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## **Oral History's Credibility, Role and Functionality: From the Arab Islamic Tradition to Modern Historiography**

*Mahmoud Issa*

### **Abstract**

**A lot of controversy and debate continue around the credibility and validity of oral tradition and oral history as a scientific discipline. In the following article, I will try to present the necessity, validity, richness, and the new knowledge of the oral qualitative interviews which I conducted with Diaspora Lubyans, from the demolished Palestinian village—in north Galilee, dispersed in fourteen different countries around the world. The interviews reveal the richness of the cultural remains - “les lieux de mémoire”- of Lubyans, and the vitality and vividness of its memory, even seven decades after the Nakba of 1948. My approach is based on both “Eastern” and “Western” oral traditions: Steinar Kvale’s “qualitative research interviewing”, Jan Vansina’s work on African “oral tradition as history”, the monumental work of “the collective memory” of Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora’s apprehension of “history” and “landscape” as “les lieux de mémoire”. All these “modern” European disciplines, had their cultural roots in Antique Ages, in Mesopotamia, and Greece, and later in Arab-Islamic culture: Gilgamesh epic, Herodotus “Histories”, the pre-Islamic oral poetry, named “al-Mu’allaqat”, and the Islamic scholar Imam al-Bukhari and his methodology of verifying the liability and credibility of the prophet’s words and deeds, collected through oral testimonies in the Hadith. Oral tradition and oral history was and still a main battle field for the impoverished, the marginal, the oppressed and the colonized. History is mainly made by those people, and their voices, whether collective or private, should be heard and registered for the coming generations.**

One of the main reasons for choosing this topic on oral history is the ongoing debate about the credibility and sustainability of this methodology as a scientific approach to research interviewing, and to document the history of individuals, whether concerned with past events and reminiscences or with the present. A number of classical historians reject from the outset an oral approach to the discipline of history. They argue that there are no specific theoretical rules for dealing with the oral

account in contrast to a historiography, which entails a strict and well-disciplined set of formulae, particularly when dealing with written archival materials and documents collected by different state authorities and institutions over centuries.

My interest in oral history arose almost two decades ago when I began to investigate the history of the Palestinian village of Lubyā,<sup>1</sup> a village, which was one of the 601<sup>2</sup> demolished in 1948, as has been documented by researchers from Zochrot.<sup>3</sup> To my astonishment, I could only find two articles from this period, written by Yousef al Youssef<sup>4</sup> in the Lebanese weekly newspaper: *al-Hurriyya* which specifically dealt with Lubyā, plus a few scattered papers and a single older booklet, written by Ibrahim al-Shihabi, who generously gave me the only copy he had at the time (Al-Shihabi 1994 and 1998). In addition, there was also a one and half page on the village's history in Al-Khalidi's *All that Remains* (Al-Khalidi 1992: 526-527).

### **Qualitative Research Interviews**

In the late nineties, I attended a course in “interviewing as a research tool” at Århus University, with the late Steiner Kvale<sup>5</sup>. Kvale had succeeded in establishing “research interviewing” as a discipline, which fully adheres to the conditions and demands of scientific methodology, especially if one defines the main goals of the research as acquiring new knowledge and modes of understanding society. “Qualitative research involves alternative conceptions of social knowledge, of meaning, reality and truth in social science research”, as Kvale wrote in his introduction to qualitative research interviewing (Kvale 1994: 17). “Research Interview is defined, thus as “an interview, which proposes to obtain accurate descriptions of the lived world of the interviewee in respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale 1994: 3). A series of technical steps and methods are necessary from the very beginning of the research.<sup>6</sup> Adopting one of two contrasting metaphors of the interviewer: as “a miner”, who “unearths valuable metal, seeks objective facts to be quantified”, much as one “seeks nuggets of essential meaning”, without the subject's interference: accumulating “quantitative data” and “objective facts.” This is totally different from the “metaphor of a traveler”, which describes an interviewer as one who understands his journey; that is, the interview, as a combined and rich tale to be told later by one who explores “the many domains of the country as an unknown territory”. Here, the traveler seeks his own questions, following the old Greek method of “a route, which leads to a goal”, through conversation with the people concerned: “wandering together with them” in accord with “the original Latin meaning of conversation”. The first “metaphor of the

miner” brings the interview into the vicinity of human engineering, confirming the modern concept of social sciences of knowledge as given. The second, “traveler metaphor”, brings the interview “into the vicinity of humanities and arts”, confirming the postmodern constructive understanding that involves “a conversational approach to social research” as Kvale has claimed (Kvale1994: 2-3). In my research, I have chosen a methodology, which adheres to the “metaphor of the traveler”, with all of the implications, richness and variations that have produced new knowledge and have provoked new reflections about social issues, in following an interview methodology-which I have employed intensively in reconstructing the social life story of the demolished village of Lubyia.

### **First Physical Encounter**

After my first visit to the ruins of our village with my parents in 1994 and after I had heard the story of the village from my father, reflecting on his understanding of the village, after half a century of forced exile, I was faced with a considerable lack of substantial material for the history of Lubyia, in spite of the fact that Lubyia had been the largest village in the district of Tiberias and the second largest village in the Galilee, after Safforiya. The constant questioning from others “where do you come from”, convinced me, both theoretically and empirically to start another long journey<sup>7</sup> of discovering and uncovering the hidden stories of this tiny piece of suppressed and marginalized modern historiography, mainly through oral history methodology and qualitative research interviews. This method is totally different than other kinds of professional interviews such as journalistic, philosophic or therapeutic interviews<sup>8</sup>. It entails different goals and structures of questioning and interacting through conversations, and a production of a different kind of knowledge.

My earlier research resulted in a book in Danish and two documentary films on Lubyia, three other inspired international research topics, and a series of articles and lectures in different European universities and elsewhere. This research influenced many others, mainly Lubyian refugees, to redefine their own identities accordingly, especially those who are born outside mandate Palestine, in post Nakba era, in exile. Thus, both personal and collective identities are taking different dimensions and interpretations as expressed by Lubyians in the many electronic sites, documentary films and interviews conducted with them in their different dispersed places worldwide.

That is one of many reasons why I became an enthusiastic supporter of the discipline, even though those who opposed it are still vehement in disqualifying the whole approach and have excluded it partially or entirely from the domain of real history. The stories I documented from the displaced

Lubyan refugees from eleven Arabic and European countries are, in my opinion, the most credible and authentic source of lively micro stories, which is a fundamental part in understanding not only the lively stories of the interviewees, but the entire macro story of the historiography of Mandate Palestine as well. The result is not only a comprehensive body of quantitative collections of incidents, statistics, geographical locations, as most objective data demands in the traditional social sciences. Rather, it is a reconstruction of essential parts of the wholeness of human life stories and scattered tales that cover not only the years of exile and its tragic ongoing sufferings, but personal stories that goes back three and four generations before the 1948 Nakba, together with a series of collective memories about the wider area of Lubya<sup>9</sup>.

Engagement in constructive dialogues with the interviewees and their descendants were the appropriate methodology to register and document the micro story of this tiny village: history of its land plots, names of its valleys and caves, marriages, burial customs, and the lively stories of its inhabitants. The challenge for us, researchers or academics, is how to record these live stories from the interviewee: what questions to ask, how to design the interview, what technique to employ, how to verify information, compare, analyze and finally write the research report. These are the main steps that qualitative research interviewing demand.

### **Resisting Oblivion**

To quote the words of Jan Vansina, a pioneer in research on oral traditions in Africa, who was hailed internationally for initiating work in the field of ethno-history (Vasina 1985 and 2004): “Official history is exclusive: elite, kings, rulers, emperors, literate. Oral history is immediate history” built up on “reminiscences, hearsay and eyewitness accounts” (Vansina 1985: 8).

In the past, history used to be the property of the winners. Now, however, history and culture belong to everyone. It is no more exclusively reflecting the lives of the elites, kings, rulers, emperors, literate, upper class people, the rich or the few, but belongs also to the marginal: the poor, the illiterate and the colonized as well. Gender perspective and women, - who almost constitute half of the population -, have generally also been excluded. A quick glance at the hundreds of oral interviews by Faiha Abd el-Hadi with Palestinian women in the thirties and fourties of the past century confirm the huge loss in the official archives, which rarely touch upon this vital topic<sup>10</sup>. Colonized people generally, and

Palestinians in particular, have been denied the right to self-determination or the right to tell their lifetime history and experiences, due to the systematic force imposed by the colonial powers against the locals/originals for centuries, such as what has happened in Africa, Latin America and Asia also. Thousands of place names have been replaced by names chosen by the occupants. Even the name of the village “Lubya” has been cancelled and replaced by “Lavi”, when a new settlement was built on Lubya’s land after its demolition. A second settlement named Giv’at Avni was built on the eastern side of the village in 1992-93. The Jewish National Fund (JNF), with support from the Women’s Zionist Organization of South Africa, subsequently planted a pine forest on the remains of Lubya and named it “The Forest of the Republic of South Africa”. Meron Benvenisti wrote on this topic in his book *Sacred Landscape* (Benvenisti 2002). On the 18<sup>th</sup> of July 1949, “a group made up of nine scholars, well known in their respective fields of cartography, archeology, geography, and history, gathered at the prime minister’s office in Tel Aviv”. Their mission was “to assign Hebrew names to all the places - mountains, valleys, springs, roads, and so on”. Two members of this committee back to 1920 “were appointed advisers to the British mandate government on all matters relating to the assignment of Hebrew names and had fought to persuade the authorities to restore biblical Hebrew place-names to the map of the country in place of the Arabic ones currently in use” (Benvenisti 2002: 11-12). In this context, the biblical name “Lavi” replaces the name “Lubya”, similar to hundred other places that were renamed to match the biblical names..

### **Collective memories and landscape as *Lieu de memoire*: Other theoretical and practical approaches to oral traditions**

On the first of May 2015, a group of South African Jews, together with Palestinian Lubyans from Scandinavia, and People from the Zochrot organization, demonstrated in Lubya to protest against the naming of “South African Forest” on the debris of the demolished village of Lubya<sup>11</sup>- a pine forest that is intended to cover the crimes committed against the people of Lubya, and to bury the material culture and the remaining physical witnesses of the past. The year before, in 2014, around 40.000 people from mandate Palestine gathered in Lubya to protest against the injustices done to the Palestinian refugees and their uprooting from their homes and fields since the Nakba in 1948, when 2/3 of Palestinians were expelled in one of the biggest ethnic cleansing operation after World War II<sup>12</sup>. The event proved that after nearly seven decades, the collective memories of this tiny village are

still active and resisting the power of oblivion among its own inhabitants and their descendants together with their supporters.

The accumulation of quantitative data on events cannot and could not replace the meaning of the lively stories of the people concerned. A vital example to illustrate the necessity of telling and documenting the stories of the oppressed majority through oral testimonies of the victims aiming at achieving amnesty, reparation and rehabilitation, is the experience of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) after 1994. This outstanding example must be followed for any just and durable solution for the fate of twelve million Palestinians, 5.5 million of whom are refugees, living in 52 camps in and around mandate Palestine.<sup>13</sup> They are denied, until now, the basic international rights of compensation, reparation and return to their homes of origin. Even in an international attempt in 1993 of what is known as “the Peace Process”, those refugees are excluded from exercising their right to vote for their political aspirations and choices<sup>14</sup>. Hearing the stories from the subjects directly, the refugees themselves would be a key to and setting the terms for a durable and sustainable peaceful solution for all the refugees concerned, as Richard Falk, the special envoy of the UN, has documented after interviewing refugees in UNRWAs refugee camps in 2001.<sup>15</sup> What is history, if it does not document and reflect the peoples’ lives and their aspirations?

The theories of “memory” and “identity” developed by the social-scientific French school, mainly those of Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora, constitute the theoretical and conceptual framework for validating the oral approach and the collective memory as well. Of special importance are Halbwachs’s theory on collective memory (Halbwachs 1992), most notably, his main argument that there is not only an individual memory, but also a group memory that exists outside of and beyond the individual. In this respect, one can observe that the five main historical events that elderly Lubyans most vividly remember and therefore most often recounted among Lubyans are: 1) the battle of Hittin in 1187; 2) Lubyas as the birthplace of the famous Muslim scholar Abu Bakr al-Lubyani; 3) the death of Damascus Governor Suleiman Pasha in Lubyas, in 1743; 4) Napoleon’s march to ‘Akka in 1799, and the role of Khalil Ibrahim Azzam, an officer from Lubyas, in the battle against Napoleon; and 5) “*Hajar el-Nousrani*”, the stone of Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup> Almost all the elderly refugees I interviewed recounted one or two of the above historical events and myths. Recently, Haj Muhammad Samir Karzoun has drawn after fifty years Lubyas’s map, with all the houses and their owners. “I woke up one day at night; I could not sleep. I took papers and start drawing. Here is the map.”<sup>17</sup> When I

compared the draft of the mental photo with that of the aerial photo taken by British aviation in 4.10.1945, it is almost identical in all details; but livelier with names and houses of all Lubyans who lived there before the city's demolition.<sup>18</sup>

A genealogical tree (Issa 2005: 49) of one Lubyian family goes back to al-Hassan, the son of Khalifa Ali in the seventh century and demonstrates the symbolic attachment to the past and the collective memory that cements identity construction of the roots, especially when living in exile. Another genealogical tree is that of Yousef Abu Dhais of Atwat's family tree (Issa 2005: 49 and 37).

Pierre Nora's apprehension of history and "landscape" as "les lieux de mémoire"<sup>19</sup> in *Realms of Memory* (Nora 1996: xvii), involves an infinite variety of possible meanings and interpretations, as well as including his classification of three types of memory: archival, duty and distance.

Through my interviews, listening and questioning elderly Lubyans, they named locations of 126 places in Lubyia<sup>20</sup> and the original sources of most of these names and their connotative meanings. Also 9 maqams (religious places), and 5 caves (their precise locations on the map of Lubyia, still remembered in exile) confirm Lubyans's apprehension of "landscape as lieu de memoire", when these monumental memoires have not been obliterated nearly seven decades later.<sup>21</sup>

Oral research interviews can be analyzed and interpreted properly and in a systematic way through the post-modern theory of hermeneutic and phenomenology<sup>22</sup> approach, because it is so flexible that people of all ages can adapt the techniques of asking and listening to, create, preserve, and learn about cultural heritage, live stories and historical narratives and interpret the multi-layer meaning of an account.

Talking together, conversation, and interpreting the dialogue are central to post - modern thought of Deridda, Foucault, Leotard and others. Global ideology is no more valid in our modern age. To understand human societies, the individual, whether literate or not, is gradually becoming the center and the goal of social development<sup>23</sup> as clarified by the "traveler metaphor" of Kvale, mentioned above.

Even in an old and stable monarchy such as Denmark's, a network of different groups related to the National Museum have conducted projects to record the history of modern Denmark through interviews with elderly Danish people. The interviews will be presented in a special museum as part of modern Danish history, so that later generations can know what their parents and grandparents had

thought and done in the past. Other initiatives are incorporating the live stories of the recent refugees in the country, recording their histories as well.

### **Oral Tradition<sup>24</sup> in Antique Ages: Herodotus- Gilgamesh and Mu'allaqaat**

Some scholars argue that oral history and tradition are and will remain one of the main sources of our conceptions and understanding of the different social, personal and historical facts and myths at a specific time in a specific period. A few have argued that oral history is as old as history itself, especially before the advent of writing in Mesopotamia and Egypt in the fourth-third millennium BCE, as a means of communication and later on as a main source for documentation. Such was argued by the early Greek philosophers of the first millennium BCE

The Greek historian of the fifth century BC Herodotus ( 484-425 BCE), who is widely referred to as the Father of History, has been considered the first in ancient times to treat historical subjects and inquiries as a field for investigation, and then to treat the orally collected material systematically and critically as demonstrated in his only book *The Histories*<sup>25</sup>. Many of his stories were considered controversial by later Greek historians, such as the Athenian comic dramatist Aristophanes (450-388 BCE) and the Athenian historian Thucydides (460-400 BCE) - who was the first to use interviews with soldiers as a new technique in his documentation of the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta. Both these authors dismissed Herodotus as a story teller, in regard to the accuracy of the events. Nevertheless, his dubious status as the Father of History has continued until the present. The tradition of oral story-telling, especially through myths, fables and epics, such as the epic of Gilgamesh is well rooted in the Greek region of the Mediterranean. As stated by William Harris:

“Most modern scholars believe that even if a single person wrote the [Homeric] epics, his work owed a tremendous debt to a long tradition of unwritten, oral poetry. Stories of a glorious expedition to the East and of its leaders’ fateful journeys home had been circulating in Greece for hundreds of years before *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were composed. But once we began to consider that the Homeric poems could be more or less than a received ancient text as literature, the way was open for other connections and new lateral interpretations. The most impressive of these was the hypothesis that Homer's writing was in some indirect but interesting way connected with the writings which go under the name of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*<sup>26</sup>.



The pre-Islamic oral poetry, named al-Mu'allaqaat<sup>27</sup>, had common cultural, traditional and linguistic traces with other neighboring countries as argued by the late Arab -Moroccan philosopher Mohammad Abid al-Jabiri in his four- volume books: *Naqd al-'Aql al-Arabi* "Critic of the Arab Mind" (al-Jabiri 1984, 1986, 1990, 2001). In the era of the seventh Abbasid Kalif al-Ma'moon (786-833CE), translation and documentation was a flourishing industry. When the classical scholars of Alexandria, Damascus and Bagdad disagreed about a saying or words in a text, they travelled the long distance to Mecca and Medina to hear from the original inhabitants there how they pronounce a word or a sentence directly. Was the illiterate playing the master of the Arabic language through the power of their remembered verses or sayings at the time of the prophet, and mainly through the tongue of Quraysh tribe? The question posed by Al-Jabiri and others is still relevant even today and still open to researchers on this relation between the oral and the written texts, and how words spoken by the Quraysh tribe was made standard for the classical Arab language, which is mostly conserved in the holy text of the Qur'an.

The oral Tradition has deep roots in the region, whether in classical Greece or in Greater Syria and Mesopotamia. One can hear until nowadays in the Ma'lula village near Damascus how children learn by heart the old Aramaic speech, which is ancestral to the modern Arabic alphabets . Ma'lula and its two neighbouring villages, Jabadeen and Bakhaa, in modern Syria represent the last vestiges of Western Aramaic, which might have been the language Jesus spoke in Galilee two millennia ago. Homer's "Iliad" and "Odyssey" stories were circulated for centuries in the region, telling the tales of the glorious expeditions to the east and the heroic acts of its semi-divine heroes returning home.

### **Al-Bukhari (810-870) a Pioneer in verifying and validating interview tales**

The classical examples of poetry and epics mentioned above are only intended as a prelude to present the Islamic scholar Imam al-Bukhari and his methodology of verifying the liability and credibility of the prophet's words and deeds, collected through oral testimonies in the Hadith.

In the seventh century and later on, a great controversy dominated the interpretation and the authenticity of the collected *hadeeth* (the oral speeches of the prophet Muhammad) and other prominent personalities, the *al-Sahaba*, a group of followers/disciples who accompanied him in his prophetic mission. Recollecting all the spoken *hadeeths* of the prophet from oral resources of his accompanies and the long period that elapsed until the beginning of its registration poses a serious question concerning the preciseness and authenticity of the accounts. It took Islamic/Arabic scholars

many years of investigation, analysis, and comparison to come to an agreement of what was believed to be the final version of the exact words of the prophet. Al-Bukhari, the Islamic historian, was one of the most well-known prominent literary figures of the classical period who challenged the authenticity of hundreds of the different versions of *hadeeths* that were recited by different people after the death of the prophet. In his six volume work, he reduced the numbers of *hadeeths* to less than 2/3. His analysis demonstrates the highly credible and well-researched methodology that he and the classical researchers had employed in dealing with presenting the most authentic registration of the oral accounts of the prophet and his companions. In many cases, al-Bukhari travelled hundreds of miles on horseback to hear someone who had been recommended by others as a reliable and confident source of remembering the *hadeeths* of the Prophet. One could say that al-Bukhari was one of the pioneers in establishing the techniques and modes of verifying the oral accounts and histories before writing them down as a credible source of documentation.

### **Objectivity in historiography?**

With the advent and advancement of printing, the role of the written word and the validity of its testimony took almost a religious connotation in the plausibility and authenticity of documents as a reliable source of history. But in recent years, and with the development of colonialist and sub-cultural studies, question marks began to rise concerning the validity of documents as the only source of recovering the historicity of the events. In the end, it is the victorious group who design, write and preserve the archives. Quite a few modern historians, as I mentioned earlier, have begun to question the ‘objectivity’ of the ‘event’, and the influence of the ‘subjective’ when recording or registering the so-called ‘objective’ event. It has become obvious that we are obliged to answer the fundamental question: who made history, and who had the legitimate authority to register events of the past? What about the experiences and the accounts of the ‘illiterate’, the ‘marginal’, the ‘colonised’ and the ‘oppressed’? Can these groups be considered to be an inclusive part of our modern historiography? And what are the best means of registering and preserving their version of histories?

Subjectivity and the personal tendency of ‘those in power’ in presenting their version of historical facts make doubtful the whole concept of “objectivity”. The case of South Africa’s oral testimonies is an example of oral testimony’s validity in history writing.

Only recently, began South Africa’s oral tradition to be established as an independent discipline with its own theories and research methodologies, especially after people realized the inadequacy of traditional historical methods. In November 2003, I participated in a tour to South Africa to study

what South Africans have done to the restitution of land and property in the last ten years of the post-apartheid era. Land Commissioner Tozi in Pretoria told us that they will employ the oral history technique in order to identify the plots of land of the black people, who had no written documentation and titles for their expropriated land. Other techniques such as family genealogical trees and marked cemeteries of the individual's ancestors would be included as proof of the claim.

### **Lack of proper Palestinian interest in Oral Traditions**

The use of oral history is a fundamental issue when we regard our own Palestinian historiography with its huge lack of information concerning our past and modern history. The problem has become paramount, because the strong and dominant discourse of the Zionist movement has prevailed and, to a large extent, succeeded in marginalising the indigenous people's accounts and narratives. When the Israeli Army entered Beirut in 1982, the first goal of their mission was to confiscate all the documents and archives of the Palestine Research centre<sup>28</sup>.

Hundreds if not thousands of books have been written to analyse the Palestinian situation from almost all aspects: historical, social, economic, psychological, and political. Among their authors are some well-known international Palestinian scholars. Nevertheless, apart from a few exceptions, one fundamental and critical aspect is still absent in these writings, namely the recording of history directly from its authentic voices or 'actors' (to use theatrical language). The rural majority of the Palestinian people, the *fellaheen*, the farmers, those who lived all aspects of 'real' life in their fields, their houses and their villages,, whether in daily life or in wartime, imposed on them from external forces: , , are absent from historical documentation. They are in the Israeli special term, which has never been used by other colonialist powers called: '*present absentees*'. Not only male, but also female voices are absent, neglected and marginalized in many ways. The narratives of the neglected, the marginalized, the alienated, are almost totally absent from our historiography. Until now, we have only the official Palestinian documentation, apart from the scattered interviews and books based on oral testimonies written recently, and the official Israeli version of the events. But the question still remains: why didn't the Palestinians accomplish the main task of collecting the oral stories of the thousands who have been expelled from their homes, lands and farms?

Is it because of illiteracy among the rural population in Palestine, among many other reasons? I fundamentally disagree. But let us suppose that this is correct, and then we should ask: where were

our intellectuals and revolutionaries? How come those Chinese and Vietnamese intellectuals wrote hundreds of books about the participation of Chinese and Vietnamese peasants in their revolutions, and Palestinian intellectuals did not?

A prior and vital question is: do we really want to know our modern history or not? And second, do we believe in new definitions of culture and history, taking care of the majority of people voices, far from the elite's concepts and their perspective and version of history?

The following example will concretely illustrate a key point of what I mean: When Sharif Kana'na, Professor of anthropology at Birzeit University first presented his proposal to his colleagues at the university to start a project to record the histories of the destroyed villages, the reaction was cynical and mocking: 'Looking for the dead debris of the past'? Nevertheless, Kana'na insisted on sending his students to the remains of the villages in Palestine, to meet the survivors, and to record their narratives. The results are impressive, and Kana'na's recordings comprise twenty-seven demolished villages, the history of which is now fully documented. Other colleagues from the BirZeit University have followed in his steps, among whom is Saleh abd al-Jawad, who felt the necessity of undertaking this huge responsibility to document the villages' historiography after the 1948 Nakba.<sup>29</sup>

Another documentarist to be remembered is the Palestinian Sahira Dirbas, who alone, without any institutional support, wrote three books about demolished villages in the Haifa district (Salama, Tira and Birwi), based mainly on oral interviews. She is still doing research on her own initiative; especially her impressive documentary films on Palestinian women.<sup>30</sup>

The question remains: are these private initiatives enough to fulfil the minimum level of rewriting modern experiences and histories, based on personal experiences? After sixty nine years of uprooting and exile in one of the biggest ethnic cleansing operations in modern times, we only have around 130 books with scattered documentary about the Nakba and the demolished villages. To demonstrate the lack of basic information on this recent history, one can see a fundamental gap in our documentation: for the past sixty five years our academics adopted the number 418 for the villages destroyed in or after 1948. Then Salman Abu Sitta (1998) came up with a well-documented map showing 531 localities, including all the localities and helmets in Negev desert. But in the year 2015, two researchers from the Zochrot office came with the number of 601 demolished villages that were documented.<sup>31</sup> Many thanks as well to the personal engagement of the late Gassan Shihabi, who published a series of books about demolished villages at his own publishing house: Dar al-Shajara-

in al-Yarmouk Camp, Damascus.<sup>32</sup> Shihabi was shot dead in the tragic turmoil in Yarmouk refugee camp near Damascus while trying to help people taking their portion of food and medicine,

Given the huge loss of documents due to the sudden uprooting of the population from their houses and lands, there is only one way to fill the gap: to record the lives of the pre-1948 generation through oral history methods as quickly as possible. According to the last estimate of a Palestinian demographer: Palestinians aged over 68 is between 3.3 and 3.9% of the whole population. This would make the pool around 210.000 (counting only those living in Palestine and the Arab host countries, as Rosemary Sayigh wrote in the editorial to Al-Janna magazine,<sup>33</sup> which concentrated on the issue of Palestinian oral history).

### **The case of reminiscences from Lubyia<sup>34</sup>**

“Reminiscences are perhaps the most typical product of human memory....Reminiscences are bit of life history. Everyone holds such reminiscences. They are essential to a notion of personality and identity. They are the image of oneself one cares to transmit to others” (Vansina1985: 8).

More than thirty old men and women from Lubyia whom I have interviewed in the last twenty years have passed away. Without their reminiscences, part of the historiography on modern Palestine modern would be lost. However, a lot has perished. One of the main resources of my research Abu Majid, Fayiz el Fawaz, who was not tired of recounting stories that fill up to twelve hours of tape recording, wrote the following piece of passionate poetry, addressing those who were able to visit Lubyia and expressing his longing to see Lubyia\_

The poem in Arabic:

Ya Za'ir In Ruhit la-bladak ziyara

Boos trabha boos lihjara

Itha mayyalt 'a lubyia al 'thbi

byihiznak ya za'ir manthar atharha

Shammil 'ala ilhara il-shmaliyyi

wi zoor il-balad hara ba'id hara

Lamma jarrabat il-kuwwat il-isra'iliyyi

'ala lubyia tshin ghara

Dabbabat wa tayyarat wa madfa'iiyi

wa rashashat tzikh bi ghazara  
Kan il 'adad wahad lamiyyi  
wa darat ilma'raka min dar la dara  
Wa bkina bihlokhim shoki kawiiyi  
kat'een il-tareek imshaddidden il-hisara  
Ila in ja'at ilkuwwat ilkawokjiyyi  
sallamatna bi'amir madroos wa sadir karara....

The poem in English (my translation)

Kiss its soul kiss the stones  
If you pass by the sweet Lubyia  
You will be melancholic at its sad ruins  
Go to the northern suburb  
And visit the village suburb by suburb  
When the Israeli forces tried  
To invade Lubyia  
Tanks and airplanes and mortars  
And machine guns shooting rapidly  
The numbers was one to one hundred  
The battle was from door to door  
We stuck in their throats a pick  
Disrupting their roads and strengthening the besiege  
Until Qawuqji<sup>35</sup> forces came  
And delivered the land by orders from above<sup>36</sup>.

Of course there are many theoretical and methodological problems that need to be studied by those who want to work on oral interviews. I faced a series of problems when I began to register the accounts from Lubyian refugees. A few examples of these problems are listed and discussed below.

1. Methods of qualitative interviews without preparing official questionnaires, but using semi-structured questions instead

2. Preparation of relevant questions and structuring the topics
3. Choice of place and time for the interviews without interventions and interruptions mostly from other family members)
4. Verification and cross-questioning (especially when there are two versions for the same event, which is normal to have in these private accounts from different angles of views). In such case, the different accounts of the same event should be left to the researcher to verify and compare the information to get the wholeness of the scene).
5. Use of written documented material, whether British, Israeli or other documentation is helpful when available: examples of the attacks to invade and capture Lubyia in 1948 was described in details by the Hagana officers with detailed maps, manoeuvres, losses and employed tactics. I also interviewed two Israeli officers who participated in the battle against Lubyia, which gives me more chances to compare and verify the credibility of the stories.<sup>37</sup>

The critical approach to the collected tales should not exclude “scandalous” stories, as Abu Majid named them. For example, a few wealthy Lubyans who were not willing to pay back the debt to a shopkeeper in the village, Muhammad Thyab (from Burj al-Shimali refugee camp in Lebanon, who holds the books of the debt until 1998); the story of the killing of a brave revolutionary, Saleh Taha, by another Lubyian who belonged to a strong tribe in the village, thus not held responsible for his act and escaped justice. A series of other incidents such as “honour killing” was also suppressed, or not spoken about openly in the community. This is the job of the researcher’s critical evaluation to analyse and report after hearing all the views of the different people interviewed.

When recounting one must consider the psychological impact of remembering the past memories, especially when marked by trauma and tragic events, lapse of time of more than half a century between the event and its newly recorded oral accounts, fear from persecution as a hindrance to vividly remembering the past (one Lubyian: Abu Sameh al-Samadi, was called by the police of a country after giving interview on the spot of what happened in 1948 and received a warning not to come back again, as he told me<sup>38</sup>). All these technical obstacles are easy to master if one takes into consideration all the above mentioned points from the beginning and before starting the research interviews.

Without the memory and the voices of the elderly Lubyans and their will to resist oblivion and keep remembering their past, there will be a huge loss, both for human history in general, and for personal loss of identities of approx. 50.000 Lubyans, dispersed to the four corners of the world and awaiting for justice to take place by admitting a return to their homeland, reparation and compensation.

I would like to end up this article by two quotations: one by Euripides (484-407/406) BCE: “There is no greater sorrow on earth than the loss of one’s native land”, and the other by Milan Kundera, juxtaposing memory and forgetfulness: “The struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting” (Kundera 1980: 5). Oral History is a continued battle field for millions who have been marginalized, deprived of power, denied the right to recount history of their lives. Imagine a history without the eyewitnesses and reminiscences of the victims of the massacres in: Armenia (1915-1923), Bosnia (Srebrenica, 1995), Algier (war of independence 1951-1962), the Holocaust (1938-1945), South Africa (1818-1994), Kurdistan (Halabja 1988), Myanmar’s Rohingya, where around 800, 000 were displaced from their houses in few months in (2017) - almost identical to the same numbers of Palestinians uprooted from their homes seventy years earlier in 1948- and finally Palestine (1947-1948), where up to 70 documented massacres took place,<sup>39</sup> such as Dier Yassin, Tantura, Sufsaf, Lod, Luby, Ailaboon, Dawaymi; to mention only a few examples.

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<sup>1</sup> Lubyia is a village in Galilee roughly 10.5 km south west of Tiberias. The Danish Research Council for the Humanities and the Danish Institute in Damascus have sponsored the research project "Lubyia: A Palestinian Village in the Middle East", 1995- 1996 & 1999. Part of the research was published in: *Lubyia var en landsby i Palæstina: Erindringer-Historie-Kultur-Identitet*. København Tiderne Skifter, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> 601 villages were identified by two researchers from Zochrot. This surpasses the 531 of Salman Abu Sitta's map and the 418 villages documented by Walid Khalidi in : *All that Remains The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948*. Washington D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Zochrot ("remembering" in Hebrew) is an NGO working since 2002 to promote acknowledgement and accountability for the ongoing injustices of the Nakba, the Palestinian catastrophe of 1948 and the reconceptualization of the Return as the imperative redress of the Nakba and a chance for a better life for all the country's inhabitants.(<http://zochrot.org>)

<sup>4</sup> Youssef al Youssef (1938-2013), an author and critic, originally from Lubyia, who passed away three years ago in Lebanon after he had left his home in the Yarmouk Camp in Damascus..

<sup>5</sup> Steiner Kvale's definition of qualitative research interview: Interview is "inter view": "an exchange of views between two persons speaking together on a theme of common interest". The interviewer can be characterized as a two metaphor Interviewer defined as "a mine Worker" or as "a traveler metaphor" (Kvale 1994:2).

<sup>6</sup> The seven main phases mentioned by Kvale (ibid, p.54) are theme, design, interview, transcription, analysis, verification and report.

<sup>7</sup> The first was a sailing journey with Joseph Conrad's fiction, my Ph.D thesis: Mahmoud Issa "*Involvement and Detachment in Joseph Conrad's Fiction*", Copenhagen, Regnbue Tryk,published, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Different kinds of interviews: personal-news-literature: drama, novel, novella-religious-journalistic-academic: oral exams-in court-therapy dialogue- qualitative research interview. (Kvale, ibid, p.12). Each of the above mentioned has its own methods and techniques.

<sup>9</sup> Lubyia is also suggested by Thomas Thompson to be a window for "Investigating Palestine's Subaltern Heritage" (a paper presented to the committee of PaHH – The Palestine History and Heritage project, 2017): "In structuring this theoretical and methodological framework, we wish to describe an inclusive and critical history of the landscape of eastern Lower Galilee as a representative model for the small-region oriented Palestine History and Heritage project. Lubyia/ Lavi (Pal. Coord.: 1905.2424) consists today of the remains of a Palestinian village, destroyed in 1948. Some three thousand Palestinians were expelled. This process of depopulation, destruction and dispossession has not succeeded, however, in wiping out the memory of this village and its surroundings. Today, it provides us with a microcosm for the some 600 other demolished villages from mandate Palestine, which have left some 5.5 million refugees today". And further by Thompson: "The village functions as a looking glass, through which we might glimpse the historical associations which once existed in Palestine from a subaltern perspective. As we understand it, this village, but one of many within the greater

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landscape of the Galilee, emerges as a palimpsest in which a mosaic of prehistoric, ancient and more recent Palestinian remains visibly mixes with contemporary and twentieth century Israeli architecture". To see more on Pahh project see: [http://teol.ku.dk/pahh/english/about\\_the\\_project/](http://teol.ku.dk/pahh/english/about_the_project/)

<sup>10</sup> Faiha Abdul Hadi's four volume books on Palestinian women's historiography, depending mainly on oral interviews with women, is a land mark in documenting the historiography of Palestinian women since the 1930's (Hadi 2006-2009).

<sup>11</sup> Link to CNN report on this event can be seen at: [http://mahmoud.dk/?page\\_id=1315](http://mahmoud.dk/?page_id=1315)

<sup>12</sup> The committee of the displaced Palestinians in Israel is demonstrating every year in one of the demolished villages in 1948 to keep the memory of the Nakba alive and unforgettable.

<sup>13</sup> According to Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), Ramallah, and Palestine 2013. Two thirds of the Palestinians are living outside mandate Palestine. In Europe alone there are around a quarter million Palestinians.

<sup>14</sup> Diaspora Palestinians had no right to vote during the two elections that took place in Palestine after the Palestinian Authorities took responsibility of the West Bank and Gaza according to 1993 Oslo Accords.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Anderson Falk is Professor Emeritus of International Law at Princeton University and Visiting Distinguished Professor in Global and International Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. In 2001, he served on a three person Human Rights Inquiry Commission for the Palestine Territories that was appointed by the United Nations

<sup>16</sup> Lubyans believe that a big stone in Lubyia was a resting place for Jesus when he was travelling from Nazareth to Tiberias. Abu Mahir Hajjo, a Lubyian living in Deir Hanna, accompanied with other elderly Lubyans showed me this famous stone when I visited the area,

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Karzoun in Yarmook refugee camp, Damascus, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> See a photo of the map in *Lubyia var en landsby i Palæstina* (Issa 2005. p 30).

<sup>19</sup> A "Lieu de mémoire" "is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or work of time has become a symbolic element of memorial heritage of any community" as defined by Nora in the following link: [http://faculty.smu.edu/bwheeler/Joan\\_of\\_Arc/OLR/03\\_PierreNora\\_LieuxdeMemoire.pdf](http://faculty.smu.edu/bwheeler/Joan_of_Arc/OLR/03_PierreNora_LieuxdeMemoire.pdf)

A lieu de mémoire (site of memory) is a concept popularized by the French historian Pierre Nora in his three-volume collection *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (published in part in English translation as *Realms of Memory*).

<sup>20</sup> The whole areal of Lubyia is 39,629 dunams as mentioned in *All that Remains. The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Al-Khalidi 1992: 526).

<sup>21</sup> To see the names see [http://mahmoud.dk/?page\\_id=554](http://mahmoud.dk/?page_id=554), pp. 188-190

<sup>22</sup> founded by Husserl, and further developed by Heidegger and Sartre

<sup>23</sup> In this regard, it is interesting to read Giambattista Vico's vision of the science of the common nature of nations, and how it moved in three stages from: Gods, Heroes, Human beings. *The New Science* (Vico 1988).

<sup>24</sup> "Oral tradition is a narrative describing or purporting to describe eras before the time of the person who relates it": (J.C.Miller1980: 2; cited by Vansina 1985: 209). Oral Traditions are no longer contemporary, "they have passed from mouth to mouth, for a period beyond the lifetime of the informants", while the sources of oral history such as reminiscences, hearsy, or eyewitness accounts about events and situations "are contemporary, that is, which occurred during the lifetime of the informant" (Vansina 1985:12).

<sup>25</sup> George Rawlinson 1996. To know more about Herodotus' predecessors and their influence see: *Herodotus*, Carolyn Dewald and John Marincola, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Fragments of Gilgamesh in Babylonian script can be dated from around 2000 BCE. The entire tale, however, is mainly known from the twelve cuneiform tablets that were found in the library of Assurbanipal (668 - 626 BCE).

<https://community.middlebury.edu/~harris/Humanities/homer.html>

<sup>27</sup> The Mu'allaqāt (Arabic: المعلقة, [al-mu'allaqa:t]) is a group of seven Arabic poems that are considered the best work of the pre-Islamic era. The name means: "The Suspended Odes" or "The Hanging Poems"- The traditional explanation being that these poems were hung on the walls of or in the Ka'ba at Mecca, after being recited orally and chosen to be written and hanged until the following year of poetry festival. It has also been called The Mu'allaqāt because it is like precious gems that hang in the mind and is watched in silence. (cf. Kirsten Eksell 2006:158).

<sup>28</sup> Bo Dahl Hermansen, is writing a detailed article on Lubyia in this volume. I will therefore not go into details and mention the many historical narratives that confirm the collective remembrance among nowadays Lubyans- especially that of the battle of Salah El Deen El Ayoubi (1137-1197) on Lubyia's land on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1187, and the following resounding defeat of the crusaders.

<sup>29</sup> More can be seen on demolished villages on the website: <http://awraq.birzeit.edu>

<sup>30</sup> An article in Arabic from the *al-akbar* newspaper concerning Sahira Dirbas's achievements can be seen at the site (<http://al-akhbar.com/node/272980>)

<sup>31</sup> <http://zochrot.org/en/site/nakbaMap>

<sup>32</sup> Old official Documents about refugees of 1948 are kept in unsafe conditions in Gaza and Amman in UNRWA archives. A recent contract in 2013 was signed between the Danish foreign ministry and UNRWA to digitalize these valuable documents (more than one million) and keep them in safe place at the Danish Royal Library in Copenhagen.

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<sup>33</sup> Al-Janna, Arab resource Centre for popular Arts, Beirut, Lebanon, 2002

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.palestineremembered.com/Tiberias/Lubya/index.html#> Links. (41 articles, 156 pictures, 2 videos, link to Wikipedia, Facebook, maps and names of Lubyans living worldwide could be read and seen on the above mentioned link). Also on my homepage <http://mahmoud.dk> two documentary films: Lubyas:” Ancestor’s land”, 1995 & “A village under forest” 2013, photos and manuscript of Lubyas’s historiography can be seen both in Arabic and English, together with many other relevant articles on Lubyas’s historiography.

<sup>35</sup> Fawzi al-Qawuqgi (1890-1977) was the field commander for the Arab Liberation Army (ALA) or what being named in Arabic: the Salvation Army; appointed by the Arab League to lead voluntary forces from different Arab countries to help Palestinians. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of July 1948, Lubyas fell to the Hagana forces after ALA left Lubyas without fight

<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately Abu Majid was one, among hundreds others, who passed away without any possibility neither to see the ruins of his home, nor to receive the minimum gesture of justice that he awaited for more than six decades in his refugee home in Yarmouk camp in Syria.

<sup>37</sup> See link to manus. [http://mahmoud.dk/?page\\_id=554](http://mahmoud.dk/?page_id=554)

<sup>38</sup> Interviewed in the Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus, Nov. 1989.

<sup>39</sup> Name of massacres and dates in the following link: <http://www.1948.org.uk/the-massacres/> To know more about other massacres since the Balfour declaration in 1917; why and how they took place, follow the link Thomas Suarez article: “The Cult of the Zionists- An historical Enigma”, <http://ameu.org/Current-Issue/Current-Issue/2017-Volume-50/The-Cult-of-the-Zionists-An-Historical-Enigma.aspx>; and see also Suarez’ well researched declassified documented book, *State of Terror*, Skyscraper Publications, U.K., 2016.