

What Matters? Considering the Future of Cultural Heritage in Palestine

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There is a long list of deficits and challenges facing the cultural heritage of Palestine, but this contribution focuses on the future rather than the past history of cultural heritage preservation. Palestinians and those who support the preservation of cultural heritage in this region can take steps now which will enable us to jointly envision and ensure a future for the cultural heritage of Palestine.

ما يهم؟ النظر في مستقبل التراث الثقافي في فلسطين.

نظمي الجعبة

مدير مساعد , رواق ,مركز للحفاظ على العمارة الفلسطينية واعادة
تأهيلها

هناك قائمة طويلة من التحديات والمعوقات التي تواجه التراث الثقافي الفلسطيني , ولكن هذه المساهمة تركز على المستقبل بدلا من التاريخ الماضي من الحفاظ على التراث الثقافي . ان الفلسطينيين وأولئك الذين يؤيدون الحفاظ على التراث الثقافي في هذه المنطقة , يمكنهم ان يتخذوا بعض الخطوات الان والتي سوف تمكننا من ايجاد تصور مشترك وضمن مستقبل للتراث الثقافي الفلسطيني .

To begin, there is an issue of semantics or terminology that must be addressed. When we discuss antiquities and archaeology, it should be clear that these are two components of cultural heritage, which encompasses the human cultural production of the past and also more recent times. Cultural heritage includes the physical (material) remains left behind, such as buildings in which lives were lived, and the intangible elements of past societies that remain alive in our own cultural practice as traditional forms of craft, song, and dance, to name but a few. Archaeology, antiquities and these other aspects cannot be discussed as if they are considered to be different or irrelevant to other components of cultural heritage. The fact that this distinction between cultural heritage and antiquities/archaeology exists is a deficit of our past, in part an inheritance of colonial systems of legislation and ways of thinking that have been imposed through education and governance rather than emerging from within, from traditional Palestinian values. The definition of cultural heritage needs to be expanded to include everything from oral history to the most important historical monument or archaeological site in the country. It is impossible to think about trips to other countries without considering their cultural heritage – who travels to Paris and does not see the Eiffel Tower and the spires of Notre Dame or taste its food?

Cultural heritage is a tie that binds and it is a resource from which we all profit, whether spiritually as a document of the richness of our faith practices; or culturally, as a testament to the stories and traditions that we share; or socially, in the music played on string and wind instruments in traditional celebrations, or in clothing worn by our men and women who still display their family or tribe or regional designs, or the food shared; or economically, as attractions for tourism, travelling museum exhibits, original craft products, and saleable replicas of antiquities. A more comprehensive view of our cultural heritage is essential to building a strong foundation for the future in Palestine.

A second consideration that is no less important is the realization that Palestine is not an isolated geographic locality in terms of its cultural heritage. Rather, the territory that should become part of a future Palestinian state is part of an enormous cultural heritage landscape. National borders are not equivalent to and do not constrain cultural heritage borders. We may discuss Palestinian cultural heritage or Israeli cultural heritage or Jordanian cultural heritage or Egyptian cultural heritage, but that construction of cultural heritage describes only one aspect and that is, simply put, a definition born of the sovereign body or nation that exercises legal control over the resources within its borders. This is an extremely limited view of archaeological or cultural heritage borders. If we consider the goal of developing coalitions for the future preservation of cultural heritage, we realize that this construction is not helpful to anyone's interest. Indeed, if we allow our vision of cultural heritage to be subsumed by national interests and national borders, the results are utterly counter-productive. We are speaking about cultural heritage of the deep and more recent past that relates to a broader region that cross-cuts both ancient and modern national borders. It is specious to attempt a comprehensive understanding of either archaeology or the broader category, cultural heritage, within the confines of merely one nation's borders. During most periods in the past, huge areas had many elements in common and, indeed, many elements that distinguish one area from another. Often, where there are changes in one part of the larger region it is impossible to understand those changes except in the context of the changes happening elsewhere. To understand cultural heritage, we must acknowledge that elements of our past history are shared in common, a point which both archaeology and oral and written tradition documents amply. This is both a statement of fact, which has been well-documented by generations of archaeologists, historians, ethnographers, and other specialists in the different disciplines of history; and a statement of possibility with ethical implications.

If we only focus on cultural heritage as an inheritance of nationhood, we formulate cultural heritage as a functional category that supports the creation of national identity. This can lead us toward a "religion of archaeology." In the faith practice of nationalism, the physical remains of the past, that is, the archaeological traces of ancient societies, are converted into national symbols. This has occurred in many countries including Israel. In Israel national interest is focused on sites that relate to the narrative of the Israelites and the history of the Judean resistance against Rome and decisions about the past ascribed to a given site may be founded in either fact or fiction, based on an archaeological reality or an invented tradition. The result for the Palestinians has been a sense that cultural heritage is not a shared resource but an instrument of subjugation in which we are not only disenfranchised in the present but in the past. I am completely aware of the importance of cultural heritage for national identity building, but this approach, or this use of the past, does not preclude a positive vision for the future that reflects the multiple layers of culture, the multiplicities of identity in the modern process of building a nation. In fact, the word "identities" is more appropriate than "identity."

On the Palestinian side, the discussion of so-called "national identity" frequently is a reaction to a denial of the existence of a Palestinian identity by Israel. So, we are compelled to prove that we have an identity. Often, I feel uncomfortable when I have to define myself with one identity. I am not one identity only. I have so many, as does Palestine and the Palestinians, which reflects the diversity of the past, present and future heritage and cultures of our land and people. As we speak about cultural heritage in the West Bank and Gaza, should we describe it as Palestinian archaeology or Palestinian cultural heritage or instead as cultural heritage in Palestine? The difference is great. The first set of expressions devolves from the prejudice of nationalism and exclusion, while the second term encompasses the concept

of shared interest as well as diversity. The idea of cultural heritage in Palestine reflects the reality that Palestinians and others consider these antiquities, monuments, buildings, cultural expressions to be cultural heritage for them too. This sense of interest or affiliation transcends the more limited concept of legal ownership. It is a recognition of the broader interest, whether scientific or traditional, of people in the remains of our shared human past. The national state is the sole owner of the cultural heritage within its national border. This includes the right to manage cultural heritage in the name of the national state, but it should also include a responsibility to manage it for humanity.

A final point relates to the many needs within Palestine society with respect to cultural heritage in all its different aspects. The less important reforms are those that target new laws, streamline administration, build a national board of trustees for cultural heritage that represents the diversity of interests and expertise, and separates the department of cultural heritage from the Ministry of Tourism by putting it under the supervision of the Ministry of Education or Culture. These needs might seem compelling and significant but in reality they are less important than developing a sense of connection between the people, the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza and elsewhere, and cultural heritage broadly defined. An aware public that wants to safeguard the cultural heritage resources in the areas where they live can be more effective than any law or administration could possibly hope to be. The need to create a sense of connection and investment among the people in cultural heritage has existed for a long time but past generations have failed to address the challenge. Even though cultural heritage and archaeological research has been underway since the middle of the nineteenth century, the excavators and researchers have not considered the Palestinian communities living in and around the place where they were working as a relevant audience. The lack of connection to cultural heritage resources leads to illicit excavations, which are still taking place at this very moment in some parts of the West Bank. Very little work has been done in the arena of cultural heritage education. While we may create the most sophisticated laws in the world and have the most important experts available to implement them, if the people are not convinced that these sites are very important to them and very important to their socio-economic development in the future, we will need more than ten thousand policemen, simply to station a single officer at each archaeological site.

The creation of sensitivity for and awareness of cultural heritage can be achieved only through hard work. Attachment is not something you can develop quickly or with short-term efforts. This should be considered a national priority that has behind it a stable funding base that can persist for a generation. If that kind of long term plan is implemented, then we will have a situation in which people will contribute to the management of historic sites, and thus to their actual protection. Much work needs to be done to achieve this result. Creativity is required to achieve it in a manner that does not cause people to feel attachment to cultural heritage resources simply because this is "our land" or "our cultural heritage" which is so often the mantra invoked in nationalist discourse. Rather, we can achieve this goal by demonstrating that we are stewards of a cultural heritage resource for our children and for the rest of the world that also considers this cultural heritage to be worthy of preservation, to have value. These perspectives can develop more effectively once the Palestinians have the ability to expand the means of benefiting from that cultural heritage in tangible ways, such as tourism. Presently, tourism in the Palestinian Occupied Territories essentially is run by Israeli companies and little, if any, benefit accrues to the Palestinians directly.

A thriving Palestinian cultural heritage-focused tourism industry will require a setting of security in which Palestinians have sole control over entrance to the territory and to the sites.

We have not reached this status yet but we can envision it and we work toward that result. We cannot develop direct efficient, official management of cultural heritage in this country unless we get a huge degree of support from you. This support is required in various domains, such as conservation, curation, site presentation and preservation training, management, equipment and support for libraries, laboratories and archives, to name but a few. The list is very long, but in order to work toward the development of Palestinian management of cultural heritage for the benefit of all people in the world, these investments will be needed.

One such investment lies in the negotiation of the future relationship between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The prospect for success once an agreement has been signed is hostage to the process of reaching that agreement. My own experience in negotiations has shown that attempts to achieve agreements become an obstacle for future cooperation if the rights of both sides are not respected, where there is no parity in the terms of the agreement. It should be a core interest of the Israelis to accord the Palestinian side all of its national rights in the field of cultural heritage. Otherwise, all future cooperation will be greatly hampered and the very cultural heritage that Israelis consider to be highly significant to their national narratives, to the Abrahamic faith traditions, and to the world will remain at risk.