

# The Traditional Palestinian Costume

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INTERVIEWER'S NOTE\*: The continuation of Palestinian traditions and culture since 1948 has provided strong reinforcement for the sense of Palestinian national identity. One very important aspect of Palestinian folk culture is the traditional Palestinian costume. Almost all that has been recently written or said about Palestinian costumes refers to them as attire of the past, something that has long disappeared. They are simply seen as objects of beauty, worthy of study and investigation, as museum pieces and collectors' items. The fact that Palestinian women, in the occupied villages of Palestine and in refugee camps, still wear their traditional Palestinian dress, is a sure sign that the Palestinian costume is very much alive, and that it is an integral part of the Palestinian woman's everyday life.

[In the following interview, Mrs. Widad Kamel Kawar, a Palestinian in Jordan, speaks about her private collection of Palestinian women's costumes, and shares with the reader her observations and comments on this subject.]

*Q. Mrs. Kawar, to what do you attribute your interest in collecting Palestinian costumes, and how did you start this project?*

*A. My interest in Palestinian costumes dates back to the 1940's. I was a child then, growing up in Bethlehem. It was a flourishing town, busy with trade and famous for its holy places. I remember vividly how on Saturdays, the official market day, I would watch spellbound all the richly-dressed*

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village women who would flood the market place from the neighbouring villages, forming a dazzling tableau of vibrant color and activity. They used to come not only to sell their farm produce of fruits and vegetables, and their homemade straw trays and baskets, but also to shop for whatever they needed for the costumes they were embroidering.

Bethlehem was the centre of the village fashion industry at the time. The reason was that Bethlehem was a meeting place of many kinds of people with a wide variety of interests. It had monasteries, religious orders, schools and, of course, pilgrims from all over the world. This inspired the residents of Bethlehem to open many shops to serve the visitors who came to Bethlehem. Many of the shops that dealt with costumes were run by women. For example, there was the shop of Manneh and Jamileh Hazboon, which was a famous centre for material (cotton, linen, silk and velvet), thread, and all the accessories needed to make a costume.

The Bethlehem women were independent and capable, due to the fact that the husbands of many of them used to immigrate to South and North America for better jobs, and the women were left alone to manage the household. In Bethlehem there were also business contacts directly with the West, thanks to the pilgrims and tourists who introduced the people of Palestine to their markets. Such contacts were made with the Kattan and Nasir families, who used to have deals with Venice, Spain and Austria.

Living in this milieu, seeing the beauty and elegance of the Palestinian woman, who wore her costume with such pride, inspired me deeply and created in me a keen interest in the costumes around me. As a city girl, I did not wear a costume myself, but women relatives of mine, in the village of 'Aboud near Ramallah, wore them all the time. I once asked them for a costume, and with great pleasure was given one, a dress, headdress and jewellery. And that is how my collection started.

*Q. What effect did the 1948 and 1967 wars have on your determination to preserve Palestinian costumes?*

*A.* In 1948 the Arab-Israeli war took place, and with it Palestinian prosperity and stability were shattered. Palestinian culture and tradition were shaken to their roots. Palestinians by the thousand left their homes out of fear, and many were forced to flee. The Palestinian problem was created. Poverty and malnutrition in the camps became a way of life. Women started selling their precious and beautiful costumes and jewellery to provide food for their families. I myself bought a few of these costumes, and I suddenly realized the urgent need to collect them and save them from being lost, at the same time helping to preserve one important aspect of our village culture. This was in the 1950's. By the time I had organized my family life,

and prepared myself for the task ahead, the 1967 war had broken out. All of Palestine came under occupation. I then felt the pressure, more than ever before, to collect valuable costumes, and organize and document any information I could find about them.

It was with this great determination that I started visiting the refugee camps in Jordan. There were many of them, holding refugees from the 1948 war, and new ones from the 1967 war – all of whom were desperately trying to re-establish their lives away from the land taken from them. Camp life became a new reality. Palestinians from different villages, each with special characteristics and ways, found themselves all of a sudden living in one area. But somehow, each group managed to keep its special identity. For example, in the Baqaa camp near Amman in Jordan, there are divisions in the camp with names such as the Jerusalem section, the Nablus section, the Jericho section, etc.

As I went about my work in the camps, I met Sheila Weir, an anthropological researcher from the British Museum in London. Like me, she had come to study the Palestinian costumes. We joined forces. I gained from her scientific methods of research, while she benefited from my contacts with the refugees, and my translations of the information we were both gathering. It was a thorough study; we spoke to many women, and many sources verified each fact. Besides the refugee camps in the East Bank of Jordan, I visited some villages in Occupied Palestine. Some villages, like Imwas near Jerusalem, no longer existed. Beit Dajan and Beit Jibreen had also gone. Some towns had no Arabs in their new population, like Isdood and Majdal in southern Palestine.

Since that time, I've been working on my own, and although I've been collecting costumes and information for more than twenty years, I still feel there is a lot more to work on in this rich field of our heritage.

*Q. To what date do you attribute the oldest costume in your collection?*

*A.* The earliest costume in my collection probably dates to the years between 1830-1850. There is very little in this field that can be traced to the period before the middle of the nineteenth century. The reason for this is that fabrics are unfortunately perishable, and little professional care has been taken to preserve old Palestinian costumes. However, we have at our disposal some descriptions of and comments about the costumes made by travellers and pilgrims who visited the country earlier than that date. I have also seen costumes donated to museums in Europe that date to around 1800; these are found in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, the Museum of Mankind in London and the Folklore Museum in Vienna.

*Q. What are the major factors that contributed to the differences one can*

*observe in the styles and patterns of these costumes?*

A. One can begin by commenting on the geographical position of Palestine. Due to the fact that Palestine is situated in the midst of the western and eastern hemispheres, it has been all through history a meeting place of many cultures and civilizations that have left their mark on many aspects of the life of the Palestinian people. The Palestinian costume is a good example which shows, in its various forms and transformations, the events of the past.

*Q. Could you give us an outline of the historical events which influenced the technique or design of Palestinian costumes?*

A. Prior to the Islamic period in 640, Palestine was under Byzantine rule. The Greek and Byzantine cultures were predominant in the area. The pilgrims and Christian churches contributed greatly to the introduction of gold thread embroidery, which we can see today, beautifully used, along with cross-stitch, in the Bethlehem costume.

Unfortunately, little has been done to find out the effect of Islam on the costumes of Palestine, although a general observer might suggest that there is a great deal in common between the Islamic geometric designs and the geometric embroidery patterns on the Palestinian costumes. Some embroidery motifs, like the feather motif, can also be found in archeological remains dated to that period.

The Crusaders are also believed to have contributed to the styles and embroidery of the Palestinian costume. Some cross-stitch designs, and especially the Bethlehem headdress that accompanies the traditional costumes, can be traced to the French pointed hat and veil commonly seen in the courts of France at the time.

Then, the Ottoman Turks ruled the country for about five hundred years. It was a period of decline in all aspects of life. The Ottoman administration was poor, and the lands they governed were vast. The economy and agriculture of the area suffered greatly, and the people lived austere, dull lives. This inactive state of affairs was reflected in the costumes of the period. The embroidery adorning them is very scanty and poor. However, some Turkish designs and motifs infiltrated the Palestinian designs, and a new style of incorporating the metallic silver thread, which was typical of Turkish and Greek embroidery, can be seen on Palestinian costumes of the time, like in the Bethlehem costume.

The political division of the country during the Ottoman rule into *wilayaat* also affected the costumes of the time. Palestine came under the *wilaya* of Damascus. Thus, the north of Palestine came closer to Syria, and the south of Palestine closer to Sinai, and the costumes of each of these areas

took on some characteristics of its neighbour's costume. For example, the *djellayeb* of Galilee is typical in cut and embroidery of the costume of southern Syria, while the costumes of southern Palestine show the influence of the Sinai dress, as seen in the Beersheba costume.

Changes were soon taking place in Palestine. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, European diplomats and missionaries became active in Palestine, and with them a new life-style was introduced, for economic interests in the area and new trade concerns brought some prosperity. Missionaries and religious orders opened schools and vocational centres. The teaching of crafts and handwork was encouraged, and new life was introduced into the local arts. Embroidery was one such art. Nuns' schools encouraged the learning of all stitches, especially western-type embroidery, which was referred to as "nuns' stitches," by the local women. Sewing machines were also introduced from Europe and that was a major event in the lives of the women of the area. The new pattern books of different designs and stitches helped in introducing exciting new motifs to their store of inherited traditional patterns, and it is very interesting to observe how cleverly the village woman incorporated the old and the new designs into her costume. For example, in a costume of that period, one can trace German, Balkan, and even Scandinavian designs.

The missionaries in Palestine also encouraged centres for commercial embroidery for the tourists and pilgrims to the Holy Shrines. The Vester centre in the American Colony outside the old city walls of Jerusalem, the German Missions in Ramallah and Bethlehem, and the Russian Missions in Nazareth and Beit Jala, are examples of such centres.

*Q. Were new materials also introduced at that time?*

*A.* Indeed. With this major cultural exposure to Western civilization, new items were introduced to the costume industry, basically European textiles like the velvets, and cotton thread. The velvets added richness to the traditional dress, while the cotton thread was more practical to use than the silk thread which was used at the time. The latter was fluffy and not fast in colour while the cotton thread was smooth and colour-fast, and thus more practical to use.

The cotton thread, however, could never compete with the lustre and beauty of silk, and women even now look very hard in the old shops to find remnants of the old silk thread to use on special occasion costumes.

During these years, a major event took place which helped in changing the life style of the inhabitants. It was the building of roads, and the introduction of railways in the area. Distances became shorter and shopping markets flourished. The economy of the area prospered and better systems

for local industry were introduced. For example, in the costume industry, machines replaced hand looms for weaving some of the textiles needed for the traditional costume. In Majdal, a centre for weaving, there were about 400 looms in the 1930's. There were also factories in Nazareth, Ramallah, Nablus and Safad.

With the fall of Ottoman rule at the end of World War I, the British Mandate came to Palestine, and with it, yet another occupation and another mode of life. During this period, the strict life the Palestinians had experienced began to relax in certain areas. Education was encouraged, better economic conditions were felt, and a higher standard of living became noticeable. All this was reflected in the women's costumes. Heavier and richer embroidery appeared on the costume, compared to the scanty embroidery of the Ottoman times. A bride could now afford a trousseau of eight costumes compared to three or four. Costumes once again became alive with colour and rich designs.

The costume accessories also had their share of improvement. Silver jewellery was replaced with gold. The common local head shawls in some areas were replaced by imported Japanese and Spanish shawls. We notice this in the coastal areas like Beit Dajan near Jaffa, where trade was more accessible with the West by sea. The imported shawl became a status symbol. A bride had to have it to complete her bridal attire. Gradually, local entrepreneurs started their own weaving factories to weave similar shawl materials, instead of importing them. In Ramallah there was the "Hishmeh" factory to weave the shawls, and there were specially trained women to embroider the decorative floral patterns in European style. Unfortunately, this new style reduced the use of the traditional *kbirka* or head scarf, that was embroidered in cross-stitch.

*Q. Were the political events of the time reflected in Palestinian costumes?*

A. Although there was a semblance of economic prosperity during the British Mandate, political unrest spread in Palestine. Palestinian nationalist leaders were aware of the plans of imperialism and Zionism for the creation of the State of Israel in Palestine. This inspired a strong resistance movement, and in 1936 the famous strike took place. All activity in Palestine came to a standstill. The Palestinians were showing the world their utter rejection of the creation of a foreign state in their midst.

One observation I would like to make here is how this nationalism reflected itself in the costumes or dress style of the town inhabitants. In Jaffa and Jerusalem, the western-style dress was the norm, yet now the men who used to wear the European hat or the Turkish fez returned to wearing

the Palestinian village headwear – the *keffiyeh* and *ikal*. The women also, who would previously not be seen without a western hat, replaced it with some kind of veil or scarf. The action expressed the Palestinians' identity with their land, and their solidarity with their leaders, calling for independence.

Political unrest continued and escalated, and in 1948, the British Mandate came to an end. The Arab-Israeli war started, but in spite of heroic battles and fierce fighting, the State of Israel was created, and the rightful inhabitants of Palestine became refugees.

Some Palestinians remained in their original villages, others settled in shacks and camps in the unoccupied parts of Palestine, while thousands of others went even further away to live in other Arab countries. Economic conditions in Palestine were poor, men struggled to earn a living and, as I mentioned earlier, women started selling their costumes and jewellery to survive. The beautiful hand-embroidered, cross-stitched, traditional costume started to be replaced by less expensive, machine-embroidered ones.

In the late 1950's and the early 1960's, the Palestinian refugees began to recover after the 1948 tragedy. Many of the men found their way to the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia and Libya, where they found better-paying jobs. They left their families behind and sent their savings home. This led to a new prosperity and there was a building boom in all the villages and cities of unoccupied Palestine. Trade became plentiful, and agriculture picked up again with the help of modern machinery bought by the farmer from the money sent to him by his son in the Gulf. This prosperity was reflected, as always, in the traditional village costumes of the Palestinian women. The embroidery was once again rich and plentiful on the costume. The acquisition of gold jewellery became the norm.

Palestinian cross-stitch embroidery centres were greatly encouraged at this time. Centres in refugee camps, villages, and towns were opened by Arab women's organizations, cooperatives and UNRWA. There was a concern for revitalizing the embroidery and its traditional usage on costumes, as well as using it to fit the modern home, to decorate tablecloths, runners, cushions, belts, purses and other accessories.

Unfortunately, the tragic 1967 war – when all of Palestine fell under occupation – was a severe setback to all steps that were being taken to re-establish the Palestinian identity. The embroidery centres suffered immensely. Yet, with determination and great courage, the will of the Palestinians remained alive, and now, in spite of all the problems, there is an enormous effort to continue the work started before.

*Q. Could you comment on the variety of embroidery styles and patterns on the costumes in your collection?*

A. To the general observer, the three hundred Palestinian costumes in my collection are almost all the same. They are long flowing robes, embroidered with cross-stitch motifs on the chest panel, the lower back, and the sides and sleeves. But when one looks more closely, each one of these dresses has a style of its own, a mark of distinction in its embroidery – something that makes it unique. For each village in Palestine has its own general pattern, and style, or cut of the costume, and its particular unit of specific patterns that has been handed down by memory from mother to daughter. At the same time, one can also notice some outside influences from other areas infiltrating the traditional patterns, for this is an inevitable outcome of inter-marriage, visiting, or travel from one location to another.

A village woman reads her patterns like a story. She is proud of them and the perfection of their execution on her costume. For her, the costume is her “passport,” a bearer of her identity. On market day, she goes to the big towns, and it is her costume that speaks for her, saying where she comes from, and reflecting her standard of perfection in embroidery, her sense of colour combination and harmony of designs. Now and then, a woman would copy a pattern which took her fancy, which she might have seen on a visitor’s costume or during a trip to the market, but the new combinations soon became typical of one village only; in fact, no two villages in Palestine have the same combination of patterns. To the village woman, this is a matter of village pride and a tradition worth keeping.

*Q. Could you describe the various elements of which the pattern is composed?*

A. The embroidery patterns are all geometric in origin. Although some basic designs are found all over Palestine, unique variations of the one design are found in each separate village. For example, the motif of the Bethlehem star becomes a moon in Ramallah, and a rose in Gaza. The cypress trees are found on almost all Palestinian costumes, but with great variety of form, shape and design. Another famous motif is what is called “four soaps in a dish” or “four flowerpots,” as seen in the Hebron dress.

As we notice, the names of motifs are frequently symbolic of everyday beliefs and events. There is one called the “Tree of Life” found in a concentrated form on the Bethlehem dress, and variations of it are scattered on costumes from all around central and southern Palestine. Nature, too, is a rich source of inspiration. There are a great number of motifs with names bearing a relationship to nature like the “water waves,” “sun,” “moon,” “stars,” “trees,” “flowers,” etc. Other names come from everyday life, like “roads,” “old man’s teeth,” “the elegant young man,” etc. The Jaffa motifs include orange blossoms and orange tree branches, symbols of the famous



orange groves of Jaffa. Magic and superstition are also reflected in embroidery patterns, as some designs represent amulets or the *hejab*, in many shapes and sizes.

Another main feature of the village costume, apart from the embroidery patterns, is the style or cut of the costume, which shows where it comes from. There is a general cut or style of the Palestinian costume that has not changed to this day. It is a long, narrow, straight dress with long, pointed or straight-end sleeves sewn low on the dress, and a rounded opening at the neck. The dress has an embroidered chest panel called the *qabbeh*, sometimes embroidered directly on the costume or appliquéd later on. The sides of the dress are also embroidered, either straight onto the dress, or on triangular extra pieces that are sewn to the sides. The lower back as well as the sleeves are also embroidered in various designs.

Three clearly distinguishable styles are worth mentioning. In the North of Palestine, the costume is cut and buttoned down below the breast piece, and worn over trousers. The skirt is also slit at the sides, and the women often wear a blouse under the dress.

The Jericho dress is very much like the costume of the village women of the Jordan valley and Salt in Jordan. It is a very long dress that the woman wears by pulling it once over a tight belt, giving it a flowing tent-like style.

The Bethlehem dress, or the *thawb malak*, a special bridal gown made of velvet and embroidered with gold, is one style of dress that spread in many villages of Palestine. Its elegant, rich appearance gave it great distinction. We can find it in the Hebron area, Ramallah and the surrounding villages, and in Majdal near Jaffa. In Majdal, there were even special factories to weave the specific material needed for the *malak*.

These are general observations on the styles or cut of the Palestinian costumes, yet more can be done to study other peculiarities, for each village has its own distinctiveness in this aspect of Palestinian costume.

*Q. It is customary to think that a costume goes hand in hand with its accessories. What were the typical accessories of the Palestinian costume?*

*A.* Let me first talk about the trousseau of the Palestinian village bride, for besides her embroidered costumes and her bridal dress, she had to have many items to go with her to her new home. The bride embroidered rectangular cushions for herself and the groom. The famous Hebron cushions are an example of this tradition. There was also the cosmetic bag, called *mukobleh*, which included eye make-up powder in a bottle, and was often adorned with beads and embroidery. The groom was also provided for with the gift of a tobacco pouch, as well as an embroidered handkerchief. In some areas like Hebron and Beersheba, where weaving was common, the bride

wove rugs as well as cushions.

The costumes, on the other hand, were never complete without the embroidered headdresses and shawls which form an integral part of the traditional dress. There are many styles of headdress, each one typical of a specific area. The headdress holds the wealth of the woman who wears it, for the coins sewn to it are one of its major features. It was a form of decoration as well as a safe place for the village woman's money.

Along with the coins, the headdress is decorated with embroidery in traditional patterns, very similar to the patterns found on the costume. The shapes differ: some are small round hats surrounded with coins and worn on top of the head, like in Hebron. Others, like those in Ramallah, are surrounded by a stuffed halo of material with coins attached to it. In Bethlehem, the headdress resembles a short conical hat worn with the help of an elasticated band under the chin, and covered with coins sewn to its front panel. In al-Bira and the surrounding villages, a cap like a baby's cap is worn covering the whole head, with the coins sewn on to surround the face. All of these basic headdresses are covered with different styles of shawls, some embroidered in cross-stitch, others with machine embroidery. Some are of thick wool, others of light transparent materials. One can easily say there are around ten different styles of headdress in Palestinian villages, but unfortunately no study has as yet been made of the origin of these headdresses, and why they differ from one area to another.

Belts are also important to the traditional costume. There are several styles of belts; mostly, they are made of red and gold striped material, and fashioned to include a small coin pocket, discreetly sewn into the belt. This type of belt is wound twice around the waist, and is typically found in the Ramallah area. In Bethlehem and Hebron, square handwoven shawls are folded in such a way as to become long scarves, and then tied around the waist.

An unforgettable item in a bride's trousseau is the jewellery. Although what the jewellery included differed from area to area, it usually comprised the following: one necklace, or two of different lengths; an amulet; bracelets of different styles; a ring, and in some areas, anklets, like in the north of Palestine and in Sinai, close to the bedouin areas. Until the 1900's, the jewellery was mainly fashioned of silver. It was bought from well-known jewellers in the big cities, like "Abu Shehadeh" in Nablus, "Zakharia and Sammoor" in Bethlehem, and "Salman Bros" in Jerusalem. Most of the jewellery in the country was made of melted coins, and coins themselves were also a special feature that decorated most jewellery.

Now most of the jewellery is gold and, as in all walks of life, the more the woman has of it the more secure she feels, for it is decorative as well as a sign of stability.

*Q. Having introduced us to this aspect of Palestinian folk culture, can you tell us what efforts are now being made to preserve the embroidery and the costumes, and what further steps you recommend to be taken in this direction?*

A. The beauty and grandeur of Palestinian costume, and the richness of the Palestinian embroidery that decorates it have provoked a great deal of interest in many parts of the world. In a sense, this went hand in hand with the re-awakening of Palestinian nationalism, after the two wars of 1948 and 1967. The preservation of Palestinian culture has become a national duty, and for a number of years, there have been movements in many Arab countries, mainly in Jordan, Lebanon and the occupied West Bank, to establish and supervise embroidery centres.

These centres have a dual purpose. They keep the Palestinian embroidery tradition alive by teaching it to young girls, and also turn embroidery into a professional skill by which a woman can earn a living. Almost every Arab woman's organization, be it charitable or otherwise, has a cross-stitch embroidery centre as an integral part of it. In these centres there is a special concern for teaching the young women the old patterns and designs. There is a predominant attachment to the authentic motif reproduced exactly, or with some modernization, such as the use of different and new colour combinations, and the use of the fashionable materials of today.

Another attempt at preserving the Palestinian costume is through the increasing interest in private collections of costumes. As well as showing pride in the Palestinian heritage, collecting is now sometimes seen as a business investment, for the old costumes are becoming rare and very much sought after. A Bethlehem wedding dress of the 1940's, for example, now costs around 800 dollars.

In addition, many museums in many parts of the world are also taking a keen interest in Palestinian costumes. Anthropologists are making special studies in this rich field. The British Museum, as I mentioned earlier, in 1967 sent a specialist to study Palestinian costumes from the refugee camps and all over Jordan and Palestine. These studies are still going on.

In the United States, the Museum of International Folk Art, as one unit of the Museum of New Mexico, at Santa Fe, has a very good collection of Palestinian costumes. It was donated to the museum by Mr. John Whiting, a missionary who lived in Palestine in the early 1900's. The costumes in this collection date to about 1840. I recently contributed many missing pieces to this collection, and helped to identify some of the items.

As to suggestions for maintaining this interest in Palestinian costumes, I recommend that the teaching of the authentic patterns of cross-stitch embroidery become part of the everyday school curriculum in private, governmental or UNRWA schools. I also want this embroidery to be

introduced and studied in hobby and art centres for the young and old. On a larger scale, more serious scientific research should be done in this field, along with the continuation of efforts for the preservation and documentation of private, as well as museum, collections.

But the surest way of preserving the Palestinian costume is to wear it. The Palestinian woman's pride in her costume and the constant care she takes to maintain its designs, as well as the innovations she adds, help greatly in establishing its continuity. It is true that the young village girl is slowly turning to the more practical western-style dress, yet we can still see her wearing her *thawb* or village costume whenever she is at home, and in ceremonies, weddings or special occasions. One interesting note is that in many villages, the modern bride makes it a point to have a copy of the traditional costume of her village in her trousseau, for the Palestinian costume today is a sign of the identity of the woman who wears it, be it in her village, as everyday attire, or in the city, as an elegant dress for special occasions. It is always an unmistakable Palestinian flag, regardless of its style, pattern or design.