

Dia Barghouti

Reviving al-Nabi Musa: Performance, Politics, and Indigenous Sufi Culture in Palestine

This article explores the revival of Palestinian indigenous performance practices that were part of the Sufi Nabi Musa festival. Focusing on the 2018 and 2019 government-sponsored performances, it examines how the different sociopolitical changes that took place in Palestinian society, following the mass expulsion of Palestinians from their land in 1948, have led to the marginalization, politicization, and eventual revival of indigenous performance practices, which are an important part of Palestinian theatre history. Exploring Sufi rituals as indigenous performance practices shows that theatre forms not based on appropriations of European-style theatre existed in Palestine in the twentieth century. It also raises important questions as to why many of them have been neglected by Palestinian non-governmental theatre organizations (NGOs). Dia Barghouti is the Arab Council for the Social Sciences Postdoctoral Fellow at the Abdelmalek Essaadi University in Morocco. Her research focuses on indigenous performance traditions in the Levant and North Africa. Her work on theatre and Sufism has appeared in *New Theatre Quarterly* and *Jadaliyya*.

Key words: Islamic rituals, religious festivals, sacred music, autochthonous traditions, Palestinian theatre.

ON 26 DECEMBER 2020, prominent Palestinian techno musician Sama Abdul-Hadi was arrested for performing a concert at the shrine of Nabi Musa in Jericho on the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Although performing a live techno concert at a Sufi shrine in the midst of a global pandemic is certainly questionable, Sama did not technically break any laws, as she had obtained permission from the Palestinian Authority (the Ministry of Tourism) to perform in the 'bazaar' area of the shrine complex and not, as was claimed by certain critics, to perform techno music in a mosque. Rioters who felt that Sama and the organizers of the event did not respect the sanctity of the Sufi shrine disrupted the performance.

The incident incited widespread and heated debate in Palestinian society about the importance of protecting religious sites, the inadequacies of the Palestinian Authority, and criticism of Palestinian artists who were out of touch with society. Under immense pressure from the public, the Palestinian Authority arrested Sama and detained her in prison, even though the Ministry of Tourism

had authorized the event. Appeals from human rights activists eventually led to her release, but at the time of writing it has yet to be determined if she will be charged on the basis of the Palestinian Authority's allegation of desecrating a sacred space.

Located seven kilometres outside of Jericho, the shrine of Nabi Musa is believed to be the burial site of the Prophet Moses ('Musa' in Arabic) and has been an important site of pilgrimage since it was built by the Mamluk Sultan al-Dhahir Baybars in 1269.¹ For the last nine centuries, pilgrims have visited it from both Palestine and other parts of the Islamic world, wishing to benefit from the intercession and blessings of the Prophet. It also hosted the *mawsim* ('season', 'festival') of Nabi Musa performed in the spring, which included a wide array of rituals and performances including *dhikr* rituals (rhythmic repetition of the divine names mentioned in the Qur'ān), circumcision celebrations, and musical processions.² The festival has undergone significant changes throughout the last century and has been profoundly affected by

the mass displacement of Palestinians by Zionist forces in 1948, as well as other socio-political changes, notably the fall of the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip under Israeli military rule in 1967. It has also been affected by the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1993, following the first Palestinian uprising (the *intifada*, 1987–93), which have had implications not only for Sufi practices, but also Palestinian culture more generally.³

The focus here is on indigenous Sufi performance practices that were part of the Nabi Musa festival, several of which have been revived by members of the Sufi orders and participants in recent government-sponsored celebrations. The importance of these practices is three-fold. First, they provide evidence that indigenous theatre activity not based on appropriations of European-style theatre existed in Palestine in the first half of the twentieth century.⁴ Second, they raise important questions about the socio-political and economic conditions that encouraged Palestinian theatre NGOs established in the 1990s to neglect indigenous forms.⁵ Finally, juxtaposing historical accounts with contemporary performances organized by the Palestinian Authority helps to clarify the ideological aims behind the revival of these forms in the Nabi Musa festival. Such a comparison helps explain the Palestinian Authority's involvement in the festival and contextualizes the recent controversy surrounding Sama's techno performance at the shrine. It also elucidates why several members of the Palestinian community have called on the government to relinquish control of the shrine to the Sufi orders.

The Historical Context

By the end of the nineteenth century, the festival of Nabi Musa was one of the most important religious celebrations in Palestine, having acquired political significance with the involvement of Ottoman officials and members of the Jerusalem elite who sought to stress the importance of Jerusalem as a political and administrative centre.⁶ Awad Halabi asserts that the festival only began to be celebrated in Jerusalem in the mid-nineteenth century. Instead of only performing rituals at the Nabi

Musa shrine, pilgrims and members of the Sufi orders gathered first in Jerusalem to participate in elaborate 'civic' rites under the guidance of Ottoman officials and members of the city's elite. Participants and Sufi shaykhs would then begin their twenty-kilometre journey to the shrine of the Prophet Moses in Jericho.⁷

The festival's political importance was further emphasized during the British Mandate (1917–48), when the 1920 Nabi Musa celebrations of Jerusalem were transformed into anti-Zionist protests, following the 1917 Balfour Declaration in which the British announced their support for the creation of a Zionist state in Palestine.⁸ This event cemented the political importance of the Nabi Musa festival in the Palestinian collective memory, and transformed it into a space where Palestinians voiced their discontent with Zionism and British colonial rule.⁹ And although Jerusalem's elite did not shy away from criticizing Zionism, they often complied with the British colonial authorities to ensure they maintained their political position. Nonetheless, the pilgrims who participated in the Nabi Musa festival during British rule used the ritual to protest against colonialism as well as Zionism.¹⁰

The last time the festival was performed as a large-scale religious festival involving thousands of Palestinians was in 1947. The massacre and expulsion of Palestinians by Zionist forces in 1948 led to the creation of the state of Israel and the disruption of several religious and cultural traditions, including the festival of the Prophet Moses.¹¹ This monumental event in Palestinian history, which displaced two-thirds of the Palestinian population from their homes – with many continuing to live in refugee camps in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, as well as in refugee camps on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip – came to be known as the *Nakba* ('the catastrophe').

Although the large-scale festivities of Nabi Musa ceased to exist, several of the rituals that used to be performed during the *mawsim* – such as visiting the shrine of the Prophet Moses (*ziyara*), performing religious hymns, and circumcision rituals – continued after 1948.¹² However, the decline of Sufi practices in Palestinian society led to the

marginalization of this Sufi shrine and the loss of many of the cultural traditions and performance practices that were part of the *mawsim* celebrations. The situation was further complicated by Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, which were previously controlled, respectively, by Jordan and Egypt. According to Amnon Cohen, the Israeli government used the area surrounding the Nabi Musa shrine to conduct military exercises, which made it impossible for Palestinians to gather in large crowds at the sacred site.¹³

There have been several attempts to revive the festival of the Prophet Moses, such as the 1987 *mawsim*, organized by Jerusalem's department of religious endowments, months before the start of the first Palestinian uprising.¹⁴ The Palestinian Authority, which came into existence with the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords, has attempted to re-establish the festival of Nabi Musa as a national festival and stress the importance of the historic site. One of the political motivations behind this revival is the fact that the shrine of the Prophet Moses is located in Area C, which is controlled by Israel and is under the threat of annexation, particularly in areas where Israeli settlers illegally occupy parts of the West Bank with the support of the Israeli government.¹⁵ However, as is explained in greater detail below, the Palestinian Authority is more interested in projecting an image of itself as being at the forefront of 'Palestinian resistance' than actually challenging Israeli settler colonialism.

Part of the Palestinian Authority's initiatives included renovating the shrine of Nabi Musa with funds from the European Union and the United Nations (UNDP), as well as organizing several *mawsim* celebrations in cooperation with the Higher Sufi Council (*al-Majlis al-Sufi al-'Ala*). Recent celebrations of the festival, including the 2018 government-sponsored *mawsim*, incorporated many of the indigenous performance practices that were a fundamental part of the Nabi Musa celebrations prior to the Nakba. Before explaining how these forms were revived in contemporary performances, it is necessary to give a description of the different indigenous

performance practices that were part of the festival prior to 1948.

The Nabi Musa Festival Prior to the Nakba

Historical accounts of the Nabi Musa festival reveal that it was one of the most widely celebrated religious festivals in Palestine, second only to the month-long one of Nabi Rubin, which took place near Yafa.¹⁶ It is among a wide range of Sufi saint day festivals that were celebrated across different parts of Palestine, including those of al-Nabi Salih and al-Khawwas in the villages of Deir Ghassaneh, al-Nabi Ayyub – near the village of Jura ('Asqalan) – and al-Khidr (St George) in al-Lydd and Haifa, to name a few. Several of these festivals took place during or after the two-week Nabi Musa festival.¹⁷

Other Sufi rituals commonly performed in Palestine in the first half of the twentieth century included *ziyara* (visiting Sufi shrines to acquire blessings), animal sacrifices, and rain-summoning processions, as well as healing rituals.¹⁸ Tewfik Canaan's detailed ethnographic account of religious life in British Mandate Palestine not only shows that Sufi shrines can be found in nearly every village and city in Palestine, but that they were also an important part of the cultural and religious life of Palestinians prior to 1948.¹⁹

Thus, the festival of Nabi Musa was part of a much broader network of Sufi activities and shrines that brought together Palestinians from different cities and villages, members of different Sufi orders, and political and religious leaders, who gathered in Jerusalem to commence the two-week festival, which began on the Friday before the Greek Orthodox Easter.²⁰ People from Nablus and the surrounding villages began the festivities a few days before the official start in Jerusalem, with music, dancing (*dabka*, a Palestinian folk dance), and the distribution of sweets to friends and relatives. The Sufis of Nablus marched through the city's streets in musical processions, playing drums and tambourines, reciting the names of God (*dhikr*), and waving the flags of different Sufi shrines (*zawiya*). After the 1920 Nabi Musa celebrations of Jerusalem were transformed into a political

protest, participants in the Nablus celebrations began to incorporate nationalist chants into the repertoire of songs performed during the festivities.²¹

Sufi dervishes, shaykhs, and pilgrims from Nablus would usually arrive in Jerusalem on the preceding Thursday and celebrations would begin on Friday – called *al-Nazleh* ('the descent') – with a ceremonial presentation of the flag of Nabi Musa to the mufti of Jerusalem. The latter would say a prayer, and then place the flag on a stick so that it could be carried at the start of the procession headed to the shrine of Nabi Musa. Participants from Hebron would arrive in Jerusalem on the following Saturday, and on Monday the different groups from Jerusalem, Nablus, Hebron, and surrounding villages would begin their journey to Nabi Musa's shrine, each with their respective flags, which represented different villages, cities, and saints in Palestine.²²

The crowds from Nablus and Hebron would enter Jerusalem in festive processions, which included singing, dancing (*dabka*), and sword fights (*sayfwa turs*).²³ After the protests of 1920, these performances began to incorporate nationalist songs with anti-Zionist and anti-colonial messages.²⁴ The procession of pilgrims which left Jerusalem on the following Monday was equally festive, with people playing drums, tambourines, and copper cups while following the bearer of the flag at the start of the procession. When the pilgrims reached the shrine of Nabi Musa, they would recite the *Fatiha* (the first chapter of the Qur'ān), then the Sufi at the head of the arriving procession would send a messenger, with a handkerchief tied around his neck, to inform the other pilgrims at the shrine that they had arrived.²⁵ The messenger would make his way to the shrine while playing the kettledrums. When he arrived, the oldest Sufi present at the shrine would untie the handkerchief while reciting the first chapter of the Qur'ān and then proceed to welcome the newly arriving pilgrims.²⁶

Pilgrims and Sufis continued to sing and dance as they entered the shrine, with the bearer of the flag and the musicians at the start of the procession. The instruments used at the Nabi Musa celebrations included drums,

copper cups, kettledrums, and different kinds of flutes (*nay*, *zummarah*, and *mijwiz*). The music was accompanied by religious songs and chanting. One of the Sufi leaders would recite verses that were repeated and sung by the pilgrims. He would control the tempo of the music by waving a sword or stick in the air while dancing.²⁷ The dances included *dabka* and *sahjeh* (clapping hands while dancing), which were often accompanied by the sound of women's celebratory ululations. People would also perform sword fights while onlookers gathered around them clapping and singing.

The rhythm of the music had specific religious meanings. For example, the rhythms of certain percussion instruments, such as the drums and the copper cups, signified 'God is [the] Living, [the] Eternal [the] Living'.²⁸ The banners carried in the procession were also embroidered with religious messages such as 'Moses is the interlocutor of God' or the names of different Sufi saints, as well as verses from the Qur'ān.²⁹ Food was always available. Certain families were responsible for cooking for the pilgrims, and meals were served twice a day, paid for by religious endowments (*awqaf*). Those who wanted to make a religious offering would sacrifice a sheep. The meat was cooked in one of the shrine's two kitchens, then distributed to visitors.³⁰ The shrine also had over forty rooms that housed visitors during the festival, but since it did not have enough rooms to host the thousands of pilgrims who visited it every spring, the majority of people set up tents around it. This included Bedouins, and people from Jericho and surrounding villages, who arrived on Tuesday and Wednesday.³¹

Merchants also attended the week-long celebrations at the shrine, selling sweets, jewellery, tobacco, and sheep (for those who wanted to make a sacrifice), as well as other commodities. They also set up makeshift restaurants and cafés, because the meals provided by the caretakers of the shrine were not always enough to feed the large number of pilgrims. Cafés were also performance spaces, hosting musicians, storytellers (*haka-wati*), and *karagoz* plays (puppet shadow theatre).³² Shadow theatre performances were

also part of the Ramadan month-long religious celebrations.

Wasif Jawhariyyeh, whose memoirs provide a historical account of cultural life in early twentieth-century Palestine, recounts how a prominent Lebanese puppeteer named Haj Mahmoud would visit Jerusalem during Ramadan to perform *karagoz* plays at cafés.³³ Each act would be performed at a different café, and the content of Haj Mahmoud's plays would change as the night progressed. Earlier performances, intended for children, were primarily stories about famous Arab figures such as 'Antar Ibn Shadad, whereas later performances catered for adults, and included poetry, music, social criticism, and political commentary. According to Jawhariyyeh, these performances were popular among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, including writers and intellectuals.³⁴

Another performance that took place at the Nabi Musa festival, also common in other parts of Palestine, was *Sunduk 'Ajab* ('Box of Wonders'): a wooden box with several glass windows in it through which the audience would look at changing pictures while the operator told stories.³⁵ As noted earlier, storytellers would also perform at cafés during the Nabi Musa festival. And much like the storytelling performances at cafés in Jerusalem that Jawhariyyeh describes, these performances were meant to attract customers, including those of well-known Arab tales such as the aforementioned 'Antara and Abu-Zayd al-Hilali.³⁶ Older women living in Palestinian villages also practised storytelling, primarily for children.³⁷

Horse racing, sword fighting, magicians' shows, and *l'ub al-Jarid*, a farcical fight performed on horseback, were also among the activities at the Nabi Musa festival. More explicitly religious performances included the daily prayers and *dhikr* rituals, with rhythmic repetition of the divine names as well as recitations from the Qur'ān.³⁸ Circumcision rituals were also performed during the festival, since it was believed that the shrine of the Prophet Moses would endow the circumcised child with blessings. It included an elaborate musical procession that incorporated songs specifically intended for circumcision

celebrations and Qur'ānic recitations. The child was dressed in silk clothes, given protective amulets, and was usually carried on horseback to the window of the shrine where he would be circumcised.

People also performed songs (*madih*) in praise of the Prophet Muhammad, the Prophet Moses, and the saints. Music, dancing, *dhikr* rituals, and religious hymns were continuously performed throughout the week-long celebrations at the shrine of the Prophet Moses.³⁹ After 1920, political slogans and songs were also incorporated into the festivities that took place at the shrine; Kamal al-'Asali notes that nationalists even held political meetings there. However, this ended after Haj Amine al-Hussieni, former mufti of Jerusalem and a central figure in the Palestinian nationalist movement, was exiled in 1937.⁴⁰

Visitors left the shrine on different days, but the flag of the Prophet Moses was ceremonially returned to Jerusalem on Thursday. Pilgrims from Nablus and Hebron also returned to Jerusalem, entering the city in festive processions with the flags of different saints and villages, accompanied by music, singing, dancing, and sword fights.⁴¹ After the flags of al-Nabi Musa and al-Nabi Daud were returned, visitors gathered at the Haram al-Sharif (the complex that contains the Dome of the Rock and al-'Aqsa mosque) on Friday for '*zaffit al-'alimat*' (the procession of the flags), which took place after the midday prayer.⁴² The procession, which included the flags of the Prophet Muhammad and al-'Aqsa, made its way from the al-'Aqsa mosque to the Dome of the Rock (believed to be the site where the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven). Before it reached the Dome, the flags were placed under a tree, known as '*zaytunat al-Nabi*' (the Prophet's olive tree), which endowed them with blessings. It was believed that this tree acquired a sacred character during the festival because the spirit of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions visited it. The flags were then returned to their storage place in the Dome of the Rock.⁴³

The majority of visitors left Jerusalem on Friday in musical processions displaying the flags of the saints. When pilgrims returned to

each of their respective villages, they visited the shrine of the local saint, along with the other inhabitants. On their way back to their homes, they would stop at the shrines of each of the Sufi saints as they passed, greeting the saint with a recitation of the Fatiha and the performance of music.⁴⁴ As noted earlier, several Sufi festivals took place at the same time as the Nabi Musa celebrations, including the festival of al-Nabi Salih in Deir Ghassaneh, al-Nabi 'Anayr in Bani Harith, and al-Nabi Ayyub in Jura (also known as 'Arbi'at Ayub because it took place the Wednesday of the Nabi Musa festival).⁴⁵ Thus the festival of Nabi Musa was part of a network of Sufi communities and shrines in Palestine that brought together members of the urban elite, inhabitants of different cities, villagers, Bedouins, and merchants, all of whom gathered in the spring to venerate both local saints specific to each group of visitors, and prophets (Muhammad, Moses) revered by the broader Muslim community.

The Decline of Indigenous Performance Practices

As previously noted, the most important event that contributed to a significant decline in Sufi practices in Palestine, including the rituals of Nabi Musa, was the 1948 'catastrophe' and the disruptions in social and political life that followed the mass displacement of Palestinians. The massacre and forced expulsion of thousands of Palestinians by Zionist forces led directly to the loss of a wide array of cultural traditions and performance practices.⁴⁶ The reason that the Nakba was so detrimental to Sufi communities living in the territories annexed by Israel was that saints, and the rituals of veneration performed at their shrines, were highly localized. Thus, refugees who were displaced to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip did not participate in, and potentially were not even familiar with, rituals of saint veneration in other parts of Palestine.

Salim Tamari explains that the ritual practices performed at Sufi shrines were pivotal in the formation of each village's local collective identity. Thus the traditions particular to

local saints were 'non-transferable' because of their close association with specific geographies that were now out of reach.⁴⁷ Although the Nabi Musa celebrations brought together people from different parts of Palestine, the Israeli annexation of Jerusalem in 1967, and the eventual ban on Palestinians entering Jerusalem (with the exception of Palestinians with Israeli citizenship or holders of Jerusalem IDs), have had a similar disruptive effect on cultural practices tied to specific localities that have become inaccessible.

The second factor that contributed to the decline of Sufi practices was the establishment of the Islamic Brotherhood in 1935. In Palestine, the Islamic Brotherhood was primarily a social reform movement, until the development of its political offshoots al-Jihad and Hamas in the 1980s. Its aim was to encourage Palestinian society to return to a so-called 'original' Islam based on the Qur'ān and the Sunna (the traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad).⁴⁸ This rigid, and often literal, interpretation of religion was at times incompatible with popular Palestinian Sufi traditions. For example, the ritual of 'Arbi'at Ayyub (Ayyub's Wednesday), one of the few rituals which managed to survive the 'catastrophe', was condemned by the Islamic Brotherhood.⁴⁹ 'Arb'at Ayyub, a healing and fertility ritual, was first performed in the Gaza Strip by refugees in 1949. It included singing, dancing, and swimming in the sea. However, performances of the ritual ceased after 1982 due to the Islamic Brotherhood's continuous denouncement of the ritual as 'un-Islamic' and indecent to women (because it included swimming).⁵⁰

Although it is unfair to claim that Hamas (now the second largest Palestinian political party after Fatah) is directly hostile towards Sufi communities, the changes that occurred in Palestinian society as a result of their social and political organizing have indirectly contributed to the decline of Sufi practices by posing an alternative Islamic ideology. The latter stressed the importance of returning to the Qur'ān and Prophetic tradition, thus marginalizing Sufi practices which cannot easily be traced back to these 'original' sources, or those derived from less literal

interpretations.⁵¹ Since the 1980s, Hamas has provided essential social services such as schools, kindergartens, hospitals, along with a strong presence at mosques and university campuses, which significantly contributed to its spread as a social and political movement.⁵²

Another factor that aided the development and growth of Hamas was Israel's policies in the 1980s, which allowed the Islamic Brotherhood to continue its operations during the first Palestinian uprising while suppressing other political groups with the aim of weakening the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO).⁵³ Hamas also benefited greatly from the financial support provided by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, which helped extend its influence on Palestinians.⁵⁴

The signing of the Oslo accords in 1993, which was followed by the return of members of the PLO leadership to Palestine (many were refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, and Tunisia), led to profound changes in Palestinian society. The majority of the grass-roots movements, which were a pivotal part of the *intifada*, developed into professional NGOs. Such was the fate of many movements headed by leftists, who, suspicious of the newly formed Palestinian government under Fatah leadership, continued to exert influence on Palestinian society by providing essential services, such as healthcare, as well as cultural and education initiatives.⁵⁵ However, the NGO reliance on foreign funding led to the de-politicization of many of these former grass-roots movements. Foreign donors such as the European Union and USAID had their own political agendas. They discouraged political mobilization and encouraged NGOs to adopt the framework of development, and, as a result, their activities became increasingly irrelevant to the broader Palestinian community, which struggled with life under Israeli military occupation.⁵⁶

Theatre troupes were in no way exempt from the sociopolitical changes taking place in Palestinian society. Israel's annexation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967 was followed by the emergence of a politically engaged Palestinian theatre, which drew on indigenous traditions and European forms.

And even though plays were subject to Israeli censorship, Palestinians found innovative ways to address the political issues of their time.⁵⁷ It was common for the Israeli authorities to arrest actors during the 1970s in an effort to stop them from producing politically engaged plays. Such was the fate of actor Musafa al-Kurd, who was part of the Sunduq al-'Ajab (Box of Wonders) theatre troupe. It was in this context that the Balalin theatre troupe, known for the experimental play *'Atma (Darkness)*, was established in 1971.⁵⁸ Balalin's plays, which addressed both political and social issues, were performed in Palestinian dialect to make productions more accessible to locals. They also drew on the traditional figure of the *hakawati* (storyteller) to encourage direct engagement from their audiences.⁵⁹

The Hakawati Theatre, considered one of the first 'professional' Palestinian theatres, grew out of the Balalin theatre troupe. Established in 1977, its members drew on both indigenous and European sources for their productions. Local traditions that were important sources of inspiration for the troupe were the storyteller, after which the theatre was named, and popular folk stories from *A Thousand and One Nights*.⁶⁰ Al-Hakawati received a \$100,000 grant from the Ford Foundation in 1983, setting a precedent for other Palestinian troupes, many of which developed into theatre NGOs in the 1990s.⁶¹ Several actors who were part of the Hakawati Theatre went on to establish their own theatre NGOs such as Iman 'Aoun and Edward M'alim (Ashtar Theatre) and George Ibrahim (al-Kasaba Theatre).

Like other NGOs, theatre NGOs were, and continue to be, reliant on foreign donors who are often interested in promoting 'cultural exchange' with European and American artists. Hala Nassar addressed some of the problems that arise from dependence on foreign funding. She asserts that although foreign funding ensures the continuation of cultural activity in difficult financial conditions, it also affects the political and artistic content of plays.⁶² Rania Jawad has shown how the productions of the Ashtar and Freedom theatres, which, although not representative of the entirety of Palestinian cultural production,

are indicative of a prominent trend among theatre NGOs, are primarily created for western audiences with the aim of acquiring sympathy for the Palestinian cause.⁶³ This is not only dehumanizing for the Palestinian subjects whom such productions attempt to 'humanize', beginning with the assumption that foreigners consider Palestinians sub-human, but it is also alienating to local audiences because it frames important political issues in a manner that is irrelevant to their lived experience.⁶⁴

The fact that theatre NGOs primarily create plays for American and European audiences has meant that they were much less likely to experiment with indigenous forms, including those that were part of the Nabi Musa celebrations. There are many ways in which engagement with these practices can take on anti-colonial meanings in contemporary contexts. However, such meanings are closely tied to the local contexts from which they have emerged, making them much less accessible to a foreign audience. This does not mean the Palestinian theatre production is devoid of experimentation with indigenous forms but that experimentation with indigenous practices was much more likely to take place in non-institutionalized settings or short-term projects.

Take, for example, British artist and filmmaker Sarah Beddington's 2012 production of *The Logic of the Birds*, inspired by Farid al-Din 'Attar's epic Sufi poem of the same title. Beddington created the performance for the Birzeit University Museum's fourth Cities exhibition, which was dedicated to the city of Jericho. She took special interest in the Nabi Musa festival, which represented a spiritual pilgrimage through which Palestinians could reconnect with their land.

The performance included readings from Attar's poem recited by Palestinian actors (the birds) who journeyed through the West Bank's desert landscape in search of God, led by actors who carried a banner with the title of the production, inspired by the flags that were part of the Nabi Musa festival. The performance took place outside of Jericho in Area C, which is under the control of the Israeli military. For local audiences who had to go to

Area C to see the production, the performance had a clear political dimension by bringing a Palestinian audience to an area under threat of Israeli annexation. It evoked al-Nabi Musa not only through the use of the banner, but also in the sense of togetherness that it created among participants, including the audience, who had to walk through the desert landscape as they followed the bird-actors.

Other examples include the work of independent artist 'Adil Tartir (previously part of the Balalin troupe), who put on *Sunduq al-'Ajab* (Box of Wonders) performances, familiar to anyone who grew up in Ramallah in the 1990s. Bint Mbareh, a musician, performs and experiments with indigenous Sufi Palestinian songs, including those that used to be performed in the Nabi Musa festival. She has recently performed at Cafe Oto in London and the 2021 Shubbak festival.

It must be stressed that these performances differ from the appropriation of indigenous practices in institutionalized NGO settings. Various theatres have been known to incorporate storytelling and *dabka* into their productions.⁶⁵ The insights of anti-colonial writer Frantz Fanon help explain why the inclusion of *dabka* into a performance does not automatically make it revolutionary. Fanon emphasizes that the return to indigenous traditions is an important part of the process of decolonization. However, cultural resistance should not be reduced to the revival of such practices. In other words, experimentation with indigenous traditions does not necessarily constitute an act of resistance: the act takes on an anti-colonial meaning *through its relation with the present context*.⁶⁶ Cultural production, then, is not divorced from the political and economic structures in which it is embedded and which it either reinforces or resists. And, as Rania Jawad points out, there is a need for a more critical examination of what constitutes 'cultural resistance' in the context of Palestinian theatre. She asserts that even though many Palestinian plays depict Israeli violations of human rights, they are made for foreign audiences with the aim of 'humanizing' Palestinians, rather than challenging Israeli settler colonialism.⁶⁷

The Nabi Musa festival is rich in political symbols that can certainly take on anti-colonial meanings in the present context. The revival of the celebrations at the shrine located in Area C not only encourages Palestinian presence in an area under the threat of annexation, but it is also symbolic of the reclamation of territories under Israeli control. The fact that the festival used to be celebrated in Jerusalem, now inaccessible to the majority of Palestinians living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, is also highly politically symbolic.

The establishment of the Nabi Musa festival is often attributed to the Ayyubid sultan Saladin, who is believed to have created the festival in order to protect Jerusalem from crusaders, when Christian pilgrims visited the city during Easter. According to Halabi, the festival only began to be celebrated in Jerusalem in the mid-nineteenth century.⁶⁸ However, the myth has become an important part of the Palestinian collective imagination, and has assumed an important political dimension after the Israeli annexation of the city. The political and symbolic meanings associated with this Sufi festival are not lost on Palestinian government officials who have been advocating for a revival. However, the fact that the Palestinian Authority acquires Israeli permission to organize a mass gathering at the shrine gives it a very different meaning from, for example, Beddington's *The Logic of the Birds*, which poses a challenge to Israeli dominance rather than compliance with it.

Government-Sponsored Celebrations

In 2018, the Nabi Musa festival included political speeches from the Minister of Religious Endowments and members of the Higher Sufi Council. The event was explicitly framed as 'resistance' to Israel's annexation of large parts of Area C and Jerusalem. Particularly striking was the speech of one of the shaykhs from the Higher Sufi Council who stressed that Sufism was the 'tolerant version of Islam' and was part of the fight against 'terrorism'. This was followed by praise for President Mahmoud Abbas and criticism of Donald Trump's 'deal of the century'. Reference was also made to the Saladin myth and the 1920

Nabi Musa festival, which was transformed into an anti-Zionist protest.

The audience included Palestinian police and intelligence officers, who would not have been able to attend the event without coordinated Israeli permission. Nationalist songs about Jerusalem and a staged performance by a Sufi group (*madih*, songs in praise of the Prophet Muhammad) followed the speeches. The celebrations also included several of the indigenous practices that have historically been part of the Nabi Musa festival, including the entry into the shrine with a musical procession led by bearers of flags. Musicians played the drums, brass cymbals, and kettle-drums, which were accompanied by singing and dancing, with some Sufis entering into trance-like states. Other indigenous performance practices that have survived are the *dhikr* rituals that take place inside the shrine. They include the repetition of such phrases as 'There is no God but God', as well as *inshad* (the performance of religious hymns), which may be accompanied by musical instruments.

Certain elements have been 'modernized', such as the use of amplification in the *dhikr* ritual, as well as the staging of Sufi religious hymns (musicians and singers are usually not separate from the pilgrims), which followed the political speeches mentioned earlier. These speeches, and the government discourse surrounding Nabi Musa more generally, make it clear that their involvement in the festival has little to do with interest in indigenous Sufi traditions. Their aim is to present an image of themselves as being at the forefront of Palestinian resistance. The fact that their presence at the site is coordinated with Israeli authorities shows how little they are interested in engaging in acts of political defiance. They merely want to be perceived as doing so. In the Nabi Musa festival the Palestinian Authority, increasingly criticized for corruption and cooperation with Israel, saw an opportunity to give itself political legitimacy by drawing on popular myths and sentiments such as 'Saladin's fight against the invading crusaders' and the importance of Jerusalem as the 'sacred lands of the prophets'.

The speeches simultaneously sought to depoliticize Sufism by pitting it against the

'less tolerant' political Islamist groups. This was clearly also a critique of the Fatah-dominated government's main political rival, Hamas. However, it could also have been directed at smaller political Islamist parties critical of the apathy of the Palestinian Authority. The use of Sufism to combat the competing influence of Islamist political parties is not unique to Palestine. Both the Algerian and Moroccan governments have engaged in similar attempts to depoliticize Sufism.⁶⁹ In addition to being historically inaccurate (there are several Sufi orders which were an important part of anti-colonial resistance), such strategies can marginalize Sufi communities and practices, which may be seen as complicit with corrupt governments.

The 2019 Sufi Encounters Festival highlighted the emergence of yet another trend – the involvement of cultural NGOs in government-coordinated Sufi events. This festival was organized by the Kamanjati cultural NGO in collaboration with the Higher Sufi Council, the Ministry of Religious Endowments, the Ministry of Tourism, and the Ministry of Culture. Organizers of the festival also received financial support from the European Union and the United Nations. The aim of the four-day celebration at the Shrine of Nabi Musa was to revive Palestinian Sufi heritage. It included *dhikr* rituals, the performance of religious hymns, and discussions with shaykhs, musicians, and researchers. The festival's programme stressed the Islamic character of Jerusalem and blamed the decline of Sufi practices on the Israeli occupation and the geographic restrictions it imposes, spearheaded by the loss of access to Jerusalem.

Not limiting themselves to what organizers described as 'popular folklore' (the reference here is to indigenous performance traditions), the festival included Palestinian and international participants from Tanzania, Spain, Canada, Tunisia, Afghanistan, Italy, Turkey, and Morocco, who performed concerts at Nabi Musa's shrine. The irony of such an approach is that it fails to recognize the cultural specificity of the Sufi heritage it is attempting to revive, assuming that Sufism is a monolithic tradition and thus automatically transferable to new contexts. Sufi

Encounters is not the first festival to posit that local Sufi practices are part of a global tradition of sacred music. Notable examples are the Rouhaniyat Festival in Tunisia and the Fez Festival of Sacred Music in Morocco.⁷⁰ It is also no coincidence that both the Moroccan and Tunisian governments have supported the development of festivals that market Sufism as 'the tolerant version of Islam'. As noted earlier, this is part of a consecrated effort to depoliticize Sufism while also promoting tourism through the commodification and staging of local Sufi traditions.

The emergence of such a festival in Palestine is equally beneficial to the Palestinian Authority whose support for the revival of activity at Nabi Musa is represented as part of a broader effort to prevent Israel from annexing more territories and preserving Palestinian culture. The fact that the Palestinian Authority wanted to turn the newly renovated shrine of Nabi Musa into a hotel (previously these rooms were used to house pilgrims) shows how little it is committed to the revival of indigenous Sufi culture. Israel's annexation and incorporation of Palestinian land into the Ma'ale Adumim settlement, which continued to expand in 2018 and 2019, extending from Jerusalem to the Jordan Valley near Jericho, shows how ineffective the Palestinian Authority's so-called 'resistance' strategies have been. After the controversy surrounding the techno concert performed at the shrine, public pressure forced the Palestinian government to withdraw its plans to turn the shrine into a hotel. And although this was not the intention, Sama's concert has inadvertently led to a renewed debate about who should have control of these Sufi shrines.

The fate of Nabi Musa has yet to be decided, but the fact that several members of the Palestinian community have called on the government to give control of the shrine to the Sufi orders shows that there is genuine interest in reviving indigenous performance practices disrupted by colonialism. Such practices are an important part of Palestinian theatre history and give Sufis, theatre-makers, and members of the public an opportunity to explore their relationship to the past through the revival of performance forms that have the

potential to inspire renewed solidarity among members of the community, a deeper connection with the territories under threat of Israeli annexation, and new forms of artistic experimentation with indigenous Sufi culture.

Notes and References

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1. Kamil Jamil al-'Asali, *Mawsim al-Nabi Musa fi Falastin: Tarikh al-Mawsim wa al-Maqam* (Amman: Manshurat al-Jami'a al-Urduniya, 1990), p. 1–98.

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3. Ibid. See also Salim Tamari, *Mountain against the Sea: Essays on Palestinian Society and Culture* (London: University of California Press, 2009).

4. For theatre productions that were based on European forms in the first half of the twentieth century see Nasri al-Juzi, *Tarikh al-Masrah al-Falastini: 1918–1948* (Ramallah: Dar al-Ard lal-Nashir, 2011).

5. The majority of professional theatres in the West Bank have been dismissive of indigenous forms, with the exception of *dabka* (Palestinian folk dance) and *hakawati* (storytelling). See Reuven Snir, 'The Palestinian *al-Hakawati* Theatre: A Brief History', *Arab Studies Journal*, VI, No. 2 (1998), p. 57–71; and Hala Nassar, 'Stories from Under Occupation: Performing the Palestinian Experience', *Theatre Journal*, LVIII, No. 1 (2006), p. 15–37.

6. Awad Halabi, 'The Transformation of the Prophet Moses Festival in Late Ottoman Jerusalem (1850–1917): From Traditional Pilgrimage to Civil Ritual', *Journal of Ritual Studies*, XXXII, No. 2 (2018), p. 1–15.

7. Ibid.

8. Awad Halabi, 'Nabi Musa Under British-Ruled Palestine', *International Institute for the Study of the Muslim World*, X, No. 2 (2002), p. 27.

9. Al-'Asali, *Mawsim al-Nabi Musa*, p. 126–33.

10. Halabi, 'Nabi Musa Under British-Ruled Palestine', p. 27.

11. Al-'Asali, *Mawsim al-Nabi Musa*, p. 126–33.

12. Ibid.

13. Amnon Cohen, 'Al-Nabi Musa: An Ottoman Festival (*mawsim*) Resurrected?', in *Mamluks and Ottomans: Studies in Honour of Michael Winter*, ed. David J. Wasserstein and Ami Ayalon (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 34–41 (p. 41).

14. Al-'Asali, *Mawsim al-Nabi Musa*, p. 132.

15. When the Palestinian Authority was established in 1993, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were divided into areas A, B, and C, where Area A was under nominal control of the Palestinian Authority, Area B under joint Israeli and Palestinian control, and Area C under Israeli control. Area C, including Jerusalem, comprises over 61 per cent of the West Bank, while Area A makes up approximately 18 per cent, and Area B 21 per cent of the West Bank. However, in practice all areas are subject to Israeli military rule.

16. See Tewfik Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries* (Jerusalem: Ariel Publishing House, 1927), p. 193–217; *The Storyteller of Jerusalem: The Life and Times of Wasif Jawhariyyeh, 1904–1948*, ed. Salim Tamari and

Issam Nassar, trans. Nada Elzeer (Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2014), p. 46–60.

17. Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints*, p. 193–217.

18. Ibid., p. 86–219.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. For example, in the 1928 and 1935 celebrations. See al-'Asali, *Mawsim al-Nabi Musa*, p. 100–32.

22. Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints*, p. 193–217. See also Omar Saleh al-Barghouti, *Al-Marahil* (Beirut: al-Mu'asasa al-'Arabiya, 2001), p. 52–6.

23. Ibid. For an example of these songs see al-'Asali, *Mawsim al-Nabi Musa*, p. 185–91.

24. Ibid. (These included the celebrations of 1935 and 1938.)

25. Ibid. See also Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints*, p. 193–217.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. For a transcription of this rhythm, see *ibid.*, p. 201.

29. Ibid. The Prophet Moses is known as the 'interlocutor of God' because God spoke directly to him (see Qur'an 20: 9–17).

30. Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints*, p. 201.

31. Ibid.

32. These puppets were usually made of leather.

33. *The Storyteller of Jerusalem*, ed. Salim Tamari and Issam Nassar, p. 59–64.

34. Ibid. See also al-Barghouti, *Al-Marahil*, p. 92–3; and Tamari, *Mountain against the Sea*, p. 84.

35. Ibid. See also Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries*, p. 208 and al-'Asali, *Mawsim al-Nabi Musa*, p. 115.

36. See al-'Asali, *Mawsim al-Nabi Musa*; al-Barghouti, *Al-Marahil*; *The Storyteller of Jerusalem*, ed. Salim Tamari and Issam Nassar.

37. Cristiana Baldazzi, 'Time Off: Entertainment, Games, and Pastimes in Palestine between the End of the Ottoman Empire and the British Mandate', *Oriente Moderno*, XCV, No. 1/2 (2015), p. 173–92 (p. 179).

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39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Frederick de Jong, 'The Sufi Orders in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Palestine', *Studia Islamica*, LVIII (1983), p. 149–81.

47. Tamari, *Mountain against the Sea*, p. 33.

48. Ziad Abu-Amr, ' Hamas: A Historical and Political Background', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, XXII, No. 4 (Summer 1993), p. 5–19; Itzhack Weismann, 'A Perverted Balance: Modern Salafism between Reform and Jihad', *Die Welt des Islams: International Journal for the Study of Modern Islam*, LVII, No. 1 (2017), p. 33–66.

49. Salim Tamari explains that the reason why this ritual continued to be performed after 1948 was because the sea was a central part of the ritual, to which refugees in the Gaza Strip continued to have access (*Mountain against the Sea*, p. 33).

50. Ibid.

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52. Glenn E. Robinson, 'Hamas as a Social Movement', in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 117–27. See also see Ziad Abu-Amr, 'Hamas', p. 33–66.

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57. Reuven Snir, 'The Emergence of Palestinian Professional Theatre after 1967: al-Balalin's Self Referential Play *al-'Atma* (*The Darkness*)', *Theatre Survey*, XLVI, No. 1 (2005), p. 5–29.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid.

60. Reuven Snir, 'The Palestinian *al-Hakawati* Theatre: A Brief History', *Arab Studies Journal*, VI–VII, No. 2 (1998), p. 57–71.

61. The discussion here is limited to theatres in the West Bank.

62. Nassar, 'Stories from Under the Occupation', p. 37.

63. Rania Jawad, 'Aren't We Human? Normalizing Palestinian Performances', *Arab Studies Journal*, XXII, No. 1 (2014), p. 28–45.

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