

Palestinian Cultural/ Historical Geography

A Curricular Requirement

By Ali Qleibo



One of the characteristics of a state is the cultural identity of its citizens.

Identity in post-structuralism is a narrative. According to Paul Ricoeur, identity is the story I tell myself or the story I tell others about myself. Responses to the questions "Who am I?" and "Where do I come from?" as well as a corollary reconstruction of the events that lead to the present underlie narrative identity.



The primordial mythos of the land binds the Palestinians to their ancestral land; "al mushkateen", the damned, is a rock arrangement that represent an accursed group of celebrants at a wedding party punished for desecrating bread in Khursa.



Trees and water springs were considered natural abodes of Anaat and Asheerat two female Canaanite deities. This sacred tree in Al Safi; until recently a recipient of vegetal offerings, remained sacred because of its modern association with our father Abraham.

Historical/Cultural Geography of Palestine, as a curricular requirement, deploys narratives as a symbolic mechanism through which national belonging can be reconstructed and communicated. The proposed curriculum explores Palestinian heritage as cultural production and its fundamental role in disseminating national identity.

In the course of their education, Palestinian students are expected to become acquainted with – to master, as far as they are able – certain bodies of knowledge that relate to Palestinian cultural/historical geography, apart from acquiring the basic skills: writing clearly, speaking articulately, and reading attentively. The Palestinian educational system has been deficient on all levels. In general, the school system produces apathetic, aggressive, barely literate, sullen graduates. Mediocrity prevails. Lax at times, authoritarian and patronising at others, the Palestinian Authority has failed to produce viable, well-adjusted, independent, and learned *tawjihi* graduates.

"Should twenty students fail, then eighteen would be chosen to pass and two would be chosen to repeat the class." In a context where the majority of students expect to pass without attending classes and with minimum effort, Abu Fuad, the Arabic schoolteacher from Bet Ula, explained the sense of betrayal felt by the students who fail my class. My stern attitude as a university teacher scares students away. "Within the Palestinian educational system all students are automatically promoted to the next level."

Lack of motivation, truancy, and indolence – symptoms of fundamental alienation produced by the curriculum of the Ministry of Education – are the common malaise of my students. By the time they have finished their schooling, by the age of eighteen, freshmen come to my classroom totally disoriented, bamboozled, frustrated, and in an almost chronic state of confused agitation. Functional illiterates, many can barely decipher the words in a sentence. The analytic move from the individual unit of meaning to synthetic overall understanding of the paragraph presents a challenge. Metaphoric and literal levels of understanding form a major handicap. Our students have been conditioned to rote learning. But they have not been trained to reflect on the meaning of the written



High places, gorens, once sacred shrines for Baal, have been replaced by sacred Moslem Sufi shrines and dot our rocky mountainous landscape. El sheikh Saleh Sanctuary stands outside Anata.

word. The literary discourse stands in one world; they exist in another. Bridging the hiatus between the words of the text and their own individual lives, i.e., helping my students situate themselves in the text, is a formidable challenge. Ill-educated, unable to concentrate, and restless, they lack passion for knowledge. They dream of breaking away from the homeland. Anywhere but here. Against this critical turbulence that underlies the new wave of immigration abroad, another aspect of the silent transfer, the educational system has yet to launch a cultural/historical/geographic multidisciplinary course to counter the current state of alienation and promote a sense of commitment and belonging. Omission is commission: our educational system produces students who are strangers in their homeland.

"I must get political asylum in Sweden," confided Basem, a 20-year-old student from Bani-Naim. "I must get away from here."

I have written elsewhere about the Muslim sanctuary of *Yaqin*, the sacred rock that marks the parting of ways between Abraham and Lot. The same

site later came to be associated also with Abraham's firm belief (*yaqin*) in God's power as he witnessed the cataclysm that shook Sodom and Gomorrah. Though Basem knew of the holy shrine on the outskirts of his village, he was ignorant of the significance of the sanctuary of *Yaqin* and had no desire to know its narrative.

"In Sweden they provide housing and a monthly allowance." He yearned to leave Bani-Naim. Although his brother is qualified as a surgical anaesthetist, it has been economically more viable for him to peddle various goods in Israel. His father also had a work permit in Israel and made a living through his work as an itinerant salesman.

My Bedouin friend Khalil, who often accompanies me on my field trips, later explained that seeking political asylum in Sweden has become a general trend among young Palestinians.

"This is in conformity with the common maxim: Minimum effort and minimum income, الفلّه والراحة."

The bonds that tie Palestinians to their homeland have sustained a traumatic blow by the Israeli systemic undermining of the Palestinian agricultural system and the transformation of the occupied

people from peasants to blue-collar workers. The primordial mythos of the land inextricably bound to the traditional economic relationship of the Palestinian peasants to their ancestral land – as reflected in the agricultural cycle, the settlement pattern, the cave cities, the perception and use of space, the shrines and sanctuaries – has been dramatically ruptured. The West Bank has become a blue-collar ethnic dorm. As Palestinians are alienated from the land, exasperated by poor income, and exploited in Israeli settlement jobs or by avaricious Palestinian capitalists (with no union rights and ridiculous low wages), the dream of migrating to Canada or seeking political asylum in Sweden has become rampant.

I soon realised that Basem does not know anything outside Bani-Naim. As is the case with the majority of my students, Basem's concept of the historical/cultural geography of Palestine is blank. Though he commutes daily to the university in Hebron, he neither knows the names of the numerous villages he passes along the way, nor does he care about them; they fade into the background of his consciousness as white noise. On his way to college he rides perfunctorily past the mountaintops dotted with sacred sanctuaries: the hallowed tree of al-Sa'ir and the cave cities of the Edomites. The contributions of the various civilisations that have



Our textbooks are unfortunate antiquated clichés in which Muslim Arab historiography traditionally disavows our Palestinian pre-Islamic culture and religion. The formation of our identity is discursively assigned to the advent of Islam in the seventh century with the Crusades being merely a brief interruption. This precept is another alienating factor.

succeeded each other in Palestine – Hurrite, Canaanite, Hebrew, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Umayyad, Crusader, Mamluk, and Ottoman – are an enigma. The land holds no mythos. There is no discourse that mediates and familiarises him with the shifting landscape. Basem is counted among the majority of Palestinians who are disoriented strangers in their own homeland!

No longer peasants, they are now children of poor blue-collar workers. The villages, no longer the bastions of tradition, have become ethnic blue-collar dorms. The puerile selection of *dabkeh*, *tabbuleh*, *ma'lubeh*, and



Al-Qatran outside Atara is an architecturally more complex Sufi sanctuary commanding a spectacular panorama.



Cave dwellings were favoured by our ancestors. They survive in Birj, Tiwane and form the underground structure of el-Dhahirieh.

embroidery as the salient markers of Palestinian identity renders it immaterial whether Basem lives in a small room in Sweden, Qatar, or the United States. His horizon, like that of many other Palestinians, is restricted to a few squalid square metres. Sequestered in their respective villages with satellites and Internet (synonymous with Facebook among my students), and caught up in family and tribal squabbles, they have no awareness of Palestinian geography, history, or cultural heritage.

The love of the homeland, the sense of belonging and identification with the land, emerges as a curricular challenge. The alienation of post-Oslo generations requires the immersion of our students in historical contexts to learn that Semitic customs and manners have endured from ancient times to the present, albeit camouflaged under a veneer of Christian or Muslim beliefs. Palestinian cultural identity thus begins not with the onset of Islam but can be traced back to early-Semitic times and the land of Canaan. Palestinian students must be made aware of the existence of holy trees, holy stones, saints' shrines, and holy men's memorial domes, which dot the Palestinian landscape and have their roots in Canaanite spirituality.

I suggested, considering that he had scored 85 on the *tawjihi* exam and was already a second-year student at Hebron's Polytechnic University, that he apply for a scholarship to study in Europe.

"Where in Europe?" he asked.

My friend Marc Pace, the representative of Malta, had told me that there are a few scholarships available for Palestinians.

"You are making fun of me! Malta is not in Europe it is here."

I must have looked very puzzled. I did not know that we have a village called Malta; I inquired where it is....

"I do not know where it is," he replied. "But whenever I ask my grandmother where she's going, she says, 'To Malta.'" "Malta is here!" he reiterated. "My grandmother goes there all the time."

He must have seen my disappointment.

To launch "Palestinian Historical/Cultural Geography" as a school curricular requirement is a form of teaching *sumud*, of remaining steadfast in the motherland. The narrative of Palestine – its peoples, its history, and its cultural geography – is integral to the struggle to ward off the confiscation of Palestinian land by Israeli settlers and the obfuscation of Palestinian heritage and cultural patrimony in the Zionist revisionist narrative. With knowledge comes intimacy and love of the land. Within this traumatic context – increasing settlements and house demolitions, the eviction of families from their homes as a preliminary step for a takeover by Israeli fanatics, the Israeli abuse of natural resources to the disadvantage of the Palestinians, the transformation of the topography of the land to

become testimony to Israeli nationalist narratives, and the appropriation of our Canaanite, Biblical, and Muslim cultural patrimony – systematising the Palestinian narrative within a coherent curriculum has assumed seminal importance. The knowledge of Palestinian cultural geography becomes a pedagogical means through which young Palestinians may develop their fundamental relation to the land and to its history. They should be taught that they are the legitimate heirs to all the civilisations that have succeeded one other on the land of Palestine. The discursive narrative of Palestinian cultural identity encompasses the diverse dynamic cultural adaptations of our ancestors to an ecological system in flux. But no one can be naively romantic and presume to teach that the present Palestinian is a modern-day Canaanite.

Identity as a social construct is one of the key aspects of historical/cultural geography, which enables individuals to experience Palestinian identity in a narrative that seeks to appropriate the history and geography of Palestine. Complemented with curricular field trips it enables the students to experience "Palestinian-ness" at iconic heritage sites. These selected sites symbolise fundamental aspects of "Palestinian-ness" and in so doing present Palestine as a family, a group of relations with shared history, values, and beliefs, as well as common characteristics.

The proposed Palestinian curricular narrative is a testimony to the silent contribution of the ancient Canaanite tribes in their various city-states, now clusters of Palestinian villages. The suggested curriculum provides young Palestinians with the narratives about ancient Semitic religious rites and symbols that are superimposed onto the Biblical iconographic figures such as the Virgin Mary, Jonah, Noah, and Lot. The tradition of St. George/al-Khader fits into this "religious rite" as well. The cultural discourse provides

extremely relevant information about the constituent elements of traditional Palestinian identity, namely the agricultural calendar, traditional sports, the role of women, and economic solidarity of the extended family, as well as the concepts of nature, sexual intimacy, and privacy. Special emphasis must be placed on the great role played by the Crimean War and the nineteenth-century Ottoman reforms in providing the underpinnings of the modernist Palestinian identity. As a result the Palestinian narrative unfolds a tapestry of life that has witnessed continued adaptations of the various peoples who have lived in Palestine.

"Historical/Cultural Geography of Palestine" is the ideological framing of history and identity. It addresses the relationship between time and space in the development of heritage in Palestine's local historical geography, which is an approach that reifies local events and narratives into national processes. The proposed curriculum implies the framing of history and its relationship with narratives constitutive of national identity. By situating the narrative in the local spatial context in the individual cluster of villages and connecting it to wider regional cultural geography, the heritage landmarks become signifiers that help advance the understanding of the highly diversified cultural expressions of Palestinian national identity.

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