



# Cultivation, Culture, Tradition, and Heritage: Festivals in and around Bethlehem

By Mays Yatim-Salsa' and Tamara Hodali



Religious, folklore, or agricultural festivals in Bethlehem have become a common tradition, revealing and highlighting characteristic aspects and traditions of the community and celebrated by all its members, irrespective of their religious or spiritual orientation. These celebrations have been passed on from one generation to the other and represent an integral part of the city's cultural scene. Continuously celebrating such events contributes towards the preserving of traditions that are part of our cultural heritage, while they also enhance the tourism sector, which serves as a tool for sustainable development.

In May 2015, the Arab Permanent Committee of Arab Culture selected Bethlehem as the Arab Capital of Culture for the year 2019. The choice of Bethlehem was a direct result of the role the town played in promoting cultural activities both locally and internationally. Many of these activities entwine cultural and religious significance with traditional celebrations such as:

*Christmas celebrations. Bethlehem Municipality Archive.*



*Bet Lahem Live Festival. Holy Land Trust Archive.*

## The Christmas Festival

As the birthplace of Jesus, Bethlehem's most celebrated festival takes place at Christmas. The traditional celebrations begin on the Sunday of First Advent and continue throughout December until 19 January. During this period, Christmas is celebrated three times: on 25 December by the Catholics, on 7 January by the Orthodox Church, and on 19 January by the Armenian Orthodox Church. On these occasions, the patriarchs of these churches come from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to celebrate Christmas and are accompanied by a procession that passes along Star Street, the traditional pilgrimage route. Various performances and celebrations are held in the town during this period.

Bethlehem's Christmas Market is held on Manger Square on the First Advent Sunday and the lighting of the tree is celebrated on the first Saturday of December. Choirs from all over the world hold concerts on Manger Square or in other locations around the town throughout the Advent season.

On Christmas Day of the Orthodox Church (7 January), the town of Beit Sahour, known for the Shepherds' Field that is located in its vicinity, commemorates the appearance of the angel that informed the shepherds

who were watching over their flocks by night of the birth of Jesus Christ with a procession that starts from the Greek Orthodox Shepherds' Field and parades around the town. Traditional sweets and handicrafts are sold during the festival.

Beit Sahour commemorates the same event with a three-day festival from 23 to 25 December. On the Catholic Christmas on 25 December, a candlelight vigil and procession starts from the Greek Orthodox Shepherds' Field and proceeds to the municipality.

## Celebrating the Saints

Churches and monasteries dedicated to different saints are widespread throughout the governorate of Bethlehem and each celebrates the saint's day of their particular saint. Celebrations generally include a mass held on the saint's feast day and a gathering that takes place usually in the vicinity of the church or monastery and features a bazaar of traditional handicrafts with many vendors present. Among these festivals are:

The Feast of St. Theodosius, celebrated on 11 January at the Orthodox Monastery of St. Theodosius (*Deir Ibn Obeid*) in Ubediyeh village.

The Feast of St. Joseph, celebrated on 19 March at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Bethlehem.



Celebrating the Saints.



Bet Lahem Live Festival. Holy Land Trust Archive.

The Feast of St. George, celebrated on 6 May at St. George's Church in Khader village.

The Feast of the Lady of Hortus Conclusus, celebrated during the second week of September at the Hortus Conclusus Monastery in Artas village.

### Holy Week and Easter Sunday

Holy Week takes place during the week before Easter, starting on Palm Sunday and ending on Holy Saturday, and is followed by the Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday. Many church services and processions are held during this week; the most celebrated procession taking place on Holy Saturday (*Sabt el-Nour* – Saturday of the Light).

The Holy Saturday procession is held by the Greek Orthodox community to welcome the Holy Fire or Holy Light. Priests from town attend the Holy Fire mass at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and bring the Holy Light back to the town to light churches and announce the end of the Holy Week. The processions start from Jerusalem by car and the priests are welcomed by scout groups and



Artas Lettuce Festival.

crowds in Bethlehem at the beginning of Star Street, in Beit Sahour at the Municipality Square, and in Beit Jala at the *el-Sahel* area.

### Seasonal Agrarian Festivals

Each Palestinian town or village is famous for a particular fruit or vegetable commonly planted in its fields. These fruits and vegetables are usually named after their town of origin to indicate their uniqueness: *Battiri* eggplants, *Bajali* apricots and *Sahouri fakkous* (a special kind of cucumber that grows in the area). Seasonal festivals are organised during the harvest season in these towns and villages to enable farmers to sell their agrarian produce directly to consumers, and they usually include folkloric dancing and singing, as well as workshops to teach traditional ways of cooking or of preparing pickles, jams, dried fruit and vegetables. Hikes are generally organised to explore the area around the festival.

The most popular festivals include the Lettuce Festival in Artas in March, the *Fakkous* Festival in Beit Sahour in July, and the Eggplant Festival in Battir in September.

### Bet Lahem Live Festival

The Bet Lahem Live Festival is a community initiative that was launched by the Holy Land Trust in 2013 to revitalise Star Street, the traditional pilgrimage route. The festival aims to create a platform that represents the fluidity of culture in Bethlehem, the spirit of its community, and the universality of its values. The Festival is held along Star Street and offers visitors a variety of activities: open-air concerts, round-table discussions, workshops, and street vendors. The bazaar showcases local art and artisan and handicraft-products, including local food and beverages. The upcoming Bet Lahem Live Festival will take place on 4 to 7 August 2016.

### Olive Harvest Festival

Olive trees are deeply rooted in the culture and tradition of Palestine as it is a most characteristic and symbolic feature of both the Palestinian landscape and identity. For thousands of years, olive and olive-oil products have played a significant role in people's social, economic, and cultural lives. The Olive Harvest Festival is held at Manger



Square in Bethlehem during the olive-picking season (mid-October to mid-November) to celebrate the olive tree and its symbolism for Palestinians. During the festival, farmers have an opportunity to sell their olive products including pickled olives, olive oil, soap, and olive wood souvenirs. *Dabkeh* (traditional folkloric dance) and traditional music performances as well as art exhibitions are held during the festival.

Properly planned festivals have the ability to attract a good number of individuals, preserve an important component of our intangible cultural heritage, and guarantee its continuity while bringing in financial support. Funds generated through festivals help sustain the jobs of vendors and shop owners, provide local tourism-related businesses with good revenues, benefit other businesses through indirect spending, and therefore increase the tax revenue for local governments. Celebrations and festivals are representatives of our exceptional cultural products that help promote culture and civilization, therefore stakeholders should be attracted to raise the city's status by developing innovative festival ideas, and in return increase the economic impact on the community.

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