



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING



Review: Palestinian Village Histories: Geographies of the Displaced
Palestinian Village Histories: Geographies of the Displaced by Rochelle A. Davis
Review by: Rosemary Sayigh
Journal of Palestine Studies, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Winter 2012), pp. 118-121
Published by: [University of California Press](http://www.ucpress.edu) on behalf of the [Institute for Palestine Studies](http://www.instituteforpalstudies.org)
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jps.2012.XLI.2.118>
Accessed: 02/05/2012 15:23

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of California Press and Institute for Palestine Studies are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Palestine Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE MEANING OF MEMORIALIZATION

Palestinian Village Histories: Geographies of the Displaced, by Rochelle A. Davis. Stanford University Press, 2011. xxiii + 231 pages. Notes to p. 278. Bibliography to p. 316. Index to 328. 5 maps, 5 illustrations. \$24.95, paper.

Reviewed by Rosemary Sayigh

Rochelle Davis tells us that she took ten years to research and write *Palestinian Village Histories*. For a Western scholar to have read and analyzed 112 of the 120 village histories published, as well as interviewed many of the authors, is in itself a rare achievement. If we add to this a range of scholarship that takes in the literature on memory, identity, postmodern anthropology, and Arab,

Rosemary Sayigh is the author of *Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries* (London: Zed Books, 1979) and *Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon* (London: Zed Books, 1994).

Islamic, and Western historiography and textual criticism, we can only admire a *tour de force*. Davis's object of study is not the villages that the books memorialize but what their memorialization means, why this process began at a specific moment (the mid-1980s), how the books were produced, by whom and for what audiences, how they are read and responded to, and what power relations they reflect. While challenging dominant Zionist narratives, the village histories, she writes, also express "Palestinian men's authoritative perspectives within dominant definitions of what constitutes history . . . attempts at the ascendancy of certain families within local social structures; and . . . the pervasive and silencing presence of certain social values" (p. 17).

Each chapter of *Palestinian Village Histories* emphasizes a different aspect of the historicity, community and national embeddedness, motivation, and silences. The first chapter "Geographies of Dispossession" sets the historical, disciplinary, and human framework through which Davis approaches her topic. Subsequent chapters deal with the different ways the village books relate to national struggle; the way they reflect original and current values; authors' and readers' aims and reticences in representing the past; the place of the village books in a distinct tradition of Arab history-writing; their display of ownership through minute descriptions of property and landscape; and the relationship between village places and their inhabitants' identity. Davis interweaves these themes with her encounters with authors and diaspora communities, as she searches for publications often hard to find.

Although *Palestinian Village Histories* is thoroughly academic in its multidisciplinary reach and rigor, it is also extremely readable. Davis begins each chapter with an anecdote that takes the reader into the living heart of her material, for example, by opening the first chapter with a recent court case involving the eviction of Mizrahi families from what is now Kafr Shalem (Salama), raising to the surface the Israeli state's settlement of immigrants on land owned by Palestinians. The chapter on "Village Values" begins with a project given to school children in Syria asking for facts

about their villages of origin. Their elders, remembering the village in terms of ethos and attachment, could not provide such "scientific" information. The assignment made both children and adults reconsider what knowledge they should have about their past (pp. 64–65).

The village books mark Palestinian history in both obvious and subtle ways: life in pre-1948 rural Palestine as remembered in exile; the Nakba when the villages became "objects of memory" through their erasure; the post-1948 period when Arab nationalism eclipsed memory of particular localities; the days of PLO predominance (1960s and 1970s) when the Resistance adopted the peasant as mobilizing symbol but neglected the rural population in its meta-narratives; and then the PLO's transfer to Tunis (1982), followed by the Oslo accords of 1993. It was these last two dates (1982 and 1993) that set in motion the memorialization of villages, through deepening the fissure between the national leadership and the refugee masses. The first two village books (on Duwaimeh and 'Ajjur) appeared in 1985, marking this transition. Up to 1982, the national liberation struggle had subsumed the issue of refugee return; after it, the refugee stratum was sufficiently cut off from "a compromised PLO" to insist on recapturing self-representation. Set in this historical sequence, the village books appear as part of a long class struggle waged first by the rural population before 1948 against feudal landlords, and later as refugees against a national movement that abandoned them when the PLO "anchored itself in the West Bank and Gaza" (p. 58).

Historic change also shows up in rising educational levels that transformed some descendants of villagers into historians. Most authors of village books are men who took up writing after retiring from teaching, often from camps, usually from the villages they write about: an "educated local elite . . . [who] remain enmeshed in and an inextricable part of their small communities" (p. 5). In a few cases, such as the book about Salama by Abdel Aziz Saqr, the author could describe the village from having lived in it, but more often authors are second-generation refugees who compiled their studies by listening to

parents and elders. In rare cases, such as the series produced by Birzeit's Centre for Research and Documentation, the studies were carried out by trained researchers. Thus authors mainly "belong" to the village in question, and to the networks formed by the village's descendants across the diaspora. It is to them, and to future generations, that the village books are primarily addressed.

Davis conveys well the often fractious relations between authors and readers, the pressure of community values, competing versions of family property or prestige, and the editing needed to avoid hurting particular families through reports of poverty, land sales, or collaboration. Readers are important to the village book authors as sources of information, fellow members, and partners in producing an accurate representation. Their corrections are solicited and incorporated in second editions, when these can be afforded.

Davis's investigation of readers' opinions extends her research into the refugee community at large, illuminating their desires as to how their village should be known. In many cases reception is critical, particularly when an author has aggrandized his own family at the expense of others. Fatima Hamdan complains of being omitted from the Qalunya book even though she brought up her children alone after her husband's death, refusing to remarry. Yet the majority fully support the purpose behind the village books, since they "embody the desire of the villagers to communicate a specific local way of being by focusing on collectively held values, family genealogies and origin stories" (p. 67). As Davis reminds us, the universal purpose of history-writing is to remember for the future. Those who write and those who read the village books share a concern to leave an inheritance for their children and grandchildren.

Bias toward male knowledge is shared by the village histories with history-writing in general. Women are consulted as sources in less than half the books, and only on subjects such as songs, handicrafts, food, and clothing. Their essential role in agricultural production and their specialized skills in healing, midwifery, sewing and

embroidery, wedding celebrations, oral poetry, and “memory work” are hardly mentioned, nor their share in property, economic transactions, and marketing. In this respect, Davis notes, the land documents that make up a large part of village books are revealing, showing that women could be sole owners of land as well as partners in sale and purchase. Davis makes the point here that such omissions reflect post-Nakba values. Probably linked to the shift in religion from syncretic to reformist Islam, this “domesticating” of village women can be seen as evidence of a post-Nakba adoption of urban, middle-class values among camp refugees, a transformation largely masked to outsiders by poverty.

In the case of gender as in other topics, Davis points to individual exceptions as well as collective norms in writing about village women’s labor. Sahera Dirbas, one of three women authors presented by Davis, describes al-Birweh women walking with their products to ‘Akka, reminding us that Granqvist reports that Artas women carried their produce to Jerusalem and sold it there. Mahmoud Said (Tirat Haifa) writes of “women’s fundamental role . . . in agricultural work” (p. 107). Ghalib Sumrayn (Qalunya) writes of his mother’s work as a healer and lists all the wives of the Salama clan for six generations, including their families and villages. Yusif Ali Abdel Aal (Mallaha) mentions women by name and skill, and includes their photos. These exceptions highlight the tension between collectivism and individualism that is also part of camp life today. Any topic raised in the village books could arouse lively debate among camp populations today, revealing processes through which diversity is expressed and yet contained.

Davis sets reticence about gender and folk-religion in a frame of values formed in post-Nakba reality, with urbanization and reformist Islam as major influences. The desire to challenge dominant outsider accounts also plays a role in choice of contents. Village book authors omit other topics besides women’s labor, for example, poverty, marginal families, sicknesses, and internal conflict. Nor would most include anecdotes such as the story about a mayor getting knocked off his donkey, as one

author of a book about ‘Innaba did, provoking a corrective version by Abdallah Al-Sufi who understands history as containing “useful information” (p. 94). Insights such as these into concepts of “history” held by the village book authors and their local readers point to a crucial difference between the written and the spoken. The permanence of the text creates a tension around contents. Oral histories on pre-Nakba village life collected recently in Bourj al-Barajneh camp (Lebanon) show less reticence on topics such as women’s work, poverty, or practices deemed un-Islamic today.

Despite their idealization of the past, the village book authors are professionals who explain their methods, cite their sources, and are concerned about accuracy. Davis’s placing of the village books within local, Arab, and Islamic models of history-writing has special value, establishing their roots in a tradition that combines the written and the oral, and has frequently focused on localities. Though this style faded in the twentieth century, it can still be seen in Mustafa Dabbagh’s *Our Country Palestine*, a source listed in most village history bibliographies. Thus the authors straddle an ancient Arabic multiparticipatory mode of writing history, and the modern mode where a single author claims authority. One of Davis’s achievements is in conveying both the collectivism of the village books and the differences between authors in methods, inclusions, or use of spoken Arabic. Vis-à-vis Western historians, the village historians claim to know better about themselves than foreigners “because they [the village historians] are using sources that lived that history” (p. 138). The detailed knowledge that inhabitants have of village landscapes, homes, properties, orchards, and water sources cannot be taken otherwise than as a proof of ownership.

Among the many fascinating questions that Davis’s study raises is the origin and political meaning of the self-reproduction of Palestinian villages. Salim Tamari explains village self-assertion as a nineteenth-century reaction against city elites. Alternatively, we might view it as a form of resistance to control by alien states, a habit of “anti-statism” that the Nakba reinforced and that was transmitted to refugee camps

where rural people formed the majority. That camps have been influenced spatially, socially, and culturally by villages is shown in preference for local and endogamous marriage; practical and rhetorical efforts to reduce inequalities; and the way that camps are as differentiated from each other now as villages once were. Another question is to what extent social hierarchy—of gender, seniority, income, prestige—is involved in village self-reproduction over time.

Davis's conversations with authors humanize them by showing their individual/communal motives, aims, methods, problems with readers, and distribution. Long immersion in the refugee community allows her to record stories outside the village history accounts, such as the anonymous woman who fled from Palestine alone, pregnant, with an infant daughter, giving birth on the way to a stillborn baby she had to bury, a story so painful that she has refused ever to tell it publicly. Davis has the skill of bringing village book authors and audiences close to the reader, displaying the discipline of empathy on equal terms with more conventional academic disciplines. The vast swathe of experience of loss and attempted recuperation it embraces makes *Palestinian Village Histories* a book to read and read again.