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Roger Heacock

**To cite this article:** Roger Heacock (2012) The Palestinian Triptych: Official, Elite and Popular Heritage, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 14:2, 297-311, DOI: [10.1080/19448953.2012.681947](https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2012.681947)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2012.681947>



Published online: 31 May 2012.



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# The Palestinian Triptych: Official, Elite and Popular Heritage

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*In the occupied Palestinian territories are found, in addition to classical dichotomies between elite and popular heritage, typically official forms, emanating from the Palestinian Authority's drive for legitimacy in the absence of a state. This triptych is exemplified through sites and sights from Ramallah, specifically an exhibition of clothing, furniture and photographs at Birzeit University, a mechanized family olive press in old Ramallah and the esplanade housing Yasser Arafat's mausoleum. While linked through the involvement of the citizenry, they display particularities, notably in the way each deals with the dilemmas of remembering, forgetting and thus surviving day to day in the face of a long-standing occupation.*

Palestinians enjoy several peculiarities. For one, this initially peasant society is now made up of a majority of refugees, scattered over several countries of the Middle East and the world, including today's Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the occupied Palestinian territories in the West Bank, Jerusalem and Gaza. It is therefore by definition a transnational society, one nonetheless highly conscious of its past, its traditions, its heritage. Scholarship from Ernest Renan<sup>1</sup> onward, however, correctly pointed to one of the essential premises for that sense of common heritage that he called a nation, namely, the process of forgetting: 'Forgetting, and I would go so far as to say, historical error, are an essential factor in the creation of a nation.' This stark formula was more recently reformulated as a form of invention,<sup>2</sup> and at the very least, construction.<sup>3</sup> In Talal Asad's words:

[t]he point has been made repeatedly that in a world subjected for centuries to the forces of European capitalism and imperialism anthropological assumptions about cultural continuity, autonomy and authenticity must be questioned. Much of what appears ancient, integrated, and in need of preservation against the disruptive impact of modern social change is itself recently invented.<sup>4</sup>

However, he suggests that traditions don't always act as an anchor but may on the contrary constitute forces of emancipation or even revolution. It is in this direction

that he suggests one should seek for the significance and prominence of such questions as religious 'rhetoric and practice' in the contemporary Middle East.<sup>5</sup>

Just as societies are divided between elites and subalterns, so is a social formation's heritage made up of an assemblage of images and formulae that pertain to one or another of these categories.<sup>6</sup> In the Palestinian case, there is no state, and the society is under foreign rule designed to reduce the spatiality of the society to a bare minimum, a unique, a simultaneously pre- and post-colonial condition. Precisely because of this absence/presence, I propose to distinguish between three types of connected but divergent examples of heritage: official, elite and popular. All have imbedded within them the colonial setting and versions of explicit or implicit resistance.

I shall here give an example of each through the particular case of Ramallah, which, as the administrative centre of the occupied West Bank, cannot be seen as representative of the occupied territories as a whole. Because it remains a typically Palestinian medium-sized town, as a market for tens of thousands of villagers in the region, it is nonetheless indicative of the general, constantly moving Palestinian heritage conundrum.

### Official Heritage (Figures 1–5)

It expresses a particular myth<sup>7</sup> surrounding the formation of the putative state and state order of Palestine, fraught with discipline and self-assurance. We are witnessing the legitimization and permanence of power.<sup>8</sup> Collective memories are marshalled to this effect, selectively, since a comprehensive type of memorizing can destabilize the



**Figure 1** Entering the Esplanade



Figure 2 'Here lies the body of the fallen president the martyr Yasser Arafat'

order being created or preserved. The plight of the refugees in the Palestinian-Authority-controlled parts of the West Bank is destabilizing, because it is a reminder of the fact that since Oslo, the Authority has de facto closed the door for the time being, to the return to their homes of Palestinian refugees, despite the fact that the leadership of



Figure 3 '... who died a martyr, November 11th, 2004'



**Figure 4** Reconstructing the Presidential Offices or *Muqata'a*, in which Arafat Spent his Final Years under Siege

the ruling PLO cadres in Ramallah are themselves returnees, or people that came back with Yasser Arafat after 1994, and refugees. At the same time, official remembrance has focused, both in quotidian practice and ceremonially, on wiping out or blurring



**Figure 5** The Mosque



certain memories, such as that of the second intifada (2000–2005). The Jenin refugee camp, virtually destroyed when the invading Israeli forces killed dozens of resisting residents in 2002, was rebuilt and re-dedicated by the international community with nary a reminder of that epic struggle. The effacement of certain memories is accompanied, in official representations, by the glorification of others (the current favourite is the *nakba* or expulsion of three-quarters of a million Palestinians in 1948).<sup>9</sup>

Here I shall show how official representations of Palestinian heritage function in the case of the esplanade dedicated to the memory of Yasser Arafat, and containing his tomb. This is to be found in the compound of the *Muqata'a*, the headquarters of the Palestinian presidency.

Upon entering the plaza, military guards in full regalia inform me that they may not be photographed, and so I didn't. Here is the discipline, inculcated from the start. On the right, traversing the square, there is a plaque commemorating President Arafat, and noting that the place was inaugurated by PA President Mahmud Abbas and financed by PADECO, the Palestinian Development and Investment Company, Ltd, a financial consortium with strong ties to the Authority.

Everything is white marble, invoking Jerusalem. At the end of the esplanade is a covered and glass-ringed chamber with the tomb of President Arafat. A verse from the Koran states that someone who dies in the service of God is not dead but alive. Behind the tomb are two Palestinian military guards in dress uniform, who inform me that I may take photographs, but no video. The straight and narrow: some acts are legal, others not. A plaque on the tomb notes that Yasser Arafat is a martyr, that he was martyred on 11 November 2004.<sup>10</sup> Leaving the sepulchre, I find a brilliant white mosque with a brilliant white marble modernistic minaret overlooking the plaza. Alongside the mosque's walls is an inscription by the Palestinian national poet, Mahmud Darwish, who has since also died, with the moving and beautiful statement that 'Yasser Arafat was the longest chapter in our lives / and his name was the new Palestine, resurrected from the cinders of the *nakba* / into the flames of resistance to the idea of the state / and in each one of us there is something of him.' I leave, dazzled by the white courtyard, white walls, white minaret,<sup>11</sup> somewhat intimidated by the instructions and admonitions of the military men. Just before departing, I remembered the place where for two years Arafat was imprisoned, surrounded by Israeli tanks, with more and more of the walls and rooms where he lived destroyed by artillery as time went along, until he continued to live, a lonely, pathetic and yes, heroic figure who, the smaller his living space became, the more faithfully he represented his people, living as they do in an ever-decreasing, more and more concrete-scarred land.<sup>12</sup> In its location now are the new, modernistic offices of the Palestinian presidency (which employs well over 400 people in the West Bank, a further 200 in Gaza). Not a trace of the ruins, which have been cleared up completely. No plaque, no visual commemoration of that period, that process, that uprising, which has now fallen into official forgetfulness, leaving the brilliant smoothness of white Jerusalem marble only. I was being instructed to remember to forget. The temporality is forward to the future, when the state has been consecrated.

### Elite Heritage (Figures 6–11)

In Palestine, it is borne by a growing Westernized middle class, which contrary to officialdom (many of whose cadres originate from this class, thus providing a transversal link), is not dedicated to forgetting and re-remembering. It endeavours rather to *resurrect* a past world of which it is in fact no longer a part, nor would its members wish to be. Their domestic, intellectual and commercial habitat, commensurate with their income, is virtually indistinguishable from that of millions of upper-middle-class people living in Denmark, France, Britain or the USA. Their conscience does not leave them alone though, regarding what they have renounced, because it ensures their difference from the rest of this global elite, Palestinians having always claimed exceptionalism, something usually recognized by friend and foe. They are wistful and nostalgic, although it is unthinkable that they should deprive themselves of central heating in favour of wood stoves, Mercedes Benzes in favour of donkeys (and why in the world should they?), designer jeans in favour of traditional dress. And so they surround and project themselves into these paraphernalia, as shown by the exhibition at Birzeit University's museum, which ran for months during 2010, an exhibition entitled (in English): 'Ramallah: The Fairest of them All?' From the entrance to the museum and faced by this title, we are dealing with a quotation from a Grimm's fairy tale (and Snow White suggests the primacy of European skin colour, combined with innocence of course), which initiates visitors to the Westernized perspective onto this oriental exhibit. Traditional living rooms designating a static type of comfort, a florid, messy (and really existing) general storefront, photographs of



Figure 6 A Nostalgic Exhibition at Birzeit University



**Figure 7** Traditional Palestinian Sitting Room as Presented in the Exhibition

couples married 80 years ago to whom Ramallah elites are surely related, a white bridal gown, a retro-oriented video show. This heritage serves, as elsewhere, to reconcile with a lost and imagined past, to assert the continuity of generations and reassure viewers that a kind of Burkean view of tradition<sup>13</sup> is compatible with Palestinianness:



**Figure 8** Traditional Palestinian Dress ('Thoub'), Ramallah Region





**Figure 9** A Palestinian Wedding, Early Last Century

the international community (closely intertwined, notably through academia, with the Palestinian elites) is enjoined to understand the deep similarities (traceable through the only apparent irony of the exhibition's title) and harmless differences that exist between (some of) us, and them. The new, Occidentalized discourse (un)covers



**Figure 10** Ramallah Weddings of Yore



**Figure 11** Photo of a Storefront in Old Ramallah

an endearing, older, oriental one, justifying Goethe's dictum that 'Whoever knows themselves and others will also recognize that Orient and Occident are no longer separable.'<sup>14</sup>

### **Popular Heritage (Figures 12–17)**

Popular heritage is a representation based on a practice. It emerges from the past, signifies it and at the same time links it to a dynamic present (albeit one that is threatened). It is self-sustaining and has its place in daily existence of the subalterns but subsumes the elites as well. It is a self-repeating, geographically and socially unifying practice, voluntarily undertaken. The example here is that of the downtown, mechanized Ramallah olive press (the *ma'sara*), belonging to the Rantisi family, 1948 refugees from Al-Lidd. It is a three-room, one-storey factory. Here the rickety and complex machines work seven days a week during the season, which begins 1 October and ends 15 November. They take the olives, crushing them, separating skin from water from oil, distilling the yellow-green liquid and dumping the refuse on a tractor that will take it back to the fields. Peasants, but also townsfolk who own olive trees, bring their product and wait for the oil to flow into their 16-litre yellow plastic containers, called *tanakes*. Those present and waiting, all ages and both sexes, engage in sociability—a yearly ritual that permits the Rantis to make a profit, employ half a dozen workers for six weeks or so and contribute to the family's income for the rest of the year, handsomely complementing revenues from their 'nouveau' shop. Customers either distil or (in the case of those who have no tree of their own) buy oil from this *ma'sara* (or one other in the Jerusalem area), including officials, elites and



**Figure 12** The Olive Press and Oil Factory, or *Ma'sara*, in Old Ramallah

ordinary people. The press works from 1 October to 15 November, when it closes down. The next day, all the Rantisi clan, along with others from the same area, go back to Al-Lidd for the yearly celebration of *Mar Jiries* or Saint George (a favoured Orthodox saint, for the Muslims the likewise deeply revered Khader), they obtain



**Figure 13** Olives Moving towards the Press





**Figure 14** Green and Black Together

one-day permits from the Israeli authorities and a daylong celebration takes place as it has for generations. The olive season is now over.

The Israeli occupation is present in all three types of heritage, through differing vehicles. In the official heritage sites, it is explicit through the references to martyrdom



**Figure 15** The Rantisi Brothers, Owners of the Press



**Figure 16** The Fourth Generation of Rantisi Refugees in Ramallah

and the Darwish quotation. It is, however, presented in a selective way: the past occulted, the future ever-present, because it is clear that the martyred President Arafat is destined to find his permanent place of repose in the Haram al-sharif in Jerusalem near the al-Aqsa mosque, as symbolized by the visual and symbolic references to the



**Figure 17** The Final Product



Holy City. In elite heritage, one senses somehow that the irrecoverable past to which one clings is lost because it has been stolen by the occupation. However, this is not explicit (something that just five years ago would have been unthinkable) and only a supposition by one or the other visitor. Interviews of the Rantis in their little oil factory show how strongly present the occupation is in this case of popular heritage: they complained bitterly of the reduced olive crops resulting from Israeli measures such as the long wall and settler violence; they need to fight for the yearly permit to make the St George pilgrimage.

There is most certainly in all of the forms described a degree of silencing involved, as though to render life liveable. The hundreds of Israeli checkpoints are, for example, visually absent. However, they are implicitly ever-present: Yasser Arafat's remains cannot find rest in the *Haram*; refugees from Al-Lidd are not sure they can attend their most important yearly ritual; and the Palestinian elites must leapfrog their environment for spatial and temporal links because they cannot traverse it. This brings us back to the question of forgetting, which in this case relates to the geographically and historically ubiquitous occupation. There are marked differences here. Official heritage is very clear regarding what will be remembered and what forgotten: the past is summed up by the present. Elite heritage (and this could be illustrated in the more general movement of culture, art and especially, the shimmering glass architecture of Ramallah) has resolutely set out to transcend, and thus in a sense, forget the conflict between occupier and occupied, in its daily forms. As for popular heritage, with its grounding in the political economy of quotidian existence, it persists in remembering and reminding, in short, reliving. There is nonetheless an underlying unity between these three ideal types, because those who engage in and thus propel them are the same people, the citizenry. The three types of heritage form a complex and contradictory totality denoting the particular and the universal in the Palestinian memory, its experience and its projections.

The heritage triptych forms a true equilateral triangle in Ramallah, creating significant virtual space in the cultural field. In other parts of Palestine, elite heritage partakes of the other two to a far greater extent, and the triangle is an isosceles one. In the absence of significant social or foreign conflict, the triangle would tend to flatten out into a straight line (insignificance of official heritage due to its absorption by both of the others). In the Palestinian conflict, all three, attempting to reframe the unaccepted reality of a long-standing occupation, directly reflect conflict heritage solutions. Taking Fernand Braudel's three types of temporality:<sup>15</sup> the 'longue durée' (many hundreds of years—olive oil production), 'social time' (a generation—the Birzeit exhibition) and immediate time (the present—the plaza and presidential grave), various levels of temporality have become vehicles for denying the occupation, since it can't be ended. Thus, repetition, the flight into an ideal past and the glorification of an existing order are all changing forms of heritage production in situations of conflict.

## Notes

- [1] Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* Conférence faite en Sorbonne, le 11 mars 1882, Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 1882.

- [2] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983.
- [3] Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity. The Formation of Modern National Consciousness*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997.
- [4] Talal Asad, 'Afterword: from the history of colonial anthropology to the anthropology of Western hegemony', in George Stocking (ed.), *Colonial Situations: Essays on the Contextualization of Ethnographic Knowledge*, Wisconsin University Press, Madison, 1991, p. 316.
- [5] *Ibid.*, p. 318.
- [6] Speaking of India at the end of the colonial period, Partha Chatterjee states that 'the split between two domains of politics—one, a politics of the elite, and the other, a politics of the subaltern classes—was replicated in the sphere of mature nationalist thought by an explicit recognition of the split between a domain of rationality and a domain of unreason . . . But it was a rational understanding which, by the very act of its recognition of the Other, also effaced the Other' (Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World—A Derivative Discourse*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986, p. 153).
- [7] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Seuil/Points, Paris, 1957, p. 193: a 'myth is a system of communication, it is a message'.
- [8] In the occupied territories, the number of such monuments is as yet minimal. There are literally hundreds of official, semi-official and religious monuments consecrated by Israel in the various territories it controls, including the West Bank and East Jerusalem, many of which pre-exist the state by centuries, and have been appropriated to entrench the Zionist narrative. Cf. Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2001.
- [9] For a decade or so, 9 December was celebrated as the day on which, symbolically, the intifada broke out in 1987, a day marked by agency. Now it is officially forgotten, in favour of 15 May 1948, a day of victimhood. Cf. Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.
- [10] This is essentially true, since whether or not he was actually poisoned as some claim, the very violent and restrictive conditions of his residence in the *Muqata'a* from spring 2002 to his death in November 2004 most certainly played a role in his illness.
- [11] This is, with due regard to cultural differences, reminiscent of the white monuments of official Washington. Early in the Oslo period, when Arafat was trying to establish his official presence in Ramallah, one of his people came to the Birzeit University History Department to find out if any of us had notions, pictures or texts regarding the White House in Washington, which the Authority was considering as a model for Arafat's future offices and residence.
- [12] Cf. Raja Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape*, Profile Books, London, 2007.
- [13] In his contemporary critique of the French Revolution, Edmund Burke states that if 'civil society be the offspring of convention [by which Burke means tradition], that convention must be its law . . . But all is to be changed. All the pleasing illusions which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which . . . incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion . . . Along with its natural protectors and guardians, learning will be cast into the mire and trodden down under the hoofs of a swinish multitude.' Edmund Burke, 'Reflections on the revolution in France', in *The Works of Edmund Burke*, 3 vols, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1860 [1790], Vol. 1, pp. 488–491.

- [14] Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *West-Oestlicher Divan*, Reclam, Frankfurt am Main, 1999.  
[15] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World at the Time of Philip II*, 2 vols, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996.

**Roger Heacock** has been a professor at Birzeit University for the better part of three decades, after having taught at the University of Paris VII. He has been a guest professor at the University of Vienna, Institute of Contemporary History and at the Collège de France.

**Address for correspondence:** Ibrahim Abu-Lughod Institute of International Studies, Birzeit University, PO Box 14, Birzeit, West Bank, Palestine.  
Email: rheacock@birzeit.edu