

Memory in exile: character, function and role in identity construction

“Lubyans” in Denmark - a case study”¹

Main Theme

Based on three years of earlier research about the historiography of the demolished Palestinian *village of Lubyas*², I would like to dedicate this project to investigating the memory of Lubyans who arrived in Denmark in the eighties as well as their children who were born here and how their new “Danish Identity” has been constructed. Memory of the past, as manifestation of material, symbolic and functional phenomena, plays a fundamental role in constructing “Danish Identity” through a continuous hermeneutical interpretation, which has intermingled the cultural past of the village with the cultural present of Denmark. In the project I intend to investigate how refugees in exile produce a complex set of memories for the new generation of Lubyans in Denmark, through the constant cultural confrontation between memories of the past and challenges of the present³. By juxtaposing the memories of the young with that of their parents and grandparents I aim to clarify the following:

1. How memory functions among the new generation;
2. Where this memory matches and/or mismatches with their parents and grandparents;
3. What figures, persons, symbols and events played a crucial role in constituting their “site of memory” (*lieu de mémoire*);
4. Why Islam has played a greater or smaller role among the new generation;
5. What differences and similarities exist between men and women or boys and girls in perceiving their past heritage as part of present cultural challenges in Denmark;
6. What personal motives lie behind this new religious tendency among refugees and exile;
7. Whether their Danish identity is in harmony or disharmony with both their past cultural roots and their current set of religious values;
8. Whether such identity creation exposes tendencies towards integration and assimilation or towards marginalization and radicalization;
9. Whether there are indications suggesting a better future for minority groups in Denmark and Europe; and
10. How our social knowledge of minorities and exiles has been enriched or clarified as a result of this project.

¹ This project was published as an article in *Dispora and Identity: The case of Palestine*, Edited by Mitri Raheb, 2017 PP107-120. Part of this article was given as a paper at Dar al-Kalima in Bethlehem in 2015.

² Lubyas, one of the 531 demolished villages in mandate Palestine in 1948, is located in Gallilee, about 10.5 southwest of Tiberias. The Danish Research Council for the Humanities and the Danish Institute in Damascus have sponsored the research project “Lubyas: A Palestinian Village in the Middle East”, 1995- 1996 & 1999. Part of the research was published in a book: “Lubyas var en landsby i Palæstina: Erindringer-Historie- kultur-Identitet”, Tiderne Skifter, 2005.

³ This project will be part of a larger project: “Palestine Ancient Heritage Curriculum project: history, archeology, place names, languages, material culture and memory” that is due to take place at the Faculty of Theology-Copenhagen Univ.

Lubyans' historical background

About 3500 people of Lubyan descent are living in Scandinavia, but mainly in Denmark. This is the second and third generation of refugees who were obliged to leave their homeland after the end of the British mandate in Palestine 1948. Nevertheless, these generations, especially those who were born in Denmark, are still connected in one way or another to Lubyas' historiography and accounts of its past that were transferred to them by their parents through oral history and local traditions. These accounts include reminiscences, ethnographic and photographic documentations, eyewitness accounts, recollections of events, collective memory based on lore and traditions, films and photos of demolished houses and old people. Modern technology and social networks are cementing the influential impact of the past on the young generation's identity through internet sites, series of unpublished monographs, three published books, articles, two documentary films, songs and poetry dedicated to the cultural and social life of the village⁴. Traditional marriage relations among the exile descendants of the village are still a dominant factor. Nevertheless, few of those young Lubyans are revolting against these traditions and customs - only to name the young well known poet in Denmark Yahya Hassan⁵ and the controversial reaction to his poetry among both ethnic Danes and his own community⁶.

Theoretical and Methodological approach

The following main theoretical and methodological methods will be used in the analysis of memory in exile and its function in new identity construction:

1. The modern French school of "memory" and "identity" theories, mainly reflecting the theories of Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora on memory, will provide the theoretical and conceptual framework for my research project. Halbwachs' theory on collective and individual memory, explained in his book *La Mémoire collective*, and his main argument that there is not only an individual memory, but also a group memory that exists outside of and beyond the individual; and Nora's apprehension of "landscape" as "lieu de mémoire", with an infinite variety of possible other meanings, together with his classification of the three kinds of memory: archival-memory, duty-memory and distance-memory.

⁴ <http://www.palestineremembered.com/Tiberias/Lubya/index.html#Links>. (41 articles, 156 pictures, 2 videos, link to Wikipedia, Facebook, maps and names of 173 lubyans living worldwide could be read and seen on the web).

⁵ Yahya Hassan's mother is from the village Lubyas- His parents, now residing in Denmark, are refugees from Lebanon.

⁶ Lubyans in Denmark are part of ca. 40.000 refugees and descendants from the village, living in eleven different countries in the world. Approx. one million Palestinians fled their homes in 1948. Some became internal refugees, but the majority fled to neighboring countries: West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Egypt.

2. “Qualitative research interviewing” will be the methodology implemented in the interviews I intend to conduct. Steiner Kvale’s book: *Inter View, en introduction til det Kvalitative forskningsinterview*⁷ and the creative methods employed in conducting qualitative research interviews, will be one of my main techniques in the analysis, interpretation and understanding of the life-world of the interviewees. The interviews will draw upon the phenomenological tradition within philosophy⁸ and the hermeneutical mode of describing, understanding, analyzing and interpreting the texts of the interviewees. Contrary to the positivist philosophical conception of the world as an objective universe of facts, Qualitative Research Interviews, though they rest on subjective understanding, add systematic, reliable, rich and valid knowledge of how minority groups in exile remember their past, tell about their lived world and understand themselves and their surrounding Danish society.

The following seven main steps employed by Steiner Kvale will be my guidelines to do research interviews: 1.thematisation, 2.design, 3.interview, 4.transcription, 5, analysis, 6.verification and 7.reporting. Those seven steps are depending neither on a free spontaneity of no-method approach, nor on a rigid questionnaire structure employed in quantitative data approach, but on the skills of the interviewer, the conversation course, the focus on certain themes, and the specific answers of the life world of the interviewee⁹.

Memory involves forgetfulness as well, and oral recording, as a methodology, has its shortcomings; nevertheless, it is the only credible tool and technique to document how people in exile narrate their own life stories, especially if they have no other means of documenting the memory of their past; how they regard their own identities, and how they understand their lived worlds and the society around them. This research method is a postmodern constructive understanding of social research and knowledge formation; different in structure and goals than other kind of interviews such as the therapeutic interview, job interview, philosophic interview or interrogation interview. Through this methodology, I hope to uncover previously taken-for-granted knowledge on the others’ values, traditions and customs, thus promoting a wider, human and integrated vision when dealing with minorities’ memorial heritage and the way they perceive their personal and collective universe.

Cultural conceptions between past and present

Seventeen years ago, my research showed that teenagers, middle-aged and elderly alike, share “Lubya” village as a central image, a theoretical and subconscious point of reference, a cultural framework and a mental image that shapes, inspires and impacts their personal lives. In this

⁷ Kvale, Steinar: *InterView, En introduktion til det kvalitative forskningsinterview*, Hans Reitzels Forlag, København, 1997.

⁸ Founded by Husserl, and later developed by Heidegger and Sartre.

⁹ Kvale S. listed twelve specific modes for understanding the qualitative research interview; *ibid*, p 41.

research project, I would like to investigate the credibility of this hypothesis, whether it is still valid, or whether there is a new cultural departure from the concepts and visions of earlier generations. Hundreds of Lubyans are naturalized as Danes, and the “new Danish identity” involves new cultural concepts and new moral values. But those new values are still intermingled with past memories of their ethnic origins, transmitted to them by their grandparents and parents. Few supermarkets and material products in Aarhus and Berlin were named “Lubya”, perhaps to remedy the eradication and obliteration of their ancestor’s village and to keep its memory alive. In their grandparents’ refugee camps in Lebanon and Syria, streets and suburbs were named Lubya¹⁰. Parents are struggling to teach their sons and daughters Arabic, feeling the menace of losing a vital pillar of their original identity. Others, such as the young poet I mentioned above, the eighteen years old Yahya Hassan¹¹, have chosen other paths and critical values to follow and adopt than their parents, in a revolt against earlier social milieu.

“Islamisation” versus nationalisation

In contrary to their grandparents who were engaged rather in a national discourse in the sixties and seventies, many of the new generation move more and more towards religion, especially Islam, as a social and referential moral frame, with a complete set of values and visions, mainly influenced by Muslim preachers and political parties as “Hizb al-Tahreer” and “ Hamas” - a new social and religious phenomenon that took place only after the evacuation of the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) forces from Lebanon in 1983. The first massive wave of migration of “Lubyans” started after the Sabra and Shatila massacres when refugee camps were left without any legal protection. That was the specific date, I presume, when religious identity started to displace national identity and dominate refugee camps and refugee’s suburbs in Denmark. “Islamisation” trends rapidly gain ground in Arab countries as a valid movement in the past three decades. Mosques, charity organizations and religious clubs are established in all the communities where refugees and exiles are now living - whether in Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Britain or elsewhere. Results of this tendency can be seen at the macro level in the Arab regions nowadays, especially after the beginning of what is called the “Arab Spring Movement” in 2011, whence “Muslim Brother” parties arrive at the top of the political hierarchy through democratic elections-as in Tunis, Gaza and Egypt; or at the micro level among migrants and refugees in different Danish/European communities. Consequently the modern Palestinian identity in exile became a mosaic of several moral commitments, and of multiple identity layers such as Arab, religious, familial, tribal, national, transnational and new modern Danish/European loyalties that often overlap.

¹⁰ One of the main streets in Yarmook Refugee Camp near Damascus is named Lubya Street.

¹¹ Hassan, Yahya – Yahya Hassan Digte – Gyldendal, 2013.

New identity construction and how young emigrant generation define themselves and others, therefore, is becoming more and more complicated and controversial; especially if we consider other decisive factors mentioned by Halbwachs and Nora such as tradition, customs, culture, landscape and past history. These factors show the diversity of the process of “modern identity” construction, as is well known through the classical works of Hobsbawm, Ranger, and Gellner - to name few known academic contributions in nation construction, memory and identity formation.

i: “Modern identity” between myth and reality

Memory of the past in facing new cultural challenges produces by necessity a new modern identity. “Modern Identity” as a terminological concept became an invented category that follows “the invention of tradition” and “the use of ancient material to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes”, which coincides with the modern nation-states over the past two centuries, as Hobsbawm and Ranger argue¹². Others dealt with this “Modern Identity” construction as a new myth that matches our nation construction that appears permanent “as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent”, to use Gellner’s words¹³. Taking in consideration the different nuances of identity formulation mentioned above, the newly constructed “Danish Palestinian Identity”, I presume, entails a series of layers that needs scrutiny and analysis in light of the new approach which stresses the importance of memory, whether personal or collective, recent or past, in identity formation among ethnic minority groups living in exile. Hobsbawm rightfully argues that “no serious historian of nations and nationalism can be a committed political nationalist ...Nationalism requires too much belief in what is patently not true”.

Nora’s approach in confirming the importance of landscape as “a site of memory” will be a valid methodological tool in studying the memory of “Lubya” as a “lieu de mémoire”¹⁴, with its symbolic, cultural and functional roles in constructing new identities for Lubyans in exile. Maurice Halbwachs¹⁵, Paul Ricoeur and Pierre Nora, reevaluated the collective memorial heritage of the French past. They did so in terms of places, archives and statues with dense concentrations of collective French heritage and the power of the person “to narrate” his own narrative, including “forgetfulness” that is a necessity, as Paul Ricoeur¹⁶ claimed. Nora designated such places, whether material or non-material in nature, as *lieu de mémoire*, or as “memorial heritage of any

¹²Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger: *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983

Hobsbawm, Eric: *Nations and Nationalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993

¹³ Gellner, Ernest: *Nation and Nationalism*, John Breuilly’s new Introduction, Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008

¹⁴ Lubya: a demolished Palestinian village as lieu de mémoire - A paper presented by Bo Dahl Hermansen in Thessaloniki at the European Association of Biblical Studies, 8-11-2010.

¹⁵ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper and Row, 1980). See also Maurice’s book: *La Topographie Légendaire des évangiles en Terre Saint –The legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land*; Paris Presses Universitaires de France, 1971.

¹⁶ Ricoeur, Paul: *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*; Edition du Seuil, 2000.

community¹⁷”- some geographical and archaeological sites may also belong; if peoples’ dreams and memories have drawn them into the sphere of this category. Thus a historical generation, an archive, a folklore song or a book may be considered to be *lieux des mémoire*, if they fall within the definition, given above¹⁸”. *Lieux des mémoire* are neither eternal entities nor framed in geographical boundaries, but rather extend to minority groups and their cultural memory, whether in homeland or in exile. A *lieu de mémoire* emerges and unfolds with the memory-community that cultivates it and bears it in exile. “We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left”¹⁹. The remains of what is left are still lived and celebrated in the folds of tradition, in the repetition of the ancestral habits, in stories and poems, and in the heavy burden of customs and tradition which “Lubyans”, are subjected to in exile.

ii. New Identity as both “construct” and “process”

The central problem concerning the imagined identity crises of the “Young Danish Palestinian” generation is still in question and needs in depth analysis to expose the different layers and dimensions of their new constructed identity. Even though religion, especially Islam, is becoming a dominant factor among the new generation, seen in the full halls of the mosques in Copenhagen, Odense and Aarhus every Friday prayer, or radicalization trends that is spread among the few, other factors are still in constant movement in the dialectical process of “remembering” and “forgetting” past experiences. Taking in consideration the many classic authors of “memory” and “identity”, my analysis will investigate the different provisions of this new constructed identity in the light of the fierce struggle for legitimacy and dominance among various powers operating among the community in exile (religious, liberal, leftist, conservative, radical). As most classic and recent studies have shown (Edward Said, Azmi Bishara, Ernest Gellner, Hobsbawm, Anthony Smith, Benedict Anderson, Rashid Khalidi, Halim Barakat, George Tarabishi, Amin Máloof, Mohammad al-Jabiri), the modern identity question is still occupying a central role in regarding the self and the “other”. Although there are different nuances in the theoretical and practical approach of each of the above mentioned, a common argument touches upon identity as both “construct” and “process”. The new Palestinian identity among the youth in exile, although having common qualities with others, has its specific formulation and components: no Palestinian state has ever been formed in history-only in 2013 has Palestine been recognized by a majority of states as an observatory state in the UN general assembly. Sovereignty is still absent and the Palestinians are still divided and widely dispersed. Five different mandate/occupational authorities - Ottoman, British, Israeli,

¹⁷ Nora 1992a:xvii

¹⁸ Nora 1992b:14ff

¹⁹ Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, translated by Marc Roudebush: <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/201/articles/89NoraLieuxIntroRepresentations.pdf>

Egyptian, and Jordanian have dominated/governed Palestinians; and Islam, Christianity, Judaism, locality, nationalism, pan-Arabism, tribalism overlap to produce a new emerged imagined identity.

iii) **Lubya's collective image emerging as a "lieu de mémoire"**

Depending on Halbwachs' theory of "collective memory" and the multi-faceted methodology of Nora's three kinds of memory: archival, duty and distance memory, I would like to investigate how young people remember "Lubya's landscape", with all its richness, varied place names and histories told to them by their parents and families. The geographical landscape of Lubya includes more than 200 names of different plots of land, valleys, trees, *maqams* (holy places), hills, ancient Assyrian, Canaanite, Jewish and Turkish names, memorised and recited by earlier generations of Lubyans. Those names commemorate historical past events on Lubya's landscape that intermingle functionally, symbolically and structurally in the new emerging identities of Lubyans in Denmark. Stories of the past are still embedded within the material remains of Lubya. Thus, the power of the past from the stone, where Jesus used to sit for a rest on his way from Nazareth to Tiberias, as Lubyans claim, via the fields of Lubya where the battle of Salah ed- Din against the crusaders took place in 1187 and the old historical poetry celebrating this victory, to the death of Damascus' governor Suleiman Pasha in Lubya in 1743, and Napoleon's march through the village on his way to Akko in 1799 - only to name a few memorial events - is playing a crucial role in redefining the boundaries of "modern identity" and giving new meanings and new interpretations to old events, among exiled generations who are looking for "original roots"²⁰. The remembrance of these places and events demands an inclusive ethnographic and critical historical approach to thoroughly investigate the mosaic of "remembering" and its role in facilitating and building an "imagined" new identity among Lubyans in Denmark.

iv) **The Nakba- catastrophe- year of 1948: a "posteriori" fundament**

Nora also identified two kinds of "great events" to be included in memory analysis: 1) events which are identified "*a posteriori*" as turning points, and 2) events which, while still in the process of unfolding, become invested with symbolic significance and subjected to ceremonies of commemoration. The *Nakba- catastrophe- year of 1948*, I presume, was a *posteriori* for Lubyans in exile, while subsequent events of the civil wars and massacres, such as those in Sabra and Chatila, Yarmook refugee camp in Damascus Syria, and other tragic events in the whole region, are all part of an unfolding process that is shaping the present identity of the younger generation, although

²⁰ Although neither they nor their parents were born in Lubya, scores of young Lubyans had visited the ruins of the village, after being nationalized as Danes, bringing with them stones, earth, cactus leaves, material remains from their ruined houses, videos and photos.

shady, ambiguous and foggy in its formulation. Members of the young generation, who lack any “*posteriori*” reference, often cling to memories and pieces of scattered documents and photos when confronted with present Danish life. In the contrary, their grandparents still keep objects from the past, such as keys, photos, lively stories, stamps and papers documenting ownership of land; although most of these artefacts are private collections kept under unsafe and inadequate conditions in private homes²¹.

Two main groups for Interviews

Built on the above theoretical frame and methodological approach, the large literature on both memory and identity, and the many years of my experience in this field²², I plan specifically to interview 40 people, divided equally between men and women: 1) 30 young people who were born in Denmark and 2) 10 middle aged parents.

State –of- the Art

- I hope to contribute to the theory of collective, private and cultural memory on a micro local level, thus enriching the social research on “memory and identity” studies among minorities, exiles and refugees in Denmark and Europe. As far as I know, it is the first research of its kind on young Palestinian minority generation in Denmark and Europe. (Five localities where majority of Lubyans reside will be chosen: four in Denmark and one in southern Sweden).

- I hope to enrich the scientific “qualitative research interviewing” methodology, based on the phenomenological, dialectic and hermeneutic interpretations of the texts concerned, consequently opening a new social horizon to the new generation of migrants, refugees, minorities and exiles, to live in harmony and consistency in their new homeland in Denmark and Europe.

- I hope to document, illustrate and inform on the uncovered cultural elements and life stories that are central in constructing both collective and personal memory of the interviewees; and investigate how they match or differ with Danish and European cultural patterns and moral values. It is of the utmost social necessity to gain new substantial social knowledge on how the new generation perceives their historical and cultural past, according to their own narrative, and how this perception affects their integration and assimilation or marginalization and radicalization in today’s Denmark and Europe.

²¹ Old documents of pre 1948 are kept in unsafe conditions in Gaza and Amman in UNRWA archives. A recent contract was signed between the Danish foreign ministry, the Arab Initiative, and UNRWA to digitalize all these valuable documents and keep them in safe place at the Danish Royal Library in Copenhagen. An exhibition of these photos is expected to take place in 2015.

²² Through my years of earlier research about the historiography of Lubyans, and the rich theoretical and empirical knowledge I got by conducting around five hundred interviews with Lubyans living in Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, West Bank and Gaza, I learned a series of techniques and methods in documenting, interviewing, recording, and transcribing oral live stories.

- I hope to create a constructive dialogue between different ethnic groups; thus paving the way for establishing reciprocal respect and understanding between majorities and minorities, based on inclusivity rather than exclusivity and marginality, on reciprocal understanding rather than stereotype prejudgments. .
- I hope to inspire, enlarge and promote other researchers in Denmark, Europe and the Middle East, in the field of “memory” and “identity” research, based on micro-local milieu. My earlier research on Lubyia was the base for two university MA studies, in Denmark and Israel²³, conducted on Lubyia village and its inhabitants; two documentary films in Denmark and South Africa²⁴; and an ongoing project: “Preserving the Cultural Heritage and Memories of Mandate Palestine”- Exhibition & Training - supported by the Danish representative office in Ramallah and the Danish Foreign ministry, the Arab Initiative Partnership Program, scheduled for opening at “Women’s Museum in Denmark ” in Århus in 2014-15; plus many academic papers on the subject of “memory” and “oral history ” presented in different fora in universities and world over.
- I hope to enrich knowledge and understanding of the historical and social events that dominate the turbulent Arab Region since 2011, in what is known as “the Arab spring”, especially by hearing and understanding the young generations’ voices and appreciating their vital role in the daily struggle to narrate their own “memories” and find their own “identities”, built on universal human rights of freedom, dignity and democratic choices.

Colleagues and Professors in different universities are involved in the earlier and the current research project: Beir Zeit University: Sharif Kana’ni, Exeter University: Ilan Pappé; Hebrew University: Efrat Ben Zeev, Cape Town University: Heidi Grunbaum; Oxford University: Karma Nabulsi; København University: Jørgen Bæk Simonson; only to name a few of whom I had, and still have regular academic relation with, whether in earlier research projects or in this ongoing project.

-This project, as I mentioned earlier, will be part of a larger project: “Palestine Ancient Heritage Curriculum project: history, archeology, place names, languages, material culture and memory”.

²³- MA by Ulrik Høj Johnsen at Aarhus University- Denmark. “*Vi glemmer ikke Lubyia*”, We do not forget Lubyia; 2006. -MA by Shmuel Groag at London School of Economics and Political Science: Culture and Society Program: *On Conservation and Memory- Lubyia- Palestinian Heritage Site in Israel* in 2006.

-An article on Lubyia by Groag Shmuel -Lubyia in Lavi Forest-On Conservation of the Palestinian Heritage in Israel. In Memory, Denial and Structure of Space, Yaacobi Hayim and Tovi Fenster editors, Van Leer institute, Jerusalem, 2011

²⁴ 1) “Den fædrene Jord”, - The ancestors Land. A documentary film on me and my parents visiting the ruins of the village after 47 years in exile, DR 1995- and 2) A South African Documentary Film “The Village Under The Forest”, a documentary film by Mark Kaplan & Heidi Grunbaum, based on my earlier research - recently broadcasted in Cape Town in 2013, and had Premier in Oslo on the 12th of Sep-2013. The Film was funded by Karibu Foundation in Norway.

Danish, European and international scholars from different universities will participate in the project to present an alternative, integrated and critical version of Palestine's history from ancient until recent times, built on a multidisciplinary approach: a project that is primarily directed to enrich Palestinian curriculum, and later to address research centers, media and academic institutions in both the Middle-East and Europe.

Place of the Project:

Copenhagen University: Faculty of Theology

The main reasons for choosing the faculty of theology are:

1. The new proposal "Palestine Ancient Heritage Curriculum project: history, archeology, place names, languages, material culture and memory" is based mainly at the theological faculty, with Assoc. Prof. Ingrid Hjelm as leader and myself as coordinator of the project. My project should be part of the modern era of Palestine.