

A Tale of Two Villages: The Visible and Invisible in Two Ruined Palestinian Villages in the Jezreel Valley, Israel

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Abstract

In this essay I describe a landscape of conflict focusing on the way conflict forms the politics of remembering and forgetting. The landscape I focus on is of two ruined Palestinian villages destroyed in 1948, which are located in the Jezreel Valley in Israel. In the essay I explore and compare the Arab and the Jewish experience and narration of the landscape. The main argument of the essay is that much for the landscape of conflict lives in between remembering and forgetting, in fragments and ambivalences. And it is in this social and political space that new ways of formulating a peaceful future could be developed.

Introduction

In this essay I will explore two sites: the ruined Palestinian villages Mujedal and Ma'alul, located in the Jezreel Valley, which is situated in northern Israel. I will investigate the relationship between past, present, conflict and place as it is lived and enacted through the physical surroundings and through the accounts of the inhabitants of the valley. The past, as examined and presented in this account, is material and immaterial, inanimate and narrated, and therefore includes sites and pieces of landscape, plus verbalized references to the past. In exploring such landscapes I also wish to create an analysis that is not confined to one ethnic group or subject area but which succeeds in overcoming categories, areas of scholarly study and political boundaries (see Barsalou and Baxter 2007). In other words, my intention is to show how the two sites are both Jewish and Arab, as much as they are both real and imagined, what used to be and what is there now. My ambition therefore in this essay is to show how these sites of conflict are

relevant to both Jews and Arabs, relevant to their past and present and therefore to their futures.

The process, which is central to the exploration of place, conflict and the past, in this essay is that of remembering and forgetting: at one extreme, the inscription of the past on the landscape by naming and posting, and at the other, the erasure and destruction of pasts and presences (see Handelman and Shangar-Handelman 1997:88). Yet, what I hope to draw particular attention to is the space between present and absent, showing how remembering is subjected to forgetting, and the forgotten is remembered. In between remembering and forgetting there are ambivalences, gaps and paradoxes, such that the past is incoherent and non-articulated. This space, so I wish to claim, in contrast to official Meta narratives, is where the option for a dialogue is located and for new ways for envisioning the future.

The Palestinian Israeli Experience of the Ruined Villages

The village of Ma'alul was occupied in 1948 and later destroyed (see Shai 2003). Many of its inhabitants and their descendants now live in the village of Ya'fia, close to Ma'alul, as well as other places in the area. Other people escaped across the border. The ruins of the villages were covered by a forest dedicated to different Jewish and other philanthropists, as is the case with many other Palestinian villages. In addition to the forest, in the place which used to be Ma'alul there is now a military base, a water-drilling site, and a farm belonging to a Bedouin man whom I will refer to as Haled. At the small farm (*hava*) where Haled and his wife Amal spend their days, there are huts, a stable for horses, a couple of goats, and a small vegetable garden. At night Haled and his wife leave the farm and return home. Haled told me that his father, who had contacts with some people on the Jewish side was offered the job of 'guarding the roads, olives, almonds and lands of Mujedal and Ma'alul for the State guardian'.

However, traces still remain of Ma'alul. Although from the main road it is more difficult to see them, walking through the forest one can find the remains of the village: two churches, a mosque, the ruins of the houses, plus the cactuses which had been used for fencing and now grow wild, and are one of the prominent signs of the ruined village (see also Ben Ze'ev 2003, Bardenstein 1998 Davis 2006). Some of the village trees, such as olives, also remain, some in amongst the trees of the forest. Close to the military base there is a grave, which in contrast to the others is still well maintained and belongs, I was told, to a young man from the village who fell from his horse.

Some of the villagers who remained in Israel, and their descendants, established official associations, registered with the Home Office's list of associations (*amutot*). In order to learn about the villages and the relationships between the first, second and third generations and the ruined villages, I met with the representatives of the associations of both Ma'alul and of the village Mujedal a village ruined too in 1948. The associations bring together the villagers and their descendants, organizing different meetings and events and thus maintaining their sense of belonging, identity and the memory of the village. They get involved in the 'heritage' of the villages by collecting documents and photos as well as other information, in some cases for publication, and deal with the management of the ruined sites themselves. The aim of the associations is to ensure that the 'sacred sites' of the ruined villages which remain (such as cemeteries, churches, and mosques) are clean, preserved as much as possible, or even reconstructed. In order to carry this out, the associations have to negotiate the possibilities and conditions for access and preservation with whoever is in charge of the place currently. And in this sense, although the associations attempt to avoid drawing on the Palestinian discourse about 'the right to return', using instead a more 'universal' language of sacred sites and human feelings, what they do, in fact, is carry out a constant so-called 'disturbing' reminder of their past presence, and in some cases they also express their dissatisfaction with the present, and their dreams and hopes for the future.

The ruined village, therefore, for the refugees and their descendants, is the material site which existed in the past, and one which exists in the present, as well as an imagined and narrated site. But the village also signifies their experiences as refugees and as distinct, intimate, social and political groups of people in the villages where they now live, with their own networks, customs, jargon and folklore such as songs in which, I was told, there are many references to the landscape of the village. Mahram, one of the refugees from Mujedal, who is a member of the association, told me that he feels that for those who are not in Israel it is better. In contrast to the story of the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani, *Return to Haifa* ([1969] 2001), in which the refugees find their house exactly as it was, the hardest thing, according to Mahram is 'to see the land deteriorating'. Mujedal was 'replaced' by the Jewish city Migdal HaEmeq in the 1950s. Consequently, the landscape has changed, houses are now ruined, others have been built, trees have been uprooted and others have been planted, so that it is difficult for the refugees to map the old landscape on the new one. Tragically, Mahram, as an employee of the construction company Solel Bone, participated himself in the building of the new city, and in what probably seemed to him like the destruction of the old village. Once, he happened to be in the area where a synagogue was built, and realized that in fact this was his family's olive plot: 'My hair stood on end, and my Iraqi assistant noticed this and asked me in Arabic: "Abu-Azmi, what happened?"' In addition to witnessing the destruction, the tragedy of many of the refugees is that they continued to live in their heart in the villages from which they had been uprooted, and never felt that the new village was in fact their home. Time had frozen, and they never were able to put down roots in their new place. Sa'ade, a descendant of a family of refugees from Ma'alul, told me that his grandfather used to dream at night about Ma'alul, 'going into the field with people who are already dead...[my] grandfather lived in Ya'fia...and he never had even one dream about it'.

However, because the refugees were able to a certain extent to visit and follow the ruined sites, their descendants could place the remains in the context of the imagined old village, and map what was not there on the present. Two men I met, who were sitting under a tree in a garden in Migdal

HaEmeq, told me that one of them was the son of a refugee from Mujedal. He was able to point to the spot where the village mill used to stand, as well telling me stories about specific trees which he also showed me. Similarly, as I was struggling to locate the churches in Ma'alul, two young Israeli-Palestinian men who passed by in their car offered their assistance. They took me to the churches, and one of them was also able to show me the remains of his family's house. Therefore, for both the refugees and their descendants, the villages are material and immaterial places. Sa'ade, the grandson who I mentioned in the previous paragraph, told me that he has 'a cognitive map' of the village, and this is what he experiences when he goes there. In this respect, he has blurred the difference between his experience and that of those who actually lived in the village. However, another man, whose parents are also refugees from Ma'alul, said that while for the first generation the village was made up of houses, for him it is 'something beautiful', 'an ideal', with 'feelings'. For him as a child, the forest, and what he called 'nature', was part of its beauty, even if it is what actually covered the village, and an ingredient of its destruction. And because of this difference, he believes that the past cannot be relived in the future: 'If we return to Ma'alul,' he said with irony 'we will ruin it.' This fear is not echoed by Sa'ade, who told that me he hopes and believes that the people of Ma'alul and their descendants will return to live there, because Ya'fia, he said, is crowded similarly to 'a refugee camp', while in Ma'alul there is land. Therefore, the present, and the sense of inequality and dissatisfaction, motivates his wish to return as much as the past does. And for that reason, I believe, the future vision of the village is not related to the past. When I asked him to describe the rebuilt village, he told me he would like the people to return and become farmers, employing modern agricultural methods with tractors, and he added that there would be 'a swimming pool, green areas...and industry'. Therefore, although Sa'ade is emotionally deeply invested in the past landscape, insisting on returning to the specific place, and not settling for anything else, the future landscape he depicts resembles more the landscape of the kibbutz, rather than that of a Palestinian village. Susan Slyomovics describes, in her ethnography of Ein-Hod, how the new Arab Ein-Houd and the Jewish Ein-Hod (which is the old village) are both unreal, and trying to imitate something else. In the case of

the new Arab village, it imitates either the old one or a Jewish settlement, and, in the case of the Jewish one, it expropriates the old village and the 'other', such that one cannot not tell which one is material and which is a reflection (1998: 81). Also, in the case of Ma'alul, the past, present and future landscapes, material and immaterial, self and other all compete, blur, or even collapse into one another so that self becomes other, and the return to the past in the future draws on images of the present.

The Jewish-Israeli Experience of the Ruined Villages

The people who were settled in Migdal HaEmeq which was built on the top of the village Mujedal in the early 1950s were immigrants and refugees, mainly from North Africa and the Middle East. Their experience of the physical surroundings was different from that of the inhabitants who lived in the valley before 1948, and who were familiar with the villages before their occupation. One of those immigrants told me that on one occasion, one of the locals who took him in his car could not figure out what Migdal HaEmeq was, until he realized that in fact it was Mujedal. But the newcomers somehow found out about the previous Arab presence. Whilst one woman who arrived in Israel from Iraq told me that the previous inhabitants used to come and confront them, saying 'this is my tree, this is my house', most of them could not remember any such encounters. In most people's accounts of their arrival and settlement in Migdal HaEmeq, the previous village was not mentioned. When I asked them to describe the physical surroundings, some of them pictured it as ruined, as if nothing was there besides trees, mud and thorns. The experience for many of them was of alienating, hostile and inhabitable surrounding. For them, the sense of absence of the previous occupants was a sense of an alienating presence, like a shadow, a ghost, or a photographic negative. One of them, who came as a child from Morocco, told me that contemporary Migdal HaEmeq is clean, painted, and decorated, with beautiful roads, in contrast to the 'destruction' and 'deserted houses' that used to be there. A similar account can be found in the novel *Each had Six Wings* (1973) by Hanoch Bartov, who describes how the encounter of Holocaust survivors with the ruined 1948 landscape is not only distant and alienating, but reminds them

of the ruined landscape of Europe after the war and their own catastrophe. However, when I asked the old inhabitants of Migdal HaEmeq directly about 'the Arabs who used to live here', all of them in reply uttered the word 'Mujedal'. One of them told me that they learned about it from 'a rumour', and said that he knew that the olive trees were 'theirs', referring to the previous Arab inhabitants. Some even said that during the early years, when there was unemployment and poverty in Migdal HaEmeq, the fruit trees were an important source of food. Another woman remembered a deserted house, the church, and the grave of an Arab pilot. But in an interview I held with her younger sister, she told me she learned about the village only when she was in high school, although she could always remember the tree gardens and the churches of her childhood. For her, unlike the adults, the traces of the village seemed like 'magic corners'.

The difference in those experiences is also the case with the ruins and the forest where Ma'alul used to be. During the difficult years of the early 1950s, many of the immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East whom I interviewed told me they earned their living for a short period through forestry. Forestry, or as they called it: 'wide hoe', was a form of relief work, provided by the State, which many of them remembered as being hard work. The woman from Iraq whom I mentioned earlier told me that she remembered planting trees as a pregnant young woman, whilst her boss, feeling sorry for her, let her rest, while not deducting her payment. The people in Migdal HaEmeq remembered how they planted forests in different places, including the forest in Ma'alul, although they never mentioned the ruins of the villages in their accounts. On the other hand, for the children in the kibbutzim, Ma'alul was a place of leisure, as was still the case when they grew up. One woman who grew up in a nearby kibbutz, for example, recounted her memories of Ma'alul as a place where summer camps were held for children coming from the city, and as a place where they went and picked flowers. For them it was 'magical', and, as she said: 'Part of the magic was that it was abandoned, deserted, with a sense of previous life, this is what it seems like to me as an adult.' In one of the conversations I had with the farmers in the field, I asked them about Ma'alul. One of them said that Ma'alul 'is related to the fountain...Sabra

hurdles, beautiful surroundings, full of life...there used to be a village, there was a church where we used to have parties. Another young man added: 'It is a place for [where you can have] a cup of coffee.' Another aspect brought up by the first farmer was the war games between 'us' and the 'Romans': 'I remember how I jumped from the aqueduct and overwhelmed someone, and then four others jumped and overwhelmed me. For children it is heaven, a playground, it takes emotional practice to realize that it is the life of other people.' Paradoxically, these descriptions resemble the memories of the son of refugees from Ma'alul whom I mentioned earlier, who experienced the forest as a beautiful place, since, as he told me, 'children do not understand politics'. On the Israeli day of independence, many of the villagers and their descendants also go to the forest for a picnic, as so many other Israelis do. And although Sa'ade told me that on that day 'the village really returns' as the inhabitants and their descendants go there, and is an opportunity for the villagers to commemorate the destruction of the village, the young man I met at the forest said that 'people forget'. In a similar vein one of the members of the kibbutz, who was also present at the conversation we had in the field, was less convinced about how naïve this childhood experience actually was. The war games and the swearing-in ceremonies, which enabled children to be initiated into the youth movement, meant, in fact, that 'we defeated the Arabs', as he said. Also, the woman I mentioned earlier once told me that she remembered that sometime in the 1950s, one female soldier, who was raped and murdered by a Bedouin man, was dumped later into a well in Ma'alul. Like the ruins of the Arab village in the Amos Oz novel, *A Perfect Peace* (1982), which was located in the Jezreel Valley, Sheik Dahar is a popular place for hiking and picnicking, but it is also the shadow which haunts Kibbutz Granot, where evil is still present and needs to be defeated. As such, therefore, the ruined village is the subject of fantasies as much as it is of nightmare

From Conflict to Dialogue: A New Old Country

In this essay I have explored two sites of memory, two ruined Palestinian villages Mujedal and Ma'alul located in the Jezreel Valley in Israel. As I have

shown, the ruined villages continue to exist in the present in different ways: they live through narratives, images, memories, and in the landscape itself. The two villages are sites of forgetting and remembering accommodating both inscription and erasure. While the forest is dedicated to certain people, it also covers the remains of the village, remains which are still present. Yet the villages are also remembered not only by those who do not wish to forget them. Since eradication is incomplete certain fragments of the past always float onto the surface in names, objects and the remains of buildings. Their existence is woven in the narratives of the people who were settled on their tops. In the landscape of conflict the 'triumphant' erases the 'defeated' yet both also mimic and collapse into one another.

And it is at this point where 'the new old country' accommodating both Jews and Arabs is located. The past perhaps cannot be fully restored. Its restoration inevitably will uproot others. Past, present and future should be separated from one another. Yet the past presence of the 'other' cannot and should not be forgotten either. In finding ways to deal with that presence of the past and the other in its present form, highlighting in new ways its physical and verbal fragmented existence, both 'sides' can open a new space for a dialogue on new joint visions of the future. New forms of ownership may be created and new landscapes built.

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