

## **The politics of spatialising shared pasts in (post-) colonial and diaspora times**

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This study investigates issues of mutuality in post-colonial heritage, with a specific focus on the Palestinians who returned to Palestine in the temporary period of peace (1993-2000) and those who remained and continue to endure the colonisation. With the signing of the Oslo Agreement in 1993, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the State of Israel agreed to end the First Intifada (1987-1993), or “Uprising” against the Israeli occupation of Palestine in 1948. The Palestinian Authority (PA) was established as the legitimate government of the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), constituting the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Around 100,000 Palestinians, who had been living in the diaspora since being ‘ethnically cleansed’ (Pappé 2006) during the Israeli occupations in 1948 and 1967, were allowed by the Israeli government to return to the OPT (MPC 2013, p.1). Some came only as temporary visitors, travelling under the passports of their new nationalities, but many came to stay. They returned to what they still remembered as their homeland to search for their roots, history and identity, and to contribute to the restoration of Palestine. During their exile, they had sustained their identity through the memories of what they had lost.

Upon their arrival, the returnees were confronted by significant socio-spatial changes as well as the large scale of destruction in the OPT. Those who had remained in Palestine, and had suffering internal displacement or had held on to their original homes despite the occupations, called themselves the *samedeen*, or “the steadfast”, and had their own experiences and memories. However, both groups found in the Palestinian folklore, cuisine, landscape, monuments, and historic buildings a common socio-cultural ground where they could meet to exchange stories about the

experiences of colonialism and diaspora, to remember the past, to heal root shock and to reconstruct identities. These chronicles were resonant within the new community, as each individual contain elements of the story of Palestinians everywhere (Alshaibi 2006, p. 37).

The returnees embraced an active role in the restoration of Palestine. The majority came to represent two new, relatively powerful classes with access to new and consistent resources (such as funding from wealthy donors): a new political elite fundamentally substantiated by direct relationships with the then PA's president Yasser Arafat, and a new professional middle class inhabiting civil society but with strong political ambitions (de Cesari 2010, p. 54). A cultural struggle between the two classes eventually became evident, over a vision of liberation as well as in conflicts over political power and economy, and over time this conflict spread through all Palestinian society. The contours of this tension took form in the manner 'in which civil society is reformulating itself: the assertion of community-based groups to defend their autonomy against the encroachment of the public sector; the struggle for a free press; the degree of autonomy afforded to the judiciary; the nature of legislation in the Palestinian state' (Tamari 2007, p.7). Some of the cultural elite of the returnees – such as artists, architects, archaeologists, and others with Western educations – set up professional NGOs to initiate development projects supported by international funding.

Conflicts erupted not only among the NGOs and with their allies (local, national or foreign governments), but also with samedeen grassroots organisations and networks that had evolved under the occupation. All claim to have a shared past, expressed by a claimed mutual relationship with the suffering of displacement and loss, commitment to the restoration of the nation, and a craving for care and healing. Yet their interpretations of this shared past diverge, following the discourses, practices, and desires that are tied to their differing experiences under occupation and diaspora. Heritage sites in particular have become battlefields of diverging interpretations and multiple claims on the shared past. The involvement of issues of mutuality in heritage development projects are likely to transform mutuality to dissonance, and divorcing the samedeen from their familiarities and the returnees from their imagined pasts and futures.

These arguments and questions are analysed in relation to two specific heritage sites: Qaryon Square and the Al-Kabir Mosque, located in the Historic City of Nablus, Palestine. Recent heritage development in these two sites resulted in conflicts locally explained by top-down and Western-centric policies. This study showed that such conflicts became inflamed by unnoticed “emotional” and “transnational” relationships of power that revolved around the interpretation of shared pasts between the returnees and samedeen. Professional heritage practices failed to begin with the analyses of post-colonial heritage beyond the dominant stark geopolitical binaries between colonial powers and their former colonies, and to unfold the multiple temporalities, socio-political networks and power relations that characterise post-conflict heritage, and more specifically the heritage of resistance to colonialism. Heritage in this study is conceived as a ‘contact zone’ (Peckham 2003), and used metaphorically to critically engage with ‘what happen’ (Thirft 2009) on heritage sites in terms of experiences, healing and signification in order to explore the possibilities that heritage can offer to manage unsettled memories in ‘places of pain’ (Logan & Reeves 2009; Till 2010).

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*Political Geography* 31 (2012) 3e14