Land of Our Ancestors

Cultural and Heritage Tourism in Palestine

By Ali Qleibo

H eritage tourism contributes to the construction of national identity. Through designing an itinerary of selected sites, villages, and towns, the cultural tourism essay proffers a historical narrative that highlights tangible and intangible Palestinian heritage, from early Natufian agricultural settlements through Amorite tribal city-states to the present. The sociopolitical significance of cultural and creative tourism identifies the specific role of the cultural factors that affect the formation of national identity.

The Palestinian sense of historical identity and its roots in the land is polemical. Estranged through complex political circumstances from their cultural patrimony,

Rabud, a traditional courtyard that includes cave dwellings with chambers for men's gatherings and newlyweds. Note the elevated entrance to allow a camel to enter the common human and animal cave dwellings.

Palestinians 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."

My vision of cultural and creative tourism contributes to the construction of national identity and comes in the wake of my recently released book, *Ard al-Ajdad* (Land of Our Ancestors), in which I survey the ecological context which constitutively constituted Palestinian elementary forms of Canaanite religious life, of *hamula*-based tribal systems that underlie the sociopolitical formation and alliances of the Amorite city-states. The chosen sites, namely, Amorite Debir (Rabud) and the Greco Roman-Crusader Ayyubid and Ottoman Sebastiya, may be developed to promote an interactive effect of cultural experience and creative performance that accelerates the construction process of tourism, on the one hand, and consolidates Palestinian national identity, on the other.

Cultural and creative tourism is the product of the high integration of culture and tourism. Unlike traditional Palestinian classical religious tourism relegated to Christian and Muslim holy sites, cultural and creative tourism proffers a new type of experience. It focuses on local original culture and takes innovative thinking as a means to supply both national and international

As an important principle of cultural heritage tourism development, authentic individual attractions have a key role to play in the pursuit of sustainable indigenous tourism, by preserving cultural identity and by fostering a culturally appreciative tourist experience.

Book cover: *Land of Our Ancestors*.

tourists with interactive learning and cultural understanding through the protective development of traditional culture. It creates opportunities for innovation in Palestine's national and international tourism market. Moreover it plays a significant role in cultural communication and perception, insofar as they provide an excellent context for research, representation, and revitalization of national culture, thereby deploying

a nationalist historical narrative by highlighting salient cultural features along an itinerary (discussed at length in *Ard al-Ajdad*) that objectifies our cultural patrimony and its roots in Palestine in the Natufian and Amorite periods through the Bronze Age and the inception of the major Canaanite city-states in Lachish and Megiddo, Hazor and Gezer, Ayalon and Debir. My vision proposes a complex multidisciplinary approach that involves cultural identity, authenticity,

complexity, and diversity. Creative forms present culture in a way that is easy for tourists to accept, further promoting tourists' cultural reception. Thus, creativity fosters national identity, with its primary focus on the relationship between heritage sites and individual local identity, in view of the significant potential role of culture in the promotion of national identity and the fact that creative patterns of expression can vastly advance cultural dissemination.

and integrate cultural knowledge, thus promoting the process of changing the common culture of tourists from one of superficiality to one of deep understanding. Importantly, the formation of cultural identity is based on the experience, perception, and understanding of culture. Cultural and creative tourism clearly provides such an opportunity.

Ethnographic fieldwork reveals a tapestry of life that has witnessed

main staple cereals, namely, wheat, barley, and lentils.

The social-cultural pattern that emerges through familiarity with a cluster of neighboring villages is astounding. 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

A hamula-centered hosh, a courtyard with chambers that lead into the caves below, flanked by *saqifeh* (men's meeting room). The pyramidal-shaped High Place looms in the background.

and perception. On the basis of research and extensive fieldwork, relevant data was collected and analyzed for my book and serves as a guideline involving cultural identity, authenticity, perception, and tourist satisfaction.

Specifically, cultural tourism provides an innovative and designed mode of expression that can realize an extensive and in-depth dissemination of culture through the creation of tourism products. Culture is characterized by uniqueness,

Especially in the field of cultural and creative tourism, creativity means packaging static and esoteric historical culture into an external form that is easy for the public to understand. As a consequence, the relevant memories of tourists in the cultural context are reproduced and consolidated, and the deepening of cultural memory leads to the positive cultural belonging of tourists. Moreover, the core purpose of cultural creative experiences is to provide opportunities for tourists to acquire

continued adaptations of the various peoples who have settled in Palestine. Each group has brought its own unique narrative to the land, such as the ecological adaptations made by the Hurrites, the original cave dwellers of Palestine, the Canaanites and their classification of nature and land use, and the evolution of the original Palestinian agricultural calendar which, during the last four millennia, was based on the cultivation of olives, grapes, figs, almonds, leeks, various species of squash and, of course, the

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.

Authenticity is important in the development of intangible cultural heritage tourism. Each village has its own narrative, its own individuality,

and its own unique character. In this essay, I propose Rabud, a recently abandoned cave city that strikes deep roots in Palestinian Amorite history, as a classic scenic spot of intangible cultural heritage in Dura in Mount Hebron. Sebastiya, on the other hand, brings together Biblical, Roman, Crusader, Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Ottoman archaeological architectural elements. In the historical reconstruction of the two towns, utmost care is paid to handle the elements of intangible and tangible heritage not as cold relics but as an integral expression of key Palestinian symbols and signs within an ecological niche that the Palestinian genius has sculpted throughout the past five millennia.

Khirbet Rabud is one of the walled Canaanite cave cities first settled by the Amorites, who named it Debir, and had the epithet Bet Sepher (House of the Holy Scriptures of the Canaanites). The city had forged the alliance together with the Amorite city-states such as Ayalon (present-day Yalo), Gezer, Yebus (Jerusalem), and Hebron to stop the marauding Hebrew tribes.

Palestinians continued to live on the site until 30 years ago, when they had enough cash to build new cement houses closer to the main road and left their cave dwellings and abandoned the village. The last centenarian died two years ago in the old family cave!

Nowadays, the village provides the romantic afternoon walk where young men enjoy the sunset and a leisurely smoke far from their conservative, vigilant fathers' eyes! The fathers, all of whom were born in the caves, come to reminisce and savor the life they had left behind.

Long stretches of the old Canaanite walls that once surrounded the Amorite sacred city are still visible, as are the Bronze Age caves, where the Canaanite kings and priests and modern Palestinians lived, and one can walk the dust-beaten alleys that join the village. The big cave at the foothill outside the city ramparts where the Israelites locked up and murdered the Canaanite chieftain and priests has collapsed because the lower rocks are chalky. Maqam al-Sheikh Ma'allah, once an open-air Canaanite sanctuary, the High Place, stands in a rubble of boulders. The outline of the sanctuary, where once Baal dwelled, is still discernible. Used by the locals as a burial ground, among the rocks of the stillborn babies, where water conduits and reservoirs abound, the site was reserved for ritual songs accompanied by dances to implore the high and elevated one, Al-Sheikh Ma'allah, for mercy and rainfall. The details are described in *Ard al-Ajdad* – the songs and descriptions of women chanting, imploring the holy man who lives in the high places, the rider of the clouds, for rain, for health, and for all their needs!

A veritable heritage town where myth, legend, and history meet, Rabud is an anthropologist's dream, where ancient history and Palestinian traditional life intertwine in one braid that forms the Palestinian narrative, interweaving in its mythos the relationship of the Palestinian peasant and the land.

The traditional polarity in which cultural anthropologists concern themselves with the living while archaeologists prefer the dead cannot be maintained in modern ethnography that serves as a basis for heritage tourism. While archaeology extends the time frame of human cultures into the distant past, it also provides valuable comparative and interpretive tools that Palestinian cultural anthropologists can use to conduct their fieldwork, an essential preliminary step for a reconstruction of national Palestinian identity. The links between archaeology, ethnography, and national ideology exact a reflexive exploration that involves past and present; a hermeneutic of the diverse civilizations and cultures that have settled throughout millennia in Palestine and creative means to actualize them in the reconstruction of the heritage tourist site.

A major challenge with using archaeology to interpret modern cultural expressions lies in the obvious fact that over time perceptions change. Each culture is a totalizing closed system of signification in terms of which the various cultural expressions acquire their referential value. Homology in form does not reflect structural semantic similarity. We cannot assume that because a sanctuary or shrine (*maqam*) is located in a place that corresponds to the Canaanite sacred "High Place" and may have been a Canaanite sanctuary (*goren*) that it was used the same way in the past by, say, the Jebusites – even if the present-day people are descended from the earlier

Columns of the Roman basilica provide an idyllic setup to watch the moon rise in Sebastiya.

ones, or even if the people we are studying had lived in the relatively recent past. Religious symbolism and all aspects of socioeconomic life are closely related to the particular details of the individual culture in a particular time and space.

Sebastiya, another case in point, is a living ode to Palestinian life, a museum of memories with which we are already acquainted through Fairuz's classical ballads. In fact, the lyrics and melodies immortalized by Fairuz haunt the old town of Sebastiya.

Sebastiya is a "place memory" par excellence, wherein the visitor "remembers" events that have been experienced by others, and it is closely associated with retrocognition, which literally means "backward knowing." In retrocognition, visitors and locals witness events as "a playback of a past scene." Thus, place memory and retrocognition juxtapose present-day environmental place memory with alterations in time that might let you literally see the past (retrocognition). With retrocognition there is a dream-like state and an altered sense of time.

In Sebastiya, history and its relationship with narratives constitutive of national identity weave a lyrical poem that celebrates the roots of Palestinian national identity in antiquity. By situating the cultural architectural narrative within the local spatial context and connecting it to wider regional cultural geography and history, the heritage attraction sites become signifiers that help advance the understanding of the highly diversified cultural expressions of Palestinian national identity.

In Sebastiya, we find a venue that reveals the composite multilayered historical and demographic levels of which our cultural identity is an expression. Sebastiya as an iconic heritage site has come to symbolize fundamental aspects of "Palestinianness," and in so doing presents the nation as a family, a group of relations with shared history, values and beliefs, and common characteristics.

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, and ethnological research can we have sufficient evidence to fathom the extent to which ancient Semitic religious practices mixed with Greco-Roman paganism and 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 in, for example, the Palestinian national religious figure of St. George/Al-Khader, about whom I have written profusely. The proposed ethnographic archaeology perceives time and temporality in distinctive and often radically different ways, from linear, sequential, chronometric, and Cartesian time, to the time defined by the coexistence – rather than succession – of past and present.

The concept of an authentic, fixed Palestinian identity is a myth, a narrative. There was never a period of true identity, a genuine moment that encapsulates a "cultural essence" or "cultural core." Rather, throughout history, each period was merely a fleeting moment that, in its transient fragility, represented a momentary socioeconomic dynamic adaptation of the culture to the available resources, thus ensuring the survival of the family within the tribe. Palestinians remain a tribal people whose elementary kinship unit was dynamically structured by the early pattern of cave dwellings that formed the ancient cities and hamlets that remained inhabited well into the twentieth century. In modernity, the locus of the extended family, the subunit of the tribe (*hamula*) in the Palestinian village, is invariably the *hosh*, the three-generation family-living courtyard. Here, the high school graduation parties, college graduations, engagements, and weddings are celebrated. The *hosh* is also the space where the four generations while away their summer evenings.

In creative heritage tourism, ethnographic archaeology is a multidisciplinary space that brings together the poetics and politics of the present while remaining, at the same time, multi-temporal. It does not aim merely to combine and mix archaeological and ethnographic practices but to produce the ontological and epistemological possibilities of a "thick description" of Palestinian culture; a hermeneutic that engages ethnographic, archaeological, ethnohistorical, biblical, educational, and artistic discourses. It builds on the experience of archaeology and cultural anthropology as well as social history, art, media, cultural studies, and human geography.

Culture is regarded as an essential manifestation of national identity because it originates from a common history and is shaped by cultural channels. More importantly, cultural identity is conducive to an individual's identification with and consolidation of national identity, and cultural reproduction and activation are the core elements of the sustainable development of cultural and creative tourism. Therefore, cultural and creative tourism provides an innovative atmosphere and unique field for tourists' cultural experience, and interaction can also promote tourists' cultural identity. Creativity represents a novel means of cultural expression that caters to the market, contributing to tourists' understanding of common culture from shallow to deep and strengthening tourists' cultural experiences and perceptions. Although previous studies have highlighted the political role of purely sightseeing cultural tourism in shaping tourist identity, such as visits to heritage sites, museums, and war sites, they have ignored the excellent function of creative elements in the value of tourists' cultural experience in the context of the dynamic development of tourism.

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