



Kamal Abdulfattah

The main characteristic of the Palestinian cultural landscape: its special constancy

Entrevista conduzida por **Ahmad Abu Hammad**
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Graduated in Erlangen University in Germany, Dr. Kamal Abdulfattah is a well-known Professor in Cultural and Human Geography at Birzeit University. In an interview conducted by Dr. Ahmad Abu Hammad, he summarised his general view about the changes in the Palestine landscape implemented during the last decades.

Ahmad Abu Hammad (AAH): What are the main characteristics of the Palestinian landscape?

Kamal Abdulfattah (KA): Detailed knowledge from the numerous valuable archeological and historical-geographical works in these territories enable us to definitely speak about the main characteristic of the Palestinian cultural landscape: its special constancy. The great volume of reliable archeological and historical knowledge as regards the Palestinian landscape does reflect it. Constancy here includes both the landscape locations and, in most cases, their names. This constancy dates from long ago. Most of the towns and villages in this study area had been in their exact places since they were built in the Canaanite period (2000BC-4000BC) and before.

AAH: Is there any special characters of the names and identity of the landscape?

KA: In many cases they still have names of Arameic and Canaanite roots: Jericho, Jerusalem, Hebron, Jenin, Birzeit, Al-Bireh, ar-Ram, Anabta, Mikhmas, Samu', Yattah, Jaba', and Rammun are but few examples. In addition, most of the agricultural terraces and field stone hedges are

also in their exact positions, on the slopes, since they were built. Plus, they are functioning in the same way, as they used to be since thousands of years ago.

AAH: Is there a variety of landscape types?

KA: Another important feature of the cultural landscapes in the Central Palestinian Mountains is the variety of its types: clustered villages, scattered hamlets and sometimes scattered individual dwellings including manor houses, stone huts and caves. Hilltop villages, slope located and valley bottom located villages. Different types of water installations and water works, from simple water cisterns into water aqueducts of tens of kilometers long. Narrow agricultural terraces on steep slopes of Western Ramallah areas. Wider terraces on the gentle slopes and wide valley bottoms of the Nablus-Tulkarm-Jenin areas. Long rectangular agricultural tracts in the intermountainous plains of Arraba-Qabatiya, Zababida, Beit Dajan, Huwwara, Lubban, Turmus'ayya and other smaller plains. Irregular orchards and agricultural tracts with stone hedges and borders in the plateau around Silwad, Ar-Ram, Dura, Beit Ummar and other plateau areas. The goat and sheep grazing grounds of the eastern slopes.

AAH: What can you say about the Palestinian landscape under occupation?

KA: The decline of the agricultural terraces and the deterioration of the scenic views of the landscape can be greatly attributed to the actions of the occupation. For example, think about the negative effect of the Israeli colonies and of the settlements expansion on forested and scenic views of the landscape. Sometimes almost all of the natural and agricultural elements have been destroyed to allow for the expansion of such colonies on it. Think also about the negative effect of the Israeli policy to change and destroy such scenic landscape elements as archeological and cultural sites of great importance to the history of Palestinians, either by urban expansion or by changing the old and Palestinian rights connected to these elements. Briefly, the situation of the wars over and the occupation of Palestine during the past century (1918 to present time) resulted in a radical transformation of the Palestinian society. The old balances of agricultural productivity have broken down because of the physically and socially destructive Israeli ways of land occupation.

AAH: What can Palestinian geographers do to highlight this change?

KA: Geographers can be functional on both the academic and the practical aspects of landscape conservation. The participation of geographers is crucial by alerting to maintain biodiversity, the preservation of local and regional landscape characters and the recognition of cultural landscape sites. This can be achieved by preparing a spatiotemporal database of historical and cultural landscapes, using local and regional studies and improved methodologies. These kind

of studies will certainly include senior and junior students and so this will raise their degree of awareness and prepare them for future and effective landscape plans and conservation. The inclusion of the students can also be done by field missions and local and regional surveys of landscape sites. The role of geographers could also be extended to actively participate in the process of decision making to conserve and manage the important landscape elements of Palestine.

AAH: What effects are being produced by the Palestinian urbanization?

KA: Urbanization constitutes a great conservation challenge, which result in the following effects on landscape:

- it replaces the native species with widespread “weedy” nonnative species. This replacement constitutes a process of biotic homogenization which threatens to reduce the biological uniqueness of local Palestinian ecosystems.
- it destroys the traditional and old terraces. Urban settlements expand over the terraces which are one of the Palestinian traditional agriculture. Sometimes, the destruction of old cultural and historical sites is achieved by Palestinian themselves, when they use these sites for new and modern buildings. This is especially sad when it happens at well-known historical sites protected by law, which should prevent destroying them or building on its location.

For all of the above mentioned characters, and because we cannot preserve all of these cultural landscape elements, we should carefully sort out different cultural elements according to its importance and keep the most important ones as models for future generation and for preservation of historical evidence.

