

A Lexical and Personal History of the French-Hebrew Term Coccinelle (קוקסינל)

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In the years 1964 and 1965 the French transgender cabaret company Le Carrousel came to Israel for two extended tours. Le Carrousel and its associated act Madame Arthur were established in Paris by the Algerian Jewish impresario, Marcel Ouizman, in the years after World War II, and evolved in the 1950s into a new type of queer cabaret. Whereas in the later 1940s performers would arrive in male attire and change into drag only for the show, many of the new cohort of entertainers lived as women in their daily lives, undergoing gender-affirming procedures in the Clinique du Parc in Casablanca. It was in this clinic that Dr. Georges Burou pioneered new and advanced surgical techniques and made medical transition more accessible, on condition that the mostly Western patients had the necessary funds.

Le Carrousel prided itself in its cast of beautiful young trans performers. Its main star, Jacqueline Charlotte Dufresnoy, went by the stage name of Coccinelle (ladybug in French), becoming an international transsexual celebrity both in Europe and beyond. When Le Carrousel arrived in Israel in the mid-1960s, the Hebrew-language press covered the tour enthusiastically, and gossip pages mentioned the famous political, business, and military figures who came to watch the show and flirt with the stars. The visit also made a huge impression on a few dozen Israeli trans youth—most of them teenagers—who could now imagine for the first time gender transition as an achievable option in their lives. Israeli trans pioneer, Efrat Tilma, wrote in her memoirs, “The show lasted an hour and I sat there hypnotized by the radiant beauty around me. The star of the show was Coccinelle, a petite woman with an amazing body.... I was stunned and wondered how to achieve it. This is exactly how I wanted to be.”

The visit of Le Carrousel was remembered by these trans women as a foundational event, marking their

coalescence into a distinct community with a shared sense of direction and future. Yet, it was also a lexical event with a far-reaching impact on the gendered selfhoods of Israeli men—gay and straight alike. Already in 1965, newspapers began employing the French-Hebrew portmanteau *coccinellim* (קוקסינלים) to refer to local iterations of gender transition to womanhood. The press almost always used a mocking tone to refer to Israeli trans youth, but it was at first intermingled with a sense that they were following in the footsteps of a glamorous Parisian troupe.

However, within a few years the Hebrew term became detached from its French original, developing into something broader, sinister and pejorative: a designation for an abject being, whose manly and human worth amounted to nothing. It was first and foremost applied to trans women, linking them with sex work, criminality, and living on the depraved margins of society—nothing of the glamor and pizzazz of the original Coccinelle remained. However, the term began to be directed also at boys and men who seemed to deviate from accepted types of normative manhood: whether by the way they moved their bodies, dressed, talked, played, dealt with adversity, or expressed wishes and desires. All boys and men could be theoretically tainted with *coccinelle*-hood (*coccinelliyut*) if they incorporated into their gender presentation or subjectivity something perceived as weak or feminine.

In the first transgender novel in Hebrew, *The Cut* (*Ha-ḥatakh*), published in 1977 by the trans author Sharon Shapira, the heroine Roni explains that a *coccinelle* is the lowest of the low, with no public legitimacy to protest any form of oppression. Seven years later, Israeli trans pioneer Nancy Schneider explained in an interview why she had to leave the country: “People like me can’t find any work in Israel and are forced, due

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French actress, vedette and singer Coccinelle (Jacqueline Charlotte Dufresnoy), during a press interview in Buenos Aires, Argentina, June 5, 1974. Eduardo Comesaña / Editorial Abril / Alamy.

to social pressures, to make a living as prostitutes on the streets. No one cares about us or takes into account our talents or our knowledge. They only connect us with sex. Nobody wants to rent us apartments.... Everyone points at us on the street and sneers: 'That's a coccinelle,' and that's the only word that exists here to define a person. Sometimes someone adds 'fucker' [*maniac*] And that sums it all up."

Growing up in Jerusalem in the 1970s and early 1980s, the word lacerated my psyche. It was clear to me from an early age that I wanted to cross gender boundaries in certain ways. As a child I was sufficiently aware that my environment clearly distinguished between boys and girls, and ascribed certain clothes, activities, and feelings to one gender or another. I felt I wanted to experience both—at the same time or at different times, choosing one or choosing the other depending on the context and my inner needs. The gender boundary

made no sense to me. I did not, of course, have the words to describe these feelings and learned quickly not to share them with other people, not even on Purim, except for one glorious instance in 1975. However, it was not until the late 1970s, when I first heard the word *coccinelle*, that I understood how deeply despised people like me were. For years I could not even utter the word, not even silently to myself. I could not think of myself in those terms, yet I wanted to explore this path, except I knew if I proceeded with transition I would not be able to be anything but a *coccinelle*, the lowest of the low.

In 1986, the Ministry of Health in Israel officially permitted for the first time "sex change surgeries for TRANSEXUALS [*sic*]" to take place in the country on a very restricted and regulated basis. This was part of burgeoning attitude toward gender transition that allowed greater gender movement and would become more prevalent in the

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1990s and the first two decades of the twenty-first century. These increasingly visible changes were accompanied by new terms like *transgender*, *trans/transit*, *genderqueer*, *abinary*, which enabled the developing Israeli trans community to employ more neutral self-referential terms. Yet, underneath the new topsoil of lexical acceptance, a “hard” old layer of scornful language remained. The term *coccinelle* is still widely used to express scorn and deviation from accepted forms of masculinity, mainly military masculinity or other adjacent forms of masculinity. In January 2025, *Haaretz* published an article about IDF officers who cautioned combat soldiers fighting in Lebanon not to seek mental health assistance for combat trauma or combat fatigue, deriding them as *coccinellim* and as “worthless wimps” (*smartutim*). Although trans people in

Israel have come a long way in terms of obtaining recognition and some rights, we are still perceived symbolically as worthless and antithetical to collective values.

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Image: Mosaic depicting King David, Gaza synagogue.

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