

What makes popular culture a site of struggle?

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Palestinian embroidery, tatreez, was once a reflection of rural Palestinian life. Tatreez motifs, as can be seen in Figure 1, were passed down from mother to daughter and embroidered on garments and objects to reflect the individual women's taste but also as a marker of her local

identity. (Skinner and Kamel Kavar, 2007) Today however, “embroidery in symbolic as in physical form has played a fundamental role in the articulation of Palestinian nationalism since 1948” (The Courtauld, 2024, 8:57). Tatrez then became more than just heritage, it became Palestinian life. This essay will argue that tatrez is a site of struggle as Palestinian folk culture was transformed into a site of resistance against Israeli occupation, apartheid and violence. This essay will explore the transformation of tatrez and the evolution of the resistance since the 1948 Nakbha. I will be arguing through the ideas of John Fiske's essay on incorporation and exportation.

Tatrez is folk culture. It is an inherited practice that has developed over generations made by Palestinian women for Palestinian women. Folk culture is a form of popular culture. However, due to the occupation this folk culture began to hold new meanings. It became a form of resistance, as Palestinian tatrez embroiderer Subyiye Krayem said “folklore is politics unto itself, it means I exist” (The Courtauld, 2024, 9:03). Tatrez became a site of individual action and a sign of solidarity, garments featuring tatrez would be seen as an expression of solidarity with the Palestinians. Both an economic solidarity, as you are purchasing a garment and symbolically as you are recognising Palestinian heritage. In 1987, the Palestinian flag became illegal, Intifada dresses (Figure 2), then made women's bodies sites of protest. This embroidery was made under very difficult circumstances, it speaks to the steadfastness of the women and highlights that resistance is a process not a singular event. (The Courtauld, 2024) Reclaiming the Palestinian flag through tatrez “is an expropriation of the commodity. It is a refusal of commodification and an assertion of one's right to make one's own culture out of the resources provided by the commodity system.” (Fiske 2010). Furthermore, in 1987 the Tatrez left the body and became a symbol, the embroidered woman, the rural female body became a pre-eminent symbol, she became literally the motherland. While she gained importance she was reduced to a symbol. (The Courtauld, 2024). Nonetheless, this resistance and solidarity is an expression of agency, a hope that there can be a change in the world.

The solidarity, through wearing and purchasing tatreez has its limitations, as the handmade tatreez has now been commodified. "Were it not for organisations that run modern embroidery projects, the richness of this art would have disappeared" (Skinner and Kamel Kavar, 2007). Tatreez is no longer made for Palestinian women to wear "it is done to earn income" (Skinner and Kamel Kavar, 2007). Furthermore, being handmade and labour intensive is expensive, and is often too expensive for the embroiderers themselves to wear. Meaning that only the privileged can afford to perform this act of Palestinian solidarity. (The Courtauld, 2024,) Although, tatreez embroiderers have a great sense of pride in their work and embroidery continues to be a quiet resistance that continues to evolve with the women who make it. After 1948 Nakbha the local intricacies of tatreez were homogenised, what once was a symbol of local identity is, today, a symbol of Palestinian nationhood. This is seen in the 'new dress', which was made in refugee camps in the 1950s. Where Palestinian embroidery was once made using Syrian silk it was now made using Egyptian polyester. (The Courtauld, 2024,) This shows it is even more complicated.

In conclusion tatreez is a symbol of the memory of a Palestinian rural life and a reminder of the folk culture that has been passed down through generations. Although we cannot be sure as to when tatreez started we can be sure it was a labour of love passed down through many generations. Through the violence of the Israeli state and its settlers tatreez was forced into a commodity. It is no longer a labour of love; it is just labour. However, the people who still produce handmade tatreez have been able to find community, resistance and a way to protest against violence. The work of men in Israeli jails highlights the power of this cultural practice. However, the act of consuming tatreez alone is not enough.



Figure 1: 19th century trapeze sampler



Figure 2 ; Intifada dresses

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