

7-17-2017

Meaning and Symbolism in Bridal Costumes in Western Saudi Arabia

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Meaning and Symbolism in Bridal Costumes in Western Saudi Arabia

Abstract

The western region of Saudi Arabia has its own unique traditional bridal garments. Little is known about these bridal costumes because they are handmade by a few families in the region. The purpose of this study was to investigate the history, significance, and meaning of the Hijazi bridal costumes. Symbolic interactionism was the theoretical starting point of this study. Qualitative data were collected via in-depth interviews from 22 married Saudi women. A purposive, snowball sampling strategy was used. The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman process. Four key themes emerged including (a) physical appearance and process of wearing the costumes, (b) meanings and beliefs related to the costumes' components, (c) appropriate occasions during which the costumes could be worn, and (d) motivation negotiated within families. The Hijazi bridal costumes have deep historical roots in Saudi culture, which continues to play a significant role in today's marriage rituals.

Keywords

bridal, costume, historic clothing, culture change

Disciplines

Asian History | Family, Life Course, and Society | Fashion Design | Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts | Women's History

Comments

This article is published as Tawfiq, W., & Marcketti, S. B. (2017). The meaning and symbolism of bridal costumes in the western region of Saudi Arabia. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 35(3), 215-230. DOI:[10.1177/0887302X17704718](https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302X17704718). Posted with permission.

1 **Meaning and Symbolism in Bridal Costumes in Western Saudi Arabia**

2 Dress is an important cultural tool that can be used as an expression of social and cultural
3 identity (Barnes & Eicher, 1992). Traditional dress represents national culture and historical
4 heritage and includes all items, garments, and body modifications (e.g., makeup and perfumes)
5 that embody the past for particular members of a group (Eicher & Sumberg, 1995; Roach-
6 Higgins & Eicher, 1992). Characteristics of traditional dress evolve accommodating changes in
7 contemporary society (Disele, Tyler, & Power 2011; Foster & Johnson, 2003). In Saudi Arabia,
8 traditional dress has a rich history and plays a significant role in Saudi women's lives,
9 particularly for special occasions such as weddings (Iskandarani, 2006; Long, 2005). However,
10 extant research regarding its meaning and symbolism is limited.

11 In Saudi Arabia, a wedding is a major event that represents a sacred bond governed by
12 culture and Islamic law. Weddings and subsequent marriages are viewed as paramount to healthy
13 family relationships and the continuation of a strong and stable Saudi society (Doumato, 2010;
14 Long, 2005). As such, weddings become public celebrations which are often marked by lavish
15 spending (Al-Jeraisy, 2008; Al-Munajjed, 1997). The wedding costume is one of the most
16 important aspects of the Saudi wedding celebration. To many people it reflects the cultural
17 values of the wedding and the status of the bride and groom's families (Foster & Johnson, 2003).

18 Several researchers have explored the prominence and the symbolic value of a bride's
19 traditional dress in different societies (Baldizzone & Baldizzone, 2001; Barber, 1994; Becker,
20 2003; Foster & Johnson, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Kochuyt, 2012). These researchers have shown
21 that traditional bridal costume holds significant and diverse cultural meanings that can represent
22 women's reproductive capabilities, connect generations of families, and ease this rite of passage
23 into adulthood. It has been suggested that traditional wedding costumes in diverse cultures are

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24 more than objects because of their powerful symbolic value and fundamental role within the
25 wedding ceremony (Baldizzone & Baldizzone, 2001). In addition, traditional bridal costumes
26 may give brides a sense of national identity, especially when they live outside of their native
27 country (Kochuyt, 2012). Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) proposed the term costume for use
28 in discussions of dress for ceremonies and rituals, thus, we will use the phrase traditional
29 wedding costumes.

30 The western region of Saudi Arabia, the Hijaz, has its own unique styles and forms of
31 traditional bridal costumes (Iskandarani, 2006; Yamani, 2004), which are still popular and
32 widely used today (Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013). However, researchers have yet to explore the
33 symbolic meaning of traditional Hijazi bridal costumes. Within Arabic scholarly literature,
34 Iskandarani (2006) analyzed the physical appearance of the design lines, fabric, color, textiles,
35 and patterns used for decorations for traditional bridal costumes in Medina, but did not analyze
36 the bridal costumes for meaning. Little is published about the meaning of these traditional Hijazi
37 bridal costumes and their place in today's marriage rituals. Perhaps this is because they are
38 handmade by a few families who live in the region who own and rent them, and are not mass
39 produced or available for purchase in stores. Rentals are usually very expensive, ranging from
40 \$300 to \$800 per night depending on the condition and the materials used for the decoration.
41 Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate the history, significance, and meaning of Hijazi
42 bridal costumes from the perspective of women who have experienced wearing them. Further,
43 we explored their continued use in rites of passage from both historical and contemporary
44 perspectives. The other primary objective was to explore the motivations that influence Saudi
45 women's decisions to wear traditional dress during the wedding ceremony. The researchers
46 propose that exploring the meaning of Hijazi bridal costumes from the perspective of women

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47 who have experienced wearing them will contribute to the literature about women's rites of
48 passage from a global perspective, in particular, the intergenerational meaning of traditional
49 bridal costumes.

50 **Literature Review**

51 **Saudi Arabian Wedding Rituals**

52 The Saudi Arabian region has been under Islamic rule since the birth of Islam in the
53 seventh century (Long, 2005). After the establishment of Saudi Arabia as a country in 1932,
54 Saudi law has continued following the rule of Islam in every aspect of life; this includes
55 marriage, weddings, and dress (Long, 2005). Islam requires men to pay a dowry (a set amount of
56 money as a gift for his bride). Moreover, Saudi culture requires approval from both the bride's
57 and groom's families before marriage (Al-Munajjed, 1997; Bin Manie, 1985). Family is a very
58 important structural unit in Saudi society and familial relationships are strong (Long, 2005). This
59 closeness makes family events such as weddings major occasions, for which Saudi women pay a
60 great deal of attention to dress (Al-Munajjed, 1997). The bridal dress in the wedding celebration
61 represents the bride and her entire family (Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013).

62 Traditional Saudi weddings include multiple culturally significant rituals celebrated over
63 several discontinuous days (Qusay, 2010). These begin with the introduction of the bride and
64 groom in arranged marriages. After an agreement between the two joining families, the
65 engagement party is held, during which the groom presents the dowry, engagement ring, and
66 bridal jewelry on an ornately decorated silver cart (Iskandarani, 2006; Qusay, 2010). As the
67 wedding day approaches, other celebrations and events take place. In Hijazi culture, the
68 *Ghomrah* party, a bridal shower, is held a few days before the wedding, during which the bride
69 wears a traditional bridal costume and henna designs are drawn on her hands and feet

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70 (Iskandarani, 2006). For the wedding ceremony itself, the bride, if not garbed in traditional Saudi
71 costume, dons a white, Western-style wedding gown (Iskandarani, 2006). The wedding
72 ceremony, however, is not the conclusion of the wedding-related celebration. Many Hijazi
73 families hold additional post-wedding parties to congratulate the new couple (Iskandarani, 2006).

74 There have been many 20th and 21st century changes in Saudi Arabia that have influenced
75 modern Saudi weddings. Since the discovery of oil in 1938, foreign workers and their families,
76 customs, and traditions have led to economic growth, modernization and increased Western
77 influence in the country (Al-Munajjed, 1997; Long, 2005). Western influence in particular could
78 be seen to be connected to the increase in female educational opportunities and representation in
79 the workforce (Al-Munajjed, 1997; Pharaon, 2004). Perhaps this explains the change from the
80 average age of first marriages for Saudi Arabian women at 15 years old in 1935 (Bin Manie,
81 1985) to an average age of 24 years old in 2007 (Qaundl, 2007). These changes might also
82 explain the adoption of Western dress for work and casual wear and the use of Western style
83 wedding dresses for the official wedding ceremony (Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013). However, traditional
84 dress is still preferred by many Saudi women for special occasions (Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013).

85 **Historical Context of Traditional Hijazi Wedding Dress in Saudi Arabia**

86 Even though Saudi Arabia is a relatively young country in terms of its current national
87 borders, it has a rich history of clothing and textiles (Long, 2005; Yamani, 2004). For example,
88 each region in the country used to have its own style of clothing and textiles that were hand made
89 through weaving, dyeing, embroidery, and sewing. These different styles expressed individual
90 group belonging and geographical and historical location (Long, 2005; Yamani, 2004). The area
91 known as Hijaz contains the two holiest Islamic cities, Mecca and Medina, and has attracted
92 many pilgrims and visitors since the birth of Islam in 610 AD (Long, 2005). As such, the roots of

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93 historical dress in the Hijaz have been influenced by the many cultural backgrounds of pilgrims
94 and visitors over hundreds of years. Furthermore, the Turkish Ottoman Empire, which ruled the
95 Hijaz region for over four centuries has exerted an ongoing influence on the styles and customs
96 of the Hijazi (Iskandarani, 2006; Yamani, 2004).

97 Whereas traditional dress in other geographic areas of Saudi Arabia has undergone rapid changes
98 or become nearly obsolete since the introduction of Western influence in the 1930s (Long, 2005;
99 Pompea, 2002; Yamani, 2004), traditional Hijazi bridal costumes have survived the increasing
100 dominance of Western styles (Iskandarani, 2006). This traditional dress helps forge a visual
101 connection to the region's rich cultural heritage within an increasingly modernized Saudi Arabia.
102 In one study, Tawfiq and Ogle (2013) found that Hijazi bridal costumes held a special value and
103 meaning for participants, and were viewed as a central aspect of the *Ghomrah* or bridal shower
104 celebration in which the bride often wears a costume including undergarments, outer garments,
105 and a tiara on her head, all of which are embroidered with gold.

106 In her study of the different stages of the traditional Saudi wedding celebration which
107 spans several days, Iskandarani (2006) described five distinct bridal costumes. Historically, the
108 five costumes worn, *al-mentur*, *al-medini*, *al-mahaf*, *al-zabun*, and *al-muskak*, differed in terms
109 of the number of pieces per dress, color, design, motif, and the detail of the embroidery.

110 Typically, the main pieces included: under-vest, pants, tiara or head cover, face cover, and an
111 ankle-length robe with very long, wide sleeves. In addition to these pieces, *al-medini* includes
112 pearls, hair accessories, and a pillow-like bib wrapped around the neck stuffed with cotton and
113 heavily decorated with diamonds, gold, pearls, and flowers which are sewn onto it the day it is
114 worn (see Figure 1). Iskandarani (2006) also described a custom in which, for the first wedding
115 she attends among relatives after her own, a newly married woman would wear one of the

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116 traditional bridal costumes. It is to be noted that wedding celebrations are gender segregated and
117 conducted within the private sphere which includes women's interactions with women and their
118 male next of kin, thus, the hijab is not religiously required (Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013).

119 "Place Figure 1 about here."

120 **Theoretical Framework**

121 Symbolic interactionism was the theoretical starting point of this study because
122 traditional wedding attire often has great symbolism, which is negotiated through social
123 interactions (Eicher & Ling, 2005). Symbolic interaction is defined as the interpretation of the
124 meanings people apply to the world around them and share through social interaction (Blumer,
125 1969). Dress is one medium to which people assign meaning; therefore, it is an instrument for an
126 individual's expression of identity, and to position and develop the self he or she desires to
127 present to the world (Goffman, 1959; Stone, 1962). According to these shared meanings,
128 individuals manipulate their appearance to convey their desired identities in social contexts
129 (Goffman, 1959). In turn, others act towards people based on these meanings, sometimes giving
130 feedback about appearance that may influence the wearer's future decisions about his or her
131 appearance (Stone, 1962). To do this, individuals take on the role of "other" in order to construct
132 themselves by imagining how others see and evaluate them using the "looking-glass self"
133 (Cooley, 1902). Based on the "looking-glass self," individuals make decisions about how they
134 should dress for different social contexts (Cooley, 1902; Stone, 1962).

135 Within the theory of symbolic interaction, Solomon (1983) and Belk (1988) explained
136 that behavior can be guided by the symbolic role of products, thus creating social context.
137 Solomon (1983) claimed that an object's symbolic meanings help individuals transition into new
138 roles by accelerating the transition and reducing their uncertainty. Eicher and Ling (2005)

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139 suggested that during wedding rites, dress is used as a symbol for a bride's transfer from one
140 social identity (unmarried woman) to a new one (wife). Belk's (1988) concept of "extended self"
141 can provide insight into the ways in which objects and possessions can become sources of
142 personal identity. According to Belk (1988), the past can be felt through the nostalgia and the
143 memories attached to possessions; items such as family heirlooms and the traditions they
144 represent become a part of people's presentation of their identities. Traditional costumes passed
145 down from generation to generation can enter into a bride's concept of her extended self. These
146 costumes become part of the ritual of marriage and help brides transition through this important
147 life passage (Eicher & Ling, 2005).

148 The authors' purpose was to explore the history, significance, and meaning of traditional
149 Hijazi bridal costumes and answer the following questions: What factors contributed to the
150 decision to wear bridal costumes for marriage celebrations? What were participants' construction
151 of the cultural meaning of the traditional costume? Do individuals of different generations hold
152 distinct perceptions of the Hijazi bridal costumes? How do interactions between the generations
153 help shape the continuation of these bridal costumes in Hijazi culture?

154 **Method**

155 After receiving Institutional Review Board approval (ID 15-079), a qualitative approach was
156 used and data were collected via in-depth interviews (Esterberg, 2002) from 22 married Saudi
157 women. A purposive, snowball sampling strategy was used to recruit research participants and
158 ensure collection of relevant data (Esterberg, 2002). An initial list of potential participants was
159 obtained from a key Saudi informant. After each interview, the primary researcher asked each
160 participant to suggest other participants among their family and acquaintances. Each of the
161 participants had worn at least one of the traditional bridal costumes (Table 1).

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162 “Place Table 1 about here.”

163 The participants were invited to bring photos of themselves wearing their bridal costumes to
164 guide the interview discussion and in order for the researchers to corroborate the interview data.
165 After gaining permission for reproduction from the owners of the pictures, some were scanned
166 by the primary researcher with faces obscured to protect the participants’ anonymity.

167 Interviews were conducted face-to-face in Saudi Arabia in the homes of the interviewees.
168 Interview questions focused on (a) the physical appearance of the costumes and the process of
169 donning them, (b) the occasion(s) for which the costumes were worn, (c) how participants made
170 decisions about which bridal costumes to wear, and (d) how participants viewed wearing
171 traditional bridal costumes within weddings today. Interviews lasted between 34 and 115
172 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Arabic, translated into English, and reviewed by three
173 readers fluent in Arabic and English. Extra attention was given to the cultural nuances of these
174 personal conversations in order to make the translations as precise as possible.

175 **Analysis**

176 The interview transcripts were coded by breaking down into meaningful fragments words,
177 phrases, and ideas considered relevant to the study. Each fragment was assigned to a code or
178 category (Esterberg, 2002). Next, to display the data, a coding guide was developed to
179 summarize these categories and the interviews were reread, searching for statements that might
180 fit into any of the categories (Esterberg, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). During the final stage
181 of analysis, the researchers looked for patterns, explanations, contradictions, and confirmations
182 to develop conclusions for the study (Esterberg, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). To establish
183 trustworthiness and dependability of the data collection and analysis, the primary researcher used
184 reflexivity, writing memos throughout the data collection and analysis processes to acknowledge

185 self-criticism and help foster reflection and interpretation of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
186 Additionally, the researchers negotiated meanings during coding until agreement was reached.

187 **Findings**

188 **Emergent Themes**

189 Our findings revealed that interviewees' weddings were deeply rooted in traditional
190 customs and shown through the bridal costumes. Specifically, four key themes emerged relating
191 to the significance and meaning of these costumes: (a) Physical appearance and process of
192 wearing them, (b) Meanings and beliefs assigned to the costumes' components, (c) Appropriate
193 occasions for which the costumes could be worn, and (d) Motivations negotiated within families.

194 **Physical appearance and process of wearing the traditional costumes.** Participants
195 recognized the uniqueness of Saudi traditional costumes' designs and their rich historical
196 context. Participant 11 explained, "the traditional bridal costumes reminds me of the old days."
197 While not knowing the exact meaning of the costume, Participant 1 stated, "My belief is that its'
198 connected to our roots and history, which bring back happy memories." Participant 2B indicated,

199 Since my mother was from Hadramawt and we lived in Saudi Arabia I wanted to strike a
200 balance between these two backgrounds. Thus, I started off with wearing the *hathiri*
201 costume and ended the party with wearing the Hijazi, Saudi Arabian costume; I saved the
202 best for last.

203 She went on to explain a bit of the costume's history, stating, "We just saw our grandparents and
204 parents wear it and did the same. Many of the *medini* costumes are influenced by the Ottoman
205 Empire when these costumes were associated with the high status and the elite."

206 Participants described their costumes' components, such as design, color, material, and
207 decorations, as well as the complicated and time-consuming process of correctly donning the

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208 bridal costumes. Participant 4 explained, “It needs someone who had the knowledge and training
209 with the process of dressing in traditional bridal costumes. From my experience, I found it to be
210 a difficult process and couldn’t have done it alone.” Another participant, 3c, described *al-*
211 *medini*, which she wore at her *Ghomrah*:

212 It was a challenge to put it on with so many pieces. A dress on top with lots of
213 embroidery, pants underneath, vest, and a head cover that included a tiara with flowers
214 that supported it. Above all these pieces, there was a long fabric which covered me from
215 head to toe and that I held with my hands.

216 Participants were cognizant of not just the costumes’ physical elements, but also the
217 social rules that dictated how to wear them. Within the framework of symbolic interactionism,
218 women are encouraged to use the shared meanings of the dress to present their desired identities
219 and prepare themselves in culturally prescribed ways (Goffman, 1959; Stone, 1962). As noted,
220 symbolic interaction theory explains how meanings develop through interactions and become a
221 common or shared perspective over a period of time within a given cultural context (Charon,
222 1998; Stone, 1962). As described to the primary researcher, the process of donning the
223 traditional Saudi Arabian bridal costumes allowed for interaction between the women who
224 helped prepare the bride for the event. These interactions may be symbolic of the brides’
225 transitioning identities, which required the help of others to fully execute. These shared
226 meanings were passed down from generation to generation through photos, stories, and
227 experiences seeing older relatives in the family wear these costumes. One of the women who
228 makes and rents bridal costumes explained the lengthy dressing process:

229 Typically, the process takes 30 minutes from beginning to end. When I dress the bride I
230 try to create a pleasant environment. I ask my assistant to help entertain the bride to make

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231 her comfortable. We start with the undergarment, then the inner dress, the vest, then we
232 let her sit on a chair while we prepare the head cover. Originally, the head cover piece
233 was sewn on but I use bobby pins with pearls to attach it. Lastly, we apply the face
234 cover...I specifically explain and teach the brides about the names and customs of each
235 piece when dressing them. (Participant 14)

236 From the interviews and photos, it was found that the appearance of the costumes through
237 generations has changed only slightly, with differences in color, fabric, and embroidery materials
238 (see Figures 2). Silk was at one time exclusively used, but the use of polyester has made the
239 garments more affordable, lighter, and easier to wear. While some participants, such as
240 Participant 4, indicated these changes “were subtle and do not affect [the costume’s] original
241 form in significant ways. The overall look is the same,” others were quite concerned regarding
242 any changes. According to Participant 3b:

243 The stupid change is decreasing their value. They use cheaper materials and you can see
244 the difference...people would use real gold and diamonds but now they use gold plating
245 and fake gemstones...They say they are changing, modifying, and renewing it. No, this is
246 not a change; this is irreverence.

247 Participant 11 concurred that changes would violate “the rules” of traditional bridal costumes:
248 “to preserve them as they are and not try to change them or modify them, because their beauty is
249 in their originality and inveterate tradition.” The strong beliefs regarding the impropriety of
250 change may be due to the valued symbolism of these costumes, possibly creating resistance to
251 change. Belk’s (1988) concepts of extended self and connection to the past can be used to
252 explain the special connection some participants had with traditional bridal costumes, which they

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253 valued more than the modified costumes. People may relate possessions to their sense of the past
254 to help them remember their pasts and enjoy the present (Belk, 1988).

255 “Place Figure 2 about here.”

256 **Meanings and beliefs assigned to the costumes’ components.** Participants not only
257 identified the physical descriptions of bridal costumes’ different components, but also the
258 meanings and beliefs behind them. Meanings ranged from cultural significance, such as
259 demonstrations of Islamic modesty and “the bride’s shyness” (Participant 7), to emotions,
260 beliefs, and social significance of what these costumes conveyed to others.

261 Within symbolic interaction theory, Goffman (1959) explained how people present
262 themselves through their appearance in ways that are socially accepted and expected. As
263 previously discussed, Islam influences all of Saudi life (Long, 2005) and is part of the rich
264 meanings associated with traditional bridal costumes. This explains why some pieces and aspects
265 of the costumes (e.g., face cover and costume length) represented modesty or “shyness and
266 purity” (Participant P6a), in accordance with religious beliefs: “I don’t even like to look at the
267 brides who wear the Western style that is revealing. Traditional bridal costumes are modest.
268 They even cover the head, the face, and everything else” (Participant 13). Due to the private
269 nature and gender segregated ceremony, the face veiling is not religiously prescribed, but rather a
270 function of cultural modesty and shyness, which some participants expressed a desire for:

271 The traditional bridal costumes are modest, long sleeved, loose fitting, and have a head
272 cover. The purpose of it is to instill shyness from a young age and conserve the women.
273 Modesty has been called a part of the faith. Modest clothing is not only a symbol of
274 shyness but is known to be associated with the high class worldwide. On the other hand,

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275 revealing clothing is for trashy people. The more you reveal the lower down the class
276 chain you get. (Participant 6c).

277 An additional symbolism of the face cover that participants spoke of is “protection from
278 the evil eye,” (Participant 1), indicated by its embroidered phrase Mashallah (God has willed it).
279 The costumes’ various colors were also said to hold meaning; for example, pink represented
280 “good luck” (Participant 3b) and “innocence and femininity” (Participant 12). The garland made
281 of tiny green apples worn around the neck was thought to be “good luck” and to promote
282 “fertility” (Participant 8b). Two other pieces with symbolic meanings were the tiara and stool
283 procession, whose “splendor” (Participant 7) made the bride “feel like a queen” (Participant 1).
284 Participant 12 explained the stool procession as a part of the actual bridal costume: “When the
285 bride does the wedding procession in the traditional gown, there are two stools that she stands on
286 with a bridesmaid on each side [one from her family and one from the groom’s family] and for
287 every step they bring the stool from behind for her to step forwards onto until she reaches her
288 bridal throne.” As discussed by Solomon (1983), individuals employ material symbols, such as
289 dress, to assist them in determining their transitions into a new stage of life. This stool procession
290 symbolizes the transition from her family’s house to her new home: “the first [stool] should
291 begin at her parent’s house (the existing stool) and last one should end up at her husband’s house
292 (entering stool),” (Participant 5). With every step of the stool procession, the bride is reminded of
293 her changing role from a single woman to a wife. According to Participant 7:

294 The *Ghomrah* is not only a marriage celebration, it goes beyond this because it is a
295 passage of ritual where a girl is transformed from a daughter living in her parent’s home
296 to a women becoming a wife and moving into her husband’s home. Given this
297 atmosphere, traditions are necessary because this is how traditions are carried on. A girl

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298 learns the tradition by seeing what her mom wears and she later wears it. This way she
299 learns how to be a bride.

300 Another piece that held significant value was the padded pillow, or bib, which was made
301 of layered satin and cotton fabric with gold jewelry attached to it (see Figure 3). This was
302 considered unique to Hijaz by several participants and used to represent the bride's "social class"
303 (Participant 15) and emphasize her "feminine physique" (Participant 12). Typically, the more
304 jewelry and gold on the padded bib, the higher a bride's social class.

305 Moreover, participants recognized the ephemeral aspects of the bridal costume as
306 essential. For example, the *ghomrah* celebration "used to be called henna party" (Participant 13)
307 "to beautify the bride and to show happiness" (Participant 17b). Before applying henna on the
308 bride's hand and legs there were special bathing rituals that included a mixture of "exotic flowers
309 such as *medini* flower pedals and purple *rehan* (basil) that were dried, ground, and mixed with
310 rose water then applied on the bride's body like a body wash. Afterwards, the bride smells
311 beautiful and body feels smooth" (Participant 14). The *medini* and *rehan* flowers were used in
312 the *Al-medini* costume "to make a flower garland sewn on the bib and in the back of the tiara to
313 support it, which give off a pleasant smell to the bride" (Participant 15).

314 In characterizing the meaning and symbolism behind the pieces of the bridal costume,
315 participants also spoke of the benefits when wearing them, such as concealing the bride's beauty
316 via the face covering until the face is exposed on the wedding day, and the emotions felt while
317 wearing the costumes. Participant 17c shared her positive feelings when she wore the costumes:
318 "I feel so proud and unique and like I'm floating on air." Participant explained:

319 I had a wonderful indescribable feeling like I lived in the old time. Even though I was not
320 that shy, when I dress *al-medini*, I felt I was shy and acted like as if I was a bride living in

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321 my mother's time. I think these are not just traditional bridal costumes. They are
322 connected feelings. It is weird but they do influence how a bride feels and acts like as if
323 they were alive. (Participant 11)

324 All participants emphasized the meaning of concealing the bride's beauty at the *Ghomrah*
325 party until the wedding day: "precious things are always covered, just like the bride" (Participant
326 17c). This enabled a bride to appear "surprisingly beautiful" (Participant 13) on her wedding
327 day: "*Al-medini* covers the bride completely like a gift-wrapped surprise until the wedding day
328 and highlights her beauty" (Participant 16).

329 Regardless of the meanings, some participants stated that while not knowing specific
330 significance, they held strong convictions about who could wear the bridal costumes and to
331 which occasions they could be worn. This may be explained through their past experiences with
332 the costumes, viewing older relatives and friends marrying and how these memories of the bridal
333 traditional have become part of their identities (see Belk, 1988).

334 "Place Figure 3 about here."

335 **Appropriate alternative occasions for wearing bridal costumes.** As participants
336 described the different occasions, they discussed the shared meanings and when and where bridal
337 costumes could be worn in the past and today. As noted in the literature review, traditional Hijazi
338 wedding celebrations last several days, and each day had its own specific traditional bridal
339 costume (Iskandarani, 2006). In the past, there were rules and specially assigned costumes for
340 each day of the "seven-day marriage celebrations" (Participant 2b). Today, however, these rules
341 are more flexible. Thus, the costumes could be worn for major celebrations outside of weddings
342 by the guest of honor, whose role is in transition. Solomon (1983) explained how dress can be
343 used to support role changes and accelerate this transition. For example, a celebration called

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344 *Saabe* (arrival of a new baby), a graduation party, and post-wedding events are all occasions
345 when some of these costumes may be worn in the present day. At all of these events, participants
346 experienced a degree of identity construction and used one of their traditional bridal costumes to
347 help them perform their new role (Goffman 1959; Solomon, 1983). Despite some flexibility in
348 their use, Participant 4 explained that the shared meanings and significance of wearing these
349 costumes for specific events must still be respected: “The traditional costume holds certain rules
350 and expectations with it. It can’t be worn by just anyone and to any event.” Further, Participant
351 8b said the traditional costumes would “lose [their] meaning” if they are not worn at times to
352 which people are “accustomed.”

353 Because all participants valued the importance of wearing these traditional costumes,
354 some participants felt that modern flexibility allows those who did not wear traditional costumes
355 for their wedding celebrations to have another opportunity to experience wearing them.

356 Originally *al-zabun* (see Figure 4) should be worn on *Sabha* (the day after the wedding).
357 Today, it has been worn on different occasions because not everyone celebrates *Sabha*,
358 the bride and groom go straight to the honeymoon... People still wear different bridal
359 costumes but not for the same things (participant 12).

360 However, some participants believed that traditional costumes should only be worn for wedding
361 celebrations: “Other than the wedding celebrations, I think it would be too much to wear it
362 because it is meant to be only for the bride” (Participant 17b). Perhaps these feelings stem from
363 beliefs that because bridal costumes symbolize the transition to the new role of wife, they should
364 be restricted to wedding celebrations. For example, the traditional costumes “which are known to
365 be for brides can only be worn at the *Ghomrah*,” according to Participant 6c.

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389 From the day I got engaged, I decided that I wanted a *Ghomrah*. I even went to my
390 grandmother and told her that the time has come that I wear something from your
391 treasure box like my relatives.

392 As mentioned in the literature review, weddings in Saudi Arabia are representative of the
393 entire family, not just the bride-to-be (Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013). Thus, participants spoke of the
394 expensive cost of the costumes demonstrating “high class” or families’ wealth, “prestige,” and
395 “class.” Participant 3b stated, “*Al-medini* was a must. It’s something everyone wore and those
396 who didn’t were considered lower class.” Another participant expressed that “its distinctive
397 shape... made me feel like royalty and walk with [my] head held up high” (Participant 4).

398 Many of the participants viewed the bridal costumes as part of a larger heritage, so that
399 wearing them fulfilled a tradition in which women became a part of a regional “dynasty”
400 (Participant 8c). Participant 8b described the traditional bridal costume in this context:

401 [It] represents genuineness, brings about nostalgia, and [is] redolent of history... if we do
402 not preserve our traditional costumes we will lose our identity. In my opinion these
403 costumes show that the person is an authentic, sincere, and noble person; it shows how
404 much the person is proud and attached to their tradition. It is like a tree without roots that
405 will soon die. We have to be proud of our tradition. Some Saudi people are proud of their
406 roots while others are denying their roots and are embarrassed about [them]. People who
407 do not wear their traditional costumes are detached from their roots.

408 Several participants regarded the Western-style dresses for the bride as “lost and brainwashed by
409 the Western fashion and are missing out on a lot. The genuine people never forget their tradition
410 and they preserve and appreciate its value” (Participant 16).

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411 The family’s encouragement became an integral part of how these women shaped their
412 views in deciding to wear traditional costumes. For families who owned the bridal costumes,
413 following their wearing of Hijazi costumes, many of the participants shared the traditional
414 wedding customs with multiple generations of family and friends. All participants asserted the
415 importance of “keeping [these traditional costumes] from vanishing” (Participant 16) by passing
416 them down through the generations. Participant 11 stated, “Each mother plays a major role in
417 communicating the information about these traditional bridal costumes to their daughters and
418 making them look beautiful in their eyes as our mothers did with us.” Participant 17b added “the
419 mother has to convince her daughter to wear it and the daughter has to pass it along to her
420 daughter, so it is passed down from generation to generation.”

421 Not all participants, however, viewed these costumes positively. The middle -aged
422 women interviewed, in particular, expressed negative feelings associated with the traditional
423 costumes, for example, Participant 12 stated:

424 On the day of *Ghomrah*, my mother advised me to wear the traditional bridal dress but I
425 refused because I was young and looking for something modern. Also, the traditional
426 dress had a funny camel’s hump [referring to the fabric train piece that attached to the
427 tiara and covers the bride from head to toes]. My mother in law objected to the idea and
428 was upset about me not wearing the traditional *al-medini* as it represents the entire clan.

429 A millennial woman shared this perspective, viewing the traditional costumes as outdated:

430 As a young girl from the new generation, I do not see anything special about it. However,
431 parents and grandparents see it as special and unique and they feel so happy and proud
432 when they see their daughters wear it. Therefore, I wore it for my mom’s sake. I’m not
433 really interested in it. It’s so heavy. I spent an hour or two to put it on, and then another

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434 hour or two to take it off. It feels as though you have 100 pounds on your head and it's
435 very itchy, yet it was a once in a lifetime experience. It looks beautiful but it doesn't feel
436 comfortable. (Participant 3c)

437 Some participants had to negotiate between multiple influences (what they wanted, what their
438 family wanted, and cultural norms) that may have been contradictory, sometimes making them
439 feel torn between opposing influences. Many of the participants discussed the way in which
440 throughout their life, from childhood to present day, family members shared memories and their
441 "treasure boxes" (Participant 8c) of bridal memorabilia, and felt influenced to wear the
442 traditional costumes. Through the use of the "looking-glass self" or social interactions with older
443 family members, participants dressed in traditional costume, in part, to fulfill familial obligations
444 and expectations (see Cooley, 1902; Al-Munajjed, 1997). The use of the costumes helped
445 reinforce the transmission of the bridal costume tradition through and between generations.

446 Interestingly, the older and the younger women interviewed, were most favourable of the
447 traditional costumes. Our findings revealed that the beliefs and symbolism about these traditional
448 Hijazi bridal costumes were communicated between and within generations. Preservation of
449 traditional bridal costumes allowed brides to connect to their heritage, adding valuable memories
450 to the costumes that became a part of themselves and their memories of their wedding (see Belk,
451 1988). The Hijazi bridal costumes have deep historical roots in Saudi Arabian culture, which
452 continues to play a significant role in today's marriage rituals.

453 **Discussion and Conclusions**

454 Our findings are consistent with and extend prior work suggesting that traditional bridal
455 dress has different cultural meanings representative of familial ties and womanhood, which are
456 rooted within the context of place and time (Baldizzone & Baldizzone, 2001; Barber, 1994;

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457 Becker, 2003; Foster & Johnson, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Kochuyt, 2012). Our study added to the
458 understanding of how traditional costumes are used to construct new identities through the
459 meanings associated with these costumes, which help accelerate transitions between roles (see
460 Solomon, 1983). These shared meanings are learned by younger generations from their elders.
461 The use of these traditional costumes for wedding celebrations, as described by older family
462 members, influenced and confirmed the younger generation decisions and helped them learn the
463 roles of bride and newlywed. Our findings provided insight to understand existing theory within
464 the context of role transitions as a symbolic interactionism perspective. Solomon (1983)
465 explained how dress can be used to aid in role transitions, particularly, in significant rites of
466 passage like marriage (Belk, 1988). Symbolism inherent in the traditional wedding costumes
467 affirmed the participants' separation from their parents and transition into a new life.

468 Participants compared the past and present of traditional bridal costumes with regards to
469 appropriate occasions for wearing them, the physical look of them, and the traditions related to
470 them. All of the participants sought to maintain the physical look of these costumes and allowed
471 only minor modifications, such as fabric type and embroidery permissible. Many participants
472 considered larger changes and modifications of these costumes as violation of the traditional
473 rule. However, most participants were flexible as to other occasions for which the costumes
474 could be worn. Maintaining the physical look of the costumes was similar to the findings of
475 Hughes, Torntore, and Ogle (2015). In their work, Black Forest, Germany participants
476 maintained Trachten traditional dress to help keep their culture alive and express their cultural
477 identity, but allowed for some changes related to contemporary life. Originally, in Saudi Arabian
478 culture, the meanings assigned to the costumes were only wedding-related. The participants
479 expressed the importance of experiencing these traditional costumes. Today, different meanings

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480 have been added however, such as extravagance and happiness, allowing participants to create a
481 new, shared meanings that enable women to wear these costumes at occasions other than their
482 traditional marriage celebrations. Translating the culturally shared meanings of the costumes
483 supplements women's performances in significant, transitioning roles at other occasions
484 (Goffman, 1959; Solomon, 1983). Not all participants revered traditional costumes because they
485 were thought of as uncomfortable and outdated, but they still underwent some level of
486 negotiation with feedback when deciding whether or not to wear them. The feedback participants
487 received from older family members influenced their choices to wear traditional costumes
488 regardless of the brides' positive or negative feelings about the costumes (see Stone, 1962).

489 Limitations for this study include the translation process from Arabic to English. Despite
490 having multiple, fluent readers who reviewed the translations, some of the richness of the data
491 may have been lost. While the multiple generations interviewed allowed for an understanding of
492 diverse perspectives, interviewing younger women may have provided opinions of those exposed
493 to more options and influences through globalization. Therefore, future research focused on the
494 millennial generation views of traditional bridal costumes should be conducted.

495 In addition, future researchers could explore cultural wedding dress of other regions
496 within Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the scope could be broadened to include other cultures, such
497 as Morocco, which has rules associated with their traditional wedding dress and practices that are
498 comparable to Saudi Arabia. A cross-cultural comparison of the meanings and practices
499 associated with traditional wedding dress through generations would help researchers to better
500 understand their significance. More research on traditional bridal costumes for immigrants who
501 live outside of their native-born country, similar to Kochuyt (2012), to see if and how traditional
502 costumes' values and meanings change, would also be beneficial.

503

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