



Al-Shajara al-Mubaraka

By Nada Atrash and Sami Backleh



The Olive Tree is a synonym for Palestine, and Palestine is a synonym for the Olive Tree. They exist together. They have formed a confluence for eternity, and they still maintain the passion between them. Never a morning or an evening passes, unless the Olive Tree, or 'the Tree of Light' as it is called by the Palestinians, is a part of it in one way or another."
Nasser Soumi, *Palestine and the Olive Tree*



Photo by Rami Rishmawi (CCHP Archives).



For thousands of years, humans have taken an interest in olives due to their admiration for the olive tree. This admiration is related to the longevity of the tree as well as to its therapeutic fruit and oil. Olives have been one of the most important sources of income for many civilizations throughout Eastern Mediterranean history. Ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Seljuks, and Ottoman civilizations have cultivated olives and produced olive oil. Phoenicians and especially the Romans are responsible for the spread of olives from the Eastern Mediterranean to Spain.

In the ancient world, the olive tree was a symbol of knowledge, wisdom, abundance, peace, health, power, and beauty. The olive has been a symbol of friendship and a source of wealth for the people who live in countries around the Mediterranean Sea. Olive oil was believed to bestow strength and youth, in addition to being used for medicinal purposes. Spiritually it symbolized consecration. The olive branch appears with a dove in early Christian art; the dove derives from the symbol of the Holy Spirit in the Gospels and the olive branch from classical symbolism for peace.

Orthodox and Catholic churches use olive oil to bless and strengthen those

In Lidda, in Ramla, in the Galilee,
we shall remain,
guard the shade of the fig
and olive trees,
ferment rebellion in our children
as yeast in the dough.

Tawfiq Zayyad



preparing for baptism. Its uses also include conferring the sacrament of the anointing the sick, as it was regarded to have natural healing properties. According to the Bible, Jesus prayed in the midst of olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane after the Last Supper. And olive oil is mentioned in Psalm 23, *"Thou anointest my head with oil."*

In Islam, the olive tree and its oil are mentioned in the Holy Qur'an. *"Allah is the light of the heavens and earth, His light is like a lantern inside which there is a torch contained in a glass jar, the jar is like a bright planet lit by a blessed olive tree, neither eastern or western, so bright it almost ignites, light upon light."* The Qur'an also starts verse 95:1 by swearing by the

olive, “*By the fig and the olive, and the Mount of Sinai.*” Prophet Mohammad recommended the use of olive oil, “*Consume olive oil and anoint it upon your bodies since it is of the blessed tree.*” The prophet was reported to believe that olive oil cures some seventy diseases.

Both olive and olive oil have a prominent place in Mediterranean cultures. For thousands of years, olive and olive oil products have played a distinct role in the social, economic, and cultural lives of the people there. Olive trees are deeply rooted in Palestinian culture and traditions. They are and have been a characteristic and symbolic feature in both the Palestinian landscape and identity. It has been indicated that the cultivation of olives in history dates back to 8,000 years ago. Archaeological

excavations in Palestine have revealed that olive cultivation dates back to the Chalcolithic Period (3750 BC).

Perhaps the Palestinian proverb “Olive oil is the mainstay of the house” reflects the role that olive oil plays in the lives of the Palestinians. Several other proverbs are connected to the olive or olive oil, either describing the benefits of the tree and its value or relating to the calendar of the picking season. During the picking season, farmers used to press the first picked olives immediately in the field using a traditional technique known as *zeit tfah* (overflowing oil). Oil is usually produced with one’s bare hands without using any tools, and the oil prepared using this method was offered for lighting lamps in shrines and holy places and for lighting oil lamps during religious festivals. The olive



Roman Olive Press. Photo by Rami Rishmawi (CCHP Archives).

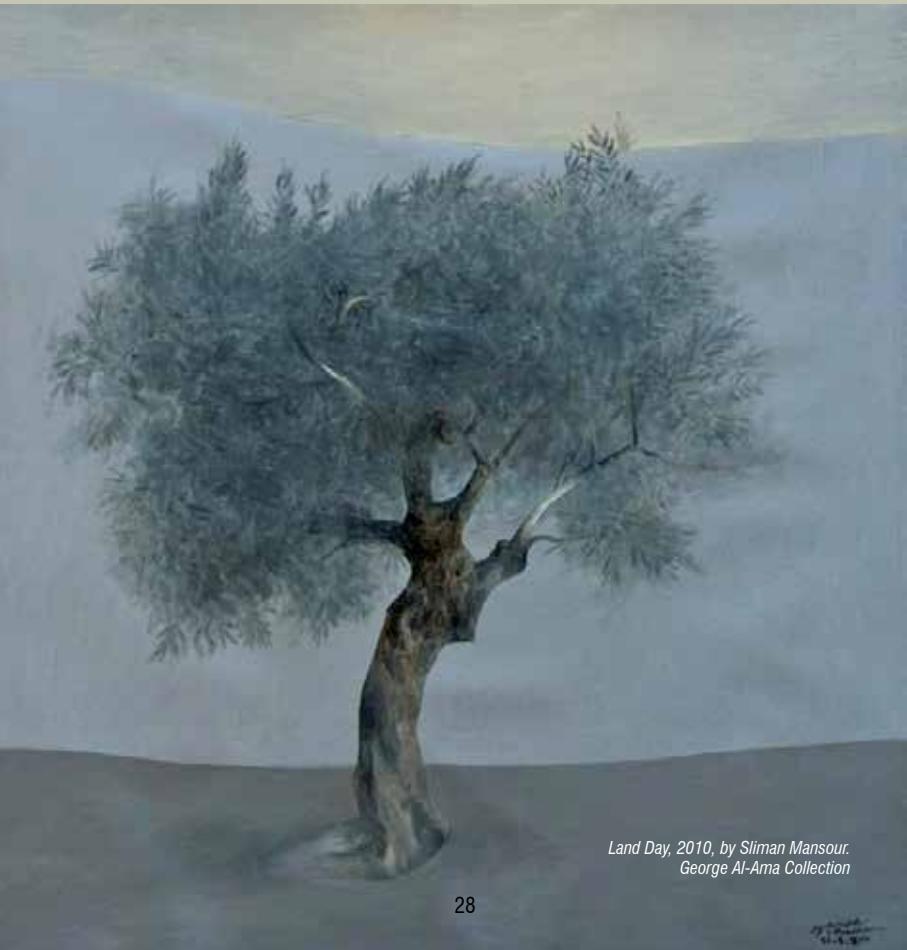
tree is often called the Blessed Tree, *al-shajara al-mubarka*, and *fellahin* swear by it, saying, “By the life of the Tree of Light” (*wihyat shajarat al-nur*). It is still common to light lamps in churches and shrines with olive oil and not any other kind of oil, even with the invention of electricity and the use of electric bulbs.

Olive oil was abundant in the Palestinian cities of Nablus, Jaffa, Akko, and Jerusalem and continues to be used in the production of soap. It has been an especially distinct feature of Nablus. As early as the tenth century, the traditional olive oil soap from the city’s factories was exported across the Arab world, and as far afield as Europe. It was reported that 27 factories were producing *saboon Nabulsi* (Nablus soap) in 1927; this industry has almost vanished today, and only two working factories were registered in the year 2000. Virgin olive oil, water, and an alkaline sodium compound (traditionally the natural ashes of salty desert plants known as *ashnan al-kali*) are mixed over low heat for approximately five days. After that, the mixture is poured over a large floor space, and then casts are laid down to cut the soap into individual blocks, which are then stamped with

the traditional seal of the factory of production.

In Bethlehem, olive wood has been used since at least the seventeenth century in the production of religious souvenirs that are sold to pilgrims in both Bethlehem and Jerusalem. The art developed and became a major industry in Bethlehem and nearby towns of Beit Sahour and Beit Jala when Franciscan artisans on pilgrimage to the area taught the residents how to carve. Since then the tradition has been passed on, generation by generation, and is dominated by the descendants of the original local carvers.

Although universally regarded as the symbol of peace, the olive tree has become a symbol of steadfastness in Palestine. Since the *Nakba* in 1967, Israel has uprooted more than 1.5 million olive trees. Moreover, farmers are forbidden to pick olives from their trees that are located near the Wall or close to the settlements. As a result, people from across the world travel to various villages and participate in solidarity actions with the farmers, providing assistance and a protective civil international presence to help them overcome the restrictions imposed



Land Day, 2010, by Sliman Mansour.
George Al-Ama Collection



If the Olive Trees knew the
hands that planted them,
Their Oil would become Tears.
Mahmoud Darwish

Photo by Rami Rishmawi (CCHP Archives).

by the Israeli occupation and settlers during the olive harvest season.

The olive tree has also become a dominant component of the Palestinian contemporary art movement. Artists such as Sliman Mansour, Vera Tamari, Nabil Anani, and others have used the olive tree to symbolize the resistance and steadfastness of the Palestinians. The olive tree is also present in the poems of Mahmoud Darwish, Taha Muhammad Ali, Tawfiq Zayyad, and others as a reflection of its deep history and steadfastness. Representations in both art and literature reflect the Palestinian experience and the role of the olive tree as an important component of the Palestinian cultural heritage and landscape. The inscription of the *Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir* on UNESCO's World Heritage list as the first site of the serial nomination Palestine, Land of Olives and Vines also highlights the role the olive tree has played in Palestinian culture and tradition.

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Photo by Rami Rishmawi (CCHP Archives).