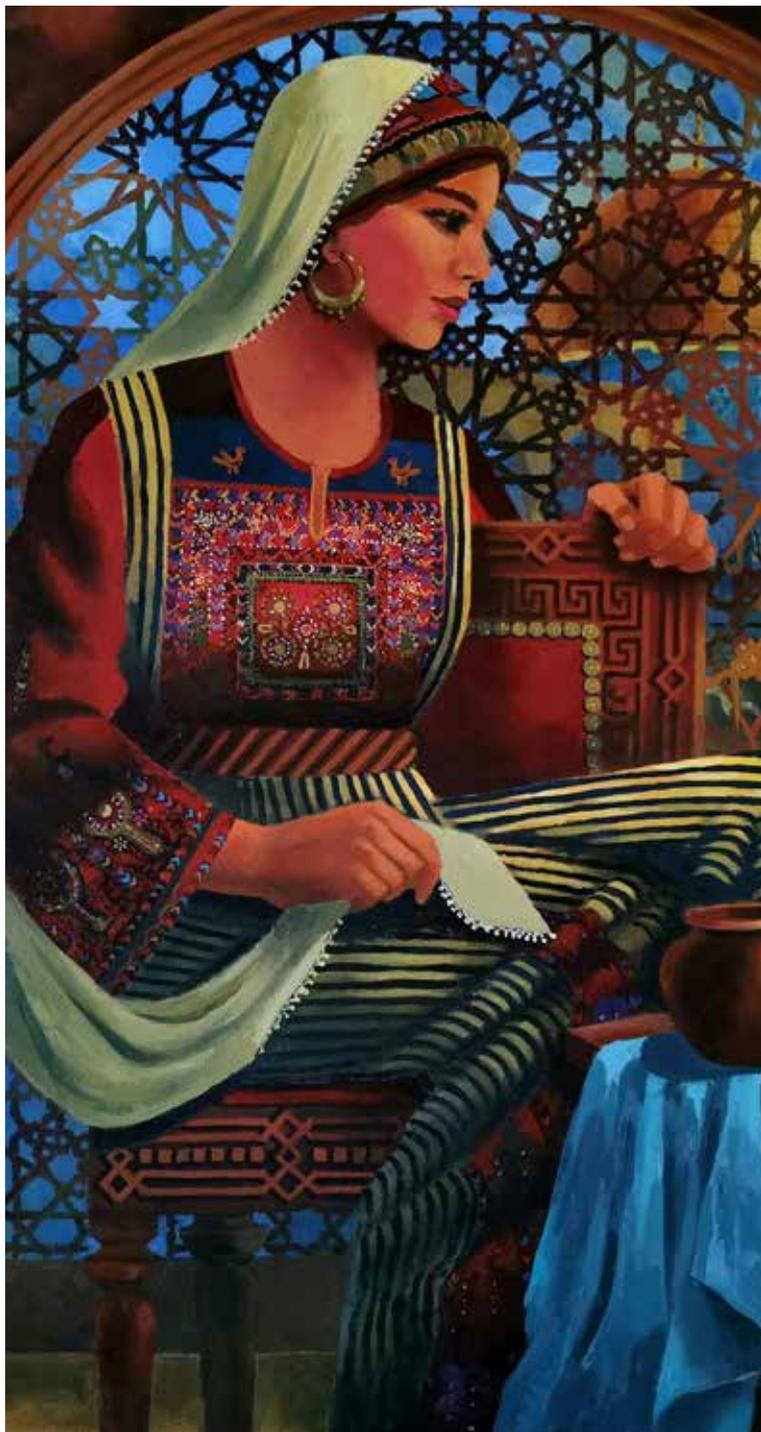
*Maha Saca is the founder and head of the Palestinian Heritage Center in Bethlehem. For more information, please visit [www.phc.ps](http://www.phc.ps).*

Article photos © by Maha Saca Collection.

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TO SHARE



\*Although the dress won the Guinness title, it was not included in the annual Guinness yearbook, as is the case with many Guinness record winners. A copy of the official letter of confirmation from Guinness is available on request from the author or from TWIP.



Artwork by Maher Naji.

## THE PALESTINIAN THOBE OUR EMBROIDERED HISTORY



### BETHLEHEM MALAK THOBE

THE BRIDAL DRESS OF BETHLEHEM, BEIT JALA, AND BEIT SAHOUR.

The dress is made of handwoven multicolored linen and silk strips of fabric, embroidered with the famous *tahreer* and *qasab* stitch. The chest panel is embroidered with the *qwar* motif with five stars; and the central part of the panel is framed with the motifs of the *subyan*, *njoum*. The phoenix adorned the chest panel. The sleeves (*al-erdan*) and side panels (*benayiq*) are adorned with colored silk strips decorated with the famous Bethlehem sa'aa motif.

From the collection of Maha Saca