CHAIN 2022

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In copertina:

Il presente volume è pubblicato con scopi scientifici e di ricerca. Pertanto le illustrazioni, le immagini e i fotogrammi presenti all'interno del volume sono utilizzati esclusivamente a tale scopo.

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Lilas Abdulmalwa

The War Memory as Part of the Syrian Cultural Heritage Identity

Abstract: By classifying the Syrian war as a crisis, when cultural sites are destroyed, it causes damage to the identity of the people. Destroying people's cultural heritage cracks their belonging by destroying their history and memory. Reconstruction after such destruction marks the beginning of massive change. The destruction of the war ushered in a new chapter in the life of this heritage. The recovery of cultural heritage is crucial because it can be the essential element to bind society in such cases. Yet, reconstruction could easily invite the erasure of a traumatic period of recent history from communal consciousness and thus from collective identity and memory. Consequently, two variables can play a role in the next phase: the destruction of tangible heritage and intangible war memory. Thus, allowing the conflict (the evidence) to be observed and recognised as part of this cultural heritage is a reverse equation; if we view cultural heritage as a resource in and of itself, while memory and identity serve as evidence, we will explore the resource as evidence. The article looks for the philological meaning of war and heritage in relation to memory and identity.

Keywords: Syria, war, heritage, memory, identity, philological research.

Many have attempted to label what is happening in Syria using various terms, e.g., the conflict in Syria, the civil war, the armed conflict, and so on. Eventually, all of these terms could fall under the umbrella term 'war'. The destruction caused by the war created a new chapter in the life of cultural heritage, forming new memories and a complicated clash of identities. Therefore, allowing the war to be recognised as part of the cultural

heritage's lifespan is a step toward its recovery. However, such an approach should only be implemented if there is consensus on the meaning of the war, a term nowadays should have been clearly defined. On the other hand, it is difficult to assign a precise definition to heritage, a meaning that could be accepted worldwide (Larkham, 1995; Harvey, 2001). David Harvey, a critical heritage scholar, deliberates in the history of heritage the idea of when the heritage was heritage, noting that it is part of the human condition to construct concepts of identity for individuals and groups, it is the use of the past (Harvey, 2001). Starting from this point, I tried to research the birth and development of these terms in Arabic literature using dictionaries as the primary resource.

1. The research on the meaning of Heritage and War in the Arab world

The Arabic word for heritage 'Alturāt, 'تُأْرَتُ ُل , derives from the word 'Alwaret, ثاراولا'. The Lexicographer Ībn Manzūr defined the term 'Alwaret' in his fourteenth-century dictionary, with a link to God referring to one of the God characters, which meant the immortal that inherits all (Ibn Manzūr [1290] 1988). On the other hand, the word Alturāt, or heritage, was only mentioned once in the Qur'an with His saying: «اَمَّلَ الَّكُأُ شَارِتُكُا أَنُولُكُأْ تَوَى translated, and you devour the heritage of other people wholly (The Holy Our'ān, Verse 19, p. 734). The interpretation in this verse says that heritage is the same as inheritance, in the sense that you collect the inheritance. The definition of heritage as «Human heritage, Literature heritage, which includes all tradition, science, literature, art, and so on that could be transmitted from one generation to another (Massoud, 1992)» in Al Ra'ed dictionary from the late twentieth century was the first to come close to the term's current common usage. Therefore, it could be noticed that none of the Alturat derivatives has been used in the past to signify cultural or intellectual heritage, so the word's meaning remains inadequate.

In 2006 the Lebanese architect Rahif Fayīad, linked heritage with humanity in his article Aleppo between Heritage and Contemporary, by defining heritage as the cultural heritage of a specific society, where the city and its architecture are the mirrors of that society, this cultural heritage is a legacy document that proves history and cultural reality. These values are the reason that emphasises the cultural value of humanity linked with its heritage, stressing the need to preserve the heritage, its memory and its society (Fayīad, 2006). Nevertheless, it was not until the early twenty-first century that significant development of the term was noted in the Lexicon of the Modern Arabic Language. which on the one hand, defined by a family heritage as «everything that could be owned» And on the other hand, all predecessor legacy 'scientific, art, literary', whether tangible such as books and building heritage, or intangible such as opinions, a society's transmitted traditions, and everything that has value for the current era and its spirit 'Islamic heritage, cultural heritage, traditional heritage'. It has also invited to the rehabilitation of the literature heritage and introduced the science of heritage study (Mukhtar, Omar, 2008). Thus, heritage has come to mean intellectual legacy rather than the ancients' original use of the term, which was limited to material legacy.

However, I believe that heritage must also be seen in terms of the cultural and social struggles that have shaped history; by doing so, we will see a particular cultural product related to a particular system at a certain era. In fact, in his paper Post-war reconstruction, authenticity and development of cultural heritage in Syria, the Syrian scholar Anas Soufan, a specialist in heritage conservation, returns the birth of the term heritage in Syria to the twentieth century due to social-political divisiveness from Islamic conservators, secular reformers, and liberal reformers (Soufan, 2018).

War is one of the significant struggles, better said, crises that could be faced. In one form or another, Syria was constantly at war. Undoubtedly, the most recent war had a significant impact on the city. Nevertheless, to assume that this was the only conflict that impacted people's identities would be naïve; Syrians were condemned to struggle with this aspect of their identity; specifically, with the social stigma associated with mental trauma in society prevents war from ever being accepted or even simply rejected for fear of breaking from the norms that society demands. This could extremely be shown in the Aleppine Artist Kayali's [1934–1978] painting 'Then What' painted in 1965 (Fig.1).



Fig.1 - Kayali, L. (1965) What After. The tragedy of the Palestinian Arab Refugees. [online]. Available at: http://www.louay-kayali. com/ ⊚ Louay Kayali / 2008 - 2009 International Syrian Plastic Artist Louay Kayali. (Accessed: 04 September 2022)

The definition of war appears evident pretty nowadays. However, it is simple to propose adequate definitions stripping out all the conditions under which people may have lived in such a scenario. The Lebanese poet Mikhail Naimy's words provide a straightforward explanation of this

idea: «The War ended. On that day, millions of people in various parts of the world danced, sang, drank and partied, except for those who tasted the taste of war; these remained silent» (Naimy, 2011, p. 171).

Consulting the Arabic dictionary it's been found that the first time the word war 'Alḥarbu, 'نُرُتُ' appeared in an Arabic dictionary was in Lisan Al'arb, which defined it as «the contrary of peace» (Ibn Manzūr [1290], 1988, p. 303). Later defined as «A fight between two groups», the interesting part is the definition of the origin of the word derived from 'Alharabu, 'لَـٰـٰتُ',' which

means 'woe and destruction' in the sense of the great sorrow (Academy of the Arabic Language in Cairo, 2004). While the definition of war given in the twentieth-century Alra'ed dictionary (Massoud, 1992) refers to 'a great anger', and only one of the word's derivatives, 'Harba, خنس 'قاس 'was defined as «the appearance of the war, a severe event». Which might be interpreted as a severe trauma 'قادی د شن مُ عَقِي دُنُ.

It is quite interesting to see how the twentieth century definition used to include the sorrow that would accompany the event and the mention that this event is destructive. While nowadays, this significance has been discarded in favour of a broad meaning, «A fight between two groups, the contrary of peace» (Mukhtar Omar, 2008). While correct, it lacks the deeper meaning of the term, which embraces both the physical level of destruction and any potential mental suffering that may accompany it.

The Pre-Islamic Arabian Poet Ibn Sulmā [520 – 609 A.D.] once fulfilled the war meaning in his suspended poetry. Summarising the feeling of tasting war significance, going beyond considering a generation born during war, a generation whose only cultural experiences may be summaries of misery and nothing else. (Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā, Mu'allaqat مِلْكَتَ مُلُ مُنْمَدِ عَفَى وَالْمَا مُنْمَادِ عَفَى وَالْمَا مُنْمَادِ عَفَى وَالْمَا مُلْكِلُتُكُ مُلِّ مُنْمَدِ عَفَى وَالْمَا مُلْكِلُكُ مُلِّ مُنْمَدِ عَفَى وَالْمَا مُلْكِلُكُ مُلِي وَالْمَالِمُ الْمَالِمُ اللهِ اللهِ اللهُ اللهُ

Translated: «War is nothing but what you promised, tried and hated; this is what the true testimonies witnessed from experiences and not from the judgments of speculation» (Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā, Mu'allaqat مِلْكُتُ مُٰلُ عَنْمُ دِ عَصْوًا مَٰ أَنْ مِأ , Verse 28. Alzuznī, 2013, p. 193).

So, the issue is, why ignore an event's inner meaning in favour of deprived meaning from the emotional dimensions of the war? The term 'war' should no longer be used to emphasise the origins of the conflict, the number of parties engaged, and so on. Rather, it should stem from its inner significance in its origin, which depicts the confusion it causes, represents the sorrow in addition to the destruction occurred to the body, and by the body, I mean the city.

2. The memory of war

In 2017, I interviewed Maher Al-Mounes, a Syrian Journalist, who always took part in the journalist team visiting cities after their return to government control. He spoke about the meaning of the heritage after war for some locals. I was giving an example of his visit on 27 March 2016, describing the city of Palmyra as a city of ghosts. When an old man was going directly to the archaeological site, telling Maher: «This heritage is the reason why I exist, if they are still here, I will rebuild my house; if they are gone, there is no reason for me to stay». While Tark, the youngest son of Khaled Al-As'ad [1934-2015] the Syrian archaeologist and the head of antiquities at the ancient city of Palmyra, told me: «it is normal for a local to go to the Archaeological site and have a cup of tea in the morning». In another metaphor, breakfast in the ruins.

A relationship between the site and the local everyday life experience that still remains, and once was shown by the camera shot taken by a local photographer from Beirut in the nineteenth century of a local boy sleeping on the ruins of Palmyra, demonstrates how the people owned the place just by living there.

Thus, the heritage must be experienced by people to become



Fig.2 – Maison Bonfils. Palmyra, Sculpture of a Capitol, Syria©1867-1899, LOC 04381 [online]. Available at: http://wendymks.blogspot.com/2015/06/in-situ-counter-indications-of.html?view=magazine. (Accessed: 31 August 2022)

a heritage. In another way, these sites' use has made them heritage. It is not only the existence of a site but rather the act of passing the knowledge in the correct cultural context.

Looking at the act taken in Al Zaatari camp in Jordan, where physical models of Aleppo, Palmyra and Homos were made (Segal 2016; Dunmore, 2016), demonstrate

a simple act of introducing the form of the place to preserve its transmission into the future and to future generations. These constructed models testify to values, they constitute an aspiration for memory and permanence; because memories exist in the form, the form of these monuments and the one that created the city, it is the paradoxical relationship between attachment to a place per se in relation to the meaning that could grow inside the children. This act aimed to acquaint children living in the Jordanian camp, who had never visited Syria or had no memory of it, with places of their land as a basis for the transmission of their identity through the recognition of a product of a certain place and time in its physical consistency and historical and aesthetic value; an act to make children understand who they are. because they are their cities, they are the memory that lives in the space, they are the form of the city in its physical dimension and when war destroys the form it hits deep into the memory. In her book, uses of heritage, Laurajane Smith argued that memory is a combination of emotions that may be seen differently, and the memory connected to heritage is a collective, social memory; in a sense, it is a collective memory that a group of people will create to have an identity through shared memory that provides belonging and identity formation (Smith, 2006).

As I heard from different locals during my visits to Aleppo in 2021: «These buildings are not just the building we use, nor the monuments that visitors seek to see, but rather they are our home, our memories, our identity; they are actually part of our belonging», one of the most important things that a person may learn visiting Aleppo is that people believe in the spirit of the stones; interestingly, this is the key factor that contributes to Aleppo's main characteristic, which is a living heritage. The city didn't gain this characteristic because people wanted to, nor because they intended to preserve it by planned action; rather, it is because they dealt with these stones based on culture. And here, when a culture deals with a heritage as a genuine living part of their daily lives, it becomes simply a continuity. The critical

looking at the cities as a continuous transformation is strongly demonstrated by Aldo Rossi in the architecture of the city. The city, according to Aldo Rossi, is a theatre of human events, this theatre becomes a reality, it absorbs emotions and memories, and each new occurrence contains a memory of the past as well as a potential memory of the future (Rossi, 1984, p. 7).

War is a manipulative event, it creates a conflict of memories, destroying some and creating others. The contradiction here lies in a ruined place which still retains its boundaries; might it be possible that this place still holds the memories it once did despite the destruction? Psychologically, this causes complex trauma. A collective memory that might only be trustworthy when it creates a common belonging link to a place and evolute on an urban scale and yet is a risky concept considering the uncertainty of which memory should be triggered and how it can be used to preserve peacefully. On the other side, the contradiction lies in the local need and thirst to recover the loss. Aleppians believe that a place's memory can only be entirely erased if a new memory has completely replaced it. Otherwise, it won't lose its authenticity if it keeps its spirit.



Fig.3 – Abdulmawla, L. (16 August 2021) War destruction. near Saḥet al tananīr ©Lilas Abdulmawla

So, the dialectic is now viewed as a part of the transformation process; described as Aldo Rossi in his book the Architecture of the city, the death is a new beginning connected with some unknown aspiration (Rossi, 1984, p.

11), as a result, the city's spirit becomes a defining character, its memory (Rossi, 1984, p. 130).

3. Then what

It was noted in the proceeding document of The post-trauma reconstruction colloquium at ICOMOS Headquarters that «After a disaster, the local community can lose faith in traditional building methods and show fear with regard to traditional construction and, as it has become associated with destruction, they may misunderstand how traditional construction works when it comes to rebuilding» (Arun et al, 2016, p. 30). I may argue with this statement because trauma is also tied to the cause of destruction; of course, people may mistrust or lose faith in the traditional structure, but the damage caused by an external factor is questionable in such a case. I found it fascinating how Aleppians believe in traditional elements and traditional building methods.

The Aleppian Mahmoud Al Siket, a civil engineer, shared this belief with me and added in 2018, «Aleppo was once built by stoneworkers, and only stoneworkers will reconstruct it». A belief I can only confirm, especially through multiple visits to Aleppo, witnessing locals and stoneworkers rebuilding their city with no exaggeration stone by stone, using mostly traditional methods and equipment.

On the other hand, one primary issue discussed by Tamim Qasmo [1946-2021], a Syrian civil engineer, during a conference in 2016 under the theme of strategies to rebuild Aleppo in which he said:



Fig.4 - Abdulmawla, L. (22 July 2021) Traditional stonework, after reconstruction. ©Lilas Abdulmawla

What I am deeply concern are the people. Returning Old Aleppo, it is not Palmyra or Rassafa. The old city of Aleppo means a living heritage. Here the heritage has two faces, physical and social. Let us say we want to rebuild the old city, first of all we should rebuild for the local people, not for tourists. We want the local people to come back, live, and work (Fansa et al 2016, p. 83)

One of the first attempts to solve such as problem is restoring public spaces, and as mentioned in The post-trauma reconstruction document, «the public space is one way of dealing with a lo lot of the problems of these cities and how it has to be reinforced» (Pullan, 2016, p. 28). However, it could only be noticed during my visits to the old city the empty restored Souq of Khan Al-Harīr in the middle of the day, despite the great effort put into its rehabilitation by the AKTC and the amazing and significant results obtained. However, I am afraid to believe that these attempts will



Fig.5 - Abdulmawla, L. (17 July 2021) Rehabilitated Souq in the old city of Aleppo. ©Lilas Abdulmawla

not be enough, as to keep a living heritage alive; it needs its locals since they are the first to comprehend their culture and identities.

In the end, understanding the paradox of the war, the trauma it caused, and the paradoxical relationship between a human, his identity, his memories, and a place, thus its cultural heritage, are some of the most crucial elements of post-war reconstruction. The Syrian heritage is a testament to the previous

society. Thus, cultural heritage is represented not only through the building but also through the society's culture, and they are intricately linked, and one cannot survive without the other.

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