The Survival of Palestinian National Identity through Commemoration

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Introduction

Around 80 percent of all Palestinians living in Mandate Palestine became refugees during the 1948 War. Even now, after sixty-five years, more than five million Palestinians are still living in exile, mostly in neighbouring countries. Surprisingly, after so many years of dislocation and on-going conflict most refugees and their descendants still hold on to their Palestinian identity (Farah, 2006). This identity is one that more than anything needs remembrance to uphold its existence in a world that seems to have forgotten them. Often, the concept of ‘collective memory’ is seen as the representative of the specific values, beliefs and traditions which unite individuals through the idea of a shared past (Le Goff, Randal & Claman, 1992). Rabinowitz (1994) observed that “Palestinian identity hinges on the experience of dispossession and exile as well as international misrecognition of Palestinian rights and suffering”. History, memory and the dream of returning to their homes is what binds this dislocated people that is scattered all over the world. The Al-Nakbah - the catastrophe – and the continuous conflict has thus had an immense impact on being a Palestinian and still defines the very way in which Palestinians identify themselves with their homeland. By performings of the past and the sharing of narratives about this often romanticized paradise of the homeland, the Palestinian identity is kept alive, even among second and third generation refugees. In this paper I argue that through remembrance in the form of narratives about the homeland the Palestinian identity continues to exist among refugees and their descendants and that the history and remembrance of Al-Nakbah forms the very cornerstone of the Palestinian national identity.

National identity and memory

Following the abstract thinking on nation and national identity as described by pioneers like Anderson (1983) and Hobsbawn and Ranger (1992), social science often defines (national) identity as a sense of belonging to an imagined community that is constantly reproduced and reinvented through traditions, history, commemorations and national symbols. Furthermore Stuart Hall (1989), Edward Said (1994) and others put in that every identity is partly the relationship between you and the other. Connerton (1989) stated: “People create notions of themselves as they relate to their world and others in their society. These interactions are at
the base of identity creation and maintenance”. An identity apparently needs to oppose to someone or something, otherwise there would be no need of a unique identity. As will be discussed later in this paper, this characteristic of identity is very much recognizable in the Palestinian national identity.

According to MacMillan (2009), history provides much of the fuel for nationalism and is used and misused to form national identities. The remembrance of events or periods important to the people of the nation is a crucial part in the invention and reproduction of national identity.

Since national and other identities are established and maintained through mnemonic practices, traditions and sites it is important to understand the relationship between memory and identity. As Gillis (1996) says, this relationship is historical and its record can be traced through various forms of commemoration, as we will see further on in this paper. Research has been done on the influence of history and collective memory on identity. It is said that communities have a history and in an important sense are constituted by their past. For this reason we can speak of a real community as a “community of memory”, one that does not forget its past (Bellah et al., 1985).

What these abstract definitions and theories mean in practice is that memory is shared by the members of the community in for example narratives, traditions and bodily practices. Narratives are the oral commemorations defining identity. Following Hall (1990), “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past”.

Connerton (1989) argues in his How Societies Remember that images and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by ritual performances, and that performative memory is bodily”. This idea is consistent with what Winter (2010) refers to as “performing the past”, which is basically a type of remembrance through action. According to Winter it is imbedded in cultural practices that individuals and groups fashion and in which other individuals and groups participate, either directly or over time. Performance is a re-enactment, an affirmation and a renewal of history and thus facilitates the creating and maintaining of both memory and identity.

In this paper the above described connections and practices will be applied to the case of the Palestinian national identity, in particular the identity of the refugees. The role of narratives and the role of performance of the past will be discussed to come to a conclusion about the connection between history, memory and the national identity of the Palestinians.
The roots of Palestinian national identity

Even though the Palestinians have never had a completely sovereign nation-state, there exists a national identity. Before investigating the discourses sustaining it nowadays, it might be wise to first contemplate on the roots of the Palestinian national identity.

This is an issue that is much debated among scholars. As said earlier all nationalisms arise in opposition to some other. This is why Gelvin (2005) and many more state that Palestinian nationalism only emerged in the early twentieth century in response to Zionism. Similarly Seddon (2004) argues that "the creation of Palestinian identity in its contemporary sense was formed essentially during the 1960s, with the creation of the Palestine Liberation Organization". On the other hand Khalidi (1997) writes, in his book *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, that "it is a serious mistake to suggest that Palestinian identity emerged mainly as a response to Zionism". According to him the national Palestinian identity formed in the late nineteenth century among peoples of the Ottoman Empire and got its present shape after the end of World War I. Yet he must admit that the emergence of Zionism played a huge role in the developing of the national identity. Either way, it is clear that opposition to Zionism and the want for independence after the Great War were the most significant boosts for a Palestinian national identity. Also, the first Palestinian nationalist organisations were formed in this period. Overall it can be concluded that this national identity is relatively modern and does not have any roots in ancient history.

The Palestinian identity of the refugees

The Palestinian national identity was of course further shaped by the events of 1948 and 1967 and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As Sanbar (2001) says: “The contemporary history of the Palestinians turns on a key date: 1948. That year, a country and its people disappeared from maps and dictionaries. ‘The Palestinian people does not exist’, said the new masters, and henceforth the Palestinians would be referred to by general, conveniently vague terms, as either ‘refugees’, or in the case of a small minority that had managed to escape the generalized expulsion, ‘Israeli Arabs’. The Palestinians became a people in diaspora. This completely changed the national identity. Al-Nakbah became a constitutive element of Palestinian identity (Sa’di, 2002). The national identity ever since has been characterized by this event, the following dislocation, the international misrecognition and the longing for a
return to the homeland. For academic Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2002), being Palestinian means “being intimately connected to intense personal and emotional upheavals regarding place, location, identity, and desire”. The Palestinian claim on the land they have lost, the so-called Right of Return, has always been rejected by the Israelis and often seen as unrealistic.

Palestinian refugees are still not allowed back to the homes they left so long ago. In her research on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Sayigh (1979) described their feeling of being expelled from Paradise. After sixty-five years only a few of the first generation refugees is still alive, but five million of their descendants still remain and even though most of them have never seen Palestine before, they identify themselves as being Palestinian. The identity of these refugees is largely fuelled by the idealized narratives and visions of the past passed on by the community. The memory is kept alive and thereby is the national identity. The following paragraphs consider the influence of narratives and of the performance of the past on the sustaining of this identity.

**The role of narratives**

Saleh Abdel Jawad, director of the Birzeit University Centre for Research and Documentation of Palestinian Society, noted that: “The Israelis are waiting for the young generation of Palestinians to forget the *watan* (homeland), so it is imperative to preserve the life of the villages in the minds of the youth. In spite of the fact that we failed in our political struggle (…) we don’t have to lose our history” (Katz, 1995). Following this argumentation many institutions are founded with the aim of preserving Palestinian memory, both in the occupied territories and in foreign countries (Farah, 2006). The aim is to keep the Palestinian identity alive by upholding the connection of the young generations with their history. One way of doing this is by the use of narratives (the oral sharing of individual and/or collective memory).

For instance, in refugee camps kids are taught about Al-Nakbah and the Right of Return from an incredibly young age. They learn about the claim to their homeland through relatives and/or in after-school clubs. This way the community ensures that younger generations will not forget where they came from (Tucker, 2013). This discourse tries to uphold the continuity of the national identity. A consequence is that a lot of refugees remain stateless, for they do not accept citizenship of host-countries (if offered) because they see themselves as Palestinian. In this way these narratives contribute to the connection between the collective memory of Al-Nakbah and Palestinian national identity.
Although memories, life stories and interpretations of history have individual authors “no individual exists outside a social context. Individual narratives draw upon the myriads of relationships and historical processes and events that inform an individual life” (Farah, 2006). There have been multiple studies on Palestinian narratives in all of which Al-Nakbah plays a crucial role. For example, Witteborn (2007) found in her research on Palestinian narratives speakers that they addressed consistent themes such as “living in a divided space, being a dislocated person, and resisting collective punishment in their authorial roles”. The topics talked about often focussed on dislocation and resistance against the occupation.

From my own experience I know how involved the Palestinian youth is in their political situation and history. When I spoke with a group of seventeen year old girls growing up in the Palestinian Territories the first topic they immediately introduced was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For me, this shows just how connected Palestinians are with their situation and indirectly with their history.

In her research on Palestinian narratives, Farah concludes that underpinning and organizing the individual narrative was the 1948 Nakbah as the central moment before and after which refugee lives unfolded (Farah, 2006). This makes that the Palestinian people are consciously aware of their history and the enduring conflict.

**The role of performance of the past**

A second way of remembering and reaffirming national history and memory is by ways of *performing the past*. In the case of the Palestinians, this means visits to their old houses, attending demonstrations or celebrating *Nakbah-day*.

There have been several short moments in contemporary history in which the Israeli government has opened their borders to some Palestinians in order to give them the opportunity to make short visits to the land that is now Israel. This was the chance for Palestinians to visit the houses they were forced out of, the so-called Al-Nakbah sites. Many personal accounts of such visits or the refusal to make them are available. One of the reasons people would want to visit these sites of memory is to re-experience and thus perform the past.

Another way of commemorating through action is the celebration of Nakbah-day, every year on 15 May. It is the day that Palestinians commemorate the Nakbah and the displacement that followed it. It is often marked by Palestinian speeches, rallies, demonstrations and sometimes
violence. This takes place all over the world, but foremost in the occupied territories and the refugee countries. This kind of commemoration definitely strengthens Palestinian national identity by connecting the people to their history through the activation of memory.

Conclusion

Since the 1948 diaspora Palestinians live scattered and dislocated all over the world. Yet even now most of these refugees and their descendants still preserve the national Palestinian identity. To come to an understanding of the reason why this national identity survives, this paper tries to analyse the Palestinian case from a history-memory-identity perspective. The Palestinian national identity among refugees involves to a great extent (1) the remembrance of Al-Nakbah and the following diaspora and conflict and (2) the constant reaffirmation of living in exile and the dream of returning to the homeland. It is through the emergence and reproduction of a collective memory, that this shared identity continues to bind Palestinians. By the sharing of narratives (collective memory) and the re-enacting and re-performing of history, Palestinians continuously commemorate, reaffirm and pass on their identity. This way history and memory play the key role to the survival of Palestinian national identity among refugees and their descendants.
References


Notes

Based on a conversation with Palestinian students on 8 April 2013, Jericho, occupied Palestinian Territories.