

# Strangers, Guests, and Cultural Blinders in Palestinian Society



By Ali Qleibo

the site. The educational excursion is a barbecue affair for the teachers and a day out of the classroom in the sun for the students. The teachers come, grill their kebab, litter the temple, and leave."

It is not uncommon to see things casually tossed into the street from the open windows of a car: cigarette boxes, chocolate wrappers, soda bottles.... Country rides are marred by the unsightly garbage strewn all along the edges of the winding narrow roads and meandering streets alongside the olive-tree-dotted mountains. Piled dumps of leftover building material, garbage loads, and trash bespeckle the otherwise scenic country roads throughout the West Bank. Litter, junk, and rubbish sully the edges of cultivated privately owned legume fields, olive orchards, and vineyards.

In the same breath one is overwhelmed by the utmost care with which the



Other cultures are other visions in terms of which we glimpse our own cultural blinders. Japanese culture provides a vista from which we can adopt a critical reflexive position in order to observe Palestinian culture. Anthropology, as a qualitative interpretive discourse, provides the foundation of reflexivity through cultural awareness. The total immersion in other cultures – categories of thought, customs, aesthetics, and values – enables ethnologists to gain a deeper perspective into their own culture.

*Olive tree in Sebastiya. Photo courtesy of the author.*

A

bus loaded with seventh-grade students pulled up at the basilica square in Sebastiya. The students trailed out of the bus in a quiet, orderly manner and were shortly followed by four teachers.

The young boys made their way to the edge of the Roman basilica while the teachers schlepped between the roman columns into the archeological site carrying the charcoal brazier, the charcoal bag, and the meat, onions, and tomatoes that go with the kebab.

"Now begins the barbecue party," Abu Muhammad, my Sebastian friend and host, winked derisively. We were enjoying the warm sunshine and sipping mint tea in the open terrace overlooking the piazza at the entrance to the Roman acropolis.

"This is the routine with the school field trips."

My question about the educational aspect of the extracurricular class activity roused Abu Muhammad. "I complained to the minister of education when he was last here. Nothing! They do not bother to walk through





privately owned olive orchards, vegetable patches, vineyards, and wheat fields are attended to. Each olive tree is impeccably pruned and spruced up in a clean, well-ploughed trough as in a picturesque nature painting. All wheat and vegetable fields, vineyards, and almond and olive orchards are meticulously looked after. Even the stone pebbles are collected in piles to be used in the building of the typical stone terraces that give our mountains their distinctive character.

The dichotomous concepts public and private are social constructs that conceptualize different domains of everyday life – from the interior, structured, orderly purity and sanctity of our bodies, homes, and fields to the external and amorphous profane boundaries. In this liminal space, in the uncontested space outside the categories that reflect the hierarchical structure of the social order, stands the anti-structure that can be defiled with impunity. The visible social structure and the invisible anti-structure overlap, interlace, and intermix to produce the field of vision whose reverberations structure the relationship of self, the in-group, and by extension the property and land constituted as personal and private in contradistinction to the external world where lurk the powers of chaos, impurity, and danger.

The power that the hidden nonverbal dimension exerts on public space and the dialectic relationship with others in this communal space renders these anonymous individuals invisible and the communal uncontested space, including the open road, the domain of disorder. Traffic is invariably chaotic and confused. Drivers unexpectedly cut into other lanes, jump lanes, zigzag incessantly into any open space, forge new lanes, push, shove, and shift arbitrarily from the extreme right lane to make a left turn, without the use of blinkers.

Anthropology provides the foundation of reflexivity through cultural awareness.

Through the total immersion in other cultures – categories of thought, customs, aesthetics, and values – ethnologists develop the skill of standing back and becoming aware of their own cultural values, beliefs, and perceptions. Through the study of the diversity of human cultures we gain a deeper perspective into our own culture.

Japanese culture furnishes formal concepts with which the in-group and out-group are categorized. The term *uchi soto* is one of the most unique aspects of Japanese culture. *Uchi* (内) literally means home, whereas *soto* (外) refers to outside. The core concept revolves around the idea of dividing people into two groups, an in-group and an out-group. One's family and close friends, as well as one's co-workers and superiors at work, are considered *uchi* (in-group). In contrast, one's clients, the anonymous others, are always considered the out-group (*soto*.) Whereas Japanese treat with deference and pay utmost respect to the outside *soto* group, in Palestinian society it is the reverse; the outsiders are regarded with distrust, fear, and outright hostility. Deferential consideration, by which we are highly impressed in Japanese social behavior, is totally absent here, a lacuna. Visibility in Palestinian culture precipitates power. The bond between the members of the in-group is promulgated by tribal-social solidarity, which is a complex network of a fluid stratified hierarchy of alliances based on reciprocity, hence the prevalence of clientelism and nepotism. To inconvenience oneself and put oneself out for another individual from the out-group as a gracious act of human consideration is hardly ever practiced. One who is not from the inside circle of friends and relatives (*uchi*) is constituted as part of the out-group (*soto*) and categorized as invisible; an object of fear, hostility, and distrust.

The pushing and shoving in the

streets is a cultural expression of the dichotomy of private versus public space and the visible versus the invisible. In this liminal space, neither here nor there, among the crowds who are anonymous strangers, one is struck by the formidable scene of a middle-aged man reverentially kissing the hand of a young woman and becoming engrossed in highly formal courtesies, "obviously" his young aunt. From this perspective the scene of the madding crowds emerges as an underlying structured choreography to a hidden polyphonic melody that the Palestinians intuitively sense and by whose rhythm



Visible cultural blinders are powerful. Hidden categories of thought and corollary behavior are symptomatic of an underlying logic in Palestinian culture. The binary oppositions private/public, closed personal space/open communal space, and inside/outside overlap with the concepts of order/chaos, pure/impure, and sacred/profane. The reverberations of these constitutively constitutive categories provide the elementary blueprint that informs Palestinian behavior.



Olive trees on the road of columns in Sebastiya. Photo courtesy of the author.



they sway. The ubiquitous litter is symptomatic of a structural lacuna in Palestinian culture and a cultural blinder for the foreign visitor.

In communally shared public space the anonymous others are at best overlooked. The category of social invisibility in Palestinian culture is analogous to the Japanese Kabuki assistants, *kuroko*, who are the stagehands that assist in a variety of quick changes of costume on stage. Dressed entirely in black, the *kuroko* presence on stage is categorically overlooked. It is common to have stagehands rushing onto the stage adding and removing props, backdrops, and other scenery, and arranging actor costumes. Their presence is perceived as an absence. Though visible they are categorized as invisible.

In Palestinian culture, the in-group (*uchi*) are visible whereas the out-group (*soto*) are invisible. Visibility in Palestinian society precipitates power; it induces deference and generates respective decorous behavior that is exclusively reserved for the in-group. Those who fall out of this classification are the outsiders who are to be distrusted, feared, shunned, snubbed, and dehumanized. The dehumanizing of the outsider is illustrated with the adage: The one who is not from your skin (not kin), drag him along the thorns (جلده مو جلدك جره ع الشوك). Moreover, trouble, disorder, disturbance, and danger are proverbially constituted to come from outside: The stone and rock come from outside (الحجر والمقلاع من برة).

The objectification and dehumanization of the out-group is corollary to the withholding of compassionate consideration from others, thus nurturing a self-centered egoistic trend of thought and behavior made evident in the common saying: Let a thousand eyes cry but let not a single tear drop from my own eyes (مائة عين تدمع ولا عيني تبكي), and the commonly heard adage, after me

the deluge (نا وبعدي الطوفان). The terse, onomatopoeic commonly used Arabic utterance “tuzz” (طنز) succinctly summarizes the phlegmatic, stolid, callous indifference to others.

In Palestinian folk society, gestures of politeness, social courtesies, and any expression of consideration for others are considered forms of self-abasement and self-ingratiation. One must have a “strong character.” From an early age, children are encouraged to be feisty, spunky, high-strung, and quarrelsome, and are admonished for docile amenable complacency, which is a sign of “weak character.” The popular maxim employs the cautionary metaphor of the docile complacent baby donkey that everyone can ride to foster a surly, feisty, irascible attitude:

الجش الصغير كل من اجا يركبه.  
Aggressive hostility to others, irrespective of whether they are

from the in-group or out-group, is demonstrated in the often quoted saying: I against my brother, my brother and I against our cousin, and we and our cousin against the outsider انا واخوي غلى ولد عمي وانا وولد عمي على الغريب.

Since relations with others are problematic, and since the others are sources of nuisance, one is encouraged to keep to oneself. The saying is quite succinct, Close the door from which the wind comes (الباب اللي يجيك منه الريح سده واستريح). The reclusive isolation and total indifference to others finds expression in the saying: around me, far from me, but not on me (حولي وحوالي بس مش علي). This detached, inward-looking insular attitude is further reinforced through the saying, الشهر اللي ما لك فيه لا تعد ايامه. Loosely translated it means, Do not count the days of the month in which you have no interest. Personal convenience comes first as expressed in the proverb

كلن يدبر النار على قرصه which means, each one turns the fire in the oven to his own direction to bake his own bread.

One is apprehensive and wary of members of the out-group. They are seen as treacherous, untrustworthy, and unreliable. The following proverb likens the neighbor who is not from the in-group to useless stones; a pile of stones is better than this neighbor (كوم حجار ولا هالجار). Inevitably the neighbor is always suspect, he may steal from you, rob you, or even rape you. المال السايب يعلم السرقة.



With my friend Abu-Muhammad from Sebastiya. Friendship is one way by which an outsider joins the in-group. Without my friendships throughout the West Bank, my fieldwork would be impossible. Once adopted, an anthropologist gains legitimacy, trust, and credibility. Photo courtesy of the author.

The columns on Basilica Square in Sebastiya. Photo from Palestine Image Bank.





Each culture is an empire of verbal and nonverbal signs that structure subjective individual consciousness. Whereas the public space, *al-hara* (حارة) refers to the world of disorder and connotes impurity, the house – in sharp contrast – is constituted as the domain of “order”; it is perceived as “pure” and “sacred.” The house has its sanctity (حرمة البيت). It is the sanctuary that underlies the deep sense of belonging fostered by the sacrosanct notion of family and shelters the individual from the disorder outside. “This is a house not a public space” (هذا بيت مش حاره) is an idiomatic form of chastising the children for making too much noise, for raising the volume of the radio or TV, for messing up the house. But, by the same token, they are sent out into the street notwithstanding the fact that they become a source of public nuisance.

In contrast, the relationship with the in-group is circumspect, decorous, and highly formalized. How guests are received, the expressions of welcome uttered, the order of libations served, the fruits, pastries, and the layout of the table are of paramount importance. Form is the message. In Arabic, they say, What matters is how one is received and not the splendor of food served. (لاهييني ولا تغديني). Yet a sense of moderation and a sense of restraint are recommended to preserve the host's dignity. One should not over-value the guest and thereby under-value oneself through excessive, lavish displays of social courtesies and generosity for, as the proverb says, Too much duty undermines the host's respectability and dignity (كثر الواجب يقلل القيمة). Once inside and in the private enclosure of the house, decorum and harmony prevail. The guest is welcomed with utmost respect and lavish hospitality. The complex rituals bespeak great social refinement. Rules supported by proverbs abound, illustrating the ways of expressing respect towards the guests.

Rule Number One: Never consult one's guests as to what they would like to eat or drink (الليشاوور ضيفه ما (عشاو).)

Rule Number Two: The guest must be seated at the center of the sitting room in the place of honor that commands a full view of the room. The sitting position is appointed by the host facing the door while the host stays close to the threshold of the room with his/her back to the door. The host defers to the guest and, in a sense, debases him/herself (للضيف الصدر وللمعزب العتبة).

Rule Number Three: The guest is the hostage of the host (الضيف اسير) (المعزب). A guest does not move from his/her sitting position, does not scrutinize the room, does not stare but must comport himself/herself demurely. In fact, there are complex rules that the guest must not break. The host on the other hand must entertain the guest in an impeccable manner. It is the host's show and he/she must regale the guest down to the narration of anecdotes from classical Arabic history, poetry, or current events. The subjects

are necessarily serious and never degenerate into bawdy laughter. The guest plays the role of a passive listener. Hence the saying, once the guest sits he is a prisoner but once he leaves he is a poet, singing the praise of the host. (الضيف لين قعد اسير ولين قام شاعر).

Sight, oversight, and lacunae overlap to constitutively codify social reality and delineate a particular cultural field of vision. Proffering public space as liminal in contrast with the interior of the house, which is orderly and scrupulously clean, contextualizes as a cultural expression the shocking dirt and piles of trash lying outside in the street. Each room assumes a hierarchical ritually designated, socially defined function. The private space is treated with great reverence; a feeling and attitude that are extended to encompass the in-group that forms an integral aspect of the visible social dimension. The external world and the anonymous people, the out-group, are constituted as marginal to the social order. The zero-degree presence is marked as an absence.... In this interstice danger lurks, for the margin as well as the out-group that populate

it are conceived of as liminal, impure, chaotic, and void of meaning.

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*Dr. Ali Qleibo is an artist, author, and anthropologist. He has lectured at Al-Quds University and held a fellowship at Shalom Hartman Institute; he was visiting professor at Tokyo University for Foreign Studies, Japan. As a specialist in Palestinian social history and through his work at the Jerusalem Research Center, he has developed the Palestinian Social and Muslim Tourism Itinerary. Dr. Qleibo has authored various books, including Surviving the Wall, Before the Mountains Disappear, and Jerusalem in the Heart. A renowned oil painter, he has held numerous art shows. He may be reached at aqleibo@yahoo.com.*

*Olive trees in Sebastiya. Photo courtesy of the author.*

