



Plant-Lore in Palestinian Superstition

Tawfiq Canaan

Marking the olive harvest of 2005, the Jerusalem Quarterly presents here an excerpt from “Plant-lore in Palestinian Superstition,” published in the Journal of Palestine Studies (1928). The essay is exceptional among Canaan’s works in its emphasis on agricultural lore, rather than the healing and prophylactic properties of plants. Canaan’s complete writings and amulet collection have been catalogued and are on display at Birzeit University.

After finishing the harvest the fellah thinks with a sense of gratitude on Him who gives everything. He therefore consecrates to some sanctuary the first fruits and the best of the oil. Thus the first *sa’* of wheat is known by the name of *sa’ el-Halil* (Abraham’s *sa’*) and is given to the poor. The ‘Idwan bedouin say: *awwal sa’ qta’ lan-nabi Su’eb* - The first *sa’* is the fee due to the prophet Su’eb. The corn is given to the *qayim* of the sanctuary. Sometimes a sheep is killed as soon as threshing is over. It is called *haruf el-Halil* - Abraham’s sheep. Many Mohammedans hang in a *weli* one or more *kaff qamh*, as

The illustrations featured here are watercolor paintings of Palestinian wildflowers painted by Lois Nakhleh.

a sign of their gratitude. The Christians offer to a church in the name of the Virgin a quantity of the newly pressed oil. Only after such an offering has been given may the freshly pressed oil be used or sold. Formerly the inhabitants of Bet Djala were in the habit of offering the first fruits of their vineyards on the alter of the church. Even now the first grapes are by many offered in the church on the Feast of the Transfiguration. They are blessed by the priest and then distributed among the congregation. It is a great pity that most of these customs are falling out of use. They show clearly the persistence of the custom of first-fruits mentioned in the Bible.

The harvest of the corn and the period spent in the vineyards and the time of gathering the olives are always occasions of joy. Men, women and children are busily occupied. The olive and corn harvests demand heavy work, while watching the vineyards and gathering in the grapes is a cheerful time of recreation. The whole family goes out to the vineyard where they spend from two to three months, living in huts (*qasr*) built of branches and rushes (Math. 21:33, Is. 5:2). The substructure is made of loose stone and the hut itself is reconstructed every year. From these high "towers" it is very easy to overlook and guard the whole vineyard. In the daytime the singing and shouting of women and girls fill the air while they gather or spread figs for drying or attend to some other work. Only the first signs of the approaching rain put an end to this primitive and natural outdoor life, and hills and mountains again become lonely and deserted (Is. 16:10). In the afternoon the greater part of the family gathers under a tree (I Kg. 4:25, Mic. 4:5) chatting, sewing and embroidering. As in olden times (Zeph. 3:10) guests are received and attended to under trees. Donkeys and mules are still fastened to a vine or a fig-tree (Gen. 49:11). The following stanza, describing this outdoor life, voices the thought that many friends are such only so long as they derive some gain: *yom 'inbak utinak kull en-nas (i)mhibbinak, halas 'inbak utinak kull en-nas 'adauwinak* - During the days of your grapes and figs all people love you; but when your grapes and figs are over then all people become your enemies.

Children spend the whole day in the fresh air playing barefooted and with head uncovered. In the evening the male members of the family return from their daily work and spend the night in the vineyard. The joyous songs and exuberant health are ample proof of the happiness of the people in this simple life.

But conditions are very different during the olive harvest when the work is extremely laborious. Nevertheless the workers sing happily even at this time (Is. 9:3): *fi 'aiyam el-hasayid binghanni qasayid*. In the days of harvesting we sing songs.

It is interesting to note that the fellahin sing and make merry not only during family and general festivals, but also during all hard work: building, vaulting, carrying heavy loads, harvesting, and the like. Dancing, clapping of hands and playing of musical instruments are of course not included, since they would hinder work. Some songs which may be heard on the threshing floor during the gathering of olives have been noted by Dalman (*Palastinischer Diwan*, pp. 4-22, 25-29).



The fellah spends day and night on the threshing floor (Ruth 3) until the work is done. After harvesting a piece of ground or gathering the olives from certain trees, everybody is allowed to gather the remaining ears or fruits. Widows, orphans and poor are given the preference. This is again a survival of a Biblical custom (Dt. 24:21, Ruth 2). A proverb says: *ma saqtah illa naraha laqtah* - Behind each falling ear there is a gathering woman.

Such gatherers are called *ba'arat* or *saiyafat*. The first word used to be used expressly for gleaners of grain and the latter for persons gleaning olives. Today the two expressions are confused and *saiyafat* is the more frequently used. Often these gleaners become aggressive, especially in the coastal plains where they are very numerous. They try to steal from the heaped-up grain. The rich landowners engage a *natar*, watchman, who often has to use force against the gleaners as in the biblical times (Ruth 2:5,15). The gleaners are kept busy since the reapers may not return to gather any ear which has escaped their notice or which they have since dropped for this, it is believed, would be to take away the blessing of the harvest (Lev. 19:5, 9). A proverb compares the gleaners with the reapers in the words: *el-laqqat ahsan min el-hassad* - The (lot of the) gleaners is better than that of the harvesters.

When the reapers rest to take their meal the owner of the field or his representative calls them back with the words: *illi akaltu minnuh qama aleh* - Attack (go back to work in) the thing from which you have eaten (i.e. go to work in the cornfield from whose fruits you have had your bread).

The Bedouin leave the last part of the field unreaped. The poor and the laborers reap it for themselves. Such a gift is called *djora'ah*. The fellahin roast the last sheaves of corn and celebrate the end of the harvest by eating this so-called *qaliyeh*. There still exists in some places the original but very old Semitic custom of burying the last sheaf in the same place where it had been reaped, while the Mohammedan creed is recited. This offering to the unseen powers living in the field is made in the hope that the supernatural beings, whose whole property has been taken away, will be appeased by the offering of a part and grant a prosperous crop in the following year.

We have to consider the influence which fruits and vegetables are supposed to exercise on the human body and spirit. Like the Hebrews of ancient times the present-day Palestinian believes that the partaking of certain vegetables causes certain moods and states of mind. While meat is believed to excite the animal passions, it is taught that a vegetable diet has no such effect, while sadness and melancholy might even be caused by it (Dt. 16:3). Therefore dervishes undergoing the prescribed preparations for a holy or magic rite eat only vegetables and fruits. The following expressions and proverbs bear on the subject: *ex-zhib ma bibat di djof isan illa aslahuh* - Currents do not stay overnight in the stomach of a man without making it better (healthy), *el-lin ma bibat fi djof insane illa afsaduh* - Figs do not stay overnight in the stomach of a man without corrupting (spoil)ing it. *El-hiar bitfi 'an el-qalb an-nar* - Cucumbers extinguish the

fire (the thirst) of the stomach. *Al-battih bakul minnuh bathalla minnuh batnaqras minnuh ubat am hasani minnuh* - I have from the melons my food, my sweet-dish, my crackle-food and the food of my horse. *Akl el-mismis midhis* - The eating of apricots causes perplexity (as it causes intestinal purification). *Akl edj-djoz birabbi il-makarem fidj-djoz* - Eating of nuts brings up the husband to virtues (= strengthens his sexual powers). *Illi biakul ful bisabih el-'idjil* - He who eats radishes is like a calf. *Illi biakul ful bisir rasuh aqua min el-'alul* - He who eats broad beans becomes stronger headed than an ox. *Taht ed-dom bihlauw en-nom* - Sleep is sweet under the zzyphus tree. *Surb ed-duhhan bizil en-nisyan* - Smoking drives away forgetfulness. In *kitrat hmumak 'abbi ghalyunak* - If your worries increase fill up your pipe (and smoke). *Min akal arb'in yom ful istatias* - He who eats broad beans (continually) for forty days becomes like a he-goat. Beans are supposed to have a very rich nutritive value and thus may excite the sexual organs. *Su atdakkar mink ya safardjal kull 'addah ibghassah* - What (good) shall I remember of you, O quince! (as) every bite was followed by a choke. *El-fidjil ma iluh sarab nil-haiwan ma iluh djawah* - From radishes no lemonade can be made and there is no answer from an animal. Nothing good can be expected to come from a bad person. *Et-tuffahah ma btisbi bass btiq'id el-manafis* - the apple will not satisfy the hunger but it sets aright (stimulates) the appetite.

Plants are often used to illustrate family relationships and the serve to give advice in a figurative way in the choice of a bride. The following are only a few examples of this kind of proverb:

Sahu el-mismis la tikwis dauwir 'al-loziyeh
Zen el-banat la tohid dauwir 'al-asliyeh

Take not the apricot pudding but seek rather the almond pudding! Take not the beautiful girls but seek rather one that is well bred! The figurative sense of this verse is subtle: Although apricots are more beautiful than almond fruits, yet they owe their existence to the almond tree on which they are, as a rule, grafted. The almond pudding is more delicious than one made of apricots. In *(i)r'et ir-'a en-nuwar nil-mar'I la tar'a fih* - If you browse, browse on the blossoms (i.e. choose the unspoilt portions) and touch not what has already been browsed upon (i.e. choose only the choicest girl as a wife and never approach one who has been already betrothed or a widow). *Zawan baladak walal-qamh es-salibi* - Take the tares of your village (country)! (They are) better than the best wheat (of a foreign country). The girls of your own kindred are to be preferred to the best educated and most beautiful strangers. *Ir'ah min rabi' baladak ulauw innuh qahwan* - Browse the green pastures of your village even if it is nothing but chamomile. *Kull fulah imsauwseh bidjilha kaiyal a'war* - Even to a worm-eaten broad bean comes some blind grain-measurer. Every girl, even if she is ugly, will find a husband sooner or later. *Sam usam naftar 'ala basaleh imsanneh* - He fasted and

fasted and at the last broke his fasting on a stinking onion. He remained a long time as a bachelor and at last married a girl of inferior family.

If against the will of the prospective parents-in-law a man chooses the younger and prettier of two daughters, when they wanted to give away the elder and less pretty, the bridegroom says: *badalna es-sahleh bin-nahleh*. We have changed the kid for the palm tree. But if they behave in the same way to the bridegroom one hears: *na'adana bil-wardeh na'tuna ed-dafleh* - They promised (to give) us the rose but they gave us the oleander.

hubb es-sihr fis-sihrih *mitl el-maiy 'al-ballut*
hubb el-hama lal-kinneh *mitl el-maiy 'al-makkuk*

The love of the son-in-law to his mother-in-law is (as sweet) as (drinking) water on (baked) acorns. The love of the mother-in-law to her daughter-in-law is (as repugnant) as (drinking) water on green carob fruits. Baked acorns have a sweetish taste, while unripe carobs have an acid, unpleasant taste.

[...]

When we consider the influence of plants on the religion of the people we find that the peasant has an acute sense of the beauty of trees, herbs and flowers. Their growth, their green foliage, lovely blossoms and refreshing fruits he acknowledges as evidence of a secretly-working life-force of supernatural power. He perceives in them the ruling Creator. The Palestinian does not look at the trees simply as plants, but as beings endowed with supernatural powers. The spirits of the upper (and to a lesser degree those of the lower) world, even his local saints, the *awlia*, may live and appear in them. This explains the mysterious fact that sixty per cent of all Mohammedan shrines are associated with trees. This is why they are revered as sacred sites. The fellah hangs pieces of cloth on them and uses their leaves for healing purposes. No twigs are cut off and even withered branches will not be carried away. Such a belief in the holiness of trees is old. We can trace it in the history of the Children of Israel from the earliest stages. The point need not be enlarged upon (cf. Is. 57:5, 65:3, Jer. 2:20, 3:13, 17:2, Ezek. 6:13, 20:28, Hos. 4:13).

It is of interest to know that the present-day peasant does not venerate the trees themselves but the divine-power which acts in them and which is derived from the godly person whose soul is supposed to be still inhabiting the shrine, tomb, cave or spring with which they have become associated. Often these holy men have appeared either in the tree itself or near by. A close observation of the species of the holy trees reveals the fact that any tree growing in Palestine can be sanctified by *awlia*.

A study of popular ideas of the origin and importance of certain plants is of interest.

The palm tree plays an important role in the everyday life of the Palestinian. There is no doubt whatever that we have here many survivals of old ideas. In the writer's opinion the present day Palestinian considers the beautiful, evergreen, erect-growing palm tree as "the tree of life." The word *sadjarat al-hayah*, "Tree of life," is not itself used, yet an analysis of the superstitious beliefs and customs connected with the palm tree leads to this conclusion.

A popular belief is that the love and devotion of Jesus to his mother came from the date which formed his main food. Therefore newborn children are often given as their first drink some drops of water into which a date has been macerated. Many Mohammedans eat a date as their first food at the *fitur* (breaking the fast) of Ramadan. It is reported that the Prophet's main food consisted of this fruit. Every child which feeds regularly on date-juice is believed to acquire the gift of charming and attractive speech. In all these cases dates from Mecca are preferred.

The main decorations in Mohammedan shrines are rude reproductions of the hand, palm branches and snakes. The first two are more often seen than the third. Even in decorating the walls of a house we commonly find that palm branches predominate. In shrines, as well as in houses, we also find decorations consisting of flower-pots and Quranic verses. In the embroideries of the Christian peasants of Bethlehem and Ramallah one also notices the designs derived from the palm tree. Many women belonging to the Orthodox Church believe that sterility may be cured by dates from the palm tree of Mar Saba. The common Arabic name for the glans penis - the organ propagating life - is the same as that used for the date fruit, *tamarah*.

Palm branches are carried in front of every Mohammedan funeral procession and later laid over the grave. I have seen many graves in the cemeteries of towns in the coastal region decorated with palm branches. Four such branches are put into the ground, one at each of the four corners of the tomb, in such a way that their tops touch each other. Often these branches are interwoven with flowers. It is a common belief that as long as they remain green the deceased is able to thank and praise God, thus partly or wholly atoning for his misdeeds in life. Many tombstones have also small palm branches engraved on them.

According to a Mohammedan belief, God created the palm tree from the clay which remained after the creation of man. Therefore it is said still to contain the same "sap of life" as is in man himself. The Prophet is supposed to have uttered the following *hadith*: "Honour your aunts the palm trees!" Owing to this supposed common origin of the date trees and the human race, it is believed that the former resembles the latter in its erect growth, the outstanding characteristics of the male tree, the disease to which both are subjected and, finally, in the fact that with loss of the head or crown, respectively, both man and date tree die.

On the table which God sent to 'Isa (Christ) from heaven, there were five dates from the fruits of Paradise. Since the rivers contain the water of life, the palm tree imbibes this continually.

It is a widespread belief that the Holy Rock (of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem) rests upon a date palm which grows at the side of one of the streams of Paradise. Since the rivers contain the water of life, the palm tree imbibes this continually.

After scrutinizing all this evidence the question to be answered is, why are so many superstitions connected with the palm tree, which is neither very abundant in Palestine nor specially dedicated to any renowned prophet? The Holy Books refer more often to the vine and the olive tree. According to the Mohammedan teaching the Almighty is even believed to have himself taken an oath by the olive tree. But an analysis of the beliefs of the ancient oriental nations shows us that with them also the palm tree played an important role. It is seen as venerated as the "Tree of Life" and as the symbol of victory on Babylonian cylinders, Assyrian reliefs in royal palaces, Canaanite earthenware articles and Hebrew coinage. This idea of the "Tree of Life," the sign of immortality, probably lies at the root of all the customs and superstitions known to and practiced by the present Palestinian. A convincing proof is the belief that God created the date palm from the same clay as the immortal Adam. For Adam became mortal only after his fall. The eating of the fruits of this Tree of Life creates life in a sterile woman. Palm branches laid down at the tomb of the deceased preserve him in life for a while, although his body is dead. In Mohammedan shrines we meet the two representations of life, the palm tree and the serpent. The name of the latter is *haiyeh* and comes from the same root as *hayah*, life. The most important spiritual and moral attributes, such as wisdom, love, devotion and attractive speech, are gained by partaking of the fruits of this Tree of Life. Thus according to Palestinian folklore the palm tree still fulfills the conditions of the Tree of Life mentioned in the Book of Revelation, 22:2-4.

The Orientals believe that originally wheat was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which stood in the centre of the Garden of Eden. It was from it that the serpent plucked a fruit and gave it to Eve. At that time wheat grains were the size of a cucumber. When Adam was driven out from Paradise God sent to him by the Angel Gabriel wheat grains wrapped in seven silk handkerchiefs. Adam sowed them, yet they grew only to their present size. This belief is cherished by Mohammedans and Christians. All wheat grains are said still to bear the ^l, the first letter of Allah; therefore they are treated with much honour. The Palestinian takes the utmost care that no crumb of bread falls to the ground. Should he perchance find a piece on the ground he will pick it up very carefully, kiss and deposit it in some place where it will not be trodden upon. The following story illustrates this. A rich man prayed once that God would give a part of his riches to needy people, since he himself could not use the whole of it. Thereupon the Almighty sent him the angel Gabriel who advised him: "If you would have your prayer fulfilled, eat while you are walking." The man followed

the heavenly advice, but he fastened around his neck a sack with a broad opening, so that no crumb might fall to the ground. God, on seeing the great loyalty of his servant in respecting the smallest gift, bestowed upon him a tenfold increase of his wealth.

Tawfiq Canaan was a prominent medical doctor and amateur anthropologist, whose extensive writings and collections of amulets and talismans at the turn of the twentieth century provide a wealth of information about Palestinian custom at the time.

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