

The Traje de Berberisca: an Encoded Dress

By Dr. Yaëlle Azagury

As a little girl, I often asked my mother in Spanish -I grew up in Tangier where Jews spoke a Spanish meshed with Judeo-Spanish: “Que me pongo hoy mama?”. Mother, what should I wear today? Invariably she gave me an enigmatic answer: “El traje de oro y de plata”. This threw me each time into the agonies of an elaborate speculation. What did she really mean by “the gold and silver gown”? I was an avid reader of fairy tales, so one came to mind. In Grimm’s *the Ass’s Skin*, the princess asks her father for three dresses: one the color of Time, the second one color of the Moon, and the third the color of the Sun. Neither requests is meant to be fulfilled. How can one make a moon-color dress? Or a sun-color dress? Or for that matter, how could one even fathom a dress of gold and silver? I was invariably puzzled. One day, though, I found out the “traje de oro y de plata” existed not merely as an imaginary riddle for inquisitive little girls . It was the *traje de berberisca*, or *keswa-el-kbira* (grand costume) as it is called in Arabic (Figure 1).



Figure 1: traje de berberisca. 19th century. Rabat

Despite its name which refers to a Berber dress, the *traje de berberisca*, an elaborate eight-piece costume still worn nowadays by Moroccan Jewish brides on the eve of their wedding during the *noche de berberisca* as it is called in the North of Morocco, or *Lilat el henna*, in the South, is originally inspired by the luxurious styles of the Spanish courts and Arab Caliphates of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance¹. In Morocco, it was used as a ceremonial dress and was part of the bride's dowry. It was actually a gift to the bride from her father, and was then transmitted from mother to daughter. She wore it for the first time on the evening preceding the wedding. From that moment on she was considered a married woman. This new status was emphasized by her right to wear the *keswa-el-kbira*.

My initiation into the secrets of the quasi-mythical dress started early. My mother, Sonia Cohen Azagury, is a dedicated collector of these gowns. From an early age, I was used to touching those sensual velvets and silks, reveling in their gem colors- auspicious emerald greens, dark reds to symbolize joy and abundance, but also fertility (the color of blood), black to ward off evil eye-, to be dazzled by the gold trimmings, the buttons in silver filigree. And the headband, called "Jemar", embroidered with minuscule pearls-aljofar in Judeo-Spanish-, emeralds and rubies if you came from a well-off family (Figure 2). In the eyes of the 5 year old I was, it offered endless amount of possibilities for dress-up.

¹ See for instance Angela Jansen: "Keswa Kebira: The Jewish Moroccan Grand Costume", in *Khil'a 1* (2005), pp.79-105: "The outfit originated in Andalusia, where today there are still festive garments that resemble the Jewish Moroccan *keswa kebira*." And she adds in a footnote: "An example is the festive dress of the province of Huelva, in Andalusia. (...) The resemblances of the jacket, the embroidered sleeves and the large velvet skirt with the gold lace decorations with the *keswa kebira* are striking."

The ceremony of the berberisca night is precisely about initiation: the initiation of the bride into the secrets of her new life, her new role as the transmitter of tradition. Both the *berberisca night* and the dress fulfill that purpose: helping the bride ease into her new role². Highlighting the ritual significance of clothing, I will first start with the dress.

A functionalist analysis of traditional dresses foregrounds the symbolic significance of clothes: a garment is a sign, and wearing it fulfills specific functions that can coexist, or overlap, in the same item. Three main functions can be identified: utilitarian, aesthetic and magical. Garments cover the body (utilitarian function), adorn the body (aesthetic) and are concerned with a symbolic meaning (magical). My focus will be the magical dimension.

The traje de berberisca is a highly complex piece of clothing, a “cosmical” dress of sorts. It is concerned with abstract, spiritual and metaphysical ideas, functioning as a highly encoded message. It carries the bride into her new life, both as a married woman, and an instiller of tradition.

² For helping me understand this, I thank my mother and my aunt Rica Cohen, whose patient findings via oral transmission have shed new light to the symbolism of the dress.



Figure 2: Jemar from Tetuan
18th century. Institut du Monde Arabe. Paris



Figure 3: Cindy Cohen de Leave
on her noche de berberisca

As I said before, it is made of 8 pieces: 1-a skirt, called *zeltita*, from the Spanish *giraldeta*, or wrap-around skirt³, 2-a bodice or breastpiece (*ktef*), 3 –a short jacket, called *gombaz*, usually with short sleeves, 4-a pair of long-wide sleeves, 5- a silk belt called *hzem*, 6-a silk scarf, called *panuelo* (*fechtul*) 7-shoes, decorated like the dress-8-a headband-hair could not be displayed after marriage. (Figure 4)



Figure 4a: bell-shaped sleeve



Figure 4-b: two silk belts-hzem



Figure 4c: Silk scarf used in the headband (*fechtul*)

³ According to the Yeshiva University Museum, “It is probably based on medieval Spanish Jewish costume, with its origins usually traced to the 15th century Spanish *vertugada* (hoop skirt, known as a “farthingale” in England). see yumuseum.org



Figure 4d: front and back of jacket (gombaz) with solar wheel motives

The skirt, the bodice and the jacket were usually made of silk velvet with gold metallic threads. They resemble the materials from which Torah Mantles are made. Most notably, the skirt wraps around the body in the same fashion as Torah Scrolls, thus metaphorically transforming the bride into a carrier of the Law.

The embroidery symbolizes aspects of marriage: concentric curves rising from the hem form a triangular shape, a metaphorical representation of fertility (see photo 3). We can usually find 22 lines or trimmings, a reminder of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and a metaphor for the Torah, written with 22 letters. Another typical number is 26. 26 is a highly meaningful number in Judaism. According to the *gematria*, 26 is the numerical value of God's name. Highly meaningful also are the seven silver filigree buttons on each side of the jacket. They point at the seven blessings that are repeated for an entire week after festive meals at the close of the wedding. 7 is also a significant number in Judaism-the day of the Sabbath is on the seventh day, for example.⁴

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Rouach, David: *Bijoux berbères au Maroc dans la tradition judéo-arabe*, ACR edition 1989
 "In the Jewish tradition, seven is a common number." Rouach points out that in Sefer Yetzirah, a book of the Kabbalah, there are for instance seven heavens, seven earths, seven Shabbat...

A very common motif on the jacket of the *keswa kbira* motif from Tetuan (it is considered the most authentic dress) is a spiral or a solar wheel, which symbolizes the “cycle of life” (eternity). (see figure 4d) Most significantly the spiral motif can also be found in burial clothes (see figure 5) in Morocco, as well as on graves in Jewish cemeteries across Morocco, pointing once again at the equation between life and death.



Figure 5: left, Jewish cemetery of Marrakesh, right, burial shroud or kfen in Arabic with characteristic solar wheel motifs

On the breastpiece or bodice, we find either geometric or floral motives. Especially favored is the rose (see figure 6a and 6b), a solar symbol whose radiating movement is like the spiral, a symbol of eternity as the alternating movement between life and death. In the Song of Songs the rose is also a metaphor for the people of Israel, “a rose among thorns” (Song of Songs, II,2)

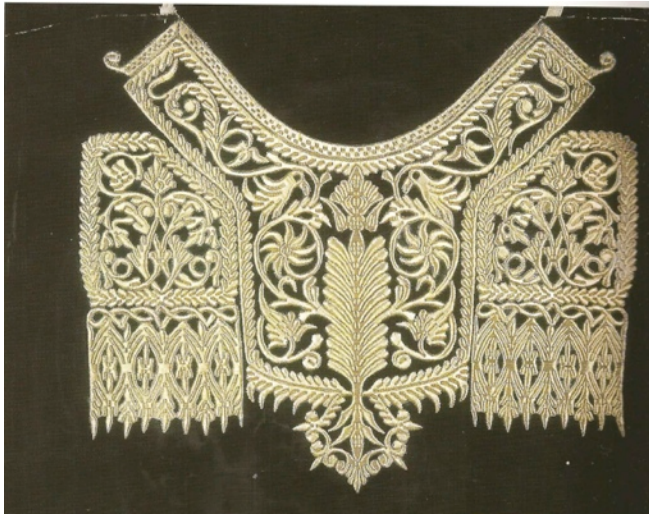


Figure 6a: breastpiece with birds and floral motives

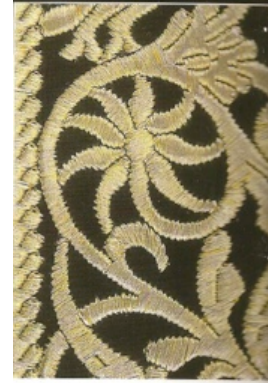


Figure 6b: detail of rose or solar wheel

-the palm-tree (figure 7): The palm-tree is usually associated with Etz Chaim, the tree of life, whose other important occurrence is on the sides of the skirt.

It is often mistaken for a star or a *hamsa* (see figure 8b).

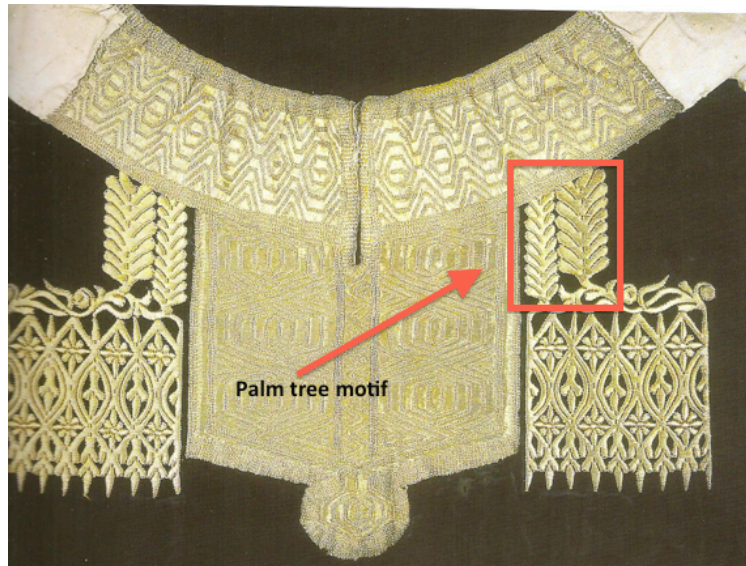


Fig.7: breastpiece with palm tree motif

Etz Chaim, first found in the Garden of Eden, is a metaphor of the Torah. Jewish tradition has much to say about the tree. The *Etz Chaim* is a symbol for both God and the Torah, or Law. The Midrash, one of the foremost Jewish commentaries, states that the first thing God became involved in, during the creation of the earth, was the planting of trees. “Tree of Life” is sometimes used as the name for a Jewish place of worship. So, the *Etz* is very important in Jewish thought.

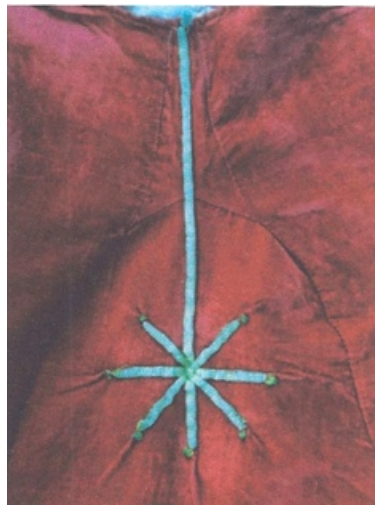


Fig. 8a: Detail of Etz Chaim on the side of the skirt

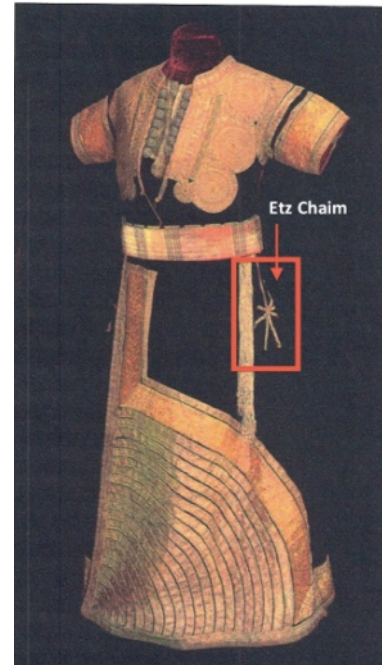


Fig. 8b: Keswa Kbir from Tetuan (20th century)
Collection Mrs. Sonia Azagury

-the almond or the almond tree (figure 9) : almond is called *luz* in Hebrew. Luz is a symbol of immortality in the Talmud and the Kabbala⁵. It is primarily a mysterious city in the Bible where Jacob had his dream⁶. He renamed it Beth-El (House of God)

⁵ See Zafrani, Haim: Chapter 2: “Jewish Society and the Judep-Maghrebian Social Imagination”, in *Two Thousand years of Jewish Life in Morocco*, Sephardic House, New York, 2005, p. 94.

⁶ Genesis 28:19 “And he called the name of that place Beth-El, but the name of that place was Luz at first”.

because he had seen the Divine Presence there. We enter the city of Luz through the base of an almond tree also named *luz*. According to the tradition, the angel of death had no power on the city of Luz. The term "*luz*" also designates in Hebrew the cervical vertebra, a vital organ, considered indestructible, from which Judaism believes the resurrection of bodies will come forth.

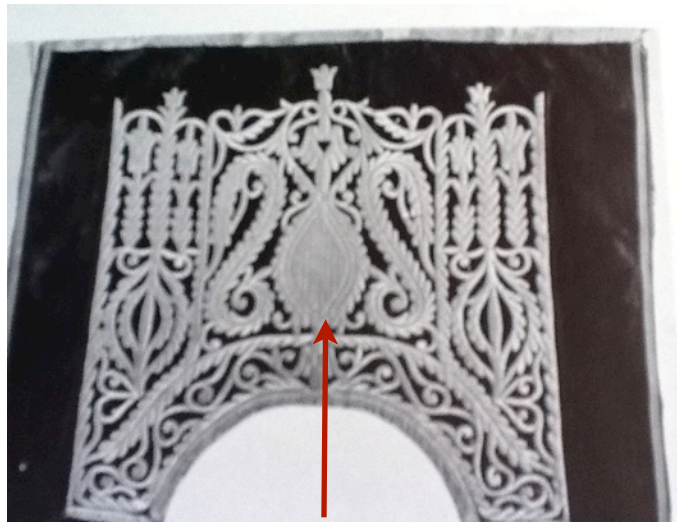


figure 9: detail of almond motif on breastpiece

-The bird (fig.6a), a motif used in jewelry in Morocco where jewelers were traditionally Jewish. Doves, usually associated with women and femininity, are symbols of purity and innocence. They are also associated with fertility. Finally, they are also synonymous with peace, harmony, hope and happiness: it is a dove which brings an olive branch to Noah's Ark.⁷

⁷ Rouach, David, *Ibid.* p.27

The dress is meant to carry the young woman into her new life- as for instance stained glass windows in churches convey representations important to Christianity. So is the evening when it is worn. The *noche de berberisca*, or *lil't el henna*, is a rite of passage done with a seal of approval from the community, and the week before the wedding a transitional period when the young woman prepares herself to leave the home of her parents to enter a new one to be created with her husband, from one social structure –singlehood- to another one –marriage⁸. In some parts of Morocco, it was customary in some rich families to organize a kind of “miniature wedding” at the age of five, when the children were dressed as bride and groom, the girls wearing a *berberisca* dress. This was done to express the hope that they would marry one day. It was an engagement in some ways. But it was also a rite of passage. The age of five is highly meaningful as it marks the beginning of childhood. The days preceding the wedding are a highly ritualized time, and they are all socialized events in order to obtain a seal of approval from the community and to go through a kind of “apprenticeship” of marriage with the wisdom of the elder⁹. On the Sabbath before the wedding-called Saftarray-, it was customary to display the young woman’s dowry. This public display emphasizes the social nature of the event

⁸ Alvar, Manuel, *Cantos de boda judeo-espanoles*, Madrid, C.S.I.C, 1971: “Todas estas ceremonias judias, tan llenas de complejidad, no son sino tramites que cumple la desposada para “segregarse” de una estructura social (su familia, la solteria) e incorporarse a otra nueva (la familia, el marido, el matrimonio).” “All these Jewish ceremonies, so full of complexities, are but multiple stages the bride needs to fulfill in order to “segregate” herself from on social structure (her family, single life) and incorporate herself to another one (her husband’s family, marriage). (my translation)

⁹ Ben-Ami, Issachar: “Beliefs and Customs”, Chapter 10 in *The Jews of North Africa and the Middle East in Modern Times*. CUP, 2003, “In the traditional Jewish society of the Diaspora, the survival of the individual, the family, and the community has always been of utmost importance. Marriage not only ensures the continuation of the community but also reinforces its bonds, because each new couple is a symbol of the unity of the group and an affirmation of its durability.”

and its collective function as a ritual for the community. On Sunday, after the signature of the *ketoubba*, the dowry was carried to the groom's house. On Monday, the bride was taken by a procession of women to the *mikveh* for ritual purification in the midst of songs and ullulation.

Finally, the *noche de berberisca* took place on Tuesday night, one day before the religious ceremony celebrated on Wednesday. It is initiated with the dressing of the bride. Dressing the bride is considered a *mitzvah*, a ceremony involving a secret knowledge. It is carried out by someone knowledgeable in the tradition. The dresser is a midwife of sorts. She is *delivering* this new woman, a married woman. The ceremony partakes in the mysteries of the cycle of life.

Once the last piece of clothing is on and the *jemar* (*crown*) is attached to her head, the bride is finally allowed to look at herself in the mirror. The subtext is metamorphosis, transformation. Her mother takes a mirror, lets her glance at her reflection quickly, and says: "*Una vez y no mas*". "Only once and never again". Then a procession of men come to escort the bride to her throne where she sits with Torah scrolls on each side (fig.10)

Significantly, the men are from the *Hevra Kadisha*, the burial society. The solar wheels in the dress pointed at the spiral of life and death. Life and death are inextricably meshed. The bride is guided to her new life by those in charge of another type of transition, the "passing" from life to death. They sing : "*Dainos a la novia, que por ella venimos, si no nos la dan a la ley volveremos.*" (give us the bride, we

are here for her, if you do not give her to us we will return to our holy studies). The bride is equated with the Torah for, like the Torah, she is the carrier of a message.

Next, the men lead the bridal procession carrying candelabra with lit candles which symbolize knowledge and clarity needed for her new life. She sits in her throne next to the Torah scrolls, (see figure 10). As I mentioned previously, the dress is made with the same fabric as the Torah mantles, wrapping around the woman's body in identical fashion.



figure 10: bride with Torah scrolls on each side

While escorting to bride to the throne, the procession of men sing *Ya'alat Hen*, -an 11th century piyyut sung also on the naming of newborn girls (we are once again in the symbolic realm of births and passages), and on the Jewish holiday of Shavuot which celebrates Moses' reception of the Torah; another hymn called *Shojanet Basade*, by Shlomo Ibn Gavirol, follows. Significantly, both celebrate the bride's beauty while they are simultaneously metaphorical representations of the Torah. Mundane love represents the relationship between God and Israel. In fact, both

hymns are from the Moroccan liturgical cycle of *Shirat Habakashot* expressing the yearning for redemption and for unity with God¹⁰.

One should also comment on the notorious low-profile of the groom: the ceremony is primarily for the bride.¹¹

Dressed in the beautiful berberisca dress, the bride carries a powerful metaphysical message inherent to Judaism. With the help of the dress, she becomes a highly encoded book, thus the equation between the bride and the Torah in the song by the men from the *Hevra*, thus her sitting next to the Torah on the night of the *berberisca*. This dress and the evening of the *berberisca* are about passages, passings, transitions. They are about transmission, instilling and perpetuating a heritage. So was this article. It was dedicated to my mother who transmitted her knowledge to me.

¹⁰ “The *Shirat Habakashot* are liturgical songs that were performed by “associations of a primarily religious nature (that) brought together lovers of Andalusian song and Jewish music for vigils held after midnight on Shabbat and during the six months between Sukkot and Pesah”. in Zafrani, *ibid.* p.233

¹¹ in the southern parts of Morocco, the main variation offered by the *lil't el henna* is the emphasis on fertility rituals . Significantly, the event usually takes places after the ritual immersion, the mikveh. The hand and feet of the bride are decorated with henna. This is an interesting case of Judeo-Arab syncretism, as this is an Arab tradition, adopted by Jews. Both Arabs and Berbers ascribe a healing and protective power to the henna plant. As Issachar Ben-Ami notes: “On the Tuesday night, the eve of the wedding ceremony, the most auspicious ceremony of the entire marriage took place at the bride’s house, the borrowed ceremony of the henna, which was the most purifying and prophylactic rite of Islamic marriage. During the ceremony the couple, along with members of their families and guests, were painted with designs in henna.” in *The Jews of North Africa and the Middle East in Modern times, ibid.* p. 192.

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