

Between al-Khader and Nabi Rubeen: Religious Pilgrimage and Palestinian Shared Worlds of Meanings¹

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Outside the West Bank town of Bethlehem lies the small village of al-Khader, home to the Monastery of Saint George, the patron saint of Palestine. Every year, in May, hundreds of Christian and Muslim Palestinians converge on the area to take part in a festival celebrating the life and memory of the 4th century Christian martyr. Although Saint George is also the patron saint of numerous countries, including England, Georgia, and Portugal and is widely venerated in the Eastern Orthodox and Coptic churches as well as among many branches of Islam, the yearly pilgrimage has a special intensity here due to the fact that the saint's mother was originally from the city of Lydda, which fell into Israeli hands after the 1948 war.

The pilgrimage was historically a regional occasion drawing thousands of visitors from near and far, but the destruction of Palestinian communities inside Israel in 1948 and the occupation of the West Bank in 1967 have reduced what was once a rambunctious festival into a more low-key celebration. Despite the changes, however, the intercommunal nature of the festival – and the spiritual syncretism of different faiths in Palestine it reveals – remains an important reminder of the cosmopolitan, crosscutting forms of being in the world that preceded the rise of identity politics, and which can be witnessed in the wide variety of festivals, pilgrimages, beliefs, traditions, and practices that are shared across communities of ostensibly separate religious groups.

Throughout Western Asia, religious forms of identification have historically formed part of a patchwork of identities – sectarian, geographic, regional, tribal – that have contributed to rooted and yet cosmopolitan identities. Within this model, differences abounded that were not hidden, celebrated or consciously tolerated, but merely accepted as a fact of life and an obvious reminder of the



Fig.1 - Enjoying a water-pipe along the shore south of Jaffa at Nabi Rubeen festival, September 1930. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

abundant diversity of God’s creation. Difference was something natural and not particularly noteworthy, and it was this daily, lived cosmopolitanism that contributed to centuries of syncretism as well as coexistence. Centuries upon centuries of migrations throughout Western Asia had produced richly varied cultural tapestries even within relatively tiny geographical zones, and while at certain times and places religious communities might have maintained some degree of insularity, this existed within a broader context where difference was expected and recognized as natural.

This model of cosmopolitanism differs greatly from liberal notions of cosmopolitanism common today, where difference is considered a unique and new social feature (often imagined to be a product of colonial modernity as well as immigration to the post-1945 “West”) that must be named, celebrated, and recognized within the scope of multiculturalism, identity, and identity politics. Forms of lived cosmopolitanisms have been analyzed to a certain extent in academia before – we can think of terms like Asef Bayat’s “cosmopolitanism from below” or Homi Bhabha’s “vernacular cosmopolitanism” – but much of the informal and formal understandings of the phenomenon still tend to take colonialism as an originary moment, ignoring the hybrid and syncretic practices that characterized life around the world long before the movement of people and goods was irreversibly intensified during the colonial era. Lived cosmopolitanisms, however, offer understandings of self and community predicated on long histories of interactions, where syncretism is a given and where differences exist but are not “tolerated,” but rather taken for granted as a given part of reality.

But this unselfconscious cosmopolitanism is quickly fading, and has been fading for decades. Palestinian Authority Minister of Tourism Rula Maayah lately told me that an

image she likes to show tourists which explains the Palestinian approach to diversity is one from a recent coffee-table book. It shows a Muslim woman in hijab praying beside a Christian woman at the Church of the Nativity. It is noteworthy, however, that the minister was not referring to a moment that she herself had witnessed; she was referring to a photograph in a book oriented toward tourists. Many of the images in such coffee-table books popularly sold in Bethlehem today are staged, and many of those which are candid were either taken decades ago or during a specific event, such as a tour from a primarily Muslim area. The image in the book was most likely a staged picture meant to indicate to the reader a conscious celebration of diversity. In the minister's retelling, the image's attraction relied specifically on the visible recognition of "the other(s)" seated beside each other and the knowledge that this tolerance of the other's presence was being communicated to the foreign audience represented by the consumer, whom she might have (correctly) assumed was likely to imagine Palestinians as religiously intolerant.

This self-conscious utilization and emphasis on demonstrating visible co-existence, however, is the opposite of quotidian cosmopolitanism. It is recognizably forced and comes directly from the playbook of liberal multiculturalism, in which each of the races and sects is offered a few moments on the podium to "represent" their identity in native costume and prove that the nation as a whole is a welcoming place. These pageants of identities pay lip service to diversity while simultaneously relying on identitarian politics and visible difference for meaning. In Palestine and across Western Asia and other parts of the world, it is this same trend towards identity politics as a form of understanding oneself and recognizing one's "community" that is animating so many of the dramatic changes we are seeing today.

There have always been different classes and social groups in Palestinian society. But the growing intensity with which sectarianism has come to color discussions of a wide variety of social issues hints at how deeply identity politics has taken root. Yearly debates around whether to erect police checkpoints around Manger Square in Bethlehem to limit Christmas celebrations only to Christians contain a clear subtext – frequently made explicit – regarding the threat of Muslim men ogling (unveiled) Christian women, even though staring or sexual harassment obviously affects women of all confessional backgrounds and is carried out by men of all confessional backgrounds. Due to the Christian community in Bethlehem having a primarily urban and thus more educated character as compared to the relative concentration of Muslims in nearby villages or in refugee camps, debates around conservatism and social norms often neatly align along sectarian lines, and questions of ownership of land or property is increasingly couched in terms that imagine the rural migration to the urban center accompanied by educated urban migration abroad as a "Muslim takeover." These discourses, meanwhile, reinforce the Christian sense of being outsiders amid many Muslim Palestinians in Bethlehem, and underline the idea of communal difference and the recognition of oneself more as part of a "separate community," and less as part of a community in which there exists natural difference.

The shared worlds symbolized by the shrine of al-Khader are increasingly few and far between in Palestinian society. But this is not a story about Islamic fundamentalism, anti-



Fig.2 - Men holding banners aloft during a process at the Nabi Rubeen festival, September 1930. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

modern radicalism, or ISIS; it is a tale of colonialism and identity politics more broadly.

As Palestinian sociologist Salim Tamari demonstrates in *Mountain Against the Sea*², the syncretism we glimpse in Palestinian life today was more extensive and rich prior to the arrival of British colonists in the region in the late 19th century and early 20th centuries, a time when the religious festivals shared by Palestinian Christians, Muslims, and Jews were far more numerous.³ My intention here is not to romanticize Palestinian life during the Ottoman period in any way, but instead to stress that the implementation of the British bureaucratic management of Palestinian life and religion led to an increasingly limited, literal, and identitarian understanding of religious space and worship (a process some have called “Protestantization,” wherein every aspect of worship must be subject to supposedly “scientific” scrutiny).

Colonial authorities banned certain religious groups from holidays associated with one group or another in the interest of public order, and the memory of shared worlds of meaning that these intercommunal festivities embodied and produced slowly began to slip away (before they were pulverized in the 1948 Nakba, when the geography of those memories was all but eradicated as well). This process was by no means unique to Palestine in the colonial world; anthropologist Reza Masoudi Nejad, for example, shows⁴ how the British banned Hindu attendance at the Muharram ritual in Mumbai in the late 19th century, and progressively limited Sunni participation as well, turning a shared ritual into a constant reminder of sectarian difference instead.⁵ In certain places in Palestine, meanwhile, the process went even further than merely banning participation on holy days. Rachel’s Tomb near Bethlehem, for example, went from being a shrine shared by Muslim,



Fig.3 - Stalls set up at the Nabi Rubeen festival, September 1930. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Christian, and Jewish women at the beginning of the 20th century to one where Jewish worshippers became separated from Christian and Muslim worshipers – a process that culminated with Israel’s construction of the separation wall around the shrine in recent decades that has completely limited access to non-Jews. Although this process was not initiated or led by colonial authorities, it occurred under colonial rule and proceeded according to the logics of sectarianism that were becoming increasingly dominant.

None of this is to suggest that the colonizers had a sinister plot to violently oppose religious identities to each other, or sought to do so by ruining popular festivals. The emphasis on religion and religious identity ties more into issues of power, as administrators sought to understand, categorize, and control through whatever means possible. Their focus on religion and religious identity was an integral part of this. It was done through the creation of systems of governance whereby citizenship was linked to religious identity and participation in the public sphere in a variety of legalistic and ever-more invasive mechanisms than ever before known. One result was setting in motion an identitarian politics unique in regional history. This emphasis on religion and sect as markers of personal identity was codified in colonial laws and passed on to post-independence republics. Or in Palestine’s case, occupied zones under foreign rule.

It is important to note that there was a brief moment of colonial and immediately post-independence modernity in which the aesthetics of sectarian difference seemed to fade away, particularly among the elite classes and aspiring middle classes. Inspired by the modernization theory that underpinned both socialist and capitalist logics and that assumed the unidirectional movement of all history in the direction of a singular



Fig.4 - Overview of the Nabi Rubeen festival, September 1930. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

civilization, global styles and preferences increasingly merged into a singular Western ideal in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s that put the identity-laden years of colonialism – and the identity politics that followed – on hold, albeit briefly.

The best example of this brief pause can be found in the 1970s photo albums widely shared on Facebook these days, especially in the Middle East, where images of women with long hair in trendy clothes figure prominently. In Iran, as in many other countries, these albums and the figures of women in them evoke a nostalgia for a time “before” hijab, a moment when “we, too, were modern” and when identity seemed to have faded away into a never-ending episode of the Brady Bunch (albeit with thicker mustaches, for both genders).

These albums always make me laugh quite a bit. From the stories I gather, my own family in Iran lived in a small, unheated apartment built by my grandfather in a poor seaside village. Like the majority of Iranians they were working-class, generally conservative, and rather confused (though admittedly titillated) by the mini-skirts of the liberal middle and upper classes. These clothes may have suggested a kind of “we’re all the same” post-identity modernity in the eyes of the wearers, but for my family, they were a clear marker of the wearer’s belonging to a world that was of an elite, seemingly not of Iran, and which they had trouble seeing as potentially related to themselves. The emotions and thoughts provoked by these cultural changes hint at the inherent contradictions within liberal Western notions of cosmopolitanism, which imagine themselves as universal and universally applicable despite their specific

genealogies that are rather easily recognized as non-universal from the outside. The identity politics of the 1979 revolution that later swept Iran were a welcome relief for my family from a world and society they felt they had ceased to understand – and that had ceased to understand them.

With the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini (and the forms of religious identity politics all over the world that he was a part of) came a sense of rootedness, of place, of history, and of being that made sense and appealed to a people who had been told for the last century by local elites as well as global colonial discourses that they (and their culture) were the epitome of backwardness. Those aspects of their identity that were previously derided and mocked were now upheld and espoused as markers of their greatness and uniqueness, and the old equations of modernity, privilege, savageness were turned on their heads. Finally, the “wretched of the earth” – to borrow Frantz Fanon’s apt phrase – could be proud of their suffering, and a reduced, streamlined, and rigidly delineated identity provided the supposed path to freedom.

Perhaps this is one of the most compelling aspects of identity and identitarian politics: in a world still defined by the contours of colonialism and those it deems outliers, identity offers a clear sense of self and pride. Identitarian consciousness rejects the complex and convoluted shared worlds of cosmopolitan meaning that preceded it, the same worlds that were derided as nonsensical by modernity. Instead, a clear new identity is presented with often tenuous or nearly non-existent roots in the old, rooted in text and disregarding actual lived experiences of the diversity of human culture, language, and practice. These days, for better or worse, it is supposedly “scientific” written facts that matter, not the collected centuries of experience, popular memory, and common knowledge.

Nabi Rubeen: Dancing in the Sea at Jaffa

Among all of the local celebrations and festivals that used to mark the religious calendars of Palestinians across the Holy Land and even places far beyond, Nabi Rubeen (“the Prophet Rubeen”) was one of the largest. Every August in a small village less than 20 kilometers south of Jaffa, tens of thousands of Palestinians descended upon the shrine dedicated to the first son (Rubeen in Arabic and Reu’ven in Hebrew) of the Biblical prophet Jacob and his wife Leah and took part in a massive carnival that often lasted up to a month.

An expansive tent city was erected at the site every year to host the pilgrims in a celebration that lasted throughout the day and night, and the carnival combined religious rituals such as prayers, supplications, and mystical practices along with somewhat more worldly pursuits such as swimming, dancing, wrestling, storytelling, camel- and horse-racing, hashish and opium smoking, fortune-telling, and other pleasures that can be enjoyed in the atmosphere of moral exception that carnivals so successfully foster. As Salim Tamari has noted, the festival was a “libidinous outlet for the urban masses” in which “modern recreational adaptations coped with a traditional celebratory culture without subverting or disrupting it.”⁶



Fig.5 – The neglected tomb of Nabi Rubeen today, converted into a shrine for ultra-Orthodox Jews. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, User: Ori_Livneh.

Among the Palestinians were many Arabic-speaking Jews, as Menahem Klein notes in his recent book *Lives in Common*, as well as European Jews resident in Jaffa and its surroundings. He cites an Ashkenazi Jew named Yair Hamburger who joined the pilgrimage in 1867 and noted that “The Jews too can go to that place without fear and the Ishmaelites (Arabs) esteem the Jews and treat them with respect when they arrive there, and especially anyone named Reuven [Rubeen], and admonish them to come pray also at the tomb of Reuven saving that he was one of the sons of your patriarch Jacob.”⁷⁷ Klein goes on to note that Jewish newspapers in Palestine continued to comment on the processions throughout the early 20th century, and Jewish visitors remained undeterred as the yearly parade from Jaffa to Nabi Rubeen that commenced the celebration took on increasingly nationalist tones.

Tamari has argued that the festival was both religious as well as “extremely ‘secular,’” pointing out that “religious sheikhs not only participated in the festival’s licentious activities, but they also blessed them and gave them public approval.”⁷⁸ Although this supposed discrepancy might appear odd to a contemporary observer, it should be stressed that the notion of an inherent contradiction between religion and secularity is a deeply modern concept that emerged out of a specifically mid-19th century European mode of thinking. As anthropologist Talal Asad has argued, the creation of a supposedly separate “secular” sphere – which in turn produced a supposedly specifically religious sphere – was an intellectual duality that would come to be applied in colonial administration as well.⁷⁹ The very notion that forms of popular culture that might be today seen as licentious or morally suspect are somehow opposed to religiosity and worship is a modern concept.

Religious festivals around the world have almost always been historically associated with sensuality and licentiousness – think of Carnival in the Catholic tradition as an example that persists until this day, or the constant debates over forms of Egyptian *mawlid* Sufi festivals that involve gender-mixing and dancing¹⁰ – and the holiday itself is a moment of moral exception in the life of ordinary people where the impermissible becomes permissible, all under the cover of religious celebration.

To suggest that there is some kind of division between “secular” festivities and “religious” blessing not only applies a secular, identitarian logic that imagines these domains as discrete categories, it also implies that they should somehow be disentangled and returned to their respective domains. The argument that the festival itself somehow contains contradictory features by its very nature suggests that these features should naturally exist separately, opposing the long history of hybridity and syncretism of the profane and the sacred and falling into the same logic trap that would come to be applied by British authorities, Zionists, and Islamic reformists in the century that followed.

Mandating Religion: Nabi Rubeen Disappears

When the Protestant British administrators who arrived in Palestine in the late 1910s and soon took control of the region arrived south of Jaffa and witnessed the festival of Nabi Rubeen where tens of thousands of all faiths came together in a ritualistic embrace of the sea’s fertility; where Sufis danced in *zikr* at the seashore while women tore off their clothes and ran into the sea asking for blessings; where men told tales in a hundred dialects of Arabic while smoking opium; where performing women wandered through singing and harassing locals for cash – those British must have wondered to themselves: what does this have to do with Reuben the son of Jacob and Leah mentioned in the book of Genesis? What is the religious significance of this supposedly religious *mawsim*?

This rationalization of religion and identity, and the need to categorize, understand, and regulate that it entailed, led to the greater policing of the festival. When Zionist militias – whose ideology was perhaps the most obvious embodiment of sectarian identity politics in existence at the time – marauded through Palestine in 1948, the festival was destroyed once and for all. The village was very nearly depopulated, the homes, coffee shops, and shrines torn down, and some 750,000 Palestinians forced into exile.

It is said that for some years after the Nakba, the women of the surrounding villages and towns – now all packed into refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza – tried to recreate the festival of Arba‘at Ayyub (which occurred just before the Rubeen *mawsim*) by using local springs for the fertility songs and dances.¹¹ But as the years passed, the memories faded, and by the 1970s a new generation emerged that had only known war and struggle and for whom it seemed obscene to dance around in dresses pouring water on each other while singing about sex. The shared worlds of meaning that the site of the festival allowed Palestinians of all faiths and backgrounds to produce and reproduce – having been subjected to rationalization under British colonialism and to mass deportation under Zionist nationalism – were dealt their death blow by the rise of identity politics.

But this process is not always violent. The contestations of identity and meaning today, surrounded by the ruins and remains of the shared cosmopolitanisms of the past, often take place in the world of meaning and our relationship to these sites of memory. Although the shrine of Nabi Rubeen near Jaffa has all but disappeared from Palestinian popular consciousness, it has been revived by religious Jews as a site of Orthodox worship. On the weekends one finds the occasional group of male seminary students reading Torah in the shrine, a far cry from the liminal worlds of fantasy and social deviance the site once hosted. The inscriptions have been painted over and the carnivalesque world of complexity that embraced an exuberant and cosmopolitan irrationality have been replaced by a literalistic, identitarian shell. The descendants of those who once danced in the sea at Jaffa, meanwhile, remain stuck behind an apartheid wall with ID cards that inscribe and re-inscribe their identities as the unwanted, expendable Other.

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Endnotes

- 1 This article is an extended version of a piece which was originally published in *The State* as part of a collection on “Lived Cosmopolitanisms in Western Asia” on Sept. 29, 2014. The collection is available at: <http://www.thestate.ae/issue-3-lived-cosmopolitanisms-in-western-asia-edited-by-ajam-media-collective/>.
- 2 <http://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520251298>
- 3 Salim Tamari, *Mountain Against the Sea: Essays on Palestinian Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
- 4 <http://www.mmg.mpg.de/subsites/diversities/current-issue/language-and-superdiversities-ii/practising-fractal-shii-identities-through-muharram-rituals-in-mumbai/>
- 5 Reza Masoudi Nejad, “Practising Fractal Shi’i Identities through Muharram Rituals in Mumbai,” *Diversities* 14 (2012): 103-117.
- 6 Tamari, *Mountain Against the Sea*, 27.
- 7 Menahem Klein, *Lives in Common* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 88.
- 8 Tamari, *Mountain Against the Sea*, 30.
- 9 See for example Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
- 10 For a discussion of how Salafist preachers and Saudi funding have targeted sites of Sufi rituals and sought to remove supposedly improper or impure elements from them in modern Egypt, see Paul Amar, *The Security Archipelago: Human-Security States, Sexuality Politics, and the End of Neoliberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013): 99-138.
- 11 It is important to note, as this anecdote suggests, that forms of religious syncretism are often better preserved among women than among their male counterparts. The gendered aspect of shrine worship and the relatively slower penetration of a literalistic interpretation of religion among women more broadly has been noted around the world in many different situations. For another example of a primarily female shared shrine in Bethlehem itself, see Glenn Bowman, “Sharing and Exclusion: The Case of Rachel’s Tomb,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 58 (2014): 30-49 and Glenn Bowman, “A Weeping on the Road to Bethlehem: Contestation over the Uses of Rachel’s Tomb,” *Religion Compass* 7, (2013): 79-92.