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History Telling as a Social Pastime

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Introduction

The telling of "history" in Gaza and the peering over its minute details is part of everyday conversation here. Recalling past events is a commonplace social discourse. Whenever friends, acquaintances, or relatives meet at any social event, happy or sad, remembering past events is a major theme. Distant events dissolve the barriers of time, seeming as if they took place in the very near past. In my experience, Gazans' happier memories are promenades by the sea and family gatherings.

In their daily discourse, Gazans share an astounding understanding of selectively highlighted historical events that delineate what is remembered and talked about, and what is overlooked or forgotten. Meanwhile a myriad of details specific to each individual experience assume the focus of the conversation. The normative discourse assumes an autonomous life. It defines proper polite subjects of conversation and informs the collective vision of commonly shared experiences. It produces a virtual museum of highly personalised oral histories, structuring Gazan historiography. The everyday individual reminiscences, discussions, and elaborations on selective historic events, assume the aura of "truth" and "reality." Within this collective discourse, history is appropriated and meaning is regained on the individual level.

I have been blessed by the willingness of Gazans to share their time and information with me. In particular, elderly people have a culture that goes beyond diplomas and specialisations. Abu Ghazi Mushtaha, 91 years old, belongs to one of the notable Gazan families living in the neighbourhood of al Shaja'ia, to the east of Gaza until the last conflict of 2014. He is a chemist and a learned man. He has lived from the time of the British Mandate to the current Hamas authority. He did his schooling under the mandate, continued his studies under the Egyptian administration, and worked as head of the laboratory in Al-Zuhur Hospital (today the Gaza municipality) before and during the Israeli Occupation. "Within three decades, I have seen the Ottomans rise and fall out of favour!" Abu Ghazi Mushtaha said, describing the diverging historical narratives taught as part of the Gaza District curriculum during the British Mandate. "The perception of history conformed to the precepts of the state. Whereas Ottomans were presented as malicious despots during the British Mandate, they rose to become fellow patriotic Muslims who protected Palestine during the Egyptian mandate. Once seen as abusive tyrants, the Turks are now perceived as our closest staunch allies. This change in attitude was paralleled by the changing school curriculum".

In relation to the British, Abu Ghazi added, "I clearly remember good aspects of the British presence in Palestine, like the learning of English. We studied the Morris Method I and II. This was a good system and gave us a wonderful openness to the world. I took my metric exam for the diploma in Jerusalem, a sort of British tawjihi. It was an open world then." "I have lived long enough to see Gaza becoming increasingly closed in relation to borders and mental horizons".

"Engineer Ali Abu Shahla, one of Gaza's first engineers and head of planning at the Gaza Municipality in the 1970s, commented, "The curriculum has changed in the past 80 years to mirror the changing occupations Gaza has endured. My good English comes from the last years when we learnt English with the Morris Method in government schools."

The traumatic spectre of the Nakba haunts every conversation. Ms. Rawya El Shawwa is daughter of the Haj Rashad Shawwa, former mayor of Gaza, and belongs to a notable family living in the neighbourhood of Al- Shaja'ia. She remembers the hundreds of refugees seeking shelter in Gaza in 1948. "They camped in our gardens and we shared food and stories with them. Some of them were from our own families. The British Mandate had separated their staff from their families to avoid nepotism. The refugees arrived stunned, in a state of shock, battered, hungry, and thirsty. I was still a child." There was a pause as Rawya drifted in her thoughts to bring back those first moments of Al-Nakba. "I spoke to them and asked what had happened and many of them did not remember."

The role memory plays in shaping folk recollections of past events is a discourse whose sights, oversights, displacements, and interpretations objectify the past as a constituent element of the present. In the oral reminiscences over temporally removed events, history is regained, passed on to others, and reintegrated into the present socio-political economic context. Ethnographic research on the incidence of historical events on individual lives and experience challenges the historian's craft by showing that the march of history is neither impersonal nor uniform. Those elements remembered and those forgotten constitute the discourse of al Nisman, a local category mentioned and reasserted by a large majority of our interlocutors. This category presents the intertwining of the seen and the not seen in a vision that fills the spaces of the numerous lacunae. It is not that people have forgotten, it is that the recollections and details involved around certain events; are superseded by other fragments of reality that are more vivid and collectively known as well as tacitly forgotten through a sort of unconscious taboos. The non-said is hidden by the social complicity that hinders their memory.

"We are Gazans from the Al-Wazir family. Father worked in Ramla under the British and there I was born. English language methods and education in general under the mandate were a unified system and I felt it was good. I remember that my history teacher was a Jew. At the moment, I did not think much of it. He used to explain history through the images in the history books. Among the different topics, we learned about were the history of the Jews, Babel, and the Last Judgement. Years later we were expelled by the Jews. In retrospect, I realise the plot to take the whole of Palestine had already started," Abu Maher said. Through hindsight, simple details are recognised as major historical events.

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Through personal recollections, Abu Maher situates himself not as a marginal witness, but as victim of a ploy woven unbeknownst to him; he was an involuntary participant in the events that culminated in the Nakba.

Discussion

History "conceived" in spoken discourse is not necessarily diachronic. The anthropologist has to then arrange the thousands bits and pieces in a coherent fashion as if it were an old mosaic being restored, keeping in mind it is the natives' image of themselves. The anthropologist, as Levi- Strauss warns, must distinguish between the native categories of thought derived from individual experience and the political strategies that represent the determinant role that make up formal history. From the Gazan perspective, "historical reality" acquires a different dimension when filtered through personalised memory and narrated over and over again. Those elements remembered and those forgotten constitute the discourse of *el Nisan*, a local category mentioned and reiterated by our interlocutors. This category at the intersection of the seen and the not seen produces a vision filling the mental spaces of the numerous lacunae. It is not that people have forgotten, it is that the recollections and the details involved are superseded by other fragments of reality that are more vivid and known collectively or tacitly forgotten through a sort of unconscious taboo. The non-said are hidden by the social complicity that hinders the memory. Its discourse of folk history helps protect Gaza from total despair.

Powerless, defeated, and under siege, yet the dream of return lingers, adding pathos to the human condition. Abu Hashem, a refugee from the village of Al-Brer recounts, "I did not go to school. We were all busy tilling the land. Schools were in the city. Nevertheless, I know the history of my land better than many. It was right after the harvest; armed Jews came in the night and threatened to kill us if we did not leave. We tried to reach an arrangement with them, promising we would not bother them and would even protect them. But we finally left in fear of suffering another Der Yasin. I arrived with my family to the Jabalia camp. I was also with my wife who is my cousin. We had just been married. We went a number of times into Israel to return to the village and get some of the harvest left behind. I have been in the Jabalia camp ever since. I have dreamt all my life of the return, and until recently I thought it possible. Have you heard of Ariel Sharon? He not only took our lands for his ranch, he followed us to Jabalia with his tanks, his F-16s, and all his ways of planting terror. I saw pictures of the ranch; you can see our two wells and the sycamores that were near." Abu Hashem looked distraught and pointed to the television where we could see Sharon's funeral. "Now I do not believe we will ever return. Our land is being sullied by this man even after his death."

Abu Hashem's eldest son turned to him and said, "Oh father, be positive. His body will make very good fertiliser." Humour is the strategy with which painful reality is embraced.

Oral histories recreate the immediacy of the experience and help the anthropologist share in it and its emotions. The memories of refugees and native Gazan people fuse together to create a dynamic positive discourse woven with humour and tears. Nizar, who was born in Al-Bureij Refugee Camp a few years before the start of the Israeli Occupation, explained, "History was not taught in schools under the Israeli Occupation. We devoured the books in the library of the Red Crescent Society that Dr. Haidar Abd Al-Shafi had kept up-to-date, and the magazines of the political parties that entered Gaza illegally." With a feda'y father, I did not have to learn history from books, which were mostly revisionist. Books did not tell the truth. They had many censored pages dealing with Israel or Zionism or any Palestine-related topic. The stories from my parents and my grandfathers, told almost in secret, gave me memories that became mine and that I have kept alive with images as vivid as if I had really seen them."

Conclusion

Oral histories recreate and preserve the memories of the homeland for those who were born later in the refugee camp, keeping them alive and fresh. These individual family "histories" have lives of their own. They tend to be enriched and invariably modified with each narration. In the case of family narratives, children sometimes amend the details provided by the elders, while in other cases the memory takes a life of its own, providing the colour and texture of everyday life and the drama of the separation from the land and the eternal assurance of the return. Once the memory of the place and of the experience is recreated, it is unavoidably mythologised. This new status does not invalidate the Gazan folk historiography leading to the Nakba, but keeps it alive.

The codification of the experience of reality is a complex mosaic that creates divergent narratives. After more than 16 years, the blockade that started in the year 2000 with the second Intifada has increasingly tightened access and minimised the mobility of people entering and leaving Gaza. The long and devastating conflict of 2014 reminds in its dramatic effects to the war of 1967 in the opinion of those of our interviewees who were old enough to experience it. The vivid experiences, haunting images, and echoes of sounds and aromas of the homeland saturate the Gazan collective memory to imbue the present with the spirit of the past. Silence, blank expanses, and lapses of memory provide space for an ever- expanding discourse in which the nostalgic yearning for the homeland becomes a means of surviving the on-going trauma of the politically imposed siege.