

## Orientalist Depictions of Jerusalem and Palestine versus Anthropological and Biological Diversity

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The first 120 pages of a four-volume book entitled *Picturesque Palestine* by Charles Wilson published in 1881 are on Jerusalem. These pages included spectacular descriptions of monuments, walls, and links to biblical names (most of them hypothetical/mythical) but barely a word on people and nature. Cox (1852) similarly wrote a lengthy monograph on Palestine including some 20 pages on Jerusalem barely mentioning the native Jerusalemites. The literature of Western travelers to Jerusalem is striking in this respect: the absence of people and little mention of nature. Travel writers like those mentioned above and many others (Mark Twain comes to mind as classical) came with preconceived notions; they wanted to see only what they wanted to see: links to the literature they knew which focused on the Bible and biblical-related writings of a land holy to a Judeo-Christian culture of the West (Rogers, 2011; Keighren and Withers, 2012; Yothers, 2016).

Not only the Muslim majority but even the other natives in Palestine (including the 15% native Christians and 3% native Jews) were almost entirely missing from these orientalist narratives. These and dozens of other Western monographs on Jerusalem rarely mention the rich native diversity of Palestine (human, fauna, flora) and consider it merely as a sterile land thus fulfilling the notion of “a land without a people for a people without a land.” Palestine thus seems desolate and devoid of life.

Palestine is the western part of the Fertile Crescent. Its diverse habitats inspired poets and nurtured prophets. It is an area whose beauty is best explained by its diversity: diversity of people and biodiversity in nature. The geology and geography that produced the rich lands also produced a strategic location connecting Eurasia to Africa. Over the centuries, the old Canaan land thus became a magnet for nearby empires, invaders, pilgrims, and traders. It became a Holy Land to followers of three world religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). More than half of the global population now follows these religions. These people and religions are living and not dead. Jerusalem and the rest of Palestine are not mere monuments for tourists and casual travellers to view through orientalist



Palestinian Landscape.

depictions as an exotic east connected only to religious and racist mythologies (Said, 1979).

Palestine's beauty is rooted in its biodiversity and human diversity. It follows naturally from variation in habitats and bio-geographical zones (Ethiopian, Mediterranean, Saharo-Arabian, and Irano-Turanian). Even though the Palestinian environment was subjected to significant damage over the decades including demographic changes and colonial activities (e.g., see Qumsiyeh et al., 2014, 2017), we still have significant biodiversity. Over 2,500 species of plants, over 500 species of birds, and over 120 species of mammals and many others inhabit this land. There is also significant human diversity despite the attempt to bury it. It goes back to our ancestors who had branched evolutionarily into many Aramaic-speaking Canaanitic people: Phillistines, Jebusites, Nebateans, Judeans, Phoneicians, Samaritans, etc. But they all mixed and traded with each other and with people who invaded and controlled the area (e.g., Romans, Persians, Ottoman Turks). At the time of Jesus, for example, Jerusalem was a bustling town of some 20,000–40,000, with people who spoke many languages: Aramaic, Latin, Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, Amharic, among others. But languages and cultures had no definite borders as they were all mixed.

The Palestinian “Arabic” spoken in Jerusalem for more than 2,000 years and until today is a mix of predominantly Arabic, many Aramaic words, and some Turkish and other words. From Aramaic, for example, we find words like *shub-bak* (window), *juwwa* (inside), *barra* (outside), *ba'l* (for agriculture that uses



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no water), and hundreds more. From Turkish we find *afandi* (a term of respect) and *baghshish* (tip or bribe). We say *franji* (Frank for “foreigner” relating to the Franks going back to Crusader times). The linguistic and archeological history was thus also buried, together with other native history of Palestine (see Ra’ad 2010). But there is still resistance and, despite attempts at creation of a homogenous Jewish state on top of Palestine, we find among the 6.2 million remaining native Palestinians: Ethiopian, Armenian, Moroccan, Aramaic, Turkish, Samaritan, Circasian, Druze, Bahai, and many others.

The rich and beautiful diversity existed a mere 80 years ago. Even agricultural diversity and living off the land is threatened and is being replaced by industrial (mono) culture. Seven million Palestinians are currently refugees or displaced persons, originating from some 500 villages and towns destroyed or depopulated between 1948 and 1950. As the old die, fewer people remember village life and traditional culture, let alone the rich tapestry of agricultural, natural, and human diversity that was destroyed in much of historic Palestine over the past 100 years (Qumsiyeh, 2004). How many remember the rich mosaic of people and nature (including diverse agricultural products) in Western Jerusalem areas like Lifta, Al-Walaja, Al-Malha, and Deir Yassin? What kind of animals were raised or hunted, what crops were cultivated, what wild plants were gathered, what stories were told of this intimate relationship to nature? Answers to questions like these will be lost unless we act quickly. Some six million Palestinians still live in historic Palestine (now Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Terri-

tories). Preserving our agricultural, anthropological, and biological heritage is essential to maintaining Palestinian identity and for a more sustainable future for nature and people.

Palestine has been subjected to foreign rule for centuries – Ottoman, British, Jordanian, and Israeli control and/or occupation. Military conflict and political struggle have superseded environmental issues, threatening our natural and cultural heritage (Qumsiyeh, 2004).

Environmental awareness and education remain under-valued and underfunded, and preserving our cultural heritage faces many challenges. UNESCO states that “the protection and promotion of cultural and natural diversity are major challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”

To preserve our cultural heritage we need interdisciplinary research on Palestinian natural history, the sociology of village life, and the traditional cultural expression in stories, fables, proverbs, and other artistic manifestation, such as museums,<sup>1</sup> thus reconnecting to our anthropological and natural heritage (our diversity).

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## Endnotes:

1. "Museums and collections constitute primary means by which tangible and intangible testimonies of nature and human cultures are safeguarded."

(<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/museums/recommendation-on-the-protection-and-promotion-of-museums-and-collections/>). The International Committee of Museum (ICOM) emphasized: "Museums preserve, interpret and promote the natural and cultural inheritance of humanity." (<http://icom.museum/the-vision/code-of-ethics/>, Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996).

## Memoricide

Alya Brejiyeh

For the past hundred years, Zionists have been using many systematic strategies against the people of Palestine. The main motivation for these actions is ethnic and ideological cleansing aimed at completing the Zionist occupation of Palestine.

One of these strategies is *memoricide*, a term coined by the Croatian doctor and historian Mirko D. Grmek after the attack on the National Library during the Sarajevo siege in April 1992. *Memoricide* is the willful destruction of a vanquished people's memory and cultural treasures. As Carmen Verlichak wrote "*Damage to memory is worse than physical destruction, because human beings, through cultural monuments, try to turn their mortality into a piece of immortality.*"<sup>1</sup>



Memories of the Palestinian Nakba.

The social, cultural, and historical life of our ancestors and their sacrifices should be remembered. Defending their rights is our historical responsibility, rights such as their right of return to their homeland after the Zionist Occupation in 1948, the year of Al-Nakba (or "the catastrophe"). Since then, the occupation power denies the right to return of more than 750,000 people who were forced to leave their homes during the 1948 war and their more than 6 million descendants. But more than that, the occupation power attempts to deny that they ever existed. Countless methods are used to erase visible signs of their existence, such as planting flora that is not specific to the terrain just to cover destroyed villages. For example, in the new town of Migdal Ha-Emek, the Jewish National Fund (JNF) strove to hide the ruins of the Palestinian village named Mujaydil by planting alleys of pine trees in order to silence stories about places previously inhabited by Palestinians.<sup>2</sup>

Destroying both physical places and conceptual spaces to accomplish *memoricide* can take different forms, such as building on top of other peoples' dwellings and sacred places (e.g., building a highway over graves of indigenous people) or making it impossible to imagine what used to be (e.g., replacing one way of thinking with another that disparages the concepts of the former; as in the case of language).<sup>3</sup>