



Palestinian Rites of Spring

Eggs, Pascal Lamb, and the Thursday of the Dead



By Ali Qleibo

It was the second week of April. I was driving through the countryside southwest of Bethlehem to visit my friend, Um Nassar in Beit Ummar. “Today marks *Khamees al-Bayd* (Thursday of the Eggs),” Um Nassar greeted me as I entered her lush *housh* (courtyard), only a few yards away from the ancient crusader sanctuary of St. Matthew. She took my hand in warm welcome and peered affectionately into my eyes. Um Nassar is in her late eighties and recognized as one of Palestine’s specialists in intangible heritage, a native expert par excellence. Experienced, knowledgeable, mature, and articulate, she has earned the respect of the community, which enhances the credibility of her narratives. As we sat under the luscious vine canopy, she reminisced nostalgically, “Last Thursday was *Khamees al-'Amwat*, the Thursday of the Dead.”

“The Thursday of the Dead constituted a veritable holiday,” my Bedouin friend Khalil from Al-Ma’sarah later confirmed. He had made his own inquiries among the older women of his village and was eager to share the data. “It is an Eid (holiday) in the full sense of the term and was celebrated like all the major Muslim holidays with the purchase of new clothes and the ritual sacrificial *dhabeh* (slaughter) of a spring lamb.” *Al-dhabiha* is a quintessentially Muslim element that marks major holidays in contradistinction to other commemorative minor holidays. The blood sacrifice is an ancient Semitic concept and,

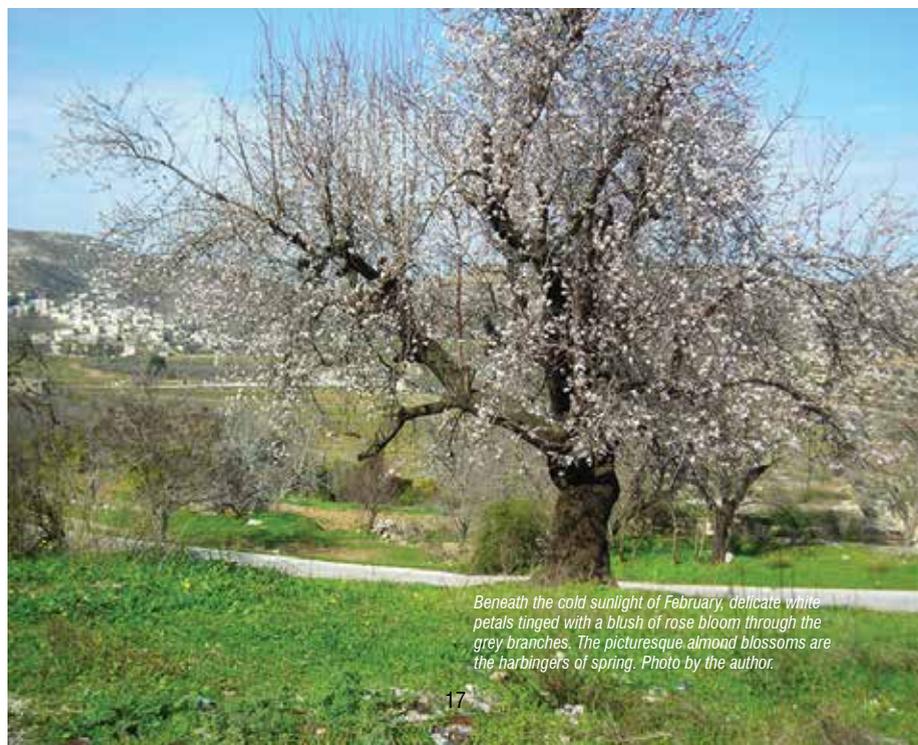
significantly, is the root of the Arabic word *madhbah* (the altar).

Though most Palestinian peasants have heard of the Thursday of the Dead, their knowledge of the ritual is scanty. The extant literature on Palestinian traditions is replete with cryptic statements that describe this major holiday. But even though these writers, folklorists, and sociologists are of rural extraction, nothing substantive has been produced because their knowledge is compromised due to the lack of anthropological training. Instead of studying the event itself, their interest is displaced on identifying the contextual data, and they merely explore its temporal position in relation to Easter, as observed in the Greek Orthodox calendar, or to other seasonal pilgrimages to local Palestinian sanctuaries that take place in April. In fact, this feast is a universal celebration that is shared by the Persian *Nayrouz* (commemoration of martyrs, also marking the beginning of the Coptic new year, celebrated on September 11), the Egyptian *Sham al-Nassim* (literally

Cultural anthropology is an interpretive qualitative study. Ethnologists analyze the data they gather from first-hand observation and use information supplied by savvy natives as their point of departure. Expert natives draw their knowledge from life experience and stories collected from those who surround(ed) them, and as close friends, they form the bridge that connects an outsider with the local community.

Smell of the Zephyr, the official holiday marking the beginning of spring), and similar feasts in other cultures.

The archetypal symbolism of the egg, celebrated in Palestine on the subsequent *Khamees al-Bayd*, carries various meanings and significance in different cultures. In Palestine, the analysis of the traditional, indigenous commemoration of death, followed by



Beneath the cold sunlight of February, delicate white petals tinged with a blush of rose bloom through the grey branches. The picturesque almond blossoms are the harbingers of spring. Photo by the author.



Author Ali Qleibo with Umm Nasser. In her late eighties and recognized as one of Palestine's specialists in intangible heritage, she is a native expert par excellence. Photo by the author.

a joyous celebration involving colored eggs, is obscured by the belief of native folklorists that this holiday is integrally related to Greek Orthodox Easter celebrations. These authors—influenced by their ideological conviction that Palestinian cultural identity is at its basis Christian—tend to overlook the pagan structures that were prevalent among the Semitic Canaanite early settlers of Palestine. They fail to note the structural, systemic adaptations to Palestine (as an ecological niche) that determined integral aspects of Palestinian cultural identity among its pre-Christian population. Consequently, they overlook the original meaning of the Thursday of the Dead followed by the Thursday of the Eggs as pagan rites of spring or a *rite de passage* from winter to spring. This major rural native rite of passage that traditionally was observed by Christians and Muslims with great solemnity thus remains shrouded in mystery.

Hilma Granqvist, the pioneer of modern Palestinian cultural anthropology, provides an exquisite ethnographic description of rituals in her seminal work, *Muslim Death and Burial: Arab customs and traditions studied in a village in Jordan*, published in 1960. In the early 1920s she was fortunate to have had the opportunity to conduct her fieldwork in the village of Artas.

Over a period of 40 years she returned numerous times to continue with her fieldwork and documented the Palestinian traditional way of life in which rituals dominated the social, religious, economic, and cultural aspects of life. Her ethnographies reveal a circumspect puritanical outlook in which rituals defined the dynamics, texture, rhythm, tempo, harmony, tone, color, and form of daily life. Along with associated verbal utterances, they formed a meticulously crafted libretto, strictly defined through structures in which the binary oppositions of the sacred/profane and the pure/impure played a constitutive role. Hilma's opus reveals the musical score that was underlying everyday life in a Palestinian village before the *Nakba*.

She describes the Thursday of the Dead as a commonly observed ritual that is enacted in the village cemetery. She notes that in the weeks following a burial it was customary to visit the dead every Thursday. May I remind the reader that one hundred years ago the demographic size of the Palestinian village was much smaller; the entire population of Artas did not exceed 300 adults and children. Interpersonal relationships were very intimate, and the death of a family member was experienced as a traumatic event. Women continued to visit the dead

even six months after the burial. The Thursday of the Dead was a ritualized drama, which put an end to the close relationship with the dead and, so to speak, turned a green leaf.

The preparation for the ritual drama would take place earlier in the week. As with all ancient-Semitic solemn holy occasions, a blood sacrifice had to be offered. On this holiday a *ramsy* (spring lamb) would be sacrificed and its meat used to make meat pies. Sweet pastries would also be prepared. Both savory and sweet pies would be stacked, separately, in braided wicker baskets and piled on top of hay-woven trays to be carried early on Thursday morning to the cemetery.

It is full spring. A lush canopy of fresh blades of grass covers the cemetery ground. Here, there, and everywhere dandelions, anemones, cyclamen, wild stock, bluebells, and a great diversity of flowering grasses and shrubs are in full bloom. The almond, apricot, and plum trees are radiant with fresh green new buds amidst the white, tinged-with-rose fruit blossoms. The feeling of a joyous picnic is evoked as the cemetery is thronging with women and children who are waiting in anticipation of the ceremonial delicacies. Local poorer women and children converge onto



Hilma Natalia Granqvist, the Swedish-speaking Finnish pioneer of modern Palestinian cultural anthropology.

The analogy between modern Palestinians and ancient Canaanites that permeates my research does not seek to establish a homologous relation. Rather, the use of analogical argument is of a typological order and points to mutually shared patterns, regularities, attributes, or functions that have survived from ancient times to modernity. Such comparisons and metaphors drawing on analogical reasoning are heuristic and help interpret aspects of Palestinian cultural expressions within a wider historical and ecological niche.

the cemetery and are joined by many others from neighboring villages. Then the distribution of the meat pies and sweet pastries begins. Each woman and child is doled out a specified portion. But the good will and sense of merriness quickly give way to noisy squabbles. Friction and tension invariably arise, and the momentum of the bickering increases. Hilma is well prepared for the situation since she has already been alerted by her informants to this eventuality; the abusive verbal exchange is in fact an integral element of the ritual.

According to Hilma's account, some of the ladies present at the cemetery hide the pies in their chest pockets, underneath their garments, and ask for more food. "You did not give us anything," they protest. "I already gave you some," the ladies who brought the food answer. Refusing to give them any more pies or sweets, they say, "You are hiding the pies in your chest pockets." "We are neither thieves nor hungry. We did not come to the cemetery to eat. We have food in our houses," the women retort. An altercation develops, and as the intensity of the confrontation



Eggs as a symbol of life and rebirth are colored and presented as gifts in celebrations of different religions and traditions worldwide.

escalates, the children steal the baskets and trays with the food and run away. Order and joyous merriment dissipate into dissonant chaos. The pitch of the women's voices rises as the arguments turn into a loud squabble. The men in the village, alarmed by the raucous noise, rush to the scene brandishing their sticks and order the women and children to leave the cemetery. (Hilma notes that although on different occasions men may brandish a stick against women, they never physically hit them. It is merely a threatening ritual gesture.) Intimidated and chased away by the reprimanding men, the women grudgingly scurry out of the cemetery back to the village, exchanging accusations, scowling and growling, and announcing that they shall not visit the cemetery anymore: قطعت المقابر واللي بده يزورهم (Damn the cemetery and those who visit them).

This ritual drama, observes Hilma, brings to an end the routine visits to the dead at the cemeteries, and the intense bonds with the dead are severed – until a new round of loved ones has passed away.

Ritualized, highly dramatic gestures and idiomatic expressions emerge as the salient features that distinguish traditional peasant society. The death of ritual in Palestinian village life is a consequence of the loss of the whole of Palestine in 1967 (*Naksa*) in the wake of the *Nakba* of 1948. Consequent to these events, Palestinian peasants have lost the ability to economically depend on their land for survival, being forced to become wage laborers instead. The distinction between traditional and modern, post-*Naksa* Palestine is quite striking; in traditional Palestine, ritual played a central role and our ancestors

tended to be conservative in this regard, making sure to faithfully pass down the rites and ceremonies. In contrast, the myths that justified those rituals could change. In fact, the explanations that I have heard concerning extinct holidays and the discontinuation of rituals associated with a variety of transitional social situations such as birth, marriage, and death arose only after the original, non-mythic reason for the ritual had somehow been forgotten.

In Beit Suriq, my friend Sarah Qandeel, God bless her soul, explained to me the Feast of the Eggs within the context of the Palestinian agricultural calendar.

“Forty very cold days, called *Al-Marbaniyyeh*, literally “the forty days” in colloquial Palestinian dialect, last from December 20 until February 1 and are followed by fifty cold days, *Al-Khamsinieh*, literally fifty days,

One of the characteristics of a state is the cultural identity of its citizens. The area of land that Palestinians consider to be their homeland has been reduced to less than a quarter of its original size due to a concurrence of circumstances. In the process, an important part of Palestine's cultural and historical heritage has been lost.

which in turn are followed by the second *Khamsinieh* (fifty days of a hot, dusty wind) that begins around March 21, and whose end marks the beginning of summer proper. The fifty cold days of the first *Al-Khamsinieh* are divided into four *sa'd* (periods, literally the four fortunes). *Sa'd* punctuate the fluctuating temperatures, indicate the increasing growth rate of cereals and legumes, and mark the return to life of dry, dusty-grey trees. April is noted for its festive Thursdays. On the first Thursday of April, *Khamees al-'Amwat*, peasants commemorate the dead. Cemeteries are visited and special sweets are given as offerings to the widows, the needy, and the children.

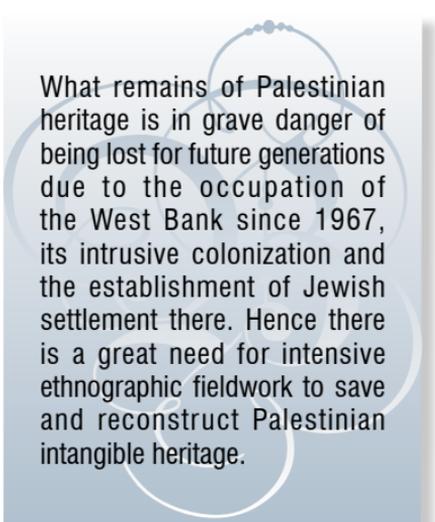


Sarah Qandeel, native expert from Bet Suriq. Photo by the author.

The second Thursday in the month of April is known as *Khamees al-Bayd*.”

Palestinian peasants proffer their own narrative of the Thursday of the Eggs in relation to the agricultural calendar. “After the seeds are planted in November and December, nature comes to a standstill. The temperature falls and the rainfall intensifies; frost and snow are common in this period. *Al-Marbaniyyeh* stretches for forty days.” Sarah paused as she sought the words by which she could describe the intense wet, cold, grey January weather. These are the shortest and coldest days of the year. “No one travels anymore. We stay around the house. Children are rarely bathed and only in the daytime for fear of colds. There is little work in the fields. Even the chickens stop laying eggs. No one ventures into the fields until *Eid al-Ghitas* (baptism celebration) in the middle of February, when the warming trend begins.”

The forty coldest days of the year, *Al-Marbaniyyeh*, end in early February. A cold wind heralds this shift, but then a warming trend begins. Despite its heavy rain and characteristic wet mud, February is the harbinger of the summer. The saying goes, *shbat bikhabet u bilabbet u rihetal-seiffih* (loosely translated, the adage that uses alliteration as a proof of its truth value says, though in February one trudges through the mud produced by the heavy rainfall yet whiffs of warm air forewarns of the summer to come). By this time, the cereals have grown and their saplings are visible above the earth. It is the time when vegetables such as lettuce, spinach, and tomatoes may be planted. “During the fifty cold days, the nights become shorter and daylight gradually increases. Plants begin to grow in size. Chickens begin to lay eggs again and these eggs are saved. When a hundred or a hundred and fifty eggs are collected, then the Thursday of the Eggs is celebrated,” Sarah explained.



What remains of Palestinian heritage is in grave danger of being lost for future generations due to the occupation of the West Bank since 1967, its intrusive colonization and the establishment of Jewish settlement there. Hence there is a great need for intensive ethnographic fieldwork to save and reconstruct Palestinian intangible heritage.

Anthropologists invariably arrive on the scene either too early or too late. We are always at a disadvantage, our knowledge is inevitably incomplete, and our vision is constrained by our scientific paradigms. From an anthropological perspective, both the Thursday of the Dead and the Thursday of the Eggs emerge as rituals handed down meticulously through the ages and are vestiges of ancient Canaanite rites of spring. Without archaeological data that would reveal the presence of colored eggs among ancient Canaanites, our interpretation remains highly conjectural: A myth accounting for a long-extinct ritual.

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 innumerable art shows. He may be reached at aqleibo@yahoo.com.