

Palestinian Patrimony and Edomite Heritage



By Ali Qleibo

The Palestinian sense of national identity is polemical and often dismissed by Israelis as spurious. Estranged through political circumstances from their cultural patrimony, they define themselves primarily as Muslim/Christian, secondly as Arab, and thirdly as Palestinian. Amorite, Edomite, Nabataean, Jebusite, Aramean, or Canaanite ancestry has no bearing on the Palestinian sense of national identity! Palestinians, caught between the hammer of the biblical narrative and the anvil of biblical archaeology, which the Israelis appropriate as their own legacy, have been estranged from their cultural heritage and have been systematically produced as the “other.”

The truism that the victor will always be the judge and the vanquished the accused succinctly describes the contentious Israeli/Palestinian wrangle over the history and sovereignty of Palestine. From the outset, biblical historiography codified the demographic expansion of the nomadic tribes into the land of Canaan in geopolitical terms. The Bible provides an inventory of the diverse tribal settlements as distinct disjunctive nations in the Canaanite city-states that dotted the Palestinian landscape. As the enemies of Yahweh, these nations had to be defeated, their gods conquered, abolished, and – in the case of the indomitable Edomites– converted. The Bible recounts the battles waged by the people of Yahweh against the “sedentarized” nomadic tribes who were satanized, dehumanized, and objectified into the other. Victors write the history. Biblical narrative sets the discourse for archaeologists, historians, theologians, and anthropologists whereby the customs, religions, and reified names of the ancient Semitic tribes of Palestine become discursively historical facts.

It is a bizarre but wonderful feeling to arrive dead center at a target you did not even know you were aiming for. Serendipity chose that my identity, confirmed in modernity, should be deeply rooted in the ancient archaeology of Palestine. Last December, as irony would have it– while conducting research on the Edomite caves in Bet Jibreen – I stood admiring the apse of the Cathedral of St. Anne, totally unaware of my personal genealogical connection to the bishop of the church in the seventh century, to his tribe, and to the Edomites on Mount Hebron over two millennia ago!

“The theological spiritual stature of Mawlana al-Sheikh Mohammad towered over the religious scene in Jerusalem in the eighteenth century,” Sheikh Saranda, from the Afghan Sufi Zawiya and the judge at the Muslim Court, answered my question about the identity of my great-grandfather whose tomb in Al-Aqsa Mosque seemed enigmatic. “A holy man of God (*walli’ min awliya’ allah al-saliheen*),” continued Sheikh Saranda, “he is the last Jerusalemite holy man and jurist. Gnostic, charismatic, erudite,” the venerable jurist added, “Mawlana al-Sheikh Mohammad was in the company of Al-Khader, i.e., connected with Al-Khader.” A mystical personage, Al-Khader figures prominently in Sufi discourse, especially in the writings of Ibn Arabi. “He was duly buried in full view of the Dome of the Rock: an honor that is most fitting for a holy man of his standing.”

Throughout the Muslim world, endowments (*waqfiyyat*) are objective tools to study genealogical lineage and social history by reference to tribal and clan affiliations. Family relations through networks of marriage are maintained

Keep people from their heritage and they are more easily controlled.

rigorously by the Muslim Court and by *Naqeeb al-Ashraf* (the dean of notables) in their social registry.

“According to these registers, the rank of the descendants, as beneficiaries, is meticulously authenticated and documented,” al-Sheikh Mazen Ahram explained.



The chamber in Al-Madrasa al-Baladiyya where Mawlana al-Sheikh Alkhalily met his followers, jurists, and dignitaries and was buried after his death. Here, Mawlana was visited by every scholar and man of great stature during their *ziyarat* (visits) to Jerusalem. This photo shows the window of Mawlana al-Sheikh Alkhalily’s mausoleum, where supplicants and pilgrims to Al-Aqsa would pause to recite verses from al-Qur’an.



■ The mausoleum of Mawlana Alkhalily stands out in the lower court of Al-Aqsa Mosque in Al-Madrassa al-Baladiyya, breaking the monotony of the well-aligned western gallery and the repetitive rhythm of the aligned portico opposite the fountain of Qasim Pasha and Sabyal Qalawoon

The venerable sheikh added firmly, “Our position is to preserve the purity of the lineages, the pedigrees of the families, and the rank of the beneficiaries. In conjunction with the Muslim Court, our work is to give legitimacy, authenticate, and safeguard archival lineages.”

Tribal genealogy, purity of pedigrees, and the study of tribal structure, their subdivisions into phratries and clans, affinal relations, and concomitant alliances constitute a historical discourse that Arabs have refined into a science known as *'ilm al-ansab*. This discourse provides an inventory and history of the Arab tribes and their roots in ancient nomadic tribes whose early beginnings harken back to pre-Abrahamic history. This genealogical discourse presents a historiography in which the tribe and its relationship with other tribes is the object of study. In this social historical discourse, the purity of pedigree of each tribe is traced to its primordial founders. Tribal structure and demographic expansion in space from the Arabian Gulf throughout northern Africa is scrutinized with great fervor.

In my interviews with Sheikh Mazen Ahram, I gained access to the endowment of Mawlana al-Sheikh Mohammed Alkhalily al-Tamimi of which I am a seventh-degree beneficiary. As a beneficiary to another family endowment, that of al-Sheikh Yihya Alkhalily, dating to the eighteenth century, I became aware of the presence of two Alkhalily al-Tamimi lineages. Qleibo, a diminutive of heart in Arabic, is a Sufi honorific name that indicates the overwhelming love that a sixteenth century ancestor harbored for Allah.

“One who studies lineages over long periods of time would frequently see telescoping, i.e., compressing a sequence of father and elder son’s repeated names into a simple two-name mention. Two hundred years of repeated grandfather-grandson names is reduced numerically to one mention.” With this cautionary note I proceeded to draw the lineage map of the Alkhalily clan based on my rank and lineage as outlined and authenticated by the Muslim Court and the Dean of Notables.

My research was given impetus when I was commissioned by a

Ironically, the sense of identification of the various Palestinian Tamimi clans stops at the level of the much-hallowed founding figure Tamim Bin Aws al-Dary, who is considered the first Palestinian Muslim. His Lakhmid, Edomite, and Nabatean tribal lineages are overlooked in a systemically produced lacuna. Paradoxically, the denial of pagan heritage in favor of Islam as the dawn of Palestinian history is ancillary to the overvaluation of nineteenth-century folklore. Hummus, *dabka*, and embroidery have become the salient elements on which Palestinian patrimony is displaced.

magazine to write a biography of Mawlana al-Sheikh Mohammad Alkhalily. His manor house had been the Alkhalily-Qleibo residence for over two centuries until 1922, when the British Mandate government confiscated the property to build the Palestinian Museum on its grounds outside Herod’s Gate. No

sooner had I begun the investigation when I realized that the modern name, Ali Qleibo, camouflages my historical name in Jerusalem’s social registry that traces my lineage to the al-Tamimi tribe in Beit Jibreen in the sixth century. In Jerusalem’s social register, my full name is Mohammed-Ali, Hussein, Ali II, Abd



■ Qasr Alkhalily is recognized as the first manor house built outside the walls in 1714. Abd al-Razzaq, my great-great-grandfather, of the Alkhalily-Qleibo lineage, married Saffiyya Alkhalily, a granddaughter of Mawlana. Four generations of my family had lived continuously in Alkhalily palace outside Herod’s Gate until the British Mandate government confiscated it in 1922. The memories of my father and older cousins who were born and grew up in the palace were haunted by their happy childhood in Qasr and Karm Alkhalily, the palace and its gardens!



■ Kusra Temple: The engraved entablature above the entrance to the Hellenistic-style Edomite double-cave temple is studded with the conventional iconic stellar representation of the pagan Arabian gods al-Lat, al-Uzza, and Manat.



■ The early Christian Nabatean church in Subeita, on the spice road that leads from Petra to Gaza through Bir Saba (Beer Sheva), displays syncretic Christian and Arabian religious symbols in which the cross replaces the goddess Manat.

al-Razzaq II, Ali I, Abd al-Razzaq I, bin Yihya II, bin al-Sheikh Yihyaa I, bin Mohammad bin Sharaf al-Din Alkhalyly al-Tamimi al-Dary.

Throughout the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, the Alkhalyly family had contributed to the intellectual cultural scene in both Damascus and Jerusalem. Numerous jurists, scholars, and scientists hail from the Alkhalyly tribe. In the classic book *Mamluk Jerusalem*, Michael Burgoyne credits Fakhr al-Deen Alkhalyly, the imam of Jerusalem – thence the custodian of the two sanctuaries in Hebron and Jerusalem– and his son Sharaf al-Deen with the restoration of two landmarks of Al-Aqsa Mosque, namely Al-Ghawanimah minaret and the building of Al-Fakhriyyah minaret in 1247.

The history of Jerusalem and that of Alkhalyly are closely interlinked and contribute through a series of intermarriages to the city's rich social tapestry. As early as 1531, Alkhalyly family members had intermittently held the position of *Qadi al-Shafi'yya* and other religious functions, mostly as muftis, jurists, imams, *hafadhat* (persons who memorize), and *khatim* (a person who not only memorizes but fully understands) of al-Qur'an. Archival data reveals that the relationship to Al-Aqsa continued uninterrupted from the early Ottoman times of Suleiman the Magnificent in 1531, beginning with Sharaf al-Din Alkhalyly as Imam of Al-Aqsa, until the present time with Yaser Yihya Alkhalyly (Qleibo) as the last family member who worked as a Qur'an

reciter. The position of mufti remained until the death of Abd al-Mu'ti Alkhalyly, in 1741, who is reported to be the patrilineal cousin of Mawlana al-Sheikh Mohammed. Ibrahim Bin al-Sheikh Yihya bin al-Sheikh Yihya Alkhalyly Qleibo, the uncle of my father, was the last jurist and Sufi.

Alkhalyly al-Tamimi al-Dari is the name of one of the major tribal subdivisions that trace their origin to Al-Sahabi Tamim al-Dari al-Lakhmi al-Adnani, descendant from our father Ishmael. The Tamimi tribe is a wide-ranging subtribe of the Lakhmid tribe whose territoriality extends from the borders of Iran, the Arabian Gulf, and the Fertile Crescent to North Africa! As pagans, the Lakhmid kings المناذرة in Hirat were satellites of the Sassanid Empire. As they adopted Christianity, they shifted alliances to the Byzantines. In the eighth century, Musa bin-Naseer, from the tribe of Bani Lakhm, بني لخم, is the general under whose leadership Tareq Bin Ziyad conquered Iberia! One of the largest nomadic tribes, Bani Lakhm, and their cousins the tribe of Bani Judhama, بني جذامة, formed Palestinian early tribal structure.

Tamim al-Dari, the bishop of Beit Jibreen, learned of Prophet Mohammad and led a delegation to meet with him in Medina where he converted to Islam, kept the Prophet's company (*sahaba*), and learned al-Qur'an by heart to become one of the *hafadhat* al-Qur'an. He participated in the final codification and writing down of al-Qur'an. He stayed on in Mecca until the murder of Caliph Othman (June 17, 656), after which he returned to his hometown Beit Jibreen in Palestine that by then had become a Muslim city. His tomb remains a sanctuary, maqam, on the outskirts of Beit Jibreen.

The Palestinian Lakhmid tribe, from which my family's founding ancestor descends, together with other tribes formed the Edomite Dynasty that reached its zenith in the age of the Edomite King Herod, born in Ashqelon, barely 37 kilometers from Beit Jibreen. Trained and educated in Rome, handsome, charismatic, witty, and shrewd, Herod rose to great power and glory and was favored by Rome. Eager to win the favor of everyone, he built cities in the name of the Caesar (Caesarea), the temple in Jerusalem for the Hasmoneans, and the temple in Hebron for the Edomites, his fellow people. The Edomites' temple, now Abraham's mosque, remains the only intact Herodian structure in Palestine. Originally it was built as a rectangular stone enclosure rising to the height of seven meters of finely chiseled masonry. The Edomite



■ The apse of St. Anne Cathedral where Tamim ben Aws al-Dary was bishop before he met Prophet Mohammad in Medina and converted to Islam. Although the Herodian Dynasty was forced to convert to Judaism, the rest of the Edomites had remained pagan yet willingly converted to Christianity; two Edomite Christians from the Bani Lakhm tribe attended the Ecumenical Councils in both Nicaea and Constantinople.



Qaus, Qaws, the god of rain and fertility, was the chief god of the Edomites, equivalent to Baal in Ugaritic sacred scripture.

temple walls formed a sacred fence, الحرم , for the pantheon of Edomite deities – of which Qaus, قوس , was the supreme god – which separated the sacred space from the profane. The fenced-in, walled, open-air courtyard included *masseboth* (standing holy stones) and sacrificial altars built on flat, rocky outcrop atop a double cave that would have included a bamoth, holy of holies, where the sacred figure of the god is kept alongside the sanctuary of Abraham and his family. The ancient Semitic cult of ancestral veneration and worship, which survives until now among nomadic Arabs, testifies to the lineage of the Edomites as descendants from Duma who is one

of the sons of Ishmael. Despite the vicissitudes of history, the Edomites continued to pray alongside both Christians and Jews until the fourth century, both at Mamre (the house of Abraham) and in their sanctuary, as attested by the complaint of Helena, mother of Constantine, against their pagan rites!

Ibn Katheer, the Arab historian, writes that the seventh generation removed of Tamim al-Dary's forefathers, when they were Edomites and before they converted to Christianity, were the custodians of the pantheon of the Edomite deities in Hebron, hence the honorific epithet al-Dary, after the Semitic word *deir* دير, which

denotes pantheon. In Hebron, the neighborhood next to Abraham's mosque is still known as the quarter of Bani Dar, where the offspring of Tamim al-Dary live and remain beneficiaries of his massive endowments.

Historical revisionism is structurally woven into biblical historiography, augmented by the Jewish historian Josephus whose narratives codify the Semitic nomadic tribes as disjointed, disjunctive nations indifferent to tribal genealogical lineages. The biblical account adopts an outsider's etic approach in contrast to Arabic emic historiography that provides an insider's insight into tribal genealogies. In Arabic historiography, the ancient Semitic nomadic tribes are ascribed their genealogical position and status by tracing their descent from either Qahtan or Adnan, who are considered the southern and northern primordial ancestors of the Semitic peoples. According to this tribal history, Ishmael and Isaac are considered the forerunners of the tribes that bifurcate into Arabs and Hebrews. Ishmael is recognized as the first to speak Arabic, which he learned in his youth in Mecca, and as such is the father of the Arab tribes.

According to the conclusions of archaeologist Avi-Yonah and seminal work by Irfan Shahid, whereas the Edomites are considered descendants of Ishmael's son Duma, the Nabateans are descendants of his son Nebajoh. Along with the Ammonites and Moabites, they belong to the Arabic nomadic tribes that migrated into southern Jordan. The Edomites drifted northward into Wadi Arabah and wandered to southern Palestine, replacing

Ethnographic fieldwork reveals a tapestry of life that has witnessed continued adaptations of the various peoples who have settled in Palestine. Traces of biblical significance, details of ethnographic interest, and vestiges of historical value keep prodding to provide insights that reveal the ethnic diversity that underlies the rich tapestry into which Palestinian culture has woven its unique identity throughout the past five millennia. The primordial mythos of the land is inextricably bound to the traditional relationship of 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, and the diverse dialects.



The tomb of Tamim al-Dary, a close companion of the prophet Muhammad and a holy man of God, survives as a maqam, a sanctuary on the outskirts of Beit Jibreen.

the Amorites on Mount Hebron to build a kingdom that reached as far as Ashqelon (where Herod was eventually born). Through Edomite territory passed the spice road that in antiquity led from southern Arabia through Wadi Arabah, famous for its rich copper mines. They established desert towns such as Al-Khalsah, Abdeh, and Subeita that were to flourish into large cities under Nabatean control, ensuring a steady flow of tribal caravans from Yemen to Palestine and thence to Egypt and Lebanon. King Solomon's famous wealth depended mostly on the copper mines in Arabah that he had wrested from the Edomites whose dominion by then had shrunk to their kingdom in southern Palestine, whence Beit Jibreen and Ashqelon rose as major cities at the crossroads of several silk, spice, and postal roads.

The passion for tribal structures and their traces in time and space has recently experienced a new upsurge with genetic studies of genome and DNA chromosomal drift patterns. In Iraq, Syria, and North Africa, the discourse of tribal history based on genetics has assumed an updated scientific level. The quest for identity as achieved within the tribe remains an overriding preoccupation.

In *'ilm al-ansab*, the concept of geopolitical nationalism dissolves to encompass the Fertile Crescent, Egypt, and North Africa in accordance with the spatial trajectory where the wandering tribes have expanded. Arabic historiography proffers a static concept of time whose discourses center on unity in diversity. The sub-tribal ecological adaptation to particular ecological niches does

not undermine the overriding sense of belonging to the tribe as a whole. Space and time dissolve to produce a sense of collective identity that underlies the modern concept of Arabism, itself a tribal concept.

Contemporary geopolitical nationalism, mitigated by many complex factors, underlies the formation of the modern national Arab states consequent to the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire. Biblical historiography – due to its religious value in the West – has acquired legitimacy, and its assumptions have structured the colonialist paradigm of which the 1916 Sykes-Pico Agreement is a symptomatic expression. The secret treaty was coordinated between the United Kingdom and France, with assent from the Russian Empire and the Kingdom of Italy, to define their mutually agreed spheres of influence and control in an eventual partition of the Ottoman Empire; a preliminary stage for the 1917 Balfour Declaration.

When Allenby entered Jerusalem on December 11, 1917, he was received by the Palestinians as a hero and their liberator from the Ottomans! Little did they know of the dagger he held behind his back.

In contemporary Palestinian culture, Judeo-Christian symbolism and Canaanite rituals are intertwined under the veneer of Islam to such an extent as to dissolve causality. Only through extensive philological, archaeological, ethnological research can we glean sufficient data to fathom the extent to which ancient Semitic religious practices, mixed with Greco-Roman paganism, survived in Christian forms or, conversely, to see that, ontologically, Christian rituals had been disconnected from their Christian

associations and had developed under the Muslim umbrella into an independent institution, as witnessed, for example, in the Palestinian national religious figure of St. George/Al-Khader, a theme I have written about profusely.

The academic discourse, in which the diachronic and synchronic levels of analysis merge, does not change the fact that the modern native discourse provides narratives of Palestinian identity as “Muslim” and “pure Arab” with tribal affiliations; or, if Christian, as “Christian” with “Ghassanid Arab” roots. The contemporary political national identity as “Palestinian-Arab” informs one's position vis-à-vis oneself, one's community, and the outside world. The Palestinian exists on one level that he/she subjectively senses as real, whereas the ancient civilizations, the cultural patrimony, exist on a different plane to which the Palestinian does not relate except on an academic or political/ideological level.

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