

## Jewish North African head adornment: Traditions and Transition

Garments, head and foot apparel and jewellery comprise the basic clothing repertoire of man. These vestments are primarily dictated by the wearer's climate and environs and, further, reflect the wearer's ethnic affiliation, social and familial status.

Exhibitions and museum collections offer a glimpse into the rich variety of headgear characteristic of diaspora Jews: decorated skull-caps; headbands and head ornaments; turbans and head scarves, as well as shawls and wraps that covered the body from head to foot. Headdresses exist from Europe, Central Asia, Iran, Iraq, Kurdistan, Yemen, the Balkans and, as shall be focused upon in this text, North Africa.

The head apparel and ornamentation under discussion in this article were crafted primarily during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, it must be noted that Jewish garments and head apparel are known to reflect age-old cultural traditions. The artistic assemblage of head adornments was not, however, uniquely Jewish. The design repertoire of eastern Jewish headdresses was given inspiration also from the Muslim environment. Both populations, in continual fear of idolatry, turned to symbols rich in hidden meanings and to colours ripe with magical properties.

The adornments under consideration here were those worn by the Jewish populace during both ceremonial and festive occasions. Festive garb, including ornamented headgear, were used in ceremonies of the life cycle<sup>1</sup> and on Jewish holidays<sup>2</sup>. Undoubtedly the most exquisite items were worn by the bride and groom on their wedding day. The Song of Songs 3:11 reflects upon the age old custom of head adornment: «Go forth, O daughters of Zion, and behold King Solomon with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding...».

The Jews of North Africa engaged in three main crafts. They were silver and goldsmiths, embroiderers of silk and gold thread, and artisan-tailors.

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<sup>1</sup> Life cycle ceremonies included events such as the following: Brit Milah (Circumcision); Bar Mitzvah celebration; Marriage ceremony; and death rituals.

<sup>2</sup> The major Jewish Festivals/Holidays are as follows: Rosh HaShannah; Yom Kippur; Sukkot; Pesach (Passover); and, Shavout.

The focus of this article is on one facet, head adornment, from within the entire repertoire of Jewish head attire used by the traditional and religious populace at the time of their major ceremonial, festive and familial functions. Consequently, the skills of particular note for this study are the crafts of gold working and embroidery —occupations practiced by the Jews and passed from father to son throughout the generations.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The explosion of settlement in North West Africa or as it is also known, the *Maghreb*<sup>3</sup>, during the late 15th and early 16th centuries was brought about by the expulsion of the Spanish Jews in 1492 and of the Portuguese Jews in 1497. This was further supplemented by the many Jewish refugees of other origins who found their way to the *Maghreb*. Once in North Africa the *Sephardic*<sup>4</sup> arrivals settled in the port towns and large interior cities of Morocco, Tunisia and elsewhere in North Africa. As recent immigrants, they differed from their native Jewish brothers who had settled in North Africa many years before. These new arrivals resided in settlements referred to as *magorasbim*, within which they preserved their congregational hegemony and native Spanish language. Further, the European background of these new arrivals provided them with the tools to become commercial and political agents to foreign establishments. Though tempered with time, the *Sepharadim* succeeded in maintaining their high-level artistic skills and, as in Spain, continued to produce jewellery and clothing with strong Spanish influences. This cultural heritage can be noted in the masterpiece of Jewish urban garb known as the *el-Keswa el-Kebirah* or “Great Dress”. This gown, with its accompanying jewellery, served as bridal wear and, thereafter, as attire for festive occasions.

#### JEWELLERY AND EMBROIDERY

Jewellery production and embroidery work are ancient crafts which played a central role in the beautification of head adornment. In addition, this particular art form highlights ethnographical as well as commercial,

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<sup>3</sup> *Meghreb* or *Maghrib* is a term used for North West Africa. This area generally includes Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and sometimes Libya.

<sup>4</sup> *Sephardic* is an appellation given to Jews of Spanish, Portuguese or North African descent.

trade and political relations between the various Mediterranean countries. This was illustrated by the craftsmen's usage of a multitude of motif and design sources, as well as the variety and types of precious materials employed in the craft.

The goldsmith craft, the spinning of metal threads for embroidery and the striking of coins were occupations practiced by the Jews and passed from father to son. The expert goldsmith mastered the various crafts connected with his profession—from smithing to the preparation of gold threads for embroidery. The attitude of Islam towards those working in metals originated in superstitions which prevailed amongst the Arabs and which, with time, passed into the annals of Islam. Goldsmithing, which in the eyes of the faithful 'falsely beautifies the world', was to Muslims as one with the trade of money lending. Thus, the Jewish population, situated on the lower echelons of the social ladder, were, through necessity, forced to take upon themselves a multitude of crafts forbidden to the Muslims.

Various threads of Islamic influence take concrete form in the items produced by Jewish craftsmen, in this case the goldsmiths and embroiderers. The production of amulets, for example, indicates how the Jews of the *Maghreb* were influenced by the superstitions prevalent amongst their Muslim neighbours. The significance of the amulet arose from the magical qualities associated with the materials, forms and colours employed in its creation. These elements gave the amulet, as jewellery, a function of significance within traditional family ceremonies.

Jewellery, primarily urban jewellery, reflects the influences brought to the *Maghreb* by the Spanish Jews expelled during the Age of the Inquisition. In addition, other waves of immigrants passing back and forth between Andalusia (Christian Spanish culture) and the *Maghreb* (Muslim Arabic culture) were also transporters of original artistic motifs. The urban jewellery of North Africa was inspired and influenced primarily by the decorative art and architecture of North Africa, which in its turn was influenced by the Spanish influxes.

Scholars agree that Moroccan embroidery was directly influenced by the Spanish craft. This is reflected in the vocabulary of the Moroccan trade which derives from the Spanish: embroidery/*Berdada*, 'the threading of a needle'/*Sartal*.

Gold embroidery derives its beauty from the interesting combination of glittering gold threads against a lavish velvet background of black, red, purple, green and brown hues. The gold threads employed in the craft were painstakingly prepared. Gilded silver rods were heated and passed through a perforated implement, each perforation being smaller than the previous one, until a thread a tenth of a millimeter thick was produced.

This rounded thread was then pressed between two wheels to form a flat band. Finally, the thin gold band was wound around a silken thread suitable for embroidery and weaving. In general, silk thread embroidery was a trade performed by Muslim women while embroidery in gold was the occupation of Jews —men and women alike.

The most important function of traditional jewellery and embroidery was within the ceremonies of the life-cycle, especially the wedding ceremony. The tradition of adorning the head is echoed in both the Jewish Bible and the *Talmud*<sup>5</sup>.

#### ADORNMENT: THE ORNAMENTAL REPERTOIRE

In *Sunni*<sup>6</sup>, *Maghreb*, within a Muslim society which also banned the representation of human images on religious articles, the Jews managed to express the vitality of divinity without committing idolatry. In many instances, the design and shape repertoire of Jewish jewellery and ceremonial objects were inspired by the Muslim environment of the *Maghreb* itself and by the Hispano-Mauresque art of the 8th-13th centuries which infiltrated architecture, popular culture and the visual arts.

The Jewish artisan, as a result of religious prohibitions, endeavoured to embellish his works —in this instance, jewellery— with symbols rich in hidden meanings: floral and vegetal motifs; geometrical designs; avian depictions; and *khamsa*<sup>7</sup> representations.

#### *Floral and Vegetal Motifs*

The most common floral representations were the five-petalled rosette, acanthus leaves and entwined vine tendrils. The primary vegetal pattern is the “Tree of Life” which within Jewish tradition represents the *Torah*<sup>8</sup>.

The “Tree of Life”, symbolizing as it does life, death and resurrection, is represented by a number of stylized forms such as the lotus, the pomegranate and the *Menorah*<sup>9</sup>. One of the more dominant, representative

<sup>5</sup> The *Talmud* is the primary source of Jewish religious law, consisting of the *Mishnah* and *Gemara*.

<sup>6</sup> *Sunni* is one of the two main sects of orthodox Islam (the other being *Shi'ah*).

<sup>7</sup> Note the text pertaining to the *khamsa* located within the section on *Adornment: The Ornamental Repertoire*.

<sup>8</sup> *Torah* or Pentateuch.

<sup>9</sup> The *Menorah* is a seven-branched candelabrum which was used in the Temple of Jerusalem. Today, the *Menorah* is an emblem of Judaism and of the state of Israel.

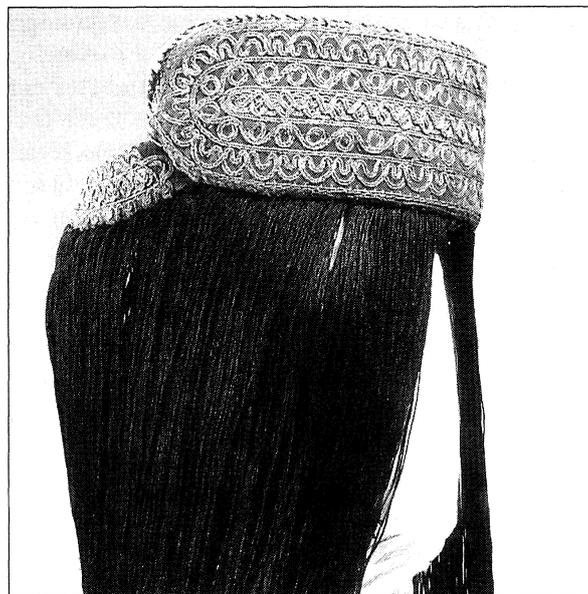


FIG. 1.—*Torah Mantle*, 19th century, velvet, raised embroidery with gold threads, with “tree of life”. Spanish Morocco.

forms was the palmette. In other applications, such as on *Chanukkah*<sup>10</sup> lamps, the “Tree of Life” is occasionally flanked with a bird and a lion. This arrangement is designed to represent the universe, since symmetry underlies the balance of Creation. The “Tree of Life” motif commonly appeared within the Jewish world, but was also basic to the Hispano-Mauresque repertoire. Aside from the appearance of this motif on or as an integral element of the head adornment<sup>11</sup>, examples of usage may be seen on Jewish sarcophagi and ossuaries in *Eretz Israel*<sup>12</sup> dating to as far back as the 1st century A.D.

In Morocco, embroidered gold thread was a popular means of embellishing the “Tree of Life” motif on Torah *mantles*. These embroideries, with their more naturalistic artistic style, originated within European decorative art and traditions. They entered North Africa via the commercial

<sup>10</sup> *Chanukkah* lamps were often formed as buildings, symbolic of two issues: the “Festival of Inauguration” (“Chanukkah”) of the Temple and, also, of the peak of Jewish aspiration—to rebuild the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Today, the *Chanukkah* lamp is used in and representative of the Jewish Festival of Lights, also known as *Chanukkah*.

<sup>11</sup> Note the description of “The Brass Crown” located in the section entitled *Urban Head Adornment*.

<sup>12</sup> *Eretz Israel* or Land of Israel.

relations established and maintained between the immigrant Spanish communities and the respective governments of the English, Italian and Dutch which flourished alternatively during the years. This enhanced style is illustrated within the Judaica collection of the Eretz Israel Museum. Notable are several *Torah* mantles from Spanish Morocco decorated with stylized palmettes and naturalistic floral motifs. Further, these same motifs illuminate the *ketubot* or marriage contracts of the Jewish populace.

### *Geometrical Designs*

Geometrical designs were very common within the Jewish and Islamic ornamental worlds as a result of the aforementioned religious prohibitions; consequently, craftsmen within both traditions sought after pure forms.

Amongst the geometrical designs most popular in the *Maghreb* was the triangle. This form occurs in a number of combinations. The triangle may stand alone. It may be depicted with a circle drawn in the center, thus creating the representation of an eye. The triangles may also be laid end to end forming a rhombus. Finally, there may be two triangles laid upon each other and pointing in opposite directions, creating a form familiar as the Jewish Star of David or a pentacle representing *Khatim Suleiman*<sup>13</sup>.

Two rectangles laid crosswise, a form better known as a cross, was another common geometrical form. Within the culture of the *Maghreb* it was believed of it to “ward off the evil eye to the four winds”.

Another shape, commonly found within golden embroideries and as head adornments, was the spirally-shaped star. The popularity of this motif was derived from its connection to the stages of the life-cycles: birth, growth, development and, further, destiny and the infinite. Consequently, the spiral star decorates objects connected to Jewish life-cycle ceremonies.

The crescent motif dates back to ancient Near Eastern civilizations. It represents renewal, strength and rebirth. These meanings are preserved within the Hebrew words *Chodesh* and *Molad*. The former word is defined as ‘month’, though the meaning ‘new’ may be derived from the root letters of *ch d s*. The latter word means ‘birth’. The crescent further symbolizes attributes such as might, daring and prestige. The Book of Isaiah (3:18) mentions a crescent-shaped jewel worn by the ‘Daughters of Zion’: ‘In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, and the headbands and the crescents [necklaces]’.

<sup>13</sup> *Khatim Suleiman* or the “Seal of Solomon”.

*Avian Depictions*

The ornithological world appealed to Jewish artists, though it was a design store which appeared within many other cultures as well.

The bird motif was a popular decorative emblem early in the cultural traditions of Spain and North Africa. It is found on both Spanish silks of the 12th century and the Islamic art of the Middle Ages. Twelfth century North African examples of textiles decorated with birds are considered to carry designs which were originally Spanish and which entered North Africa through the migrating Jews. The typical format saw a bird or a combination of two birds facing each other and separated by a vegetal motif. These decorative representations appear in lace works as well as Islamic and Jewish embroideries, though in the latter the bird symbolizes the soul, the spiritual, and the Spirit and Compassion of God.

Jewish North African ornamentation regularly features ornithological motifs embroidered on the breast cover of a wedding costume and/or on the head adornment. As mentioned above, birds may appear individually or in pairs. The avian motif appeared on jewellery, on wedding and celebration costumes, for it was also a symbolic representation of harmony

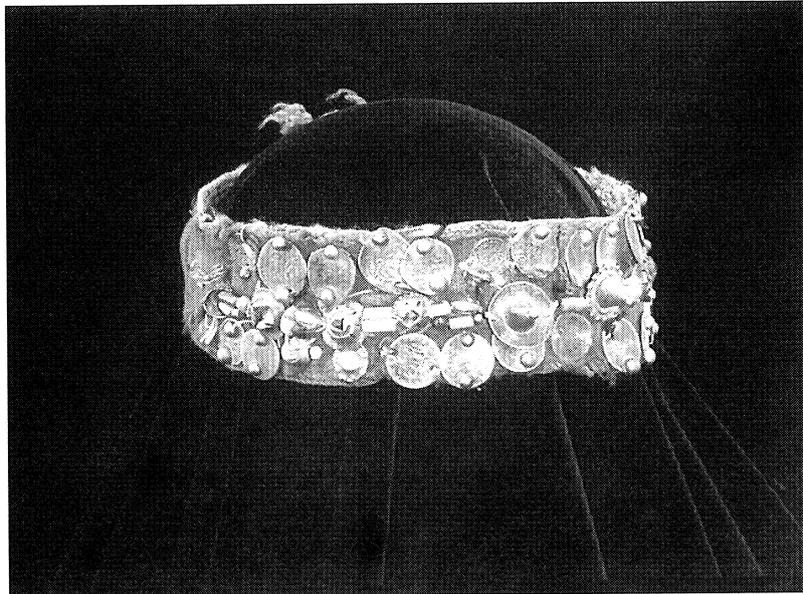


FIG. 2.—*Tarbush for child*, green velvet fabric, couched gold-thread embroidery, with pair of birds. Morocco.

and happiness. The bird motif is common on *Torah* mantles, where the depiction may be of heraldic birds flanking the “Tree of Life”. In these instances the nature of the birds is dedicatory: they honoured the memory of the deceased through the bird’s symbolic incarnation as the *seppour hanefesh* or soul.

Birds are also portrayed on the large *khamsa* hangers which held synagogue lighting cups. The thumb of the *khamsa* may be shaped as a bird’s head with a pointed beak or as a long beak pointing downwards.

### *Khamsa Representations*

The *Khamsa* or “open palm of a hand” represents a tangible example of the belief in the ‘evil eye’ and the means of defence against it. The *Maghreb* Jews, like their Muslim neighbours, believed in the protection provided by the *khamsa* against magic, divination, demons (*jenun*) and the ‘evil eye’.

The *Maghreb khamsa* has two shapes. Often it is fashioned with three joined fingers, while the thumb and little finger are stretched out to either side. This hand orientation conveys happiness and blessings. Protection



FIG. 3.—“*Khamsa*”, brass, repoussé and engraved, 19-20th century. Morocco.

from evil is represented by a hand with all five fingers separated. The number five owes its significance to the five fingers of the hand and consequently became synonymous with the hand itself. The significance of this number finds reflection in the expression *Khamsa fi'ainak*, roughly translated as "five/hand upon your eye". An idiom, when accompanied by the raising of the hand in a defensive gesture it was intended to ward off the evil spirits.

*Khamsa* images were often the subject for wall paintings in private dwellings, while *khamsa* forms were generally suspended above the doors. This characteristic design was particularly dominant on the jewellery which played a role in the ceremonies of the life cycles, such as births, *bar mitzvahs* and weddings.

#### *Urban Head Adornment*

Ornamented headgear was preponderant in the ceremonies of the Jewish festivals and in momentous life-cycle celebrations such as those listed earlier. The cultural and religious traditions encircling the motif repertoire illustrate the tension existing between design freedom and the fear of committing idolatry. In order to avoid any transgression of the Second Commandment (Exodus 20:4), the Jews turned to symbols of hidden meaning as well as colours resplendent with magical properties. These elements aided in warding off evil and helped ensure fertility, livelihood, prosperity, health and long life. The description of a kingly act illustrates the importance of head adornment during the wedding ceremony: the *Talmud* tells us that King Agrippas stopped before a wedding and presented his crown to the bride; the king pronounced that since 'I always carry a crown on my head, thus I will give it up to another to carry for one day'<sup>14</sup>.

The custom of head adornment at wedding ceremonies did not disappear. The style and shape of the various head decorations did, however, change over the years to reflect the historical circumstances of the Jews. North African head adornment, in the form of jewellery, appears in all of its wealth and dignity during the Era of the Spanish Exile.

The Spanish influence, however, failed to reach the rural areas of North Africa; consequently, the head adornment described below is exemplary of styles existing within the urban areas of the *Maghreb*. The Spanish influence is visible primarily in the jewellery popular with the city dwellers.

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<sup>14</sup> The Talmudic reference for this anecdote is *Ketubot* 17:1.

The ornaments used to adorn the brow, hair and headgear of the female wearer were comprised of several units. Each element, with its associated magical qualities, was able to stand alone as an individual piece of jewellery or together as a set. The combination of several magical elements —or, rather, jewellery items—, within one adornment only further increased its magical value.

The following section will outline the various types and uses of head adornment common amongst the urban population of the *Maghreb*.

*The Embroidered Crown*, designed to be placed atop the head, featured a row of varied-shaped pendants, such as *khamsot* and crescents, which adorned the brow of the wearer. This particular example of head adornment was made of quilted cloth heavily embroidered with lines of pearls, beads, geometrically shaped silver or brass plugs and precious or semi-precious stones. The stones employed in the beautification of the crown were emeralds, carnelian, turquoise, coral and yellow amber. The white of the pearls symbolized purity, happiness and blessings, while the colour and shine of the stones provided protection against the 'evil eye'. The fullness of design leads to an impression of *horror vacui* or a fear of empty spaces. This was and continues to be reflected in the Islamic attitude toward decorative art. A further characteristic of this crown type is the presence, notable from the above-mentioned motif repertoire, of rosette and vegetal patterns.

*The Tadg* adorned the forehead of its female wearers through its combination of individual openwork panel elements or *twigz*, decorated with floral designs and precious stones. It has been discovered that individual *twigz* or "small crowns" were also utilized as items of head jewellery. This style is reminiscent of the head adornment favoured by royal women during the European Renaissance.

*The Swalf* is an adornment which takes the form of a band of stiff cloth trimmed with black threads. The material band is embroidered with gold thread in a variety of designs forms characteristic of the North African goldsmith craft: geometrical; vegetal; and, spiral shapes. The lower section of the *swalf* gives the appearance of a wig as it is comprised of black silk threads which trail over the wearers shoulders and back. This head adornment style was used primarily by the older, respected women of the community on special occasions.

*The Tasifipha* is a typical form of head attire from the Deira or Dadas Valleys of Morocco. It combines quilted cloth with decorative elements such as coins, coral or silver panels. The Judaica collection of the Eretz Israel Museum features a *tasifipha* which carries a depiction reminiscent of a *sombrero* amongst the coins and panels. The probable origin of this

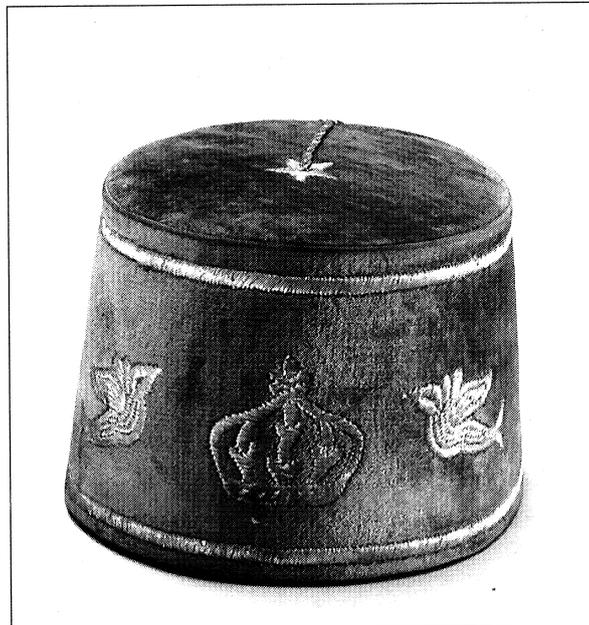


FIG. 4.—*Swalf wig*, cloth band embroidered with black silk and gold threads. Morocco.

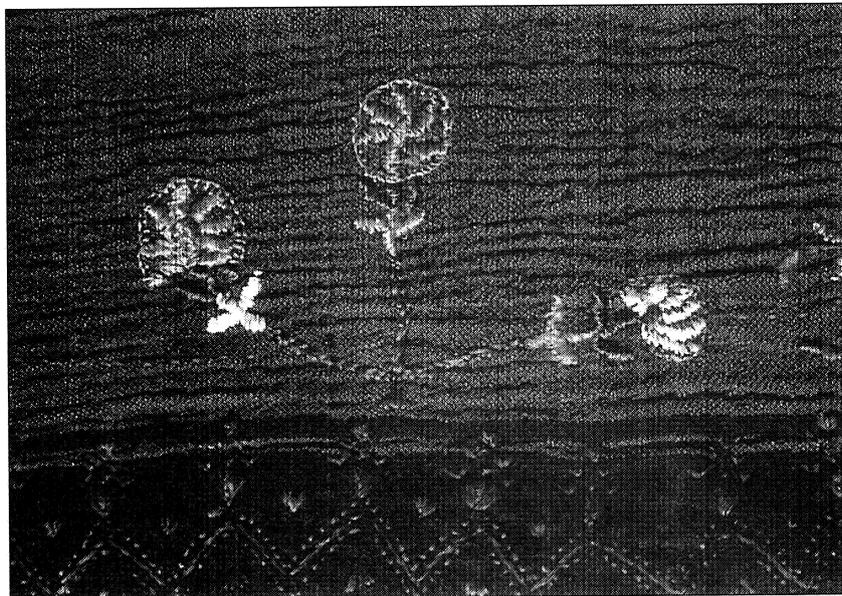


Fig. 5.—*Tasifpba*, head attire, gilded cloth, coins, panels, reminiscent of a sombrero. Dadas Valeys of Morocco.

headband style crown may be found within the old artistic sources of Greco-Roman and Byzantine art.

*The Brass Crown* of the Eretz Israel Museum collection is an unusual work created by Moroccan jewellery-smith who immigrated to Israel during the 1950's. As an artisan, he desired to continue the tradition of head adornment, but was required to adjust himself and his craft to the changing tastes and styles of the modern era.

The crown was designed from openwork brass with an upper edge scalloped with stylized palmettes and a pair of open-winged birds. The body is characterized by a vegetal design, while the base is shaped by rounds of brass surmounted by stylized foliage. The center of the crown is adorned with a large blue semi-precious stone which carries with it the symbolic significance of an amulet against the 'evil eye'. The artisan succeeded in creating a crown which incorporates elements of Jewish ceremonial art and traditional motifs. This tradition of incorporating and transferring stylized motifs from one functional area to another was well-known in Morocco. A typical example was the creation of *Torah* finials from pieces of antique jewellery. In the instance of the crown we see a reversal of this practice. Instead of integrating secular objects into holy ones we see that this modern artist has, in order to earn a living, brought symbols from Jewish ceremonial life into the creation of a modern work of head adornment.

Traditional crowns designed with bands and loops of chain and pendants decorated with filigree and granulations were known in Tunisia and Algeria as well as in Morocco. In Tunisia, other elements such as fish which symbolized fertility were added to the general repertoire of geometrical, floral and bird designs. In Algeria another technique was utilized by the Jewish craftsmen —enamel work. Normally the artisans employed the use of green, blue and yellow colours to which was added red coral.

The tradition of head adornment is an ancient one which accompanied and embellished Jewish life throughout the festivals and life-cycle celebrations. It did, however, find itself in a process of social and economic change. The gradual 20th century departure from traditional costumes and subsequent preference for western attire lead to a decline in the status of the head adornment and, further, brought about the decline of the goldsmiths craft. A step in this decline saw parts of the head adornment-jewellery being broken up and sold as simple decorative jewellery pieces to tourists without regard or mention of their primary function as head adornment. In some cases the jewellery pieces have been lost forever as they were melted down as a source of precious metals. These overall trends

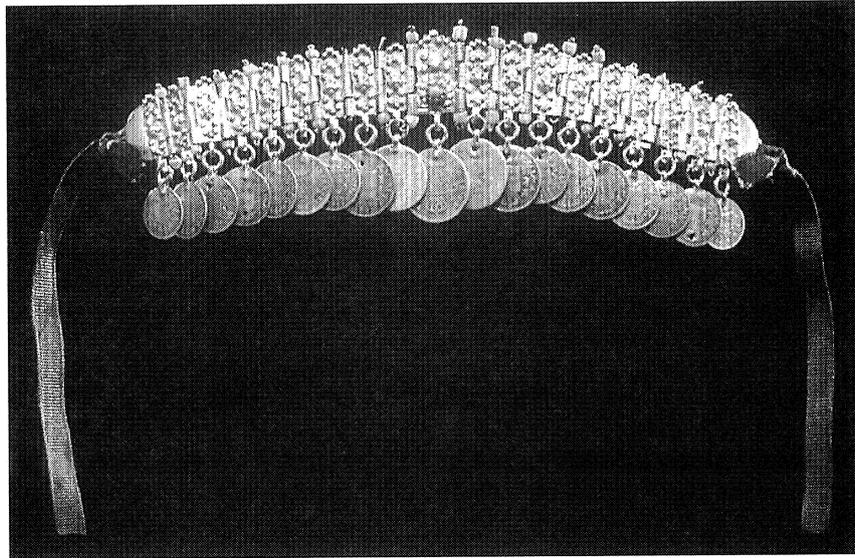


FIG. 6.—*Brass crown*, adorned with a large blue semi precious stone. 1950.



FIG. 7.—*Woman's headscarf (detail)*, 19th century, Tunisia.  
Silk-embroidered wooller fabric.

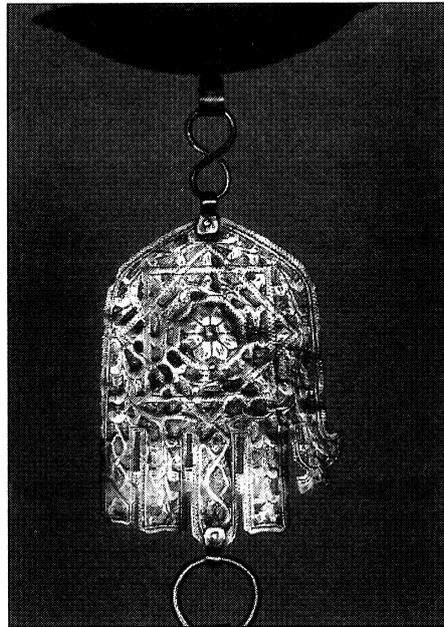


FIG. 8.—*Headdress Ornament*, Tunisia, Tunis, 19th century.

of the twentieth century greatly affected the inventory of traditional Jewish ceremonial jewellery available today. However, the gold thread and jewellery head adornments that have survived in museum and personal collections until the present vividly portray the achievements of the past goldsmiths craft and provide a testimony to a way of life in North Africa which was enriched by the exiles of Spain<sup>15</sup>.

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La autora analiza la artesanía del tocado, particularmente en joyería y bordado, hecha por judíos de la diáspora residentes en el Magreb a finales del siglo XIX y a lo largo del XX. El sentido religioso de los diversos elementos iconográficos incorporados al trabajo revela una tradición artística que se remonta a los artesanos judíos de la España anterior a 1492, pero que tenía que recibir influencias del contexto islámico de las sociedades en las que ese trabajo tenía lugar. A lo largo del siglo XX, esta tradición ha ido desapareciendo progresivamente, surgiendo en su lugar elementos procedentes de la cultura occidental contemporánea.

The author discusses the craftsmanship of head adornment, particularly jewellery and embroidery, made by diaspora Jews in the Maghreb in the late 19th and the 20th centuries. The religious meaning of the iconographic elements involved was part of an artistic tradition that goes back to the work of the Spanish Jews before 1492; nevertheless, the craftsmen had to deal with the Islamic environment of the societies in which they lived. The 20th century has seen a gradual departure from these traditional patterns and a subsequent preference for those of contemporary western culture.