

Palestinian embroidery added to UNESCO cultural heritage list

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Ramallah, December 17 (RHC)-- The United Nations cultural agency (UNESCO) has added the art of traditional Palestinian embroidery to its Intangible Cultural Heritage List. The new listing was made during the 16th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, an annual gathering of hundreds of participants including state representatives, NGOs and cultural institutions.

“This step is important and timely, in order to protect our Palestinian identity, heritage and narrative, in the face of the occupation’s attempts to steal what it does not own,” Shtayyeh said in a statement on Wednesday.

Palestinian embroidery – or “tatreez” – is an artistic tradition passed down through generations that involves hand-stitching patterns and motifs with brightly coloured thread onto clothing. The thobe, a traditional, loose-fitting dress worn by Palestinian women, is the most commonly embroidered item of clothing.

While the practice originated in rural areas, the culture of stitching and wearing embroidered items is now common across cities and villages, with different patterns representing the various regions in historic Palestine and can act as an indicator for the economic and marital status of the woman wearing it.

Atef Abu Saif, the PA minister of culture, said that the ministry worked for more than two years to get Palestinian embroidery on the list. “Heritage is the living reservoir of the memory of our people on this earth. The preservation of the national cultural identity of our heritage is indispensable to the necessity of confronting an occupation that harnesses all its capabilities to eradicate and steal it,” he said in a statement.

“What our grandparents and forefathers created and left for us in heritage consisting of beauty, splendor and roots that are deeply fixed, is the best evidence that we are the people of this land,” added Abu Saif.

The new listing described Palestinian embroidery as a “social and intergenerational practice.” “Women gather in each other’s homes to practise embroidery and sewing, often with their daughters. Many women embroider as a hobby, and some produce and sell embroidered pieces to supplement their family’s income, either on their own or in collaboration with other women.” The practice is transmitted from mother to daughter and through formal training courses, the listing adds.

UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces, associated therewith – that communities, groups, and in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.”

The Representative List was first launched in 2008. In its 2003 convention, UNESCO defines the list’s purpose as “to ensure greater visibility” and to “increase awareness” of the significance of nominated elements as representatives of intangible cultural heritage. Some of the well-known elements on the list include Chinese Shadow Puppetry, French Gastronomic Meals and South Korean Kimchi.

The move comes days after contestants for Miss Universe 2021 came under fire for what Palestinians said was an appropriation of their culture during a tour of Israel ahead of the competition held in the southern city of Eilat on December 12.

In their visit to the predominantly Bedouin city of Rahat, candidates posted images of themselves on social media donning Palestinian embroidered thobes while making stuffed vine leaves. Miss Philippines Beatrice Luigi Gomez angered many when she captioned her photos with a “Day in the life of a Bedouin,” along with a #VisitIsrael hashtag.

“Colonialism, racism, cultural appropriation, patriarchy, whitewashing, all in one place,” said Ines Abdel Razek, the advocacy director for the Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy (PIPD) and a policy analyst with the Al-Shabaka think-tank.

The U.S.-based Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) activist group described it as “cultural theft” and an “attempt to self-indigenize.” “Through posts sponsored by the Israeli Ministry of Tourism, Miss Universe contestants have showcased their engagement with Palestinian food, clothing, and dance traditions — but they’ve called this culture, and the land and people from which it originated, ‘Israeli’.”

“The Miss Universe posts demonstrate the importance of a cultural boycott of Israel. The Israeli government blatantly uses culture as a tool to glamorize or camouflage its oppression of Palestinians, so we must collectively resist participating in it or giving it our attention,” the group said.

On Wednesday, a group of Palestinian women wearing embroidered thobes descended on al-Manara square in downtown Ramallah in the occupied West Bank to protest the Miss Universe incident. “I’m wearing this thobe, and I will pass it down to my granddaughter. We are standing here today – we have a history, civilization and roots,” Nadia Hassan Mustafa, 70, from the village of Beitin, told Al Jazeera.

Laila Ghannam, the governor of Ramallah said “this type of attire is a part of our daily life and everyone who follows our culture knows this.” “We do not use it for fashion shows or for beauty queens. Our beauty is well-known, it is in our mothers, in the mothers of martyrs and prisoners, in the beauty of the women who are oppressed,” she told Al Jazeera.

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