

On Tattoos, Talismans, and the Sacred Palestinian Body

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It was January of 2024, just three months into the genocide that had already thrown us into an unceasing time warp, and my friend and tattoo artist Haitham Haddad was freehanding a flower stem along my wrist in black ink. We were catching up over the familiar buzz of the tattoo machine, the nagging sensation of tiny needles jamming ink just beneath the surface of my skin. Snow swirled through the air in fat clumps beyond the shuttered blinds. In the warmth of the tattoo shop, its walls lined with flash sheets and Palestinian political posters, *we had not yet*, in the words of Gazan journalist Shrouq Aila, *seen the 8th of October*.¹

The tattoo that Haitham did that day on my hand was my first “visible” tattoo, in the sense that my five other tattoos were all relatively easy to hide: a forsythia branch trailing my ribcage; a snake caressing her nest of figs on the inside of my upper forearm; an eye, whose sister lives on the body my of longest friend, peering out over the top of my left elbow, always watching my back. When I had reached out to request the tattoo, I told Haitham that the poppies were for the martyrs and the seeds were for the living, a reminder, inked onto the back of my dominant hand, of who I am accountable to as I write and draw.

As Haitham tattooed dandelion seeds drifting between poppy heads along the back of my hand, I thought about the process of image-making in Palestinian communities. Here we were, two Palestinian artists engaging with symbolisms of Palestinian-ness so essential to us that we chose to embed them into our very flesh. Unlike my tattoo, many of the Palestinian-coded

¹ “Report from Gaza: Ceasefire Announcement Raises Hopes, But Israel Kills 81 in New Attacks,” *Democracy Now!* 16 January 2025.

tattoos that Haitham develops for flash sheets and in custom designs fall outside the traditions of our conventional Palestinian nationalist imagery. With many writers, theorists, and artists now articulating Palestinian-ness as an embodied practice that exists beyond formal legal designations like citizenship,² I have been thinking about the relevance to this discourse of tattooing—another embodied practice—for those of us who choose to represent our Palestinian-ness through tattoos. Tattooing is a deeply symbolic practice, and symbolic production is co-developed between artists and community members, evolving to reflect collective political imaginaries. How does the evolution of imageries of Palestinian-ness intersect with tattooing? This essay is an attempt to explore this question.

Embodiment theory articulates the body as a text that can be read through embodied signifiers associated with race, gender, sexuality, class, or other identity-related factors. Whether chosen for their affective power or for more personal, impulsive, or whimsical reasons, tattoos addend the text of the body.³ In non-white, queer, or other communities considered subaltern in some way, they often serve to interact or interfere with the ways dominant discourses of otherness are projected onto the bodies of the community. They become a way to “re-author” the body, to transform it from a passive readable object into a site of active subjectivity. While tattoos can complicate how a body is read, tattooed images themselves are also often highly symbolic and can thus be essentializing and reductive.

² See, as just a few examples of the ways this has emerged in the post-Oslo era: Sophia Azab’s essays “Palestine Made Flesh” (*The Funambulist*, 21 December 2014) and “Who Will We Be When We Are Free? On Palestine and Futurity” (*The Funambulist*, 28 June 2019); the creative project and accompanying book *Refugee Heritage* by Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti (Art & Theory, 2021); and performances by Leyya Mona Tawil under the moniker Lime Rickey International. I touch on this topic in my master’s thesis (*Palestinian Futurism: A No-State (Re)Solution and Other New Imaginaries*) and in a forthcoming paper titled Riffs in Palestinian Spacetime: Palestinian Futurisms and Imagining Liberation Beyond the Nation-state.

³ Patricia MacCormack, “The Great Ephemeral Tattooed Skin,” *Body & Society* 12(2), June 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X06064321>.

This aspect of symbols, which gain meaning through the collective sphere but also from individual experiences, is what makes them both effective and challenging to work with.

Before our appointment, Haitham had drawn individual flower heads, leaves, and an assortment of watermelon and dandelion seeds, then printed these drawings onto the paper transfer stencils used to confirm tattoo placement, carefully cutting up each component with a pair of scissors. Together, we positioned the stencils, arranging the bouquet of poppy heads and scattered seeds in purple stencil ink along the back of my hand and wrist. Poppies are part of the visual lexicon that has long helped define what it means to be Palestinian. This lexicon also includes other bounties of the land—oranges, olive trees, and akoub. It includes textile embellishments, things made by many hands: tatreez and the woven grid of the kuffiyeh. It also encompasses symbols of our resistance, like stones and slingshots. While diverse in origin, many of the symbols dominant today contain the visual legacy of our state-building project: the 1960s through the 1980s saw a solidification of the imagery that represents Palestinian national consciousness, through posters lining the walls of our cities and refugee camps (themselves constituting a living visual archive)⁴ and through decades of visual production by artists with multiple, complex relationships to Palestinian state-building institutions.

This body of imagery—produced and reproduced so widely, and in so many combinations, that it has congealed into a mass exceeding the specificity from which its parts originated— helps us tell a story about who we are and where we come from. We imagine these symbols as part of our lineage, projecting ourselves into them and out from them. They inform our sense of self both as individuals and as a collective across the

⁴ For an exploration of this phenomenon, see Ghassan Halwani's film *Erased, ____ Ascent of the Invisible* (mec film, 2018).

complexity of our diasporas *bil-dakhlil* and *bil-ghurba*.⁵ This is both useful and risky. Tatreez, for example, is a rich, diverse, and specific set of embodied traditions, yet it can flatten us by obscuring the sheer variety of Palestinian textile-based traditions even as it makes Palestinian-ness legible on the international stage. A proliferation of PLO-run embroidery classes in the camps, to create a source of income for Palestinian women and as a form of cultural preservation, helped contribute to tatreez becoming the significant national symbol that it is now. I, too, embrace it, even with the knowledge that in my family's village in the Galilee our people largely opted for relatively unadorned cotton garments; these allowed my grandmother to scramble up fig trees as a teenager and collect ripe green fruits without getting snagged in the branches.

Post-Oslo, beyond the horizon of what may be called the collapse of our decades-long state-building project, I see new symbols and imageries emerging within Palestinian artwork that can better capture the complexity of our political realities. Haitham's work is one example of this phenomenon, which points us towards something much deeper and more durable than state building: the persistent embodied practices of being Palestinian. "The political importance of our bodies (cultural, social, corporeal, and ephemeral) to colonized peoples, especially for those whose bodies function in exile, is fundamental to our understanding of how Palestine is practiced outside of the limitations of the nation-state and the politics of utterable recognition it demands," Sophia Azeb writes. "The bodies of Palestinians and their relations in exile act as an *exercise of existence* — bodies unrecognizable and unacknowledged as life forms by their oppressors but unable to

⁵ For a deeper look at the concepts of *al-dakhlil* and *al-ghurba* in the Palestinian context, see Edward Said and Jean Mohr's *After the Last Sky* (Pantheon, 1986).

be detached from themselves in their own self-knowing.”⁶ Creating an alternate futurity demands that we “remember imaginatively,” Azeb argues, “to reflect on what was, what should have been, and what might still be.” Political dreaming that reaches beyond the psychic and political borders of the nation-state—and beyond the web of misogynistic and heteronormative entrapments that the nation-state relies on and reproduces—requires new ways of engaging with symbols and other imageries that are loaded with nationalist histories and meanings.

If tattoos function for wearers in ways similar to clothing, a mode of adornment used to “construct and deconstruct” the self,⁷ it makes sense that tatreez, the most inherently embodied of our imageries, one that has adorned many Palestinian bodies for centuries, would be a natural choice for a tattoo. But the work of cross-stitch, passed down through time via embodied practice, is challenging, and no less so in tattoo form. When Haitham started tattooing in Haifa, tatreez tattoos were in demand, and Haitham possessed a unique ability to patiently and precisely etch hundreds of tiny colorful cross-stitches into the surface of the flesh. Now, however, Haitham draws from numerous Palestinian and Arab visual traditions to explore and produce new kinds of Palestinian-coded imagery, and often does so collaboratively with tattoo wearers. Haitham described tattooing one diaspora Palestinian who wanted to honor their family’s heritage by using a combination of long-established but non-specific Palestinian symbols. In further discussions, Haitham learned more about their background and ultimately worked with them to co-design a tattoo specific to their family history and personal experience: a dream-like pastoral scene dotted with ripe orange trees native to their family’s village,

⁶ Sophia Azeb, “Palestine Made Flesh” (see note 2).

⁷ Alessandra Castellani, “Identity, Gender Roles, and Tattooing among Italian Lesbian Women” in Sinah Theres Kloss (ed.), *Tattoo Histories: Transcultural Perspectives on the Narratives, Practices, and Representations of Tattooing* (Routledge, 2020).

represented within the frame of a vintage Palestinian postcard. The result celebrated their family's heritage while reconfiguring classic symbols to self-consciously invoke the role nostalgia plays in the lives of so many Palestinians, especially those living in diaspora. Such collaborative reimaginings of our visual representation can help us to think differently about our collective history and identity. Through this process, we may reflect together on how our visual lexicon is formed, how it influences our collective memory and imagination, and what role we might play in transforming it in order to shift the way we think about our past and, by extension, imagine our political futures.

When it comes to creating original designs and flash sheets, Haitham draws from both pre-modern archival sources and from the work of modern and contemporary SWANA graphic designers and illustrators such as Burhan Karkoutly (1932–2003) and Mohieddin Ellabbad (1940–2010). Both Karkoutly and Ellabbad created popular images of Palestinian resistance for the general public, particularly through the production of posters and children's books. These illustrators derived inspiration from some of the same pre-modern sources Haitham draws from, such as richly illustrated Persian miniatures and Orthodox icon paintings. While Karkoutly and Ellabbad contributed to the development of the nationalist visual lexicon we are accustomed to today, Haitham works in the tradition of these modern giants of SWANA design and illustration not only by drawing inspiration from their work, but also by engaging in new and imaginative ways with similar types of source material. One text of particular importance to Haitham's work is the thirteenth-century cosmography *Aja'ib al-Makhlūqat wa Ghara'ib al-Mawjudat* (The Wonders of Creation). Written in Baghdad by the cosmographer Zakariya al-Qazwini (c. 1203–1283) and illustrated variously in India, Turkey, and elsewhere at different points in history, the book is an artifact of

the transmission and mixing that took place across trade routes. Creatures like the otherworldly fantasy animals of *Aja'ib al-Makhlūqat* appear throughout Haitham's work—crustaceans, birds, and fish sporting human heads, mer-people, and undefinable winged, feathered, and serpentine forms. These appear alongside variations of the buraq, a winged horse often illustrated with a human face that is said to have been ridden by the prophet Mohammed, in a story that emerged through the transmission of Islamic texts and traditions across cultures. Haitham, who also cites the importance of queer aesthetics in the production of this new visual lexicon, explains the significance of hybrid creatures:

I'm not tattooing any gender, I'm tattooing a hybrid, the ultimate expression of what is a "non-thing," and you can call it whatever you want, you can dress it the way you want.

This declaration of the function of the hybrid also calls to mind Azeb's theorizing of the Palestinian body as "unrecognizable and unacknowledged" within the paradigms of political modernity, yet steadfast in our collective self-knowing. Haitham's tattooing practice is a way to remember imaginatively what it means to be Palestinian. In locating these symbols of hybridity, Haitham enlivens the archive and re-authors established symbolisms through the embodied practice of tattooing. This type of creative work—the search for and recognition of the modern self while studying the past—is necessary to reimagining our place in a constantly shifting and increasingly fractured political landscape. Through this process, we move beyond dominant, long-established paradigms of Palestinian-ness, which in turn demands that we think beyond prevailing political frameworks about our future.

In addition to hybrid creatures and objects, Haitham's tattoo designs include references to magic and witchcraft—to childhood memories of elders praying over newborns with salt and bread to draw out evil spirits. Haitham often arranges numerological grids like those seen in traditional buduh protective talismans onto the bodies of hybrid creatures, turning the divine guardians into amulets. Each of Haitham's amulets contain a unique set of numbers related to the names of beloveds or numbers of significance for the wearer of the tattoo (never copied from other amulets). These tattoos function as protective talismans that cannot be defined or categorized but have something majestic about them, hovering in mid-air.

In the traditional Palestinian context, as in many other Indigenous tattooing traditions, tattoos have historically signaled inclusion as part of a community. My father recalls studying the patterns that dotted the face and hands of his father's sisters when he was young. Some commemorated life milestones like marriage or childbirth, others acted as protective spells. Their placement on the most visible areas of the body indicates that part of their function was to be seen, to be read. The process of hand-pricking ink into one another's skin in celebration or for protection is a community-building practice that produces visible signifiers of belonging through blood and ink. Perhaps there, inside the tattoo shop, as Haitham creates protective amulets using numbers carefully selected for each individual or works with us collaboratively, we find ourselves closer to the roots of our Indigenous tattooing practices than we may initially realize. While many discursive tropes around tattooing focus on its permanence, or interpret tattooing as an expression of individualism, it can also be understood as a constantly transforming project of collective image-making on the site of the ever-changing body. This highlights not only the fluid and communal nature of the production of symbolic meaning (through a process of

“imaginative remembering”), but also the impermanence of the body and the role of the skin as a living and ephemeral archive not entirely unlike the poster-lined walls of our cities and refugee camps. Haitham is a guide, shaping and informing the images we produce and begin to embody as a community, which together form a new lexicon that in turn shapes us, even at times becoming part of our flesh.

Today, the ways that Palestinian-ness is understood in the international sphere is shaped in part by what might be called a lexicon of anti-imagery, which depicts gruesome violence to Palestinian bodies as the norm. Artists are in a position to insist on different kinds of imagery and narratives around Palestinian-ness. And Palestinians who collect tattoos to embody and celebrate our identities are shaped by and, through requests for certain symbols, help shape this imagery. In Haitham’s tattooing practice, these images become protective spells and signifiers of belonging that bind us together. In turning to ancestral imageries and image-making practices, locating elements of the modern self within them, and then projecting those images onto the body, Haitham encourages tattoo-wearers to recognize ourselves and one-another as divine beings, connected through a shared history, embodying new political futures. Together, these images form a text that tells a story of shifting political and social narratives on our skin, and our bodies collectively form a living archive, one that is ever changing and ephemeral as our flesh. This is so as we move through the world carrying the taste of death on the backs of our tongues, and the taste is ever-present, embittering even the sweetest of moments. Writing this essay, I turn over the flowers on my wrist and hand again. Hand tattoos are notorious for fading quickly, and the delicately rendered edge of a petal that grazes the outside of my palm is already growing faint. The tattoo has become a reminder of things that may be

lost, of the ways we enliven memory through dreaming, and of what may eventually grow as a result of our collective tending.



Leila's tattoo by Haitham, 2024. Photo by Rihab Charida.

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