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The meaning and symbolism of traditional bridal costumes in the western region of Saudi Arabia

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Dress is an important tool used to express cultural identity (Barnes & Eicher, 1992). In Saudi Arabia, traditional dress has a very rich history and holds a significant role in special occasions such as weddings (Iskandarani, 2006). The western region of Saudi Arabia, Hijaz, has its own unique styles and forms of traditional bridal garments (Iskandarani, 2006). Little is known about these traditional Hijazi bridal costumes, perhaps because they are handmade by a few families who live in the region, are not mass produced, and not available for purchase in stores. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the history, significance, and meaning of the Hijazi bridal costumes. The motivations that influence Saudi women's decisions to wear them was also explored. Of particular interest was the costumes' representation as rites of passage from both a historical and contemporary view. Symbolic interactionism was the theoretical starting point of this study, because traditional wedding attire often has great symbolism which is negotiated through social interaction (Eicher & Ling, 2005; Stone, 1962).

Qualitative data were collected via in-depth interviews from 22 married Saudi women ranging in age from 24 through 74 years old (Esterberg, 2002). The range of ages was sought to provide a generational perspective and to attain greater historical information regarding the Hijazi wedding dress. A purposive, snowball sampling strategy was used to recruit research participants and ensure collection of relevant data (Esterberg, 2002). Photographs of participants wearing the costumes, with faces obscured to protect their anonymity, were also collected as part of the data. Each of the participants had worn at least one of the traditional bridal costumes. The data were analyzed using Miles & Huberman (1994) process. Four key themes related to significance and meaning of the costumes emerged.

Physical appearance and process of wearing them. Participants recognized the uniqueness of the Saudi traditional costumes' design and their rich historical context. They described the costume, its' components such as design, color, material, and decorations as well as the complicated and "time consuming" process of correctly wearing the bridal costume. From the interviews and photos, it was found that the appearance through generations changed only slightly, with minor differences in color and embroidery materials found.

Meanings and beliefs related to the costumes' components. Participants not only identified the physical description of the different components, but also the meaning and beliefs behind them. Meanings ranged from regional and cultural significance such as demonstrating Islamic modesty and showing "a symbol of shyness," as well as emotions and beliefs of what the costume conveyed to others. For example, the color pink represented "good luck" and "innocence and feminism" while the face cover symbolized "protection from the evil eye" and "shyness and purity." Participants also spoke to positive benefits and feelings when wearing the bridal costumes such as the splendid physical appearance, concealing the bride's beauty until the wedding day, and the sentiment or emotion felt while wearing the costumes. Regardless of the

meaning, some participants stated that while not knowing specific significance, they held strong convictions about who could wear the costume and to what occasions.

Appropriate occasions the costumes could be worn. As participants described the different occasions, they discussed the shared meaning that specifies when and where these costumes are worn in the past and today. In the past, there were rules and especially assigned costumes for each day of the “seven-day marriage celebrations.” Today, these rules are more flexible thus the costumes could be worn in different major celebrations, but only by the guest of honor. For example, a celebration called the *Saabe* (arrival of newborn baby), a graduation party, and post wedding events. Lastly, some participants viewed the traditional costume as “fancy enough” to be an alternative to the Western white wedding gown that has grown in popularity in Saudi Arabia, as both symbolized and conveyed marriage and “feelings of happiness.”

Motivation negotiated within families. Participants revealed that meanings regarding the bridal dress were passed down through intergenerational ritual of passage. Daughters learned from their mothers that the costumes represented transitioning from girls to women. Participants also spoke of the expensive cost of the costumes demonstrating the “high class” or families’ wealth, prestige, and class. Beyond their immediate families, wearing of the bridal costume fulfilled a traditional heritage in which the women became a part of a regional Saudi Arabian “dynasty.” The family encouragement became an integral part of how the women shaped their views in deciding to wear the costumes. Following their wearing of the Hijazi costumes, many of the participants shared the traditional wedding customs and costumes with family and friends of multiple generations. Not all participants, however, viewed these costumes positively. Middle aged women, in particular, expressed negative feelings associated with the traditional costumes such as being uncomfortable and outdated. Interestingly, among the women of the millennial generation interviewed, traditional costumes seemed quite popular. Findings revealed that the beliefs and symbolism about these traditional Hijazi bridal costumes was communicated through and within generations. The Hijazi bridal costumes have deep historical roots in Saudi Arabian culture which continues to play a significant role in today’s marriage rituals.

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