

JERUSALEM
NEIGHBORHOODS

The Dom and the African Palestinians

Platforming Two Marginalized Jerusalem Communities

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Abstract

Two marginalized communities living within the walls of Jerusalem's Old City, the Dom (who self-identify in English as Gypsies) and the African Community (who self-identify in English as African Palestinians), have long suffered from racism from the Israeli authorities and wider Israeli public as well as from within Palestinian society. Yet despite sharing some similarities in their historic exclusion, they live with recent experience that is very different: The African Palestinians are, broadly speaking and despite persistent racism, accepted into Palestinian society, and granted status and dignity, while the Dom remain excluded and widely vilified. This article presents voices from both communities, and offers some ideas as to why their experience differs.

Keywords

Minorities in Jerusalem; Dom; Domari; Gypsies; African Palestinians; Black culture in Jerusalem; racism in Palestinian society; racism in Israeli society.

Two marginalized communities living within the walls of Jerusalem's Old City, the Dom (who self-identify in English as Gypsies) and the African Community (who self-identify in English as African Palestinians), have long suffered from racism from the Israeli authorities and wider Israeli public as well as from within Palestinian society. Yet despite sharing some similarities in their historic exclusion, they live with recent experience that is very different: The

African Palestinians are, broadly speaking and despite persistent racism, accepted into Palestinian society, and granted status and dignity, while the Dom remain excluded and widely vilified.

This article presents voices from both communities, and offers some ideas as to why their experience differs. It is based on face-to-face interviews conducted in Jerusalem in October 2019, and is adapted from material in my book *Nine Quarters of Jerusalem: A New Biography of the Old City* (London: Profile, 2022).¹ It is not an academic study, but I hope there is value in amplifying these voices and stories nonetheless, and that my findings may prompt further, and more scientific, research. I hope, too, that platforming marginalized communities in this way might help continue to open channels of engagement for scholars and artists from within these communities to be able to tell their own stories, in their own way.



The girl dropped out of school when her mother died.² It was a heart attack, they said. So young, only thirty-seven. The girl was about seven, and didn't understand what a heart attack was. Suddenly her father had become a widower, taking care of nine children – five boys and four girls. The girl's grandma helped raise her. Grandma was very kind but she died after only three years, and then it was much harder. The girl was sad. All of the family was sad. It left a big impact. This was not the life they wanted.

Now the girl is grown. Her name is Amoun Sleem. She is from the women of Dom, born into a family that has lived in Jerusalem for more than two hundred years. In English, she chooses to call herself a “Gypsy,” even though that word is emotive and often carries pejorative overtones in Europe and elsewhere. But “Gypsy” is her preference and her prerogative. (The word seems to have originated in England in the sixteenth century, after people with Amoun's history first began arriving there and the English thought they had come from Egypt.)

Dom is what Amoun's people call themselves. Their roots, like the roots of almost all Gypsies, lie in India, where a low-status caste of people who travel and earn a living from music and craftmaking, was – and still is – known as Domba. In irregular waves of migration that began roughly fifteen hundred years ago, some Domba people moved westwards.

Some reached Armenia and the Caucasus around the eleventh century. They are the Lom, who now speak Lomavren.

Some continued into eastern and central Europe around the thirteenth century, and some of these kept moving, reaching northern and western Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. They are the Rom (or Roma), who now speak Romani.

Others stayed in Turkey, Iran, central Asia, and the Arab lands of southwest Asia, travelling on their own or forcibly relocated from place to place by rulers or invading armies. They are the Dom and they speak Amoun's language, Domari.

Lom, Rom, and Dom – all connected.

There are many other, smaller groups within those three, such as the Sinti and Yenish of German-speaking Europe, the Kale or Calé of Spain and Brazil, the Lyuli of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and many more. Some, like Irish Travelers, who are not

Romani, have their own, unique history.

The Dom reappear here and there throughout the centuries, always on the edge of things: Brought to entertain the Shah of Persia as dancers and musicians. Exiled first to the Mediterranean coast, then to the islands of Greece, kept well away from power centers in Damascus and Baghdad. Employed as acrobats, fortune-tellers, and bear handlers in Constantinople. Scraping a living in Cyprus selling nails and handmade belts.

Today there are maybe two million Dom altogether, with most in Turkey and Iran. There are sizeable communities in Jordan and Egypt and, before the war, also in Syria. Roughly, twenty thousand Dom live across Gaza and the West Bank, Amoun estimates, with perhaps one thousand or fifteen hundred in Jerusalem, about half of them inside the Old City. The Dom are Muslim (with a few Christian), speak Arabic, and live within Palestinian communities, but Amoun is very clear: they are neither Palestinian nor Israeli. They are Dom.

Almost everybody calls the Dom *nawar* but Amoun clicks her tongue at that. *Nawar* may derive from the Arabic word *nar*, for fire. It has local meanings connected to wandering, and pejorative connotations of fire-worship. Perhaps that is because people were envious of Dom blacksmithing skills, she says. Or maybe they just mixed up Dom with Zoroastrians. Nobody knows. But the word also has older meanings connected to deceit and witchcraft, and has come to stand for people lacking decency and civilized values. People who are dirty, living in filth, begging from others. Some translate it as “black,” suggesting it refers to the Dom’s often darker skin color. It is a racist slur that deliberately ropes together lots of different minorities, not only the Dom. But few people consider the disrespect, or care. They just say *nawar*, and spit. They don’t recognize the Dom as part of society, Amoun says.

They experience a lot of discrimination.³ Israelis dismiss the Dom as Palestinian. But Palestinians dismiss the Dom as *nawar*. Socially, politically, and economically these people are at the bottom of every heap. Almost no Dom children leave school with qualifications. Perhaps two-thirds of Dom men are unemployed. Many of the rest earn a living as sanitation workers, clearing drains and sewers.⁴

Amoun grew up among the Dom community that lives in the northeast corner of the Old City inside Bab al-Asbat, Lions Gate, in one room in a house next to the Old City wall. People still call that area *harat al-nawar*, the Gypsy quarter. It is very precious to her. She thinks of it as her hideaway. Those streets were her home, and the compound around the Church of St. Anne, a few steps from her house, was her favorite place when she was a child. Whenever things got too much, she would retreat into those shady gardens to find peace and privacy, or sneak inside the church to listen to the pilgrim groups singing hallelujahs.

Amoun’s parents could not read or write, so when the family got a letter, she’d be sent out to find a neighbor who would read it for her. It was so humiliating. She could see nobody really wanted to help them, and it made her angry and ashamed to be put in the middle like that.

She’s never forgotten how abusive the teacher was to her at school when she was

little. The teacher would stand her up in front of the whole class and shame her, calling her names like “nawar” and “street urchin.” Sometimes the teacher would hit Amoun. She would call Amoun worthless, or say there was no point her being at school because she’d just grow up to be a prostitute and a beggar, like all *nawar*. When Amoun’s mother died that was the last straw. Amoun ran away from school, and stayed away, for two years.

Finally, she did go back – but the very first day, the teacher pulled her by the ear so hard that she lost her earring. From then on, she and her friend Latifa, another girl with dark skin, agreed that whatever the teachers did to them, they were going to laugh, turn it into their private joke. At every punishment, Amoun and Latifa laughed and laughed.

It was about that time that the head teacher, who hated her too, called Amoun a flea, an insect, and said she should be exterminated. That was terrible. Amoun cried a lot about that, at home. In private.

She remembers her school uniform. Blue and white it was. Like prison clothes, she says. The day she graduated, she tore it to shreds.

But she refused to see herself as a victim. Quite the opposite. She led a gang of girls in her neighborhood who fought back against boys who would bother them. She saw herself as someone who would never do what is expected.

She was always open to the world, always talking to foreigners, especially the tourists at St. Anne’s Church, selling them postcards. Maybe that’s why her language skills are better than some other people’s, she says. During and after school she worked as a cleaner at a Dutch guesthouse, Huis op de Berg, then on the Mount of Olives. The money helped her through three years of college, where she qualified with a diploma in business administration.

She owes that spirit to her wonderful dad, she says. He was strict, but also kind and patient. He spent all his life trying to be father and mother in one. Every year, Amoun would rename Mother’s Day as Father’s Day, and hunt around for some small gift she could afford for him. Socks are cheap, but useful. He got a lot of socks.

Her father would talk to Amoun about the skills the Dom brought to Jerusalem, like weaving reeds into mats, working with metal to make cutlery and sieves or fix cooking pots, or training horses. Amoun remembers watching Gypsy guests of his carefully cutting at the bamboo that grew beside the house, then crafting bamboo flutes by hand and playing beautiful music.

Her father also gave her a lot of freedom from social traditions, including marriage. The usual Gypsy model, Amoun says, would be to marry his daughters off at fifteen or sixteen, but he let Amoun say no. The neighbors reckoned he thought he was better than them, that he had ideas above his station, but he didn’t, Amoun says – he was just open-minded and wanted the best for his children. So he let Amoun choose. And she chose to stay single. She still is today, in her late forties. She doesn’t feel sorry about it one bit, she says. Quite the opposite: her freedom and independence to make her own choices, and decide her own path, remain the most important things in her life.

Thanks to the kind and supportive staff at the Dutch guesthouse, Amoun had the

chance to visit Europe – that first trip was more than twenty-five years ago now – which helped open her eyes to new possibilities. Still, she lost many friends, at school and afterwards, when they realized she was *nawar*. All her siblings faced the same thing. Her three sisters also never married, and two of her five brothers married women who are not Dom. This comes from the open-mindedness of her father, she says. But some Dom people don't like it. They ask Amoun why her brothers didn't take wives from within the community. She says she doesn't care what people say and neither do her brothers. They are happy with their choices, she says, and so is she. She loves all of her nieces and nephews.

This leads to what has become the major work of Amoun's life, trying to improve the situation for the Dom in Jerusalem. So often they give up, she says. They have no hope to make a better life for their children, or to create change by finding new doors to open. But she has long been committed to try and show her community that misery and poverty need not continue unbroken from generation to generation. The future can be new, she says. Her father understood the importance of education, and she wants to pass that on.

At the beginning, in 1999, she would just try and help people by distributing clothes and blankets, and running informal classes to boost literacy and job skills. Her office was her bedroom. That was where the nonprofit Domari Society of Gypsies in Jerusalem began.

Then, by meeting people from outside the community, she slowly started to develop wider networks. Volunteers arrived to help. Small amounts of funding began to trickle in from donors. By chance she found a building available to rent in a low-income area of Shu'fat, a neighborhood north of the Old City, and the Domari Society moved there in 2005 and expanded to become a community center, offering more classes and more support.

Now she and her team of volunteers offer Dom women access to vocational training and opportunity to earn income from craft skills like embroidery and jewelry making, hairdressing and cooking. Women – and even some men, she says – take literacy classes, to improve their reading and writing. The idea, she insists, has always been to try and help the Dom help themselves.



Figure 1. Sign at the Domari Society community center in Shu'fat. Photo by author, October 2019.

Amoun remembers her father speaking the Domari language sometimes, but it is hardly heard any more. Everyone speaks Arabic, and Domari is getting lost. It is poorly documented. There are maybe as few as ten or twenty individuals left who are still fluent. That's another motivation for the society, she says, to help keep Domari alive and support scholars who are able to study it.⁵

So she had the last laugh on those awful, sadistic teachers. Now she calls herself a warrior for education. Discrimination in school is not as bad as it was when she was young, she says, but it still exists, and it still dissuades children from completing their studies. Amoun has put more than a hundred Dom children through the Domari Society's after-school program since it started, giving them support with homework and one-to-one tutoring for extra study in Arabic, mathematics, and English. Some of those children have gone on to university. At the moment, she has fifteen students enrolled, and two teachers coming in to help them.

But, equally importantly, she's taken on the role of changing minds about the Dom. Too many Palestinian people stick to old stereotypes about the Gypsies being a closed community, unwelcoming to strangers, she says. It's not true, she says: she'd welcome anyone willing to help or support, but nobody comes. She gets some interest from Israeli academics and journalists, and she receives them because she says people need to know the hardships the Dom face, but she is adamant that she doesn't want to take anything from them.

A key concern is raising awareness internationally about the situation of the Dom. There have been exhibitions and lectures, and Amoun has traveled abroad to collect awards. She always says yes to interview requests from the media, she says, because before the Domari Society few people even knew that the Dom existed. Her community was unseen and unheard. Now it has a voice. With the help of friends and supporters, in 2014 Amoun published a book in English to tell the story of her life and family, and also, she says, to help readers around the world understand Dom perspectives from the inside.

Tourism is another way. Before the pandemic Amoun started hosting international tourist groups at the



Figure 2. Front cover of Amoun Sleem's book in English. Photo by author, October 2019.

center in Shu‘fat. They ate, and talked, and hopefully would buy some crafts. All of it helps take her message about the Dom to the world and generates income for future sustainability.

But despite all this, she’s faced huge opposition, not least from within the Dom community itself. Some say she is trying to change Dom culture, or seeking power and money for herself. She knows that people don’t like how she’s broken down gender barriers and challenged the community’s traditionally patriarchal leadership. Some accuse her of corruption. They shun her and slander her. But, as she wrote in her book, she did not seek the pain of being a Gypsy, the pain of being a woman, or the pain of people attacking her.

And there are still lots of attacks and violence within her community. Things sometimes feel desperate to Amoun. But she tries to live her life decently and honestly, she says, to bring no disrespect to her two cultures, Arab and Gypsy, and to encourage children and adults to be proud of their identity. That was missing for many years here, Amoun says. She is proud she has been able to help bring it back.



After one brief account of marginalization in Jerusalem, here comes another, about a community with roots far from the Dom. African Palestinian society in the Old City is centered on a street with a unique history. My story of that street begins once upon a time, long ago, with a blind man called Aladdin who loved animals.

Aladdin was special all his life, and even after he died people never forgot him. When he was still young and sighted, he was trusted with dangerous, clandestine missions. When he got older and settled into a position of authority, he wielded his power so wisely and generously people began to talk about him as a sign of divine intervention, so determined was he to make life better for all. Folk even gave him a new, gently ironic – but religiously inspired and deeply respectful – nickname: “Someone Who Sees Things Clearly.”

You can give a nod to Aladdin today, if you’d like to, because he was real, and he’s still sleeping the big sleep, more than seven hundred years on, behind a window looking onto the flagstone street in Jerusalem that carries his name.

Our Aladdin was born probably in the early 1220s, named ‘Ala’ al-Din Aydughdi⁶ (sometimes rendered as Idghadi or Edgadi) ibn Abdallah al-Salihi al-Najmi al-Rukni.⁷ He was a Mamluk, and the Mamluks – who ruled the Islamic world for more than 250 years – changed the face of Jerusalem entirely. Jerusalemites today live with the built legacy of Mamluk culture.

Going by Mamluk history and his family name, which is of Turkic origin (meaning “son of the rising moon”), it is possible ‘Ala’ al-Din Aydughdi was born in Crimea or the Caucasus. He was trafficked to Egypt most likely as a young boy, probably along with many others. He would have been installed in the military barracks at the hilltop citadel overlooking Cairo, cut off from wider society and trained intensively. Since he was one of the thousands of enslaved soldiers – that is, Mamluks – of Sultan al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub, he was dubbed “al-Salihi” and “al-Najmi” to show his

ownership. We know little of his early life. Following Salih's death and the Mamluk coup in 1250, he moved into the service of famed military commander Baybars, also a Mamluk, also once a Salihi, who had been trafficked to Cairo from somewhere around Astrakhan, north of the Caspian coast in the modern Russia-Kazakhstan borderlands. Baybars excelled, rising to the highest echelons of the army and eventually, in 1260, to the throne as sultan. To mark his new allegiance, 'Ala' al-Din became known as "al-Rukni" (Baybars' full name was Zahir Rukn al-Din Baybars al-Bunduqdari).

It was soon after 1262, when he was sent on a secret mission on Baybars' orders to arrest the governor of Damascus, that 'Ala' al-Din's life changed forever. For some reason – I've not been able to find out why – he lost his sight. No record of his personal anguish has survived. Perhaps, in desperation, when he must have feared for his future, he sought support from his master and patron: Baybars and he were about the same age. We don't know.

'Ala' al-Din next appears as a Mamluk oligarch, shunted off to Jerusalem, where he served for many years as governor. Even into old age, he held particular renown as a breeder of horses. It was said he loved his animals so much that he was able to recognize each individual by its distinctive smell and gait. People gave him the tender nickname al-Basir, meaning all-seeing when used as one of Islam's names of God, but better translated in this context as astute or insightful.

Governor 'Ala' al-Din also established endowments for public institutions, including in 1267 or 1268, soon after his arrival in Jerusalem, a *ribat* (pilgrim hospice) for impoverished men and women arriving to pray at al-Aqsa. Ribat 'Ala' al-Din still stands today as one of the city's oldest Mamluk buildings, an array of cells around a central courtyard a few meters from Bab al-Nazir (Inspector's Gate) also known as Bab al-Majlis (Council Gate), one of the entrances into the Haram al-Sharif compound.

When the governor died in late summer 1294, he was laid to rest in a side room within the hospice. And there he still lies, behind a barred window looking out onto Tariq 'Ala' al-Din – named not for the man but for his tomb, which over the centuries became venerated as the mausoleum of a saint. Pray beside it and God answers your prayers, wrote Mujir al-Din in 1495.

Fifteen years after Ribat 'Ala' al-Din opened its doors, another similar hospice, but larger, was completed directly across the narrow lane, and named Ribat al-Mansuri for the new sultan, al-Mansur Qalawun. Both ribats flourished, and by the sixteenth or seventeenth century they had gained a new function, converted into permanent lodgings for people described as Takarna. Who the Takarna are takes us into a story of Africa.

War Jabi (or, in some readings, *the* War Jabi – it may be a title rather than a personal name) – was the first ruler in the West African Sahel to adopt Islam, in 1035.⁸ He had authority as king of Takrur, an independent state established in the semi-arid country that flanks the lower Senegal River, on the border between today's Senegal and Mauritania. Mass conversion of the king's subjects quickly brought Takrur new links of culture, politics, and trade with the wider world of Muslim Africa to the north and east. In the years after, Takrur became prosperous enough and confident enough to

challenge and eventually subdue the Ghana Empire that was for several centuries the regional superpower, founded on dizzying wealth from gold and salt.

Takrur faded,⁹ but its Muslim status had already propelled it into the consciousness of Arab and Muslim geographers and historians, observing from beyond the great expanse of the Sahara.¹⁰ Some even visited Takrur, to write reports and compile maps. Interest in the region grew rapidly, and the name of the country became an Arabic shorthand for West Africa as a whole. The adjectival form *Takruri* (plural, *Takarir*) or *Takruni* (plural, *Takarir* or *Takarna*) morphed into a broad-brush descriptor for any Black Muslim person with origins in West Africa – or, in some usages, central or eastern Africa, too. That looseness persists to this day: some will hazily place Takrur in the deserts and arid highlands of Darfur, where today Chad and Sudan meet, thousands of kilometers distant from Senegal.

African Muslims may have been visiting Jerusalem from the earliest days of Islam, but the tradition of coming to the city in sizeable numbers on pilgrimage after completing the *hajj* to Mecca only really took off in about the fifteenth century.¹¹ And, as always, some pilgrims chose to settle. During the Ottoman period, as also in Mecca and Medina, Africans – or Takarna – who lived in Jerusalem found jobs as police enforcers and security guards for the colleges and residential courtyards that clustered around the edges of the al-Aqsa compound, and as gatekeepers ensuring non-Muslims did not enter the compound itself. These loyal employees needed somewhere to live, and the Ottoman authorities selected the ribat of ‘Ala’ al-Din – which was then being called Ribat al-Basiri, after ‘Ala’ al-Din’s nickname – and its neighbor Ribat al-Mansuri.

This small section of a small street became a center of African settlement in the very heart of Jerusalem. As under the Mamluks, social stratification gave the free Muslim Takarna higher status than Jerusalem’s many enslaved non-Muslim Africans, who lived where they did without choice and were invariably dismissed in speech as ‘*abd* (slave; plural, ‘*abid*), a term still freighted with racism across the Arab world today as a slur used against Black people.¹²

More changes swept through the narrow street in the early twentieth century. It is not clear where the Takarna had been relocated, but by the time the British displaced the Ottomans in 1917 the two ribats had been converted into a prison, to cope with fallout from the growing Arab resistance to Ottoman rule. Ribat al-Mansuri had become a holding pen for those with short sentences or awaiting judgment, while Ribat al-Basiri housed long-term prisoners and those condemned to death, thereby gaining another name along the way – Habs al-Dam, the Prison of Blood. Soon after taking power, the British moved the prison to al-Maskubiyya (Russian Compound) outside the walls of the Old City.

“At that time, you know, Amin al-Husayni – who would become the mufti of Jerusalem – had six bodyguards, all Africans.”

Musa Qaws, tall, glasses pushed up on his forehead, quick to smile, is standing in a room within Ribat al-Mansuri, a long hall of rough stone divided into five bays by four squat columns.¹³ Each column supports cross vaults sprouting to form the

ceiling. Notwithstanding the new tiled floor and a bit of touching up here and there, the structure of the interior is pretty much how it would have been when ‘Ala’ al-Din Aydughdi stood here.

“The mufti was in conflict with the British then. They chased him inside the [al-Aqsa] mosque and shot dead one of his bodyguards, a man called Jibril, but the others helped him escape to Silwan and then outside the country.”

Musa is talking about 1920, when Husayni was implicated in fomenting violent protests (the so-called Nabi Musa Riots). The British authorities tried him *in absentia* and sentenced him to ten years in prison, before upending their own policy by issuing a pardon and appointing him mufti the following year.

“In return for the help from the bodyguards, the mufti used his influence with the waqf. Since then, Africans have lived here in these two courtyards. We are protected, and we pay a [nominal] rent to the waqf.”

It is an extraordinary connection, and an unlikely chain of events, that nonetheless helped ensure the continuity of Jerusalem’s centuries-long African presence in the Bab al-Majlis neighborhood.

Musa is a journalist, working the late shift at *al-Quds* newspaper translating English news reports into Arabic for the morning edition. He has lived all his life in Bab al-Majlis as part of *al-jaliya al-Afriqiyya*, the African community, that won the right to settle almost a hundred years ago. He also volunteers to help run the African Community Society, a grassroots local organization founded in 1983 that punches far above its weight in terms of social impact and visibility among the wider Palestinian community.¹⁴

“More than two hundred people live here, most of them kids. There are about twenty-eight families,” Musa says, referring only to Ribat al-Mansuri. Slightly fewer live in Ribat al-Basiri, he adds, estimating that something approaching 450 people altogether form the community.

These two Mamluk ribats are full of life, with children and mothers and shouts and laughter and smells of cigarettes and cooking. Both courtyards, formerly large open spaces (28 x 23 meters in Ribat al-Mansuri and 23 x 20 meters in Ribat al-Basiri), are



Figure 3. Musa Qaws of the African Community Society. Photo by author, October 2019.

now crammed with modern housing, built with support from Taawon, a Palestinian NGO that draws international funding to help renovate Jerusalem's Old City buildings. Few people here can afford renovation costs themselves; estimates suggest around three-quarters of Palestinians in Jerusalem live below the poverty line.¹⁵ Within the ribats, narrow alleys now thread between unmarked doors and walls of stone or concrete for only a few meters before reaching a dead end: the pressure on space does not allow for throughways. Every corner is occupied, rising three and four stories overhead.

“We consider ourselves Afro-Palestinians,” says Musa. “We are Palestinian, but we have African roots. We have built here in order to keep our residency rights in Jerusalem.”

There are African Muslim communities of varying backgrounds and histories outside Jerusalem – in Gaza, Jericho, Haifa, Jaffa – but the families living in the two ribats claim origins in four specific areas: Senegal at the westernmost edge of the continent, and Nigeria, Chad, and Sudan stretching towards the east.

That said, there may be confusion over nomenclature. Palestinian researcher Husni Shaheen in 1984 identified the four areas as Senegal, Nigeria, Chad, and “French Sudan,” a distinct colonial term – *Soudan français* in French – which equates more or less to modern Mali, also at times including parts of Niger.¹⁶ A related term in Arabic, *bilad al-sudan*, meaning Lands of the Black People, is vague, referring to a trans-Saharan region stretching all across the continent from west to east. With that in mind, and the haziness of cultural memory, African Palestinians' use of the term “Sudan” may not always refer to today's Sudan, and may perhaps better be defined loosely as west-central Africa, extending at its easternmost extremity to Darfur, in the west of the Republic of Sudan. A parallel Black Muslim community in Damascus, reportedly established in the years around 1948, also claims West African origins, though from the area of Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire, on Mali's southern borders.¹⁷ British anthropologist Susan Beckerleg quoted one unnamed woman she spoke to in Jerusalem in the period 1995–97 as follows: “We just say [we came from] Sudan because we do not know and because the name means ‘place of black people’. It could just as easily have been Congo!”¹⁸



Figure 4. Entrance to Ribat al-Mansuri. Photo by author, October 2019.

Either way, of the many people who came to Jerusalem after performing hajj, some chose to volunteer with the Syrian-led Arab Liberation (or Arab Salvation) Army in 1948 and then stayed on after defeat. They are, and – as Musa emphasizes – always have been, free. Other African communities in and around Jerusalem may have roots in slavery, he says, but not the people of Bab al-Majlis.

“Our older generation used to get in fights with people about this,” says Musa in his easy, soft-spoken way, crow’s-feet crinkling the corners of his eyes. “My father came from Chad. People would say ‘*abid* [slaves] and call this place *habs al-‘abid* [prison of slaves] or *harat al-‘abid* [slave quarter] and [my father’s generation] would have to say no, we came here voluntarily, as pilgrims. Now we rarely hear this word ‘*abid*. Because of our activity in the Palestinian community, in the last ten or twenty years we succeeded in changing this name. If you ask anyone about this place now, they will say *al-jaliyya al-Afriqiyya*, not ‘*abid*.”

That activity – open and accessible to all – is a source of pride. Manar Idris, from the African Community Society, describes a children’s club run for under-twelves, designed to improve mental health and combat high dropout rates among Palestinian students by offering help with homework, emotional support from a social worker, and space for leisure activities and social interaction. She outlines programs to strengthen bonds of identity between Palestinian young people living inside and outside Jerusalem, as well as mentoring schemes, skills courses such as sewing workshops for women, and grassroots projects to build links between neighborhoods across the Old City. The hall in Ribat al-Mansuri was recently renovated to serve as a community hub, hosting exhibitions and arts events as well as seminars and workshops. It draws outsiders to ‘Ala’ al-Din Street, raising the community’s profile and providing an independent source of income.

But the respect shown by wider society to Jerusalem’s African community also stems from political action. Several individuals have played significant roles in Palestinian resistance to Israel’s occupation. Nasir Qaws, Musa’s brother, heads the Jerusalem section of the Palestinian Prisoners Society, supporting Palestinians in the Israeli justice system. Fatima Barnawi, of Nigerian descent, served ten years in Israeli jail for a failed bombing attempt in 1967 before joining the Palestinian national movement and becoming the head of the Palestinian Authority’s women’s police force in the 1990s. She died in Amman in 2016. Mahmud Jiddah and his cousin Ali Jiddah both served seventeen years in Israeli jail for a 1968 bomb attack when they were members – Mahmud aged twenty, Ali aged eighteen – of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Both, now in their seventies, are freelance political tour guides, explaining Palestinian perspectives to visitors, and are well-known Jerusalem characters.

The prestige of having members serve as gatekeepers for the Haram al-Sharif until 1967 and take an active role since then as resistance fighters and community organizers under occupation gives the African Palestinians unusual status.

“We have high respect from the people, which helps us to be more integrated,” says Musa. “We don’t feel that there is discrimination against us in Palestinian society.”

Ali Jiddah concurs. “We are well accepted and respected,” he has said. “I never felt discriminated [against] because of my color. I think it has to do with our role in the national struggle.”¹⁹

The community’s location, steps from al-Aqsa, also gives it symbolic significance: African Palestinian youth see themselves as a first line of defense for the whole Old City community and are often first on the scene whenever there are clashes inside the mosque compound. This frequently makes them the first targets of Israeli police. Many have served prison terms, which, as Musa explains, often rules out decent jobs thereafter. “We are not very compliant people,” he says. “Most of the youth are unemployed.”

Mahmud Jiddah, born in 1948, remembers growing up in one of the original cells around the edge of the Mamluk courtyard of Ribat al-Basiri, his family of eight occupying one room of seven and a half square meters.

“I believe at that time I was happier, much more, than this time,” he has said. “Because we were living as one family. We can share everything together. We have condolences that we all share. If somebody got married, we all shared. I remember my father when he used to come from work, he used to ask my mother if she cooked that day. We rarely cooked because we were very poor, but if she said yes, then the second question was: ‘Did you send something to our neighbors?’ Because if we cook, for sure our neighbors would smell it, and maybe they don’t have food. How could we enjoy our food if at the same time our neighbors are hungry?”²⁰

Mahmud’s cousin Muhammad, who came to Jerusalem in the 1940s, recalled the same era in a 1997 interview.²¹ “When I arrived there was a big war going on between Germany and England,” he said. “But it didn’t affect us much.”

His family’s journey began before that, and far away. Muhammad was born in the Chad capital N’Djamena, then known as Fort-Lamy. His family was Hausa – Africa’s largest ethnic group – and as a young boy he spent five years studying the Qur’an at schools in northeastern Nigeria. Around the age of fifteen, he and his uncle started walking. They walked east for two months, across Chad and Sudan, until they reached the Eritrean coast. They found passage across the Red Sea to Yemen. Then they started walking north, to Mecca for the hajj, then to Medina, then to Jerusalem. The route totals at least five thousand kilometers, probably more.

“I was married [in Jerusalem] when I was about twenty,” he said. “My wife had been born here. But her father was Fulani [a West African ethnicity], born in Nigeria. He did as I did, marrying an Arabic-speaking woman.”

Today, all these lines are getting blurred. A hundred years of intermarriage, along with cultural and political assimilation, means that many in the African Palestinian community, now in its third generation, freely recognize a complex layering of identity.

“I’m an Arab and I’m an African,” says Mahmud Jiddah. “At the same time, for example, my mother has two sisters, one is a villager, one is a Bedouin – so I am from the city, the village and [the desert]. I live these three things.”

Musa Qaws speaks even more plainly. “I am Black, and Arab, and Muslim,” he says.

As so often here, though, paperwork rarely matches personal identity. Like Mahmud's father and others, Musa's Chadian father carried a French passport, a legacy of Chad's colonial history. Musa himself, though, has no passport, after being deemed ineligible decades ago for a French one and wary of seeking any other. "I am considered by the Israelis a resident, not a citizen – if I apply for Chadian nationality it means I am rejecting my status as a Jerusalem resident, so the Israelis might revoke my ID card and kick me out."

He laughs dryly and drops his hands while he talks.

"My wife is Palestinian, born in the U.S.; she holds an American passport. My children also hold the American passport. But if I want to travel abroad, I must get a travel document from the Israelis, and they put in it that my nationality is Jordanian. I am not Jordanian! Before 1967, during Jordanian rule, Jordan called us [African Palestinians] foreigners, and refused to give us passports."

He also expresses concern around assimilation.

"The Jiddah family and the Qaws family are both from the Salamat tribe in Chad. The first generation [who came to Jerusalem] used to speak [Hausa and other] African languages. But because our mothers are Palestinian, we – the second generation – didn't learn these languages, only Arabic. There's a hidden conflict between them and us. They considered themselves to be the originals, and said that we were not pure. They called us *muwallad* [meaning, in this context, a person with one African and one non-African parent]. With the intermarriage with the Palestinian community, little by little in fifty years' time you won't find a Black person here."

Bab al-Majlis has suffered from a tightening of control by the Israeli authorities.²² In addition to the checkpoint at the street's eastern end by the Haram gate, armed police now also stand ninety meters away at the street's western end, where it meets the main market thoroughfare al-Wad Street. They effectively seal off the neighborhood. Only residents, and sometimes older Muslim Jerusalemites, can pass, usually after questioning. Others must show permission, or be escorted. Tourists are barred from entering what is a public street.

No other similar street is blocked off in this way. The extra checkpoint raises tensions – the only racist name-calling that African Palestinians face now is in Hebrew, remarks Ali Jiddah – and it has had a devastating impact on the street's half-dozen small businesses, who now see no tourist traffic and instead must rely on selling children's toys and knock-knacks to worshippers passing to and fro between prayer-times. The community's social programs, workshops and after-school clubs – reliant on ease of access – are often suspended, for months at a time or permanently.

Faced with the extra stress and ever-worsening overcrowding, Musa says, some in the community are moving away to the suburbs or to towns such as Lyd and Ramla, west of Jerusalem, and Rahat in the south, "though the majority prefer to stay here." Dispersal is helping to forge links with other Black communities. Musa describes cordial relations between the African Palestinians and Jerusalem's Ethiopian Christian congregations, as well as with a group known as the Black Hebrews, founded by African Americans in the 1960s and based in the Israeli town of Dimona. But he

draws a sharp contrast with Israel's substantial Ethiopian Jewish community, who – like all Israelis – serve in Israel's army. "We don't have any relations with them at all, because of their military connection," he says.

Why does Musa stay? He offers a familiar Jerusalemite metaphor.

"If you take a fish from the sea it will die. Jerusalem is my sea. I can't live outside it. There's a special feeling you get when you walk in the Old City. When I leave my work at the newspaper around midnight, and arrive back at Damascus Gate, quite often I just stop and look. You feel secure, even though there are many settlers, and soldiers. It's a feeling I can't describe. I can't live anywhere else."



Of all the many migrations into pre-World War II Palestine, that of people from western and central Africa has been studied perhaps the least. Literature is sparse, and many questions remain unaddressed. Why, for instance, has the twentieth-century experience of two marginalized and racialized Muslim communities – the African Palestinians and the Dom – been so different in terms of integration? Some in the Dom, as in other disempowered groups in Jerusalem, are taking concrete steps to try to preserve their cultural heritage, but the African Palestinian community seem to have already lost much of theirs in the space of a few decades, apparently without regrets.

British writer Nikesh Shukla helped develop the thesis of the "good immigrant."²³ It suggests immigrants are automatically assumed by host populations to be bad people – bad for society, bad for the economy, and/or just bad in general – until they somehow prove otherwise and thereby "earn" the right to be called good and treated fairly. Where that mark of proof lies can be arbitrary, and may be different for one person or group of people from another. For mainstream Palestinian society, it seems, the Dom – despite having been present for centuries, settling, speaking Arabic, sharing community – haven't reached the mark and so remain "bad," still ostracized and dehumanized with racist slurs.

By contrast, Palestinian society has judged that Jerusalem's immigrant African community – also settled, also Arabic speaking, also community oriented – has done enough to merit acceptance and a shift away from racist name-calling. That's surely welcome, even though it reveals another layer of patronizing racism in itself.

Some of the difference seems to rest on each community's self-identification and impressions of its relationship with the Israeli state. The Dom try to withdraw from political engagement to occupy a tiny space *between* Palestinians and Israelis, suffering grievously from both sides as a result. The African Palestinian community has thrown itself wholeheartedly into Palestinian national politics, also suffering terrible hardships, injustices, and bereavements but able, through sacrifice, to claim a moral standing that has overcome antipathy.

Yet according to historian Yasir Qaws, slurs such as 'abid remain "oddly frequent," as does generic labelling of Black people as Sudani or Tavruri. He states: "While other Palestinians perceive them as a single entity, West African descendants are far from

constituting a homogeneous group.” He describes how patterns of self-identification reflect a desire to accelerate social acceptance: “West Africans in Jerusalem highlight their Arab origins to the detriment of their African origins . . . The use of genealogies or stories can prove the quality of their Arabism [to] the Arab world.”²⁴

‘Ala’ al-Din Street itself may play a role. Would the situation have been the same had it been the Africans who had settled in a far-flung corner of the city by Burj al-Luqluq and the Dom who had established themselves at the very gates of al-Aqsa? It is impossible to say, and the processes within Palestinian society that deny dignity and agency to entire subgroups on the basis of inherited stereotypes remain under-investigated.

Looking beyond issues of discrimination, Michael Hamilton Burgoyne quotes Jerusalemite historian ‘Arif al-‘Arif’s account of the Takarna, referring to an 1855 visit to al-Aqsa by Belgian nobility during which the Takarna were imprisoned so that the visit could take place unchallenged.²⁵ This suggests the community was resident in the two ribats on ‘Ala’ al-Din Street at that time, but I can find no reference to where the authorities confined them: was it in their own homes, or elsewhere? Al-‘Arif says the two ribats were converted into a prison “at the end of the Turkish period,” but omits mention of the fate of the Takarna in the intervening five or six decades. Were they relocated, or did they continue to live within the prison – and if the latter, was their movement restricted?

Many gaps in knowledge remain. It is fervently hoped such gaps will be filled principally by scholars and artists from within the marginalized Jerusalemite communities I have been so privileged to meet and write about.

Matthew Teller is a writer and journalist based in the United Kingdom. His book Nine Quarters of Jerusalem: A New Biography of the Old City was published by Profile Books (UK) and Other Press (United States.) in 2022.

Endnotes

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 - 6 Material in this section was sourced from the following: Mujir al-Din, Safadi, and Ibn al-Jazari mention the blind governor ‘Ala’ al-Din Aydughdi. Material throughout this section was sourced from Michael Hamilton Burgoyne, *Mamluk Jerusalem: An Architectural Study* (London: World of Islam Festival Trust, on behalf of British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, 1987), 117–26; Donald P. Little, “Mujir al-Din al-‘Ulaymi’s Vision of Jerusalem in the Ninth/Fifteenth Century,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115, no. 2, (1995): 244; Nasser Rabbat, *Mamluk History through Architecture: Monuments, Culture and Politics in Medieval Egypt & Syria* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 40; Ali Qleibo, *Mamluk Architectural Landmarks in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Taawon, 2019), 66–67; Zayde Antrim, “Jerusalem in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods,” in Suleiman A. Mourad, Naomi Koltun-Fromm and Bedross Der Matossian (eds.), *Routledge Handbook on Jerusalem* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 102–9.
 - 7 Not to be confused with another Mamluk governor of the thirteenth century, ‘Ala’ al-Din Aydughdi ibn Abdallah al-Kubaki, who ruled Safad and Aleppo before a period in jail and then retirement to Jerusalem. He died in 1289 and his tomb, the Kubakiyya, still stands in Jerusalem’s Mamilla cemetery. Material in this section was sourced from: Michael Hamilton Burgoyne, *Mamluk Jerusalem: An Architectural Study* (London: World of Islam Festival Trust, on behalf of British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, 1987), 117–26; Donald P. Little, “Mujir al-Din al-‘Ulaymi’s Vision of Jerusalem in the Ninth/Fifteenth Century,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115, no. 2 (1995): 244; Nasser Rabbat, *Mamluk History through Architecture: Monuments, Culture, and Politics in Medieval Egypt and Syria* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 40; Ali Qleibo, *Mamluk Architectural Landmarks in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Taawon, 2019), 66–67; Zayde Antrim, “Jerusalem in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods,” in Suleiman A. Mourad, Naomi Koltun-Fromm and Bedross Der Matossian (eds.), *Routledge Handbook on Jerusalem* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 102–9.
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