



***The Folktales of Palestine: Cultural Identity, Memory and the Politics of Storytelling***, by Farah Aboubakr. London: I.B. Tauris, 2019. 256 pages. \$115.00 cloth, e-book \$103.50.

REVIEWED BY INEA BUSHNAQ

One could say that Farah Aboubakr's book *The Folktales of Palestine: Cultural Identity, Memory and the Politics of Storytelling* is yet another instance of the fallout from the Nakba. Clearly the Aboubakr family is part of the Palestinian diaspora. In her introduction, the author writes of a childhood lived constantly on the move but never in Palestine. Yet she knew she was Palestinian and felt nostalgia for the place she had not seen because of the folktales her mother used to tell in Palestinian colloquial Arabic. For her, these oral tales embodied Palestine. Her book, originally a PhD thesis at the University of

Manchester, is an analysis of cultural identity and memory as manifested in traditional Palestinian folktales and of the preservation of this oral art as a form of resistance.

In another part of the world, and thirty years earlier, anthropologist and folklorist Sharif Kanaana, returning to Palestine after fifteen years away, was driven—by guilt for his long absence and by nostalgia for the Palestine he had left behind—to publish for the English reader a collection of forty-five folktales, *Speak Bird, Speak Again* (University of California Press, 1989) with fellow Palestinian and professor of English Ibrahim Muhawi. Kanaana's aim was to preserve and revive the memory of pre-1948 Palestine: "*Speak Again* refers to revival, regeneration [and] also to hope" (p. 176). Aboubakr chose the book and its Arabic version *Qul ya ta'ir* (Mu'assasat al-dirasat al-Filastiniyya, 2001) as primary texts for her work.

Unlike other collections, these two subjects come with a "comprehensive scholarly apparatus" (p. 47) and hence were ideal for analysis. The author's quest covers not only the forty-five folktales but also the motives of the compilers and their "meta-material," of which there is a generous amount: fifty pages of introduction, thick layers of footnotes, explanatory "afterwords," and folkloristic analyses. Aboubakr even combs the foreword by the late folklorist Alan Dundes and the authors' acknowledgements.

It was outsiders who first paid scholarly attention to Palestine's oral narratives. The two-volume *Volkserzaehlungen aus Palaestina* (Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1918) was collected by German biblical scholar Hans Schmidt and annotated with references to the Bible. By contrast, the focus of Aboubakr and her subjects, Kanaana and Muhawi, Palestinians all, is squarely on their threatened society as depicted in the folktales. The question of Palestine remains open: the country under constant threat of erasure from the map and its culture denied. A sense of loss has continued to be shared by most Palestinians. That both Aboubakr and Kanaana turned to the folktale as an affirmation of Palestine's existence is interesting but not surprising. Palestine had been largely an agricultural society of peasant farmers. The *fallahi* oral tale, handed down from preliterate times, remains its most enduring collective artform. Beyond entertainment, the contents of the stories also convey Palestine's cultural traditions and social values. Kanaana sums this up as quoted in an

interview that forms appendix 1 of the book: “The folktale represents the whole society which participated in forming it . . . [It] is a coherent and distinctive chunk of the culture; it gives a setting and what takes place within that setting” (p. 168).

Aboubakr, a teaching fellow at the University of Edinburgh, applies her considerable learned expertise to the seemingly simple stories. Her book is studded with citations of the theories and work of other scholars. Her rich bibliography comprises one tenth of her script. As she studies Kanaana’s text step by step, Aboubakr echoes his organization of the stories under stages of the life cycle (“Individuals, Family, Society, Environment, Universe”) and probes his narrative for the subjects that she is interested in: collective memory, power, women, rebellion, and identity. Although their styles and emphases diverge as the scholar and her subjects consider the same forty-five tales, the conclusions they reach are not unrelated. In her transcribed interview with Kanaana, the author comments on the way his book is divided: “I agree with you. The family is considered the cornerstone of the society,” and he responds: “Especially the women as they represent the core of the family and society” (p. 174).

Only two full stories, with their Arabic originals, appear in Aboubakr’s book, plus brief summaries of twelve stories she quotes. For the general reader, the book reads too much like a dissertation, which it is. On the other hand, students of folklore and of folk narratives generally will thank Aboubakr for her meticulous examination, under an academic microscope, of the role of folktales in Palestinian society, the role of women as storytellers, and the role of compilers in choosing which stories to publish.

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