



# IN DEFENSE OF PALESTINE'S CULTURAL HERITAGE

WALID SALIM YUSEF

THE PRESERVATION OF  
PALESTINE'S CULTURAL  
HERITAGE IS PART OF THE  
OVERALL STRUGGLE AGAINST  
ZIONISM AND FOR THE CREATION  
OF AN INDEPENDENT STATE ON  
THEIR OWN SOIL.

**R**ESCUING popular forms of expression is one aspect of the Palestinian people's struggle against the Zionist occupation of their land.

Despite the catastrophes of occupation, exodus and dispersion they have suffered, there is currently a rebirth of all forms of cultural expression. This demonstrates the people's intense desire to keep their national personality, their heritage, alive.

The upsurge in the Palestinian national liberation movement after the 1967 war has greatly affected the people's lives. It has awakened their national personality, their dormant potential, not only in cultural and artistic areas but also in the many ways they carry out their struggle.

This process of Palestinian cultural rebirth has been given a boost by numerous popular or politico-military organizations, trade unions, women's and professional associations. Many intellectuals and public figures working in various branches of arts and letters have under-

taken this labor of compiling the people's heritage, whether it be in the form of proverbs, poem-songs, poetry and folk tales or folksongs and dances. A variety of attempts have been made to keep the cultural heritage of Palestine alive inside occupied territory and in exile.

A great deal of attention has been paid to popular forms of expression linked to daily life: ceramics, articles made of wood, mother-of-pearl, glass, metal and raffia reeds, dressmaking, embroidery, and all handicraft work that produces useful objects.

These crafts come out of a very ancient, constantly evolving national culture of which the people are very proud.

All these forms of expression — these utensils and clothing which have truly indigenous roots — take on a special significance because of the circumstances our people are living in. The heritage left by many generations of Palestinians who have lived in their own land has left imprints of their national history and the fruits of their development, along with their

artistic and cultural treasures. It is a magnificent proof that the soul of this people has never been, nor will ever be, stamped out.

Palestinian social and professional institutions and revolutionary organizations have on many occasions prepared exhibits of works of art, handicrafts and new forms of popular expression, which have been displayed in the Arab countries and other parts of the world. These have helped put other people in touch with our people's national culture so they can become familiar with it. This fills us with genuine pride, because it means that people in other parts of the world can become aware of our immense love for our homeland, the depth of our ties to our land and the solidity of our historic treasures.

Palestinian culture is the living and historic face of our presence in our homeland and our nostalgia for her. It shows what it was like when our people lived there in peace. It also tells us how cherished this peace was, which was destroyed after the onset of Zionism. And it shows how the expansionist and colonialist attacks were carried out ignoring our people's presence and their deep roots in the land. That is why the people — hundreds of craftsmen and other skilled individuals — have worked both inside our country and in exile to preserve our patrimony. This is one form of resisting the Zionist attempts to destroy us as a nation and to wipe out our people's deep roots and their living forms of creative expression developed over the course of history.

Just as Israel has made every effort to usurp the lands of the Palestinian people and murder our people — because it doesn't want to recognize our people's existence — it wants to wipe out any evidence of our presence as an independent nation, our patrimony and traditions, discrediting and stealing this heritage in every way possible.

But despite these imperialist and colonialist plans and the aggression itself, Israel has not been able to carry out its designs, because the Palestinian people, who have taken up arms and who are resisting by every possible means, have obtained the recognition, esteem and support of all free peoples and of the progressive and socialist countries. They have shown by their enthusiasm and vitality the love they feel for their patrimony, which year after year our people enrich with a new sense of heroism.

#### Overview of Palestinian popular culture

Popular forms of cultural expression, that is, artistic forms that come from the people as a whole and whose authors remain anonymous, are passed on from generation to generation, and are improved or expanded according to popular taste. These generally reflect the pre-

dominant life-styles, economy and culture of each region.

The Palestinian people have preserved a long tradition of artistic and craft forms that grow out of their everyday needs. Among these are blown glass, in Hebron; ceramics and pottery in Gaza and many other regions; wood and mother-of-pearl crafts in Jerusalem and Bethlehem; the production of copper and embossed silver utensils for the home, and the production of woven goods in brightly colored reeds; the ancient tradition of hand-weaving, tapestries and carpets, especially in Gaza and Nazareth. This craft work preserves certain traditions dating back to the Byzantine and Islamic periods, modified over the years, as can be seen in some rural peasant products.

Fine arts and architecture — visible in many ancient edifices remaining in the country, such as churches, mosques and old mansions in the traditional Eastern Arabian style — also hark back to this Byzantine and Islamic period. All of this shows the successful development of a hereditary national architecture characteristic of most Palestinian cities and villages. There is universal admiration for the elegant stone buildings which reflect the refined taste of our people throughout the course of history preceding the Zionist aggression. Holy cities like Jerusalem and Bethlehem are not the only ones with these characteristics. It is also typical of most coastal





Mustafa el Kurd plays popular Palestinian music.

Arab cities, such as Nablus, for example. After the 1948 war and the creation of Israel, these cultural relics were usurped by the Zionist states. The Arabs were expelled from their homes, which the Israelis turned into stores and cafés.

The folk art carried on by our peasant population is a vital part of our heritage that has attracted the attention of Western visitors and researchers. Numerous studies, accompanied by photos and drawings, have been published on this theme.

One of the folk art forms that has been studied most is the sewing and embroidery done by peasant women. This handiwork is different in each region. There are 25 different kinds of typical dress. Each has characteristics unique to its particular region, relating to geographical differences (mountains or plains), means of production, or religious influence, each of which is reflected in the ornaments. These popular art forms linked to dress and weaving, as well as the production of domestic articles (table cloths, tapestries, cushions, etc.) and local handicrafts using colored reeds (baskets, rugs) are part of the folk culture which are threatened by extinction because their existence is based on the peasants' roots in their land.

Along with the loss of the greater part of Palestine after the war in 1948, most of its inhabitants, thrown off their plots of land, began a massive exodus. But the Palestinians have brought their culture with them to the countries that have taken them in and have spontaneously taken care to protect their traditions. But our people's dispersion and their economic and social living conditions in refugee camps for 25 years have created obstacles and pressures that threaten to wipe out these forms of popular art.

Before the creation of the Palestinian national liberation movement the people, their land and their national patrimony were threatened with extinction. But from that time on, and especially after the 1967 war and the later occupation of the rest of Palestine, there has been a complete change in our people's situation.

The Palestinians have taken upon themselves the defense of their own cause. In the context of this upsurge, the Palestinian popular, professional and women's organizations have played the role of liaison between the people and their past, their culture, and their many forms of collective expression. This national reawakening has incited the masses to take the initiative in protecting their cultural heritage and to renew

their old customs. This heritage is a source of pride for the people and its being united to the national cause is one more element in our people's resistance, despite the diaspora.

#### **Zionist occupation since the war of 1957 and their treatment of Palestine's patrimony**

In the years following the Israeli occupation of the West Bank the Gaza Strip and other Arab lands, Israel was not content with just appropriating the lands after dispersing their inhabitants, installing settlements, transforming the country's economy into a subsidiary of the Israeli economy, and in general weakening all components of the Palestinian people's national existence. Beyond this, the Israeli occupation was aimed at erasing all signs of our people's existence as a nation, our civilization and our culture. It tried to extract the people's national artistic heritage and plagiarize certain cultural elements, pretending that these are part of Israel's historic patrimony. In so doing they violated all international rules and laws, totally denied the decisions of the UN, UNESCO and world public opinion.

Holy places such as mosques, churches and convents have repeatedly been pillaged and profaned at the hands of Israeli government forces, which amounts to an attack on Arab sovereignty. The importance of places of worship is more than just the religious value they have for the Christians and Moslems of the world. They are also symbols of the country's civilization, a sample of its fine arts and architecture, and in addition contain manuscripts of great historic value.

There have been numerous direct acts of desecration and pillaging of these holy centers since the occupation, including the burning of the Al-Aqsa mosque, the theft of the Virgin's crown in the Church of the Resurrection, the arson fires at the Saint-Jean and Sainte-Jeanne Churches and the Sainte-Catherine monastery in the Sinai. Many valuable artifacts have been taken off to unknown destinations and the famous Dead Sea Scrolls have disappeared.

Article 4 of the 1954 Hague Convention mandates respect for works of culture and calls for all signators to refrain from harming them. It condemned the theft, fraud, and dispersion of cultural works. The International World Assembly held in New Delhi in 1956 also called for the prohibition of any state carrying out archeological exploration in the territory of another country in the case of armed conflict between the two. It expressed the need to take appropriate measures to preserve all archeological findings in the occupied territories, stating that these should be turned over to the authorities to which they rightfully belong. But Israel flagrantly violates these international agree-



ments. From the beginning of the occupation it has ceaselessly carried out archeological excavations the length and breadth of the country, not just in Palestinian lands but also in the Syrian Golan and the Egyptian Sinai.

It is regrettable that Western media simply echoes Zionist propaganda, passing off as an understandable and well-intentioned undertaking what really amounts to a prolongation of the theft and disparagement of the country's archeological heritage and civilization. The Zionist authorities openly and shamelessly flaunt these thefts, showing their total lack of concern for the calls made by the General Assembly of UNESCO during its 15th session in 1968. That resolution urged Israel to protect and care for all cultural centers, buildings and properties and to abstain from carrying out further archeological exploration or taking these findings away, or in any way changing them so as to alter their characteristics or their historical and cultural identity.

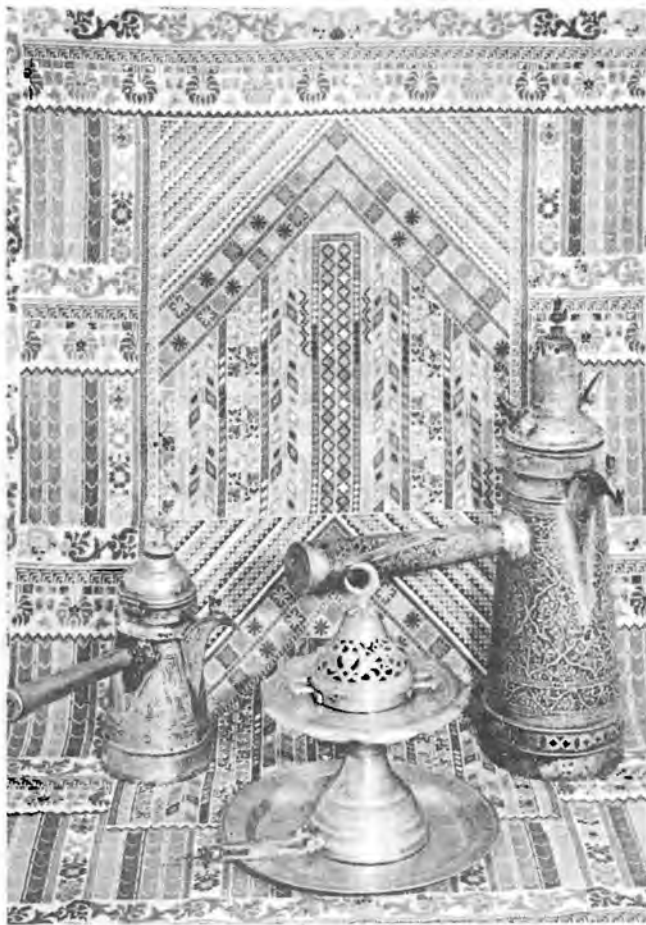
But it's not just a matter of excavating for objects of archeological value or stealing historic

treasures. The archeological findings, buildings with historic value and sanctuaries of the Palestinian people are threatened with destruction. There have been more instances than can be recounted here of the demolition of ancient buildings, the measures taken to modify or change the characteristics of holy places, not to mention the houses destroyed in the search for the Wailing Wall, which was the pretext for carrying out dangerous excavations in the district of the Al-Aqsa mosque. These excavations threaten to cause fissures in the holy places, but are carried out because, according to Zionist authorities, "they are historic and holy undertakings". All of this is carried out despite the protests to the United Nations by residents of Jerusalem and national and religious associations, and despite international accords and decisions.

British University professor Kathleen Kennon has called the Israeli excavations carried out around Jerusalem a crime, and has called on world public opinion to oppose them. In a letter sent to the London *Times* published August 17, 1982, Dr. Kennon clearly stated that the



Palestinian art can be found in the main galleries of Europe.



excavations have damaged buildings that surround the city which are among the most beautiful monuments of the Middle Ages. She added that "it is totally criminal to damage these monuments."

There was a huge outcry by Israeli religious figures when six holes, not exceeding 15 centimeters, were made in the Wailing Wall to prevent the collapse of an ancient dwelling near the Wall. The house would not have been in danger of collapse if Israeli officials hadn't carried out excavations around it.

Israeli religious leaders set up a storm of protests against this "execrable" action. The Rabbinical Committee called for general protests and issued a call for demonstrations and prayer meetings in front of the Wall. On February 6, 1972 the head Rabbi sent a telegram to Theodore Kallek, mayor of Jerusalem, demanding that the work be stopped. The mayor immediately went to the spot, but let the work continue. The Israeli prime minister formed a special commission headed by the director general of the Ministry of the Interior to investigate the affair, and mobilized representatives of the

Ministry of Religious Affairs and of the municipality of Jerusalem.

A local spokesman reported the incident as follows: "Two months ago the municipality ordered the demolition of a building that houses 65 Arabs, but the order was overturned at the request of the Department of Ruins, which further asked the Jewish commission to shore up the house, in consideration of its historic value, and because the damage done to it had put it in danger of caving in. Arab workers made the six 15-centimeter deep holes under the instructions of the Jewish commission in charge of restoring ancient housing."

This led Rabbi Berl of the Religious Affairs Ministry to label the incident a "scandal" and demand that Israeli religious groups organize a protest. *Hatsopah*, the newspaper of the national religious party, called for the punishment of those "guilty" of this "desecration".

Moshe Dayan, former Israeli Defense Minister, who acquired an almost legendary image during the 1967 war, decided to add another false title to his fame, claiming knowledge and experience in archeology. In November 1969 Dayan celebrat-



ed the opening of a center to display archeological relics, under the pretext that he himself had discovered them. A war criminal like Dayan doesn't occupy himself with such a respectable pastime; the lie is too big to be given any credence. The Israeli newspaper *Haalem Haza* reported the event and published an article describing Dayan as a professional relic thief. It claimed he had obtained them through his agents. The value of the objects Dayan had in his possession was around three million Israeli pounds sterling.

Dayan's widow is also an "expert", but in another field: that of acquiring Palestinian dresses. She buys samples of typical regional dress and Palestinian embroidery, which she later exports to Europe and the US as "made in Israel".

There are three central offices in Israel responsible for buying Palestinian objects of art and handicrafts. They get into the hands of the Israelis via middlemen in specialty shops in Tel Aviv, Haifa, Jerusalem, Netanya and other cities outside of Israel. One of these offices is called Maskit, and is run by Dayan's widow. It owns a number of stores which sell Palestinian dresses and objects of folk art in Europe and the United States. Another is the Wizo, which has stores in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa, and the third is Beersheba, which is in Tel Aviv.

The Wizo, whose name comes from the initials of the Women's International Zionist Organization, has for a long time been given extensive rights to merchandize Palestinian products abroad. Since 1940 it has been selling embroidery, silk cloth and leather handicrafts that have been world famous for centuries.

After the state of Israel was founded and Jews who had emigrated to other Arab countries returned, the craftsmanship of our people became even more famous, because the emigrants brought with them elements of the folk culture of these regions. The occupation of the remaining Palestinian lands in 1967 increased the opportunities to exploit Arab manpower due to the economic pressures exerted on the Arab population of the West Bank. All these factors have opened up great possibilities for the Israelis to buy people's products at ridiculously low prices and resell them on the foreign market after labeling them "Made in Israel".

As we broaden our knowledge of popular culture we will find numerous examples of the Zionist's massive, outright theft of the Palestinian people's cultural heritage.

Well-known popular Arab dishes such as *homox*, *felafel* and *chawarma* have become typical Israeli dishes. Popular music and dances, art in general, decoration, writing, are copied, and local customs are altered. For example, the Palestinian *kouffich* has been turned into a women's dress.

But the lies that the Israeli government and information apparatus spread all over the world, their falsification, robbery and plagiarism don't worry the Palestinian people. As the proverb says, "You can fool some of the people all of the time; you can fool all of the people some of the time; but you can't fool all of the people all of the time."

Palestinian art, crafts, and popular patrimony are known to researchers and specialists in this field, and have been reflected in studies and investigations made since the most ancient times about Palestine and its people's culture.

Before the foundation of the Jewish colonies there were many German specialists in Palestine linked to the German-Palestinian Association. From the time it was founded in 1876 this group helped publish a magazine dedicated to the study of living conditions of the indigenous residents of the region. There were also many Palestinian researchers who specialized in the study of popular art and customs, such as Dr. Taufik Canaan, who wrote many important articles in English and German. There were also Stephan Stephan, who focused on popular stories, and Amer Salah-El Barguthi.

Modern Western writers and investigators are still interested in the study of the Palestinian people's heritage in arts and crafts. This is shown by the popularity of Weir's *Palestinian Embroidery*, published by the British Museum. This work contains about 30 photographs of an important collection of embroidery and clothing displayed in the museum. Many articles about Palestinian culture have been published in specialty magazines and newspapers in Great Britain, the German Federal Republic, the United States, Sweden, Finland, France and the Soviet Union, not to mention all those published in Arab periodicals.

Recently, popular and professional institutions and associations, the women's and writers' unions and research centers have agreed to pay more attention to various aspects of Palestinian cultural heritage. The PLO research center published the book *People's Art of Palestine*, by Causra Jouwahiria Arnita (1968). This book deals especially with folk songs, musical instruments and customs of Jerusalem; the wedding ceremonies and celebrations, religious holidays, festivals, and popular proverbs from the city of Tourmos Aya. A similar book, *Folk Tales*, by Nemr Serjan, was published in 1974.

The preservation of the Palestinian cultural patrimony is an important aspect in the struggle for independence of the Palestinian national personality. The people, under the leadership of their sole legitimate representative, the PLO, have taken this on as a part of their general fight against Zionism and their struggle to create an independent state on their native soil ●