

Songs of Pain and Pride

Burj el-Barajneh Dispatch

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After making my way through the rubble and squalor of the overcrowded refugee camp near Beirut's International Airport, I arrived half an hour late for my appointment with Umm Muhammad, a local living repository of Palestinian folk song traditions.

Umm Muhammad, or as she pronounced her name in the northern Palestinian dialect, "Im Imhimmad," warmly welcomed me into her spotless, tiny apartment. It was *'Id al-Fitr* (the feast concluding Ramadan), and the air was spiced with the scents of Arabic coffee and freshly baked date cakes. Umm Muhammad led me into a cozy room, where we began our interview. At first I had trouble hearing her over the squawking of a television blaring Arabic "video clip" pop songs, dubbed Mexican soap operas and annoying foreign advertisements.

Umm Muhammad looked askance at my tape recorder as she began recounting Palestinian musical traditions. When I asked her to sing a song from Palestine, the floodgates opened. "I want to sing you some *'ataaba*," she said. *'Ataaba* is a form of improvised colloquial sung poetry that has existed for centuries in Greater Syria and Mesopotamia. "Which theme of *'ataaba* would you like to sing, mother?" I asked. "*Furaqiyyat*, my girl." She referred to a genre of songs that convey nostalgia and sorrow over the loss of loved ones.

Umm Muhammad's voice was very strong for a woman in her late seventies; it expressed a depth of passion that no formal music training could have provided. The earnest huskiness of her voice brought to life the land and the people about which she sang. Clearly, I was in the presence of a fine exponent of musical tradition.

During intermissions between songs, Umm Muhammad discussed politics openly. "They sold us for pennies," she complained, referring to Palestinian and Arab leaders. When I asked her to be careful of what she said on tape, for her safety, she defiantly retorted: "'Ala teezi [my ass]! Let them kill me if they wish! I fear no one!"

When questioned about the fate of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Umm Muhammad's answer conveyed a deep and bitter weariness. "No one wants to know. They might as well put us all in one huge container and get rid of us with one shove, instead of this slow death." The "container" analogy brought to mind horrific images of European Jews during the 1930s and 1940s. No sooner had I thought this, than she beat me to it by adding, "I lost my husband and a son in two wars. Why did they make us pay the price for World War II?"

She showed no self-pity, however, only surprise and puzzlement. She was ready to forget the misery of the 350,000 or so Palestinian refugees in Lebanon for the sake of one stone-throwing youth in the West Bank. "Forget about the Palestinians here in

Lebanon; our fate was sealed long ago. But I watch these brave young men on television and I pray for them.”

I asked Umm Muhammad about the “right of return,” and she told me that she had actually “returned” once to her birthplace, Acre (*‘Akka*, in Arabic). “I went back to ‘Akka two years ago,” she recounted. “A relative of mine got a permit for me to visit. Would you believe it?! I needed a permit to visit my own homeland!” Curious, yet apprehensive, I asked her how she found it. Umm Muhammad’s eyes sparked. “I left my cousins young, and now they are old. Women my age use crutches over there, not like your Umm Muhammad here! I even managed to do the sword dance at a wedding in ‘Akka!”

“Did you kill anyone with your sword?” I inquired cheekily. “Kill anyone? Of course not! The dancing area in the village was so big, I couldn’t have reached anyone with my sword even if I had wanted to. I danced to a famous song.” I asked what song and she grabbed the tape recorder and launched into a well-known song style that accompanies a traditional dance called *sahjeh*. This dance features two lines of men standing opposite each other (called *sahhaajeh*), clapping their tilted hands in unison towards the floor. Sometimes, a woman, or a group of women, dances between the lines of men, holding a sword or a dagger. The main song is usually performed by at least one lead singer (*Hadda’* or *Hadi*). The rest of the participants act as chorus, singing a refrain: “*Ya halali ya mali... Ya halali ha mali*,” meaning “what I have is mine by right.”

As I said goodbye to Umm Muhammad and her family, the call to afternoon prayer (*adhaan*) wafted over the confined space of the camp, blending harmoniously in my ears with the last, stirring verse that Umm Muhammad had sung. It made me realize that we Palestinians had indeed once lived on our land. I also realized, as I left the entrance of the dismal camp, that we had not safeguarded that land, that *halal*.

People like Umm Muhammad make me believe in the possibility of regaining our *halal*.

“*Ya halali ya mali... Ya halali ya mali...*”

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Middle East Report Spring 1999

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