



Jerusalem's Palestinian Identity and Intangible Heritage

By Dr. Ali Qleibo



“We never lower our heads to anyone except God,” muttered my Palestinian colleague as we watched our Japanese hosts ceremonially exchange farewell bows following our dinner in downtown Tokyo.

“Palestinians do lower their heads as they spread open their arms and bend the upper torso in a bow of courtesy as they welcome or bid farewell to their visitors,” I whispered. “Bending the head and body forward is a common gesture of good manners that expresses deference and consideration to guests and that we complement with specific verbal rituals of welcome and farewell.” “The Prophet has visited us,” “We have been blessed by your visit,” “You have brought light to the house,” etc.

Ironically Japanese highly ceremonial manners, splendid customs, and elaborate traditions provide insights into aspects of our “Palestinianness” that would otherwise have been overlooked. Ethnographic details that we would have taken for granted, that are commonplace in our society and that are deemed trivial in our studies of Palestinian intangible heritage acquire value, significance, and become visible once glimpsed in the sumptuous Japanese cultural expressions of the Edo period.

The sight of two young Japanese men, squatting upright so that all their weight is distributed on their heels, waiting outside a shop in Ueno, Japan, jolted me. It was reminiscent of our peasants and Bedouins



Photo from Palestine Image Bank.

who assume the same body posture as they wait in front of government offices or at bus stops along the road in the countryside. To squat upright without one’s hips kicking out reveals a concept of the body and of comfort that would otherwise not merit ethnographic description. Kneeling upright on the knees while eating is common to both our Bedouins and to the Japanese. In both cultures, lounging on the ground with legs outstretched is regarded as improper.

The thematic may vary. The homology in form does not reflect a parallel meaning, yet the exposure to this dramatic cultural expression stimulates the expert to identify salient elements of intangible culture in our own society. In Japan we learn to apprehend the ethnographic minutiae in our own culture.

Japanese tea ceremony, of paramount symbolic spiritual significance in Japan, brings to mind the social rituals of coffee drinking, the various types of social visits, and the symbolic role of sipping coffee over half an hour in the modulation of topics of conversation between moments of observed silence. The timing of serving coffee punctuates the ritual social visit from the “welcome

Expertise in the field of ethnography, the total immersion and study of one particular culture, cannot proceed without scientific training in methodological cross-cultural comparison. Ethnography as such cannot proceed without ethnology. The study of one particular culture is enhanced through expert cross-cultural comparison with other cultures, hence the allure of Japan’s intangible heritage as a cultural trove.



Photo by Firas Mukrkar.

coffee” to the “goodbye coffee.” The *furoshki*, the Japanese square cloth used alternately to store away kimono and precious objects or as a gift wrap, is reminiscent of the traditional Palestinian cloth *bu'jeh*, in which precious garments and valuables are stored, and in which our grandmothers

used to wrap their soaps and clean lingerie to change into after the weekly bath in the public *hammam*.

The study of cultural identity falls at the axis of intangible and tangible heritage. It is the study of the actors' customs, memory, and narratives, the spoken word and the silence. Such detailed ethnographic studies have their respective concepts, theories, and methodologies that provide the guideline for both the initial stage of research and the final codification of the acquired knowledge.

In ethnography, generalizations gleaned from particular experiences can be misleading. As I travel in the Palestinian countryside, fieldwork experience yields a single inevitable conclusion: there is no such thing as the typical village. In fact, each village has its own character, its own (albeit unknown) history, its own geography, its own customs and manners.

In fact, there are no generic peasants. Each village is composed of its clans and households, and each is its own case with its own unique outlook, expectations, and attitude to life.

Photo by George Azar.



It is a sociological truism that peasants generally keep sheep and chickens, that they plant cabbages, lettuce, onions, cucumbers, and tomatoes, and that they have olive, peach, apricot, fig, and almond orchards. They also tend vines. They may have Qays or Yaman tribal affiliations. The village may consist of various tribes with varying prestigious pedigrees. The ceremonial food may be *musakhan*, *mansaf*, or *maftul*. But it does not all taste the same; they do not have the same embroidery patterns; they do not have the same customs and values. Each village is unique. Al-Burj is different from Surif; and Ramallah, Jenin, and Dura – each has its own character. The historic cities of Gaza, Jerusalem, Nablus – each has its distinct flavor, texture, rhythm, and identity.

Throughout time Al-Quds al-Sharif has stood out as the Holy City. The stones of Jerusalem's edifices are weighed down with religious symbolism. From any rooftop, when I turn my head around, I feel submerged by Christian and Muslim references that shape our identity.

To Palestinians, the Jerusalemite is enigmatic, projecting an image that is inconsistent with his/her feelings. Cosmopolitan and at ease in the world at large, we nevertheless remain staunch conservatives at heart. Jerusalemites are invariably misconstrued by fellow Palestinians as high-strung, stubborn, overly sensitive, highly volatile, irritable, and aloof. Indeed, we are proud, and our sense of dignity and personal integrity takes priority over any other pragmatic consideration that, unwittingly, further distorts our fragile and vulnerable nature. To outsiders we appear cold, arrogant, and elitist. In fact, we are spontaneous,

unpretentious, sentimental, and extremely emotional.

The Jerusalemite sense of puritan frugality is construed by other Palestinians as stinginess and miserliness. Our lifestyle is simple and austere. Though we cherish bodily comfort, our homes, furniture, clothes, and manners are sparse. We avoid ceremonious and conspicuous displays of wealth and power as practiced by other Palestinians. In contrast, Jerusalem is distinguished by its holiness and its patrician families, affiliated with various religious functions, which have intermarried over the past eight centuries. Every member of these families knows his/her status without feeling the need to flaunt it through pompous display of wealth. Ironically, our pious frugality and sense of religious austerity are a source of derision to others.

A Jerusalemite is self-controlled, sober, and rational. The female is *mahyubeh*, feared and respected. Liberal, cosmopolitan, and cultured from early in the twentieth century, she has become professional. Yet she is fearsome. The Jerusalemite lady knows how to command respect, intimidate, and keep men at a distance. Such characters, *al bint al mahyubeh* who fights for her rights and commands respect, are common in Jerusalem. Often Jerusalemite ladies inherit the responsibilities of *awqaf* administration. The image is that of seriousness – a no-nonsense lady who neither smiles nor jokes nor banters. Dressed elegantly but modestly she does not wear a veil. Her *sutrah*, the veil that keeps men at a distance, lies in her impeccable image. It is her class. She is always serious, attentive, on guard, reticent, and reserved. The anecdote of my friend, Ms. Lamis el Husseini, comes to mind.



Photo from Palestine Image Bank.

She was awarded a medal from Yasser Arafat for her cultural contributions. To the surprise of the audience, Arafat, who was standing on stage, gave her the medal but without the usual kiss. She said, "He was about to, but from my eyes, looks, dress, and demeanor, he knew to keep a distance." *Al bint al-qudsiyyeh* (a Jerusalemite female) is famed for her *hebeh*; she commands respect and keeps men – even the National Symbol – at a distance.

"Jerusalemites have a distinctive style," Monica Awad concluded as we enjoyed our latté in the American Colony open courtyard. In front of us sat an Arab woman in her thirties, professional, well dressed with dyed light-chestnut hair color, smoking her cigarette as she typed on her laptop." "Definitely not one of us," we both agreed.

Jerusalemites navigate their way socially in a disengaged, deliberate but courteous manner. Laughing aloud, dancing, and singing are considered *ajib*, shameful expressions of private emotional states that should

never become public. At weddings Jerusalemites watch others dance but they do not move from their chairs. Amidst the merriment and mirthful frolic they maintain a stoic composure. Other Palestinians poke fun at us by saying that should a Jerusalemite finally join in the festive mood it would be expressed only in the gentle tapping of the foot to the rhythm of the music. Such Puritanism is misunderstood by other Palestinians who consider us cold, gloomy, haughty, introverted, and miserly, which is not the case; for we are hospitable without excessive indulgence, and we welcome and open our homes and hearts to friendships.

The Jerusalemite effendi *hamidi* approach to life was to a great extent an ascetic analytical contemplative view that finds its best expression in the Turkish and Persian miniature art form. In these miniatures, the nineteenth-century ideal man is presented in a meditative mood holding a book in one hand and a rose whose aroma he is sniffing in the other. The sword dangles, a beautiful curving perpendicular line, suspended from an equally elegant, if much thinner line that turns around his waist suggesting a belt. The *hamidis* were highly aware of and sensitive to beauty. The disposition to enjoy all that is refined and artistic included the delight taken in the anecdote, music, poetry, calligraphy, nature; in short, love for everything that is beautiful and enchanting.

Ottoman culture and values have left an indelible stamp on our manners. The deferential hand kiss of the father, mother, uncles, and aunts continues. Many customs and institutions of Jerusalem have assumed iconic status: the visits to the cemetery after morning prayers on the two major holidays; the sending of Zalatimo

mutabbaq pastry to congratulate a cousin for his son's return or his daughter's engagement; the family lunch reunions with Ja'far's *kanafeh* or *halawet smeed* (semolina with goat

cheese and pine nuts) for dessert; the seasonal customary fuss over the preparation of the special apricot, quince, and bitter-orange jam to join the stocked-up pantry lined with jars of home-preserved white goat cheese in spiced brine, green pickled olives, olive oil, aromatic spiced clarified butter, red lentils, rice, sugar, and flour in brown burlap bags still survives. The delight with the early-spring fresh grape leaves and the preparation of *lahmeh waraq*, eaten only by Jerusalemites, continues. The joy in seasonal sojourns in nature in the various family estates in Jericho and Al-Oja in winter, Ein Karem and Alonia in spring, and Gaza and the sea in the summer is remembered fondly. Each family has its own rhythm, its own flavor to its family reunions and Friday visits to its estates and farmlands.

"To be Palestinian is difficult. To be a Jerusalemite is extremely difficult. Most of us live in a forced exile deprived of the hope of ever returning home," sighed Monica. "The few Jerusalemites who survive are hostage to the Israelis and subject to innumerable discriminatory measures calculated to make our life extremely difficult."

"We live in a permanent state of anxiety; our life over the past five decades has been that of destitution and estrangement. We suffer to see our properties, shops, and streets in Katamon or Talbiyeh – in fact, all over West Jerusalem – inhabited and enjoyed by our enemy," said Mrs. Marroum.

I know a few who refuse to reach beyond Jaffa Gate. The grief of the lost Palestine remains an open wound in Al-Quds.

For the past century Jerusalem has stood apart from the rest of Palestine with its distinctive cosmopolitan character. From all over Palestine parents would send off their children to Jerusalem's boarding schools. For the girls there were many options: the Schmidt School, the Sisters of Zion, the

Rosary Sisters, the Jerusalem Girls' College, etc. The boys would invariably be sent to the Frères School, Terra Santa, or St. George.

"The Christian and Muslim identities are deeply intertwined," Nora Qort explained. "Christian elements are intrinsic to both ethnic groups."

"Our relationship is not of condescending tolerance or patronizing acceptance. We are the mirror image of each other," Monica further qualified.

"Our Muslim cuisine includes the Christian Lenten recipes; our Muslim holidays are celebrated with *ka'ek* and *ma'mul* pastries symbolic of Jesus' last moments on the cross, in the shape of the crown of thorns and the sponge," Wajdi El Nammari added. In fact, Muslims anticipate eagerly *al-barbara*, a sweetened wheat porridge, spiced and adorned with nuts to celebrate St. Barbara's feast day, and our Christian neighbors anticipate Ramadan's *atayef* and the rest of the delicacies associated with the Muslim holy month...."

Time changes and rearranges. Nothing remains fixed. Jerusalem was depopulated soon after the *Nakba*. The veil of nostalgic melancholy, *al huzon*, has come to be inextricably linked to the experience of Jerusalem.

Here, there, and everywhere, whenever Jerusalemites meet, we sense a common bond that unites us. Our personal identities are rooted in the collective memories of implicitly shared narratives that shroud our beloved city with a veil of nostalgic melancholy.

Identity is a construct; a narrative we tell ourselves about ourselves, about our history, customs, idiosyncrasies, characteristic traits, and origins. It is a mirror whose reflection lies at the axis of the "real" and the "imaginary" – it is a dynamic process in time. We achieve our identity through our discourse with members of our society and in contradistinction to cultural expressions deployed in other societies.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Christian missions in Jerusalem had already succeeded in providing a safe locus whereby the local Muslim and Christian population could profit from full exposure to Western civilization. Within the context of the Christian missionary schools, the privileged Jerusalemite had the better of the two worlds. One slept in the shadow of the Dome of the Rock in the Muslim Quarter but spent the school day in the Christian Quarter studying under the tutelage of French, Italian, Spanish, Maltese, Irish, and German friars and sisters.



Photo by Tarek Bakri.

Hamidi cultural ethos, values, and customs continue to shape Palestinian urban life in general and Jerusalem in particular much as nineteenth-century Edo culture still exerts a constitutive role on post-modernist Japanese society.

Dr. Ali Qleibo is an anthropologist, author, and artist. A specialist in the social history of Jerusalem and Palestinian peasant culture, he is the author of Before the Mountains Disappear, Jerusalem in the Heart, and Surviving the Wall, an ethnographic chronicle of contemporary Palestinians and their roots in ancient Semitic civilizations. Dr. Qleibo lectures at Al-Quds University.