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*Multiple Meanings and Ambiguous Trends*

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DOI
10.5040/9780755648283
Publication date
2026
Document Version
Final published version
Published in
The I.B. Tauris Handbook to Gendering the Cultural Histories of the Arab World

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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Moors, A. (2026). Women and Gold: Multiple Meanings and Ambiguous Trends. In H. Elsadda, & S. Shami (Eds.), *The I.B. Tauris Handbook to Gendering the Cultural Histories of the Arab World* (pp. 387-400). I.B. Tauris. https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755648283

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Download date:11 Nov 2026

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# Women and Gold: Multiple Meanings and Ambiguous Trends

Annelies Moors

## Introduction

It is hard to overstate the importance of gold jewelry in the Middle East. This region is a large consumer of gold, with most of this gold, imported in kilo bars, used to manufacture jewelry.[1] This gold jewelry is sold in the gold markets of the larger cities, where small shops, one next to the other, have their display windows filled with bracelets, necklaces, earrings, and other pieces of gold jewelry, that radiate a deep yellow. The large majority of shopkeepers are men, but women are strongly present amongst their clientele. They come to visit the shops to buy and sometimes to sell pieces of gold jewelry, together with male and female kin, as a couple with their future husband, or by themselves. Gold jewelry is not only visibly present in these shops, it is also displayed on women's bodies. Some items, such as solid gold bracelets (bangles), may be worn in everyday life, while the more fragile or larger items are reserved for festive occasions, especially weddings.

I became academically interested in gold jewelry during my research on how women gained access to property in the Nablus region of Palestine and how this had changed through time (Moors 1995). Wearing gold was not only by and large a woman's affair, but women were also the owners of this gold.[2] The amounts and kinds of gold women possess may vary substantially, but many women owned at least some small pieces of gold jewelry.[3] As become evident, women acquired most of their gold jewelry when they enter into marriage.

Owning gold is part and parcel of the strongly gendered marriage economy. An Islamic marriage contract includes a dower, a sum of money which the groom needs to hand over to the bride when the contract is concluded.[4] As Islamic law does not recognize marriage in community of goods, the dower remains the property of the bride herself, with which she can act as she wishes; neither her husband nor her father or other kin can claim it. Social practice may, of course, diverge from legal doctrine. But also when brides do not receive the full sum registered in the marriage contract, they would commonly receive some gold jewelry as part of their dower. Next to this, they may also receive additional gifts of gold, from their husband at their engagement (*shabke*) and from their kin when they marry (*nqut*).

Yet in spite of its importance for women in the Middle East, little attention has been paid to gold jewelry in academia. There is a literature on Middle Eastern jewelry in the field of material culture. But these publications usually focus on "customary jewelry," often on the more

spectacular silver items, such as Bedouin women's facial jewelry and head dresses. Also, these individual pieces of jewelry are often presented as having a life of their own with little attention paid to their significance for the women wearing it. Whereas this is understandable if the focus is on the materiality of these items, it is harder to understand why anthropologists have paid little attention to women's engagements with gold jewelry. Anthropological handbooks on the Middle East (Altorki 2015; Bates and Rassam 1983; Eickelman 1998) hardly refer to it, if at all. Recent comprehensive introductions to social and cultural anthropology (Balzani and Besnier 2021) mention neither gold jewelry nor the dower. Also those writing on gender in the Middle East have largely overlooked the significance of gold for women.[5]

Gold jewelry matters to the women who own and wear it, both as a source of economic security and the embodiments of social relations and notions of self. At the same time, an analysis of the changing forms and meanings of gold jewelry also connects and sheds light on the relations between the global and the local, economy and kinship, commodity and gift, class and gender, and materiality and signification. As part and parcel of the transfer of wealth at marriage, gold jewelry links the global gold market with strongly gendered local economies of marriage and kinship.[6] It functions both as a commodity, with great liquidity, and as part of a gift economy, with its lack of separation between persons and things. Because of its material qualities, gold jewelry very easily moves not only from the stage of commodity (bought on the market) into that of a gift (presented by and to particular individuals), but is also easily resold again to the gold shops, returning to the status of commodity.

Gold jewelry is not only a repository of economic value and a means to store wealth, but it is also a form of adornment. It is displayed on the body for others to see; it makes the social relations implicated in gift exchanges visible to the world, and part of a system of meaning making.[7] The gold a woman wears speaks about and produces status hierarchies; it presents the quality of marriage and kinship ties, and embodies and constructs gendered and classed notions of self. Gold jewelry then connects what is often kept separate: materiality, both in the sense of economic value and as material object, and signification, the meaning-making work particular kinds of gold jewelry do that shape social (marital and kinship) relations and notions of self (particular ideals of womanhood).

In this article I focus on the changing historical entanglements of global and local gold markets with shifts in kinship and marriage economies, that are strongly classed and gendered, and the emergence of consumer culture.[8] The insights I present are largely based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Nablus town itself, in one of the refugee camps at the outskirts of the city, and in a village to the east. I have spent roughly two years in the region between 1982 and 1989, and then engaged in briefer periods of fieldwork between 2003 and 2019. Next to participant observation, I worked with topical life stories and did archival research in the shari'a court on the registration of marriage contracts.

In the following I start with the shift from silver to gold jewelry. Whereas in Palestine, such a transformation was already on its way in the 1920s, in countries such as Oman and Yemen, this only gained momentum in the 1970s.[9] Because of this more recent and better documented shift from silver to gold, I include a brief section of the latter to illustrate how this process took place. Next, I briefly describe the emergence of gold as central to the monetary system and the developments in the global gold market that have affected the sale of gold in the Middle East. The main part of this article centers on a discussion of the different kinds of gold jewelry that women

in the Nablus region buy, wear, and often also sell again. I analyze the centrality of the gold that is locally referred to with the term baladi gold, which foregrounds economic value. I then turn to the emergence of "Italian gold" that in many ways functions inversely, highlighting how jewelry works as an adornment to present a new classed and gendered presence. The last section elaborates on the emergence of other kinds and styles of gold jewelry, such as Gulf gold and hollow bracelets, how women relate to these new trends and these may be seen as an ambiguous and limited turn to consumer culture.

## From Silver to Gold: Global Developments and Local Economies

Whereas silver jewelry has historically been far more common than gold, older pieces of silver are still hard to come by.[10] Because silver jewelry tarnishes easily and wears rapidly, it was often melted down to be reworked into new pieces. Still, it is evident that a variety of similar styles of silver jewelry can be found in the Middle East, North Africa, Central-Asia, and India, often quite similar to those of the ancient civilizations and empires, such as those of Sumer, Egypt, Western Asia, and the Horn of Africa. Such strong resemblances are both due to long-standing trade links and of the material affordances of silver. Yet there are also considerable differences between countries and regions, such as the level of purity of the silver, and whether or not precious stones are incorporated. Individual pieces of jewelry—bracelets, necklaces, earrings, and so on—may be different in size and weight, have different functions (with amulets worn for protection), and different qualities of workmanship.

Silver jewelry was produced and sold by craftsmen. Clients came to the workshop of the silversmith to order particular items or to buy the popular items that were widely in demand and hence ready-made available, while in more remote areas itinerant silversmiths may travel around with a small stock of jewelry. Working silver was a craft mostly handed down from father to son. Most jewelry was similar to that of earlier period, but silversmiths may also gradually incorporate some changes in their designs, such as the shape of the silver beads.[11]

For centuries the chief sources of silver for jewelry making were old silver items that were melted down and the Maria Theresa thaler (MTT) (Flandrin 1997). This coin is named after the Austrian Empress Maria Theresia, and was first minted in 1751 when increased trade led to a growing demand for silver coins with a high and constant silver content.[12] The new coin became rapidly popular not only in large parts of Europe, but also in the Ottoman Empire, especially amongst traders in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. In the 1970s the value of the coin increased manifold because of the rapid rise of the price of silver on the world market. Invariably the date of 1780, the year Maria Theresia died, was stamped on these coins. The Maria Theresia thaler was not only melted down to provide silversmiths with the silver to work with, but it was also often incorporated as part of a necklace. Smaller silver coins were also used as decorative parts of jewelry.

Silver jewelry was bought and sold according to the weight of the silver.[13] This jewelry was not simply worn as a form of adornment but was first and foremost a source of economic

security in hard times and a means of storing wealth. It was seen as having a more stable value than bank notes, while at the same time it had a high liquidity; it was easy to carry it along and to sell it. Women obtained most of their silver when marrying as dower. Depending on the region women would receive bracelets, long necklaces with danglers, and possibly an amulet-box, earrings, brooches, toe-rings, finger-rings, chains with forehead pieces, and less often anklets, and nose rings.

The shift from silver to gold jewelry was often gradual. If in Palestine gold jewelry was already becoming more common in the 1930s, in Oman, up till the 1950s jewelry was by and large made of silver. Only amongst wealthy traders in the larger port cities, some pieces of gold jewelry were worn. When more cash was available silver jewelry started to be replaced by gold, at first gilding silver became popular, then silversmiths began to make smaller items of solid gold.[14] With the very rapid increase of the price of silver on the world market in the 1970s, many women sold their silver jewelry. By the late 1980s silver jewelry had increasingly become seen as old fashioned and was mainly sold to tourists and expatriates. As a means of storing wealth gold jewelry is more secure (as it does not wear like silver) and its lighter weight is appreciated. This gold jewelry is no longer produced by local artisans but has become the province of businessmen, who deal in mass-produced, often Indian-style gold jewelry.

There are many similarities between silver and gold jewelry: both have an important function as economic security yet are also worn as an adornment on the body. Both functioned as a commodity and were acquired by women when they married. In both cases, weight and purity are important, hence the scales present in all gold stores. Yet gold has also particular properties that make it more attractive than silver. It is bright (reflecting light efficiently), does not tarnish (oxidize) or wear (in contrast to silver) and hence it is highly durable (Renfrew 1986: 149). It is also a relatively soft and highly ductile (easy to stretch into a wire or the flatten into gold plate). For use in jewelry gold is usually alloyed with other metals, such as copper or silver, to make it harder. The gold content of such alloys is measured in carats, with pure gold designated as 24 carat.[15]

Gold as an asset has gained a central place in the international monetary system. Historically, silver has been used more extensively as money, as gold was a precious metal that only the wealthy could afford to hold. By the mid-nineteenth century, the gold rushes in California and Australia increased the supply of gold substantially.[16] Gold got a further boost when during the third quarter of the nineteenth century the major trading nations left the silver standard and adopted the gold standard. If, under conditions of war and economic depression, it was not always possible to maintain this system, the Bretton-Woods agreement (1944) again introduced the gold standard, but in a modified sense.[17] By the early 1970s, however, the large gap between the official gold price and that on the free market led to the collapse of this system: between 1971 and 1973 the gold price rapidly rose from $38 to $123, and in 1980 the price of gold peaked at $666, the effect of the oil crisis, rampant inflation, and political instability. The decisions of a number of central banks to sell part of their gold holdings led to the decline of the price of gold in the later 1990s, with the gold price reaching a low of $254 in 1997. After a slow rise, the financial crisis of 2007–8 and the subsequent EU debt crisis led to a huge price increase, with the world market price reaching $1813 in 2011–12. By 2015 it had declines to $1081, to rise again rapidly to $1958 in 2020.[18]

Economists have argued that other forms of investment are more profitable, as investing in gold does not provide interest. However, the economic rationale depends on what alternative forms of storing wealth are available at a certain time and place, as well as on levels of inflation and interest rates. In countries where access to banks and stock markets is problematic, where inflation must always be anticipated, and where people's trust in state institutions is low, holding one's reserves in the form of gold has been a sensible thing to do, also in economic terms (for Palestine see Harris 1988). Moreover, under conditions of political instability and war-like conditions, gold has the additional benefit that it is easy to transport, has maximum liquidity and a very high international acceptance.

## Baladi Gold: Economic Value, Kinship, and Marriage

Most of the gold jewelry that replaced the earlier silver pieces is called *baladî* gold. This term simultaneously refers to the local, the indigenous, and the authentic; it is, for instance, also used for food that is locally grown. Such *baladî* gold is always 21 or 22 carat, and its main function is as a repository of economic value, a means to store wealth.

A major concern for those buying gold is how much they will lose again when they want to sell it. The price of *baladî* gold items is by and large determined by its weight and the world gold price. With the latter changing twice daily, it makes sense that shops always have a scale available and do not work with price tags. People are, of course, well-aware of the fact that the world gold price with its fluctuations largely determines what they will receive when they sell it again. But there are also predictable losses. These are the additional costs involved in producing and selling jewelry, such as the costs of labor and of taxation. In the case of *baladî* gold, these usually remain limited to 5–10 percent.

Such *baladî* gold comes in a variety of relatively standardized forms and shapes. When rural women in the Nablus region started to acquire gold jewelry, this was usually in the shape of Ottoman or British gold coins (*lîrât dhahab*), facsimiles of official coins ("fake coins"), with a gold content of 22 carat. They would often wear these attached to a piece of cloth as a necklace (*qilâda dhahab*). Such coins were considered as a convenient way of holding gold bullion in "small denominations." Individual coins could be sold one by one and the losses incurred when doing so were small.[19]

In Nablus town gold jewelry was also worn in other shapes and formats. Next to, or instead of, wearing coins urban women bought various types of solid open-ended gold bracelets (bangles), such as those called "twisted wire" (*mabrûma*, made of gold wire twisted together), "pear" (*injâsa*, named after its pear-shaped end pieces), or "snake" (*hayâya*) bracelets, and the lighter *sahab*, a simple closed golden bracelet. By the later 1960s these gold bracelets had also become more popular in the rural areas. The value of these bracelets, which were quite standardized, was largely determined by weight; the gold content was usually 21 carat. Gradually a greater variety of bracelets made of *baladî* gold appeared on the market, including more flexible ones with small pieces of gold attached in-between two golden chains. From an economic point of view gold coins remained the best investment, but the losses incurred when selling these various kinds of *baladî* gold bracelets also remained limited.

Even if economic value is central to *baladî* gold, wearing such gold coins and bracelets simultaneously entails the public display of social relations. Women receive most of this *baladî* gold as part of their dower; they either bought it from the money they receive as dower or received gold jewelry directly as dower. Wearing this kind of gold is often considered as an expression of the status of the groom and as a means to contribute to this. It is simultaneously also an expression of the quality of affinal and kinship relations. When a recently married woman wears a lot of *baladî* gold, it is evident that the groom's side has been both willing and able to transfer a considerable sum of money to the bride; it is also taken as a statement about the groom's respect for the bride and her family and of his generosity.

But wearing gold does not only express the relations of the groom with the bride, it also speaks to kinship relations. Up till the late 1950s in the rural areas, it was still common for the bride's father to pocket part of the dower himself. Hence, displaying *baladî* gold may also be read as a statement about the relation of a woman to her father, with the gold on her body indicated that her father could afford to spend generously on his daughter. More recently, it has become common for fathers and other close kin to provide a woman with additional items of gold jewelry as wedding gifts. *Baladî* gold then does not only embody economic value, functioning as a source of economic security, but it also presents the quality of marital and kin relations to the world at large.

Whereas women acquire most of their *baladî* gold when they marry, there are two other ways in which they may acquire gold. One of these is receiving gold jewelry through inheritance or pre-mortem gifts. Whereas it is true that women often refrain from claiming their shares in agricultural land, real estate, residential houses, shops, and other forms of property, gold jewelry is often an exception. This is not simply the case because gold jewelry is easier to divide, especially if held as coins, but especially because it is inherited from mothers. It is relatively common for a woman to already give her daughters, especially a daughter who may have postponed her own marriage in order to support and take care of her mother, some of her gold jewelry pre-mortem. This gold has a particular value to the daughter as it remains linked to and embodied elements of the person of the mother. This is in contrast to when mothers use their gold to help their sons with the costs of marriage. Then this gift element is often avoided. Rather than directly presenting her gold jewelry to her future daughter-in-law, she would instead sell it, and her son would use this money to buy his wife newly made gold jewelry.

There is yet another way in which gold jewelry may function within the dower system. Women from poorer families who work in relatively well-paying jobs, such as the refugee women who went to work as teachers in the Gulf States, often stored their savings as 21 carat *baladî* gold. Yet, in this case, they would not wear and display it for others to see. On the contrary, they may decide to keep it hidden, saving it for their own wedding. It is true that paying the dower is the husband's responsibility, but these adult women anticipated that they may need to help their future husbands with the costs of marriage. They would present the gold that they bought themselves as part of the dower gold their husband had provided them with.

What matters most with baladi gold is that it easily moves again from part of a gift economy into that of a commodity. Many women would at some moment in life sell their gold. Whereas it is recognized as her property, she may more or less willingly use it to support her husband in building a house, in setting him up in a business, or help her children when they need money for their education or to marry. She may also need to sell her gold to spend on the daily household

needs, if times are difficult and her husband is unable to do so. Yet, if she does so to help her husband, there is often a strong sense that he then is indebted to her, and if his economic situation improves, he may well buy her gold again to replace what she had given him.

## The Emergence of Italian Gold: A Modern Counterpractice

If the shops in the Nablus gold market looked rather similar, there was also one that looked quite different. The display windows of this shop were less crowded and more care had been taken to arrange each single item in an appealing manner. The individual pieces also had a different look to them. They were lighter in color, smaller, more delicately worked, and no two pieces looked the same. This shop appealed to a wealthier clientele.

Much of the gold jewelry sold in this shop was referred to as "Italian gold." This kind of gold was also often acquired at marriage, but in a different manner as had been the case with baladi gold. Starting in the 1960s, a new trend had emerged in the registration of the dower. Whereas up until then it had been considered prestigious to include a high sum of money in marriage contracts, now in a few marriage contracts only a token dower, a symbolic amount, such as 1 JD (Jordanian Dinar), was registered.

Registering the dower in this novel way was "invented" by a particular section of the urban elite. The first ones to do so were the women from very well-off families who were themselves highly educated and had entered into professional employment. It then rapidly spread amongst a wider range of upper-middle-class families who also considered themselves a part of a modernizing elite. This sharp rupture in registration practices did not mean that brides no longer received gold jewelry. On the contrary, they received gifts very similar in value to what their peers obtained for whom a high amount was still recorded. What mattered was that they no longer obtained these items as a contractual entitlement, but rather as gifts that the groom now was to "voluntarily" provide. The token dower indicated above all that the bride and her family forego legal guarantees and could trust the groom. This enhanced the status of all parties involved.

It was in these circles of society, where gold jewelry had acquired the status of a gift, delinked from a contractual payment, that women became attracted to "Italian gold," that is gold jewelry imported from Italy, that later may also be produced elsewhere. These smaller, lighter, and more exclusive pieces of jewelry looked very different from the more standardized, solid, heavier pieces of *baladî* gold. Because of their greater hardness—Italian gold is 18 carat—it could be turned into a much wider variety of models and fashions. Women often referred to such Italian jewelry as *môdêlât*, smaller pieces that would follow fashions in jewelry. A substantially larger part of the price of Italian gold was made up of labor and design costs as well as taxes, import duties, costs of insurance, and transportation. Selling this gold, women would incur a considerable loss; jewelers mentioned amounts of 30 percent and in some cases even 50 percent. At their weddings these women may combine necklaces, bracelets, and earrings of Italian gold with a diamant-set ring, also an item that would incur substantial losses if it were resold.

Italian gold then did not work well as a means to store wealth and was far less valuable as a source of economic security. Yet this is part of what made this kind of jewelry so attractive to this section of society. Wearing Italian gold, these women showed that they did not need gold as a means of economic security, that they could afford to forego financial guarantees. The women employed in the professions considered themselves self-consciously as quintessential "modern women." To them wearing heavy *baladî* gold bracelets was old fashioned, something that belonged to the rural economy of peasant women but would clash with their self-presentation as a modern professional woman from a prominent urban family. Also, they considered *baladî* gold as part and parcel of a marriage system they wanted to distance themselves from, that is a marriage economy in which marriages were arranged by the older generation with little space for younger women to express their preferences; Italian gold also fit better with the kind of companionate marriages they preferred.

By the 1980s other shops had started to sell a few smaller items of Italian gold, such as rings. At the same time also some families from the (lower) middle classes had started to register a token dower. Yet in this case, motivations may be different. In some cases, they registered such as dower as they hoped to receive more than what they would have obtained if a fixed amount had been registered. But this was also a risky thing to do that could backfire. If the groom's gifts did not live up to expectations, no legal redress would be possible. In these circles women were then more careful about gold. It is true that they also liked to receive some of these small pieces of fashionable Italian gold, but they (and their families) would consider it far too risky to give up and forego *baladî* gold. They made sure that much of what they received was in the format of the solid 21 carat gold bracelets.

## Emerging Gulf Gold and New Baladi Formats

If during the 1980s Italian gold had spread also beyond elite circles and professionally employed women, it did not take very long for this trend to stagnate and even to go in reverse; at the end of the decade Italian gold had lost much of its popularity. Trends in dower registrations show a similar pattern, the number of marriage contracts with only a 1 JD prompt stabilized and then started to decline. Italian gold also largely disappeared from the market, or was restricted to small, unexpensive pieces, occasionally even only 14 carat.

Baladi gold, in contrast, kept its strong position in the gold market. The golden coins remained a popular item for brides from the rural areas. But there were changes in how these coins were now displayed, the necklaces with such coins (the *qilâda dhahab*) took on a different aesthetic format. The younger generation no longer accepted necklaces consisting of coins, sewn onto a piece of cloth. In their eyes, such a style of display, that had been common in their (grand)mothers' days, was outdated. They much preferred the more sophisticated styles that had appeared on the market. These necklaces consisted of an uneven number of the same coins, often twelve, but with a larger decorative one in the middle, the coins attached to a heavy gold chain, with each of them set in a nicely decorated frame (*birwaz*).

Next to such an upgraded style of *baladî* gold necklaces, a different type of 21 carat gold jewelry started to appear in the market, that is gold "from the Gulf" (*khalidji*). This turn from

Italy to the Gulf (especially the Dubai gold market) as a supplier of gold jewelry fits with broader trends in the production and trade of gold jewelry. Whereas in the 1960s, Italy had become one of the most important centers for gold jewelry production worldwide, in the 2000s, Italy lost its predominance as exporter of jewelry; countries such as China, India, and the UAE emerged as a major trading hubs (De Marchi et al. 2013: 870).

In the Nablus region, "Gulf gold" had become available at roughly the same time when Italian gold had started to disappear. By the late 1980s, the "Indian set" (*taqm hindî*) had already gained popularity amongst the urban middle and lower middle classes. Made of 21-carat gold, such a jewelry set consisted of a matching necklace, earrings, and bracelets that were elaborately decorated with small, light pendants and trinkets. The younger generation considered this type of gold aesthetically more attractive and more fashionable than the heavier more standardized *baladî* gold. It is true that the labor and other additional costs of Gulf gold were higher than was the case with baladi gold, but these costs were still considerably lower than had been the case with Italian gold.

This type of gold jewelry was called "Indian" because much of the gold jewelry in Dubai is either imported from India or made in Dubai by artisans who had migrated from India (see also Vora 2011). At first this type of gold jewelry was imported from the Gulf region to the West Bank; labor migrants working there also brought home individual pieces. Later local workshops also learned how to produce it. Such locally produced items became popular as they were better adapted to what the local clientele preferred; it also included lighter, less elaborately worked items. Avoiding the costs for transport and import taxes, the additional costs of such locally produced pieces were, moreover, lower than those imported from Dubai. Also more generally, the idea of buying a matching set of necklaces, earrings, and bracelets gained traction.

The matching sets of gold jewelry, usually 21 carat gold, vary in price, not only because the items included differ in weight, but also because of the additional costs involved—those requiring more labor and imported from abroad more expensive. The introduction of these new formats has engendered a more rapid change in styles of gold jewelry. Fashion has become an important criterion when selecting and deciding what kinds of gold to buy. Yet, there are also limits to this development. In cities such as Dubai shops selling branded jewelry have become popular, that is shop selling the kind of jewelry in which design and brand name make up a considerable part of the price. In Nablus there is no market for such branded jewelry. More generally, gold from the Gulf has also become less popular (with the taqm hindi considered old-fashioned). There is now a greater demand for gold jewelry from Turkey and most recently Malaysia.

These trends tie in with broader patterns of change in the Nablus gold market. Previously most of the shops were owned by urban Nablus families, who were engaged in the artisanal production of jewelry with skills transmitted from father to son. More recently some shops have changed hands and are now owned by more prosperous villagers, often returning migrants from the Americas, such as those from the neighbouring village of Hawara. With the Palestinian authority making an official gold content hallmark mandatory, the long-standing relations of trust have lost some of their importance. Machine-produced items—often made in Hebron, in the southern part of the West Bank—have largely been replacing artisanal production except for the older styles of baladi bracelets, which are now in some shops only made to order.

# Hollow Bracelets and Flimsy Coins: A Move toward Display and Consumption?

Baladi gold still has a strong position in the market, even if young women select items that they considered more sophisticated than the older ones. By the early 2010s, baladi gold was again restyled and this time more substantially so. Both coins and bracelets that looked at a first glance very similar to the older models had been transformed into something quite different. These bracelets are no longer made of solid gold, but are hollow, and the coins no longer have the feel of a real coin but have become rather flimsy pieces of gold. At a second glance, that is looking from closer by, this change is also visible, especially for those in the known, as these bracelets are often a little larger and are recognizable as mass-produced. If from a distance it is hard to visually discern the difference, when one picks up such a bracelet up it is immediately evident that it is hollow, as its weight may be only one-fifth of the older solid models.

To understand the appearance of hollow bracelets and flimsy coins on the market, we need to return to the trends in the world gold price and link these to local economic developments. As indicated previously, from the early 1970s the price of gold has started to rise very substantially. As shop keepers sell their gold jewelry based on the daily gold price, the price of individual pieces of jewelry differs from day to day. Yet, the effects of a rapidly rising gold price depend very much on how these intersect with local economic trends. When the gold price climbed rapidly in the 1970s, this was simultaneously a period in which migration to the Gulf states rapidly increased. The rise in disposable income affected the economies of marriage, with the sums registered as a dower also rising rapidly.[20] The net result was that gold jewelry had become much more expensive, but that brides also had more money to spend on it.

When the next major price hike of gold occurred, by the late 2000s, the economic context was very different. The gold price increased dramatically, but this time it was during an economic recession which also affected the West Bank badly. As a result, this time, the sums registered as dower in the marriage contract did not show an increase. Hence, there was far less money available for brides to spend on dower gold. If they were to buy the solid baladi coins and bracelets, they would only be able to buy a very small number of items. It is in this context that hollow bracelets and flimsy coins gained popularity. As they are so much lighter, brides were still able to buy what had been common prior to the huge increase of the world gold price. As these hollow items are more fragile and dent more easily, such bracelets are worn less often, often only at special occasions.

Next to these developments there are also alternative ways of "engaging with gold" that have remained relatively marginal and have not become a trend. There have always been women who would only receive very little gold when they entered into marriage. Yet, because of importance attached to the display of gold, in such cases they may try to find alternatives. They may have a close relative or friend who would be willing to lend a few pieces for the wedding, to be returned afterwards. Another solution was to buy some items of "Russian gold." In spite of its name this is not gold jewelry, but rather gold-plated jewelry (see also Hogan 2010). A few shops have started to sell such "Russian gold" in Nablus. Whereas the hollow bracelets of baladi gold are sold in the regular gold market, and are not considered as "fake," gold-plated jewelry takes up a very

different position in the field of value. The few shops selling it are not considered part of the gold market, and the display windows explicitly announce that "this jewelry is not gold."

Whereas these women are not able to buy gold, there are also those who have the financial means to buy gold, but who have come to prefer "traditional silver jewelry," sometimes decorated with precious stones. To them this is a means to distinguish themselves from the mainstream, to present an alternative, modern, upscale lifestyle, that simultaneously shows an interest in or attachment to local traditions. Still, whereas they would opt to wear this silver jewelry at festive occasions, they do not do so at weddings.

Next to this, a small number of women have been outspoken about their dislike of gold jewelry, as a form of resistance against how the gold-marriage nexus works. These women, often left-leaning activists, express their dislike of gold jewelry and high dowers in ideological terms. They rejected the mainstream marriage system as a technology to reproduce both social (class) and gender inequality. Especially during periods of heightened politicization with great hopes for the future, such as during the first intifada, young committed women would happily forego any type of gold jewelry. But once the political climate changed, and hope turned into despair, the material side of marriages became again more important and especially in the post-Oslo transition, the public display of consumption was again acceptable (Johnson et al. 2009).

# Conclusion

Gold jewelry is a strong case of how the global and the local are entangled and how materiality and signification work simultaneously. Gold has particular affordances, such as its durability and limited supply, yet it is people who have turned gold into a thing that exerts huge power over them, as evident in the central function it has in the monetary system. The gold price is a world price that has come to fluctuate daily, something that jewelers and their clientele keep track of.

Yet how gold is turned into particular kinds of jewelry and how people acquire it is strongly local. In Nablus, as elsewhere in the Middle East, relatively large sums of money change hands at marriage through the dower system, with much of it in the format of gold jewelry. That is, the ownership of gold is intimately related to local economies of marriage. Much of this gold was and still is baladi gold, that is 21 carat gold, that functions both as a repository of wealth in a setting where economic and political insecurity is the norm, and as a means to present the quality of affinal and kinship relations to others.

The amounts and kinds of gold jewelry women obtain are again strongly influenced by global developments and how these intersect with local trends. It is the relation between the world gold price, which has fluctuated substantially since the early 1970s, and local economic developments at various scales, including inflation, currency exchange rates, and income levels that has an impact on the dower and the amount of gold jewelry women can acquire. Economic developments also have an impact on the trade in and production of gold jewelry. Importing gold from Italy has first risen and then sharply dropped, with a stronger presence of imports from Dubai, often made by Indian artisans, and later a wide variety of countries, including Turkey. Another development has been the move from importing ready-made gold jewelry to the local production of similar items, that simultaneously is a shift from artisanal production to mass production.

Access to gold jewelry is not only gendered but also classed. This is not only visible in the amounts of gold jewelry a woman is able to acquire, but it also affects the kinds of jewelry women prefer to obtain. Amongst a particular class, the professional well-educated elite, there has been a move away from baladi gold, and a strong preference for Italian gold. Together with the registration of a token dower, this gold worked in a different way. It was a means to downplay the economic side of marriage and the dower as contractual obligation. Instead, it presented those wearing this gold as part and parcel of a modernizing elite.

Yet there are also countervailing forces. Token dower registrations lost again some of its appeal. Italian gold never became widely popular, and eventually largely disappeared from the market. For many their material situation had become too insecure to be able to give up on the economic protection of contractual registrations and baladi gold. What we witness then is that trends in gold jewelry are not linear. Gold was and is still very important for most women as a source of economic security. Yet at the same time, there is a partial, ambiguous shift toward some kind of a consumer culture, in which the work gold does as an adornment has gained some traction. Aesthetic value has become more important with a greater appreciation of the kinds of gold that are more fashionable, but there are limits to this.

The result is the emergence of a variety of hybrid, ambiguous formats. Gulf gold had become attractive to a younger generation, as it is both more secure than Italian gold and aesthetically more attractive than baladi gold. As such, it functions as an in-between category. Women may also decide to buy a variety of kinds of gold jewelry, holding most of it as baladi gold, but also including some smaller, more fashionable items which they wear at different occasions, to present different subjectivities to different publics. Simultaneously baladi gold itself has taken on new formats. The older models, such as the coin necklaces, have become upgraded, attached to a gold change and framed, while new formats have emerged, such as the hollow bracelets and flimsy coins, that still look sufficiently similar to the far more valuable solid models. Opting for such bracelets because of the rapidly risen world gold price has become widely acceptable.

One of the specific affordances of gold is that it can endlessly move into and out of the status of gift and commodity, as the gold jewelry people sell gets melted down to be re-used to make new pieces of jewelry. The dower has partially shifted from a contractual obligation to part of a gift economy. Different kinds of gold jewelry have been linked to different kinds of marriages, embedded in particular socialities and producing multiple subjectivities. The gold worn at the weddings of the better-off who entered into companionate marriages differed considerably from that of rural women engaged in agriculture whose marriages were more firmly controlled by the older generation. The changing trends in styles of gold jewelry (pointing to multiplicity and ambiguity) similarly are present with respect to these different forms and economies of marriage.

# Notes

1 At times 25 percent of all gold coming on the market was destined for the Middle East (Green 1980: 191).

2 There are many hadiths stating that it is prohibited for Muslim men to wear gold, for instance, "Gold and silk has been permitted for the females of my Ummah [community, AM], and forbidden to the males." Sunan an-Nasa'i 5148 (book 48, the book of adornments, hadith 109). http://sunnah.com/nasai/48#109 last accessed December 12, 2022.

3 As I have argued elsewhere, anthropologists have also largely overlooked how the dower may function as a potential source of women's access to property (Moors 1995: 148ff).
4 The dower is often divided in two parts, the prompt dower (due at marriage) and the deferred dower (due at divorce or widowhood); in the article the term dower only refers to the prompt dower. Also, the dower is an Islamic institutions. For the importance of gold jewelry for Christian women see Jansen (1993).
5 Exceptions are Hogan (2010) and Wright (2020).
6 The London market is the most important gold market. It sets the twice daily global reference benchmark for gold in US dollars.
7 In taking issue with the distinction between things that are commodities and those that are not, Appadurai (1986: 13) emphasizes that things may be one and/or the other at various moments during their life-cycle.
8 This contribution builds on and includes insights from my earlier work on gold and silver jewelry (Moors 1998; 2003; 2013).
9 At least until the 1920s silver jewelry was far more widely available in Palestine, especially in the rural areas (Weir 1989: 194). Before the twentieth century the extent to which gold jewelry was in use in Jabal Nablus is hard to judge, but certainly had remained restricted to the top layer of society (Tucker 1988).
10 This section is largely based on Moors (2008).
11 Sometimes working silver was the province of a particular category of the population. In Yemen with its caste-like system of professions, this was the province of Yemeni Jews (Klein-Franke 1988). This tradition was strongly affected when in the late 1940s the Israeli government transferred the large majority of the Yemeni Jews to Israel. Elsewhere Armenians had a strong presence in crafting jewelry.
12 On the face of this large and heavy coin—with a diameter of almost 4 centimeters and weighing a little over 28 grams—Maria Theresia was depicted, and on the reverse side, the Austrian coat of arms, a double eagle with the imperial crown (in Arabic the coin was also called abu rîshe, the father of feathers).
13 For extensive descriptions of silver jewelry in Oman, including wearing and owning silver and the shift to gold, see Morris and Shelton (1997).
14 Following the departure of the Jewish silversmiths, gold workers who had learned their trade as apprentices to Indian jewellers in Aden, came also to Sana' (Mundy: 539).
15 This means that 21 carat is 87% pure gold, 18 carat is 75% pure gold, and 14 carat is 50% pure gold.
16 Simultaneously the process of mass-producing particular forms of jewelry, like chains, started with the introduction of machine-production, The World Gold Council 1997, "Gold jewelry in the 1990s," www.gold.org last accessed December 23, 2002.
17 It did so in a modified form: the value of various currencies was fixed in terms of gold, but only the US dollar remained convertible (at $35 a troy ounce = 31.1 grams).
18 These prices are based on monthly averages per troy ounce. See https://www.gold.org/goldhub/data/gold-prices/ last accessed December 18, 2022.
19 Countries such as Syria, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia produce large amounts of such coins. The great increase in gold coin production in Saudi Arabia in the late 1970s is explained in part by the fact that migrant laborers (and pilgrims) bought such coins as a secure way to take their savings back home (Weston 1983: 58).
20 Between 1976 and 1984 the average dower approximately tripled (Moors 1995: 93).

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