

**"Nationalising and Denationalising the Sacred:
Shrines and Shifting Identities in the Israeli–Occupied Territories"**

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In this article I present a reading of Christian and Muslim Palestinian uses of two West Bank Christian holy places. The first is the Greek Orthodox monastery of Mar Elyas (the Prophet Elijah) located on the Hebron Road between Bethlehem and Jerusalem; the second is the municipal shrine of Bîr es–Sayideh ('The Well of the Lady') in Beit Sahour, a mile to the east of Bethlehem. I elucidate how Palestinians of different sectarian affiliations engage the complicated processes of interpreting the significance of a holy place and defining their relationship to it. The investigation of the shrine activities around Mar Elyas on the prophet's feast day will show that the place has very different meanings to the various groups of people who attend the feast, and will set out how the members of these groups interpret the site and their engagement with it. This multivocality of place raises the issue of the politics involved in 'fixing' its meaning; moving both in space and time to Beit Sahour during the intifada, I will discuss how the Christians and Muslims who live in the town elaborated a means of maintaining their religious relationship with a holy place they see as a central feature of their town's identity without succumbing to the pressure, imposed upon them by religious hierarchies, to fix the identity of that place (and of themselves as users of the place) in sectarian terms. In my postscript I will then attempt to bring the status of both sites up to date, showing how subsequent social and political transformations have impacted upon the holy sites.

The analyses presented here raise the issue of the central role members' perceptions of 'antagonisms' mobilised against them play in constituting communities (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 93–148). During my initial fieldwork (made up of a number of extended visits between 1983 and 1990)¹, Muslim and Christian Beit Sahourans were in the process of defining the activities of both religious institutions and the State of Israel as equally threatening to what they perceived as their interests. In response to this perception, Beit Sahourans elaborated a secular nationalist communal identity which allowed them to reject communalism² and unite against and resist the external forces of both 'foreign' religious institutions and the 'colonial settler state'. This identity was, however, neither inevitable nor fixed and remains hegemonic only as long as it appears to offer a viable solution to the dilemmas of the peoples it constitutes as an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991: pp. 5–7). The elements which make up communal identity – not only the persons brought together within the definition but as well the interests which are seen to join them, the strategies perceived as best serving those interests and the antagonisms believed to beset them – are labile, and redefinitions of any of these can lead to a shifting of the entire field of identity making enemies of former neighbours and allies of previous antagonists.

Robert Hertz's until recently disregarded³ "St. Besse: a study of an Alpine cult", first published in 1913, raises the still salient issue of the way a single religious site is interpreted in very different ways by discrete communities which engage in commemorative festivities at it (Hertz 1983). Hertz stressed that the holy place speaks for and of a community and that therefore the meaning of such a site has to be analysed not in terms of the place itself but in relation to the social practices of the communities which revere it and the identities those activities generate.

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper published in *Man: the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* XXVIII:3. Sept. 1993. pp. 431-460. I am grateful to May Davie and *Chronos* for asking me to prepare it for publication in Beirut. The postscript with which it closes reflects on transformations witnessed on subsequent visits to the West Bank in 1993, 1994, 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2003.

² Louis Dumont, in an important article setting out the genealogies of nationalism and communalism, defines the latter as 'that ideology which emphasizes as the social, political, and economic unit the group of adherents of each religion, and emphasizes the distinction, even the antagonism, between such groups' (Dumont 1970: 89).

³ Jeremy MacClancy, in 1994, wrote up subsequent fieldwork to the shrine of St. Besse in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (MacClancy 1994).

Following the trajectory mapped by Hertz, I explore the meaning of two Palestinian holy places in the light of the models of community brought to them by their worshippers. In doing so I consider the wider analytic domain of identity and the situations in which it is constituted.

'Identity', like 'ethnicity', became a central issue in anthropological inquiry in the wake of Frederik Barth's programmatic assertion that we need to attend 'to problems of boundary maintenance' and 'ask ourselves what is needed to make ethnic distinctions *emerge* in an area' (Barth 1969: 17). Studies of ethnic and national identities (e. g. Madan 1972; Loizos 1981; Kapferer 1988; and McDonald 1989) have emphasised the role played by the 'other' who lies beyond those boundaries in defining the identity of the 'self' which lies within. In this paper I develop that work in line with Laclau and Mouffe's theory of 'antagonism' (1985)⁴ in order to explore the processes through which persons come to formulate identities for themselves and their communities in periods of radical social conflict.

In the situation I described in 1993, when the original paper was written, Palestinians were engaged (as they are now) in a national liberation struggle. Palestinians under Israeli occupation were constructing new forms of community and affiliation appropriate to confrontation with an enemy they knew to be dedicated to their extirpation. Significant similarities exist here between the creation of a 'Palestinian' entity in the face of Israeli antagonism and the unification of Nilotic tribes in the southern Sudan by prophets in the context of substantial foreign aggression (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 184-91; also Lienhardt 1961). Evans-Pritchard noted there that the presence of prophets in Nuer society was a 'recent development' (1940: 186) and attributed

the strong tendency towards federation between adjacent tribes...to the new Arab-European menace. Opposition between Nuer and their neighbours had always been sectional. They were now confronted by a more formidable and a common enemy (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 189).

Lienhardt, in discussing the origins of the divinities who possessed various Dinka prophets, suggested that these divinities had recently come from outside the domain of the Dinka; the free divinity Deng kur

was the Nuer prophet Ngungdeng, father of Gwek who rallied the Nuer against the British' (1961: 95) and other Western Dinka prophet-inspiring divinities were believed by the Dinka to have entered Dinkaland from areas in which the Mahdi, an Arab prophet who waged holy war against the British, had operated (1961: 72 and 164-5).

Implicit in both texts is the important recognition that novel forms of mobilization and affiliation were generated by confrontation with a powerful external antagonist. Lienhardt's recognition that the cultural borders between the Dinka and surrounding 'peoples' can be blurred by shared antagonisms suggests that those borders, and the identities constituted within them, were far from fixed. Nonetheless Evans-Pritchard and, to a lesser degree, Lienhardt tended in their ethnographies to present events as though they had occurred in a stable ethnographic present. Both thus understated the impact on Nuer and Dinka societies of the British occupation of the Sudan (see Geertz 1988 and Clifford 1988: 32).

In consequence, the segmentary model bequeathed to anthropological theory by these works stressed the systematicity of pre-modern societies at the expense of attending to the processes of transformation imposed upon such 'systems' by the contingencies of conflict and historical change. In focussing on the historical context of the cultural transformations effected in contemporary Palestinian society I demonstrate that segmentary opposition can be a useful model

⁴ 'in the case of antagonism ... the presence of the "Other" prevents me from being totally myself. ... (it is because a peasant cannot be a peasant that an antagonism exists with the landowner who is expelling him from his land). Insofar as there is antagonism, I cannot be a full presence for myself' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 125).

for understanding political mobilization in modern as well as in pre-modern societies. However, in using this model I shift emphasis from the systematic workings of the internal structures of society to the role of the outside enemy in forcing reformulation of the terrain 'inside'. In so doing I suggest that the inside is neither stable nor systematic but is itself a response to the assault on its inhabitants from outside. By considering changes in the meanings of holy places and traditions related to them in contemporary Palestinian society I will demonstrate how holy sites serve as monuments to imaginings of community and how such monuments prove to be as labile as are those communities themselves.

The Shrine of Mar Elyas

In Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine (1927), the Palestinian folklorist Taufik Canaan not only details how Palestinian Muslims in the early part of this century inscribed central moments of their individual and collective lives on the Palestinian landscape but also notes that 'the various ideas described in the following pages are common to both Mohammedans and Christians among the Palestinian peasantry; where the two groups differ the differences are only superficial' (Canaan 1927: vi). This assertion found validation in the eighties and nineties in the practices of villagers and townspeople from the region of Bethlehem at, to take one of several local examples, the Greek Orthodox monastery of Mar Elyas.

On the day preceding the saint's day⁵ (), local Muslims accompanied Christians to Mar Elyas, a holy place on the peripheries of Bethlehem district, both to visit the monastic chapel and to join friends, family and neighbours on the grounds of the nearly inoperative monastery. Outside the sixth century building the area was bright with small groups of men, women and children picnicking under the olive trees and listening to the music of ouds (Arab lutes) and transistor radios. In front of the church men, women and children massed, waiting to enter the shrine. Some of these carried loaves of bread cooked with mastic (and stamped with an image of the Prophet Elijah), bottles of oil, and candles (some of which were three inches thick and as tall as the bearer). Once inside the local people would struggle through the priests and monks performing the divine offices specific to the coming feast day⁶ to the front of the church where those bearing gifts would light candles, leave olive oil before the icons, and hand their loaves to a novice monk who in turn would distribute bits of sanctified bread – some of which people would eat on the spot while the rest would be saved to be given away later to family and neighbours outside and at home. The donors then would join the others who had gone directly to an icon of St. George to wait their turns to place a chain attached to the wall of the church around their necks, to kiss it three times, and to step through it. While this traffic was frenetically (and noisily) flowing, the monks of the Greek Orthodox Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre⁷ were struggling to amplify the Holy Word sufficiently to have it heard over the babble of thronging Palestinians and the perpetual clanking of the miraculous chain.

This cacophony of groups, contending within the same restricted space to perform actions deemed appropriate to the place and time, was echoed in the interpretations they imposed upon those actions. One priest explained to me that the chain had been found in a cave beneath the

⁵ 2 August by the Julian calendar, which continues to be used in the Holy Land because of the *status quo* (see note 12 below); the feast is celebrated elsewhere on the 20th of July

⁶ Although the saint's day in the Greek calendar is nominally on one day, it stretches over two days because of the saint-specific vespers of the preceding day and the saint-specific liturgy of the saint's day itself. The popular ceremonies, with some variations which will be described below, cover these two days but tend to concentrate on the day before the feast. This description is based on my observations of the first and second of August 1984.

⁷ The Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre, the ruling body of the Greek Orthodox Church in Israel and the Israeli Occupied Territories, is made up for the most part of Greek and Cypriot monks, and resides in the Patriarchate of the Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem. It has full control over the activities of the church in the region (as well as in Sinai and Jordan) which include not only liturgical and pastoral activities but also maintenance of the considerable properties it owns.

monastery and that, since the cave, like the monastery, is dedicated to Elyas and believed to be the spot where the Old Testament prophet fled from the persecution of Jezebel (1Kings 19), local people see the chain as one which had bound the saint⁸. According to an Orthodox priest I interviewed, their fervent attention to the chain is an expression of their deep devotion to the prophet:

those who enchain themselves with it – around the neck and around the waist – bind themselves to the saint and make themselves one with him. All the sacrifices, like the oil for the lamps, the bread, the candles, express this self-dedication. Elyas is a mediator between God and the people, and they can talk to him when they can't talk directly to God.

The priest explained, however, that this devotion, while spiritually correct, is actually misguided; the chain had bound Christians during Muslim persecutions and is associated with the monastery because in the past local Christians had hidden from their oppressors in the caves beneath it.

The priest's story was echoed in the stories of some of the lay persons. George Hadweh, a leader in the Greek Orthodox Boy Scout troop which comes from the nearby town of Beit Jala to help in the ceremonies, explained to me that Elyas was a great protector of the Christians during their persecutions while leading me inside to show me an icon of Elijah killing the prophets of Baal. This he told me, with a blithe disregard for scriptural chronology, shows Elyas slaughtering the Jews and Muslims who persecuted the Christians. The chain, Hadweh said, is an ancient chain found in a cave beneath the monastery which 'may have bound Elyas or... may have bound persecuted Christians'. By revering the chain people call on Elyas to deliver them from their afflictions just as God delivered Elyas from his and Elyas delivered the Christians from theirs. The chain, Hadweh added, is particularly useful for alleviating insanity.

Other local people, including two Muslim women who had just stepped through the chain, told me that it is 'linked' to another at the Greek Orthodox shrine of 'Khadr (St. George) in the nearby Muslim village of the same name. Canaan wrote that the chain at 'Khadr was used specifically to bind, and thereby cure, the mad (Canaan 1927: 79–80). Persons approaching the Mar Elyas chain did not, however, restrict the efficacy of that chain to curing insanity but asserted that it as well alleviated a number of other afflictions: illness, bad luck, sinfulness, and even the evil eye. If the Mar Elyas chain ever had the specific function Canaan attributes the chain at 'Khadr, that function had subsequently become more general; people using it claimed they did so because it 'gives good fortune'. While the 'Khadr chain may be 'linked' to the one at Mar Elyas because Mar Elyas is dedicated both to St. George and to Elijah (icons of St. George and Elijah flank the iconostasis), this was never proffered as an explanation. People stressed only the efficacy of the chains; what they had in common was that each served to turn bad fortune to good.

The links between the chain and the saint's day, the saint and even the place had begun to seem rather tenuous, and several constellations of conflicting interpretations floated around the crowded interior of the small chapel. The priests and monks were involved through their ceremonies in articulating the small chapel within a nearly empty monastery into a network of religious institutions and practices they believed to be both universal and eternal. The offices of the day preceding the saint's day, like the liturgies on the saint's day itself, rehearsed the association of the Prophet Elijah with the sacred history of the Church, and, by so doing, legitimated in the eyes of God and of the worldwide Greek Orthodox community the officiants' presence and the existence of the small outpost of orthodoxy. The chain stood for them as both a relic and an emblem of the monastery's place in the general Orthodox struggle to survive and

⁸ There is no sign in the Bible, Old Testament or New, of Elyas (the Prophet Elijah) having been enchained. The use of 'Elyas' for 'Elijah' is interesting as a moment in the diacritical process whereby Christians mark themselves off as other than Jews; 'Elyas' is the New Testament form of 'Elijah' and yet it is used by both priests and lay-persons to refer to biblical events prior to the period rendered by the New Testament.

overcome disbelief and unbelievers. To the priest with whom I spoke the spectacle of the local population binding itself within the church was an emblem of his and his colleagues' mission to promote amongst the general population the same obedience to God and his agents that bound them to their service.

In Hadweh's interpretation Elyas did not have the 'transparency' attributed to him by the priest; the saint, for Hadweh, was a power in himself rather than an agent of God or a transmission line to him⁹. One does not rally around Elyas in order to display one's allegiance to the god of Elyas but because the prophet protects those who are devoted to him against whatever forces threaten them, be those religious or secular. Those forces were described as having operated in the past under the banners of Judaism and Islam. However at the time of my research they were seen not as mobilized along denominational lines but instead as aligned more generally against the possibility for local people to live a decent, satisfying life. The chain both reinvoked and signified the persecutions suffered by Elyas's community at the hands of its enemies and asserted that the Prophet Elyas would overcome those who oppress his dependents. It was not, in 1984, at any point articulated that Elyas would protect local Palestinians against the forces of a Jewish state.

Hadweh's description of the icon as a portrayal of the prophet in ancient times destroying the Jewish and Muslim enemies of the Christians asserted a communalist reading of antagonism and identity in accordance with the traditions he had imbibed during his upbringing within a Christian community and his education in a Christian (Lutheran) school. Nonetheless, Palestinian Orthodox communities in the latter half of the twentieth century had come to see the interests of the Greeks of the Orthodox church as inimical to their own, in part because of the legacy of antagonism to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate granted them by the Arab Orthodox Movement¹⁰. As a result, Hadweh's description of the contemporary Christian community excluded the priesthood from that community, and defined the Greek Christians as enemies of the community Elyas protects. For Hadweh, the priests who claimed to be the servants of the prophet and of his God were, in fact, the enemies of those who appeal to the saint for protection. Hadweh and I discussed a Greek Orthodox man who, thirty years earlier, had come to Jerusalem from Athens on pilgrimage and settled there to work for the Church. The previous evening this resident pilgrim had told me that 'religion is more important than the land; I do not care for Palestine, I am a resident of the holy land'. Hadweh's response to this statement was

people like this are a problem. The Greek church – like the Muslim Brotherhood [the Muslim Brothers of Palestine] – insists on considering everything in terms of religion. Palestinian Christians are allowed no place in the Church. The condition of being a

⁹ A young Syrian Orthodox woman, who had walked from Bethlehem to Mar Elyas (about 5 kilometres) with two co-religionists and a Muslim, told me that she had asked a favour of the saint and had promised to walk from Bethlehem to Mar Elyas and back in return. I asked: 'you have walked here to ask a favour of God?' and she rapidly and firmly corrected me, saying 'No, of St Elyas'. Canaan, discussing Palestinian Muslims, confirms this: 'According to Palestinian Arabic belief God is the Almighty One. ... But the saints are preferred. They are easier of access and stand nearer to men as they all were once human beings. At the same time they know human needs, ailments and weaknesses very well. Therefore the belief in them and the fear of them has spread so widely among the Palestinians that gradually they have taken the place of God' (Canaan 1927: 132). Salim Tamari, in a recent article on Canaan, refers to this supplantation of the divine function by the local saints as a 'dethronement of God' (Tamari 2004: 36).

¹⁰ One of the consequences of the pre-revolutionary Russian Orthodox church's attempts to extend its influence in Ottoman Palestine was its systematic fomentation of dissatisfaction within Greek Orthodox Palestinian communities about the Greek church's failure to provide locals with pastoral or social services (Hopwood 1969). This led to the lay creation of the Arab Orthodox Movement, an organization dedicated to wresting control of the church and its substantial properties from what it termed a 'foreign' priesthood. After the Russian church's intervention was abruptly ended by the revolution, the Movement was strongly supported by the British mandate government (Bertram & Young 1926) and - after the British withdrawal of 1948 - by the Jordanian government which appropriated the West Bank and Jerusalem (Hilal 1992). After the Israeli government took control of the West Bank in 1967, the Israeli state came to work closely with the Greek church (Nachmani 1987) in an attempt to subvert the Greek government's opposition to the Israeli occupation. As a result, the Movement became in large part quiescent since the church-state alliance made it evident to many Arab Orthodox activists that any gains that might be made by the Christian Palestinians would only be made after the Israeli occupation was ended (interview with Arab Orthodox Movement member, Bethlehem, March 1987). Nonetheless, one of the outstanding legacies of the Movement is the awareness among Christian Palestinians that the interests of the hierarchy of the Orthodox church are foreign and antagonistic to their own. The subsequent sale of Mar Elyas lands to the Israeli state, as well as countless parallel cases, has only served to strengthen the antagonism between the Orthodox patriarchate and Palestinians of all communities.

[Palestinian] priest is that one must marry so that one cannot move up the hierarchy¹¹. It feels like a foreign occupation. A couple of years ago the scouts here beat up a priest.

Hadweh's identification of himself as a 'Palestinian Christian', rather than as an Orthodox Christian, indicated a formulation of identity tying him more closely to other Christians (regardless of denomination) among whom he lived than to co-religionists who were not Palestinian. After telling of the Patriarchate rules excluding Orthodox Christians from significant participation in the church, he discussed how the interests of the 'foreign' churches prevented local Christians from asserting their identities as Christians. The firman of the status quo¹² was seen by Hadweh and other indigenous Christians with whom I spoke as a denial to them of Christian – as opposed to Greek, Armenian, Latin, etc. – identity. Hadweh told me

the most evil thing here is that we do not have one Christmas. All over the world Christmas is the twenty fifth except here – it is a shame for the Palestinians. We have tried to fight it by making the feast on one day, but they would not agree because of the question of who would go into the church first.

The communalism evident in Hadweh's description of the icon of Elijah and the prophets of Baal shadowed an imagined community bringing together all Christians living in his homeland in opposition to Jews and Muslims, but that sensed community was not acknowledged by the church to which he owed formal allegiance. Furthermore, the activities of the foreigners who controlled that church served not only to deny fellow Orthodox Palestinians full membership of the church but also forbade expression of the wider Christian community to which Hadweh saw himself belonging. Thus, for Hadweh, there was a substantial conflict between his religion, which provided him with supernatural protectors and granted him an identity as part of a particular people (Christian Palestinians) living in a particular land (Palestine), and that of the priests and monks dominating that religion's institutions, who saw him, his people and his people's lives as largely extraneous to their interests as Greeks in a Greek Orthodox holy land. His participation in a festival on the territory and under the legislation of the Greek Orthodox clergy therefore brought him onto contested ground. This contest was manifest in a discourse which both stressed his identity as a Christian dependent on the succour of Christian saints and distinguished between his Palestinian Christianity and the priests' and monks' Greek Christianity.

Hadweh was not, however, led by this either to pull back from the religion or to withdraw from the festivities. The religion and the feast of Mar Elyas were important to him; he wore a cross around his neck which hung prominently outside his shirt and over his boy scout scarf, he frequently went to church and prayed to its tutelary saints, and he attended the feast with his fellow boy scouts – many of whom were Catholic – to protect the festivities from those who might, in the name of politics, deny his people the practice of their religion: 'we watch out for trouble; some nationalists may try to disrupt things because they say there is no place for celebration under occupation'. Just as Hadweh saw the church leaders failing to represent the Christian Palestinians by refusing to recognise any aspect of their experiences which could not be

¹¹ Official Patriarchate policy at the time was that one had to be a Greek or Cypriot national to be a member of the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre (soon after it became evident, as American and Australian monks began to appear in the monasteries, that this had changed, but what remained constant was that no Palestinians were allowed entry). Christian Palestinian men are allowed to become priests in the church but are forced, as a precondition of ordination, to marry. This precludes them from becoming monks and thereby makes it impossible for them to join the Brotherhood. This policy had been overturned by the British during the Mandate Period and, as a consequence, two Palestinians had been forced upon the Brotherhood. By 1984 these had long since died of old age, Israeli support of the church had ensured that the old exclusionary policy had been reinstated, and no Palestinians had joined the Brotherhood to replace them.

¹² The status quo agreements, finalized by an Ottoman firman, legislate over the conflicting claims of the various churches to rights and privileges within the holy places. The firman, adopted in turn by the British, the Jordanians and the Israelis, establishes the reigning government as perpetuator of the status quo as it was fixed in 1852. It is generally held by the ruling powers that withdrawal by the government from its role could lead to an open-ended struggle between the churches over which would control the shrines.

interpreted in terms of the interests of their church, so too he believed that nationalists would disallow the full expression of local Christian identities by proscribing religious ceremonials and insisting that all manifestations must be explicitly and exclusively nationalist¹³. Hadweh's identity as a Christian and a Palestinian located him, then, between mutually exclusive discourses on identity; that of the foreign church which, in providing a religion, denied national identity and that of the nationalists who, in working to realize a political identity, allowed no room for the expression of religious identity.

For those, Christian and Muslim, who linked the Mar Elyas chain with the chain at the monastery of 'Khadr and thus indirectly with St. George, the association of the miraculous chain, the feast, the monastery, the Prophet Elyas and the Greek Orthodox church appeared largely contingent. Stories told by Christian and Muslims attending the feast suggested that at Mar Elyas it was the wonder-working artifact which was important. There was no discussion of why the chain was empowered or whose power it mediated; pilgrims simply referred to the chain as a source of health, good luck, sanity and freedom from the evil eye. The people who ritualistically handled the chain were at the monastery not because the day was holy to Elyas or because the day was holy at all. Rather, the chain was used throughout the year whenever there was access to it; the feast day was special because on that day the church – which at the time did not have a resident monk – was open.

Many persons, in fact, claimed that they came to the feast to be with their 'neighbours' rather than to revere the chain or Elyas. Such assertions, which suggested that to some even the devotions to the chain were a consequence rather than a cause of the gathering, were reiterated outside the church where people's attentions flowed from group to group rather than being channelled towards the miraculous or the sacred by the dynamics inside the chapel. In the crowded olive groves outside the monastery the strands of motives and meanings were woven into a tapestry of a multi-denominational community united by its perception of itself as a community with shared traditions and practices. The Muslim who had accompanied the Syrian Orthodox young woman referred to in note nine told me that 'the religious difference doesn't matter, we all come. It is for friendship and community as much as for religion.' Persons circulated from small group to small group, sharing food, drink and gossip. Some of these people told me they did not go in the church at all but simply came on his day, as they always had, to be with their neighbours. One man said 'we all come to be together around the saint's place'.

There was considerable heterogeneity within this apparent unity; some attended the site just to picnic, others to take a blessing from the chain, others (Muslim and Christian) to redeem promises and ask blessings of St. George and of the Prophet Elyas, and some to visit, and sacrifice to, the Prophet. Many persons seemed to attend to carry out more than one of these activities. Each person's attested motives, and the identities that devolved from those motives, shifted as the person moved from context to context. Hadweh, who stressed his Christian identity while serving both as guide to a foreign anthropologist within the church and as guardian of the festivities in the company of his fellow scouts, became just another member of the mixed community which constituted itself around the monastery when he joined Muslim friends and neighbours in the small groups scattered around the olive groves.

¹³ Salim Tamari points out that the Palestinian left, which then dominated political activism along the Ramallah-Jerusalem-Bethlehem axis, maintained until the early 1990s 'a venerable tradition of divorcing the political from the cultural and social spheres' (1992: 17-18). This meant that political activists defined domains in which public expressions of identity were made (such as religious festivals) in purely political (i.e. national) terms. Whether or not this was actually the case, what is significant is that it was defined as such in Halweh's discourse.

The festivities at Mar Elyas, then, seemed to serve as a 'floating signifier'¹⁴ for the people of the region. Each individual was able to attribute to the place and the gathering meanings personal to them, and yet, because the time and the place served as a place of inscription for so many diverse meanings and motives, the feast constituted a community. People recognized that community at the same time as they recognized the multiplexity of its character; it was, in a very real sense, a concentration of the more dilute community they moved through from day to day. The only people excluded from this sensed community were those who would make rigorous the criteria of participation: the priests who saw the celebration as specific to their own particular sect and, hence, as antipathetic to all other religious persuasions (whether those of other Christian communities or of Muslims), and the nationalists who would deny this shared sense of communal identity in calling on a 'higher' national identity exclusive of precisely that field of faith and local community which made the people feel at home.

The following day, the saint's day proper, effectively belonged to the church *per se*; there was a strong delegation present from the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre, and the only local people were old women, very few accompanied by children, who quietly attended the liturgy and drifted off after the church ceremony was completed. The Brotherhood, and the liturgy with which it asserted its ecclesiastical identity and fixed the significance of the site in relation to that identity, hegemonized the time and place, and the only Palestinians who participated were those who wished to assert themselves as Greek Orthodox believers dependent on the succour of a liturgy presented before them by a foreign clergy in a language they had never been taught to understand.

Beit Sahour and the miracle at Bîr es-Sayideh

The situation in Beit Sahour – a municipality with a mixed Christian–Muslim population – which gave rise to the shrine of Bîr es-Sayideh in the nineteen eighties differed in significant ways from that of Mar Elyas. In some ways the demographic isolation of Mar Elyas from Palestinian communities contributed to this difference. While Bîr es-Sayideh is located immediately below the main marketplace of Beit Sahour, Mar Elyas in the mid-eighties stood on an isolated promontory above the Judean Desert¹⁵. Palestinian houses which, in the past, had been located within walking distance of the monastery had been abandoned and for the most part bulldozed over the preceding decade because of the expansion of Israeli settlement in the area. Consequently, when Palestinians came to Mar Elyas they came from a number of discrete areas of settlement to a holy place *per se* rather than to a holy place at the hub of other non-sacral community defining activities. The identities at play at Mar Elyas tended, therefore, to be explicitly linked to interpretations of the monastery and its contents, even if those interpretations mobilized other elements of the pilgrims'

¹⁴ The term 'floating signifier', drawn from Lévi-Strauss' introduction to the work of Marcel Mauss (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 63), is proposed by Jacques Derrida as an alternative to the classical idea of an essence held to stand at the centre of any discursive structure constituting and determining the signification enabled by that structure. Derrida provides several examples of such 'transcendental signifiers' from the history of Western metaphysics such as 'eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject), aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness or conscience, God, man, and so forth' (Derrida 1972: 249). Derrida contends that Saussure's insight that all signs take on signification through opposition to other signs in a diacritical system invalidates the idea of extra-linguistic essences standing outside of semantic structures and giving rise to those structures. The constitution of all meaning within language undermines all assertions of referentiality; things 'outside' language only come to have significance in language. Since there is no meaning outside of language which language elaborates and describes, all definitions of a field of discourse are effectively 'unfixed' and 'up for grabs': '[t]he absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely' (Derrida 1978: 280). By extension, we can understand that 'objects' of/in discourse, such as the festivities at Mar Elyas, are constituted in the way people talk about them and through the meanings they attribute to them. Unless the process of interpretation is stabilized or hegemonized by an uncontested act of power, the 'object' itself 'floats', taking on a number of meanings from the ways it is read by the people who engage it.

¹⁵ In 1997 construction of the Israeli settlement of Har Homa began on nearby Jebel Abu-Ghneim. Monastery lands were either purchased or expropriated at this time for the settlement and the network of roads connecting Jerusalem with Har Homa and settlements further to the south. The monastery's isolation from Palestinian populations was effectively completed by these activities, as will be discussed below.

lives only contingently connected to religion and religious artifacts. The sort of secular community observed in the olive fields around the shrine was, in a sense, an accident of proximity. It dissolved with the occasion, perhaps leaving behind a residue of good feeling towards others of other villages and religious affiliations, but did not provide sufficient ground for the building of political identities and programmes. The shrine of Bîr es-Sayideh, in contrast, is not only a sign of the sacred but is a marker of sacrality located in the centre of a community in which sectarian and national identities are focal concerns. It is the wider field in which a shrine operates which gives the shrine both its character and its significance, and the differences of the fields surrounding Mar Elyas and Bîr es-Sayideh lead people to interpret the places and to articulate their identities in relation to those places in very different ways. In presenting a sense of the particular context in which the shrine of Bîr es-Sayideh developed, I elaborate some of the conditions which gave rise to the Beit Sahouran project of rearticulating religion's place in the assertion of communal identity¹⁶.

In 1983 Christian and Muslim Palestinians who had come to the Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem to participate in what they called 'the feast of Bethlehem' spoke to me of repeated sightings over the previous three weeks of the Virgin Mary and two other figures in the shadowed depths of an underground cistern beneath the market square of Beit Sahour. At the time I did not follow up these rumours of a 'miracle', and I did not visit the site of this apparition for another five years. Nevertheless, in the interim I learned enough about the local communities and their situation under occupation to make their reception of and response to the alleged intrusion of the sacred into the course of their daily lives seem signally important.

It was difficult to ignore the Palestinian presence at the commemoration of the Nativity of Christ. One of the more exciting aspects of Bethlehem's Christmas Eve ceremonies was the massing of Palestinian scouts in Manger Square to greet the Latin Patriarch on his arrival from Jerusalem to prepare for midnight mass. Scout processions, which despite their military demeanour were grudgingly allowed by the Israeli authorities¹⁷, were a common sight at Muslim and Christian feast day ceremonies throughout the Occupied Territories before the intifada. There tended, however, to be considerable differences between the deportment of Muslim and Christian troops. Muslim scouts marched in black-and-white 'Fatah' keffiyas and bore banners on which the nationalist tetrad of green, red, black, and white was conspicuously manifest. Among the Christians, national emblems and colours were conspicuously absent, and the uniforms and banners of Christian scouts served solely to distinguish between the troops' various sectarian identities. Conversations with scouts and religious functionaries made it clear that it was the churches which restricted the public discourse of the Christian scouts to the celebration of religious identity. Church leaders, at the time exclusively foreign, were afraid of offending the Israeli authorities¹⁸ and loath to allow local Christians to denigrate the importance of the foreign-run churches by publicly asserting that their religious identities were only part of a larger national identity. At the Bethlehem Christmas procession no Muslim troops were allowed to march with the Christians despite the facts that Muslim Bethlehemites also saw Christmas as the 'name day' of their city and

16 Primary research on Beit Sahour took place in January 1990, while the town was under siege by the Israeli Defense Force. This was funded by the Middle East Research Information Project, and some this material appeared earlier in Bowman 1990: 50-3.

17 The Scouts, insofar as they were under the patronage of Christian and Muslim religious institutions, were not subject to the draconian laws against 'gathering' imposed on secular organisations by the Israeli military authorities. As a result the scout activities, when not constrained by the religious authorities, became the *loci* of guarded public displays of nationalist identities.

18 In 1987 Michel Sabbah, a Palestinian from Nazareth, was appointed as Latin Patriarch because, lay persons and priests said, the Catholic church had decided in the face of growing antipathy to the church by Catholic Palestinians to make a significant concession to local Christians. On the outbreak of the intifada Sabbah announced that he was cancelling the Christmas Eve procession in Manger Square and restricting the ceremony to the midnight mass, out of sympathy with the Palestinian people. In response, Israeli officials warned that if the procession was not held as usual 'it might result in the erosion of some of the rights of the Roman Catholics in the Holy Land' (Jerusalem Post 24 December 1987). Al-Tali'a, a Palestinian weekly, reported in the same week that Shimon Peres had contacted the Vatican and threatened that the Israeli government would stop carrying out its obligations as the ruling authority in the holy land in maintaining the status quo agreement. In consequence, Sabbah withdrew his threat. At present the Christmas Eve procession is formally carried out, but scouts and local people do not attend.

that local Muslim scout troops annually asked to participate. While the Latin Patriarchate allowed Christian troops from various sectarian groupings (Catholic and non-Catholic alike) to march together, the entire display (the order in which the scouts marched, the insignia of their costumes and the slogans on their banners) were permitted only to make manifest the communal identities distinguishing between the groups; nothing was allowed to suggest that these young men and women shared a political identity with each other and with the excluded Muslims.

There was, however, one exception. The Beit Sahour troops, although like the others organized into sectarian groups by the different churches which sponsored them, were uniformly dressed. All wore black-and-white keffiyas and webbed military caps. On their shoulders were patches (attached by snaps or safety pins) on which the scout fleur de lis was figured out in the Palestinian national colours of green, red, black and white. The difference was striking, and one person in the watching crowd remarked: 'they must be Muslims from Jerusalem'. Others would not allow that – there could not be Muslims marching with the Christians – but were clearly nonplussed by the scouts' overtly political appearance and by the uniformity manifest in all the Beit Sahouri groups. One of the Sahouri scout leaders, seeing me photographing the event, asked me to come to Beit Sahour on the following day (Christmas) to see 'the real Christmas celebration'.

On Christmas Day the winding streets of the hilly town were crowded with local people and bereft of Israelis or foreigners. The focus of enthusiasm was the scout troops, as it had been the day before, but in Beit Sahour the procession was very different. For one thing, it was much more military; whereas in Bethlehem many of the scouts had seemed to be flirting with the crowd, calling out to friends and family in the audience and showing off with bravura poses and exaggerated baton tosses, in Beit Sahour boys and girls, men and women marched in disciplined formation with their faces set and fixed firmly forward. More significant, however, was the fact that the various attendant Christian troops from Beit Jala, Bethlehem and other towns were joined by a large contingent of Muslim troops, not only from Beit Sahour but also from as far away as Ramallah, Silwan and Jerusalem. Scout uniforms were less flamboyant, and whereas on the previous day the bright insignia of the various sectarian communities had stood out strongly, here all the scouts had covered the badges of their particular troops with the green, red, black and white fleur de lis patch previously worn only on the shoulders of the Beit Sahour contingent.

In Bethlehem the troops had been brought together to receive the Patriarch, and when the Patriarch had withdrawn (to meet local dignitaries, including the military governor of the Occupied Territories) the scouts had dispersed. In Beit Sahour, in contrast, the Christmas parade from the Greek Orthodox church through the town to the community hall in the basement of the Latin Church was merely the ceremonial facet of what was a larger, and distinctly extra-ecclesiastic, project. In this instance religion provided the occasion rather than the reason for a public manifestation exceeding – in duration, rhetoric and purpose – the bounds set by the ceremonial event. After the parade had ended the mingled troops gathered for two hours to chant nationalist slogans, to dance with their keffiyas wrapped around their heads and to enthusiastically applaud a succession of speakers (scout and civilian alike) who referred to them variously as 'rifles for the pleasure of Abu-Ammar's [Yasser Arafat's] eyes' and 'the unarmed army of Palestine' while discussing the complexities of organizing a united Muslim and Christian 'Pan-Palestinian Scout Movement' in the face of opposition from church and mosque. The fleur de lis scout emblems which I had seen pinned or snapped onto scout uniforms were the markers of this movement, and they were removable precisely because the movement was an anathema not only to the Israeli military but as well to the religious authorities on which the troops depended both for funding and for legal status.

The central role played by the Beit Sahour scouts in uniting Muslims and Christians within a political organization explicitly intended to substitute nationalist union for sectarian

divisiveness¹⁹ was not something exceptional for Beit Sahour; the demography of the town brings Muslims and Christians together in their economic pursuits, and the strength of the town's economy (based on small factories producing plastics and various craft goods as well as carrying out piece work on textiles) led local Christians to commit themselves to remaining there rather than emigrating to the Palestinian diaspora as have many Christians from other mixed towns such as Bethlehem and Beit Jala. Beit Sahour is a largely Christian town, although there is some question about the precise proportions of Muslims and Christians in the population. In 1984 Father Pena of the Franciscan Order estimated that eighty three per cent of the town's population was Christian, largely Greek Orthodox but with substantial numbers of Latin and Greek Catholics and much smaller Lutheran and Syrian Orthodox populations (Pena 1984)²⁰. Christians and Muslims I spoke with in Beit Sahour in 1990 tended to quote much higher figures for the Muslim population – between twenty five and thirty percent – but just as Pena's interest in Christian communities and his dependence on local parish priests for his information may have caused him to underestimate the number of Muslims in Beit Sahour, so Beit Sahourans' pride in having overcome the opportunities for fragmentation thrown up by religious differences may have led them to inflate Muslim numbers. Whatever the actual proportions, in 1990 two members out of eight on the municipal committee were Muslim, and people were quick to point out that these were on the committee **not** as representatives of the Muslim population but as spokespersons for major family groups which happened to be Muslim. The distinction was significant; Beit Sahourans saw themselves as Palestinians who happen to be either Christian or Muslim, rather than as Christians or Muslims who happen to live in Palestine.

An alternative reading of identity, which would define people by religious affiliation rather than in terms of the place in which they live and the neighbours with whom they share that life, was promulgated then, as now, by three significant forces in the Occupied Territories: the Israeli government, the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), and the foreign churches. Israeli encouragement of Palestinian sectarianism is not simply an extension of Israel's own imaging of itself as the Jewish nation for the Jewish people; it is perhaps more saliently a continuation of the policy of divide-and-rule it has used against 'non-Jewish minorities' in Israel and the Occupied Territories since 1948 (Lustick 1980; Tamari 1982). The state's covert support of the 'Muslim Brothers of Palestine' through the mid-eighties and the free rein it gave to the Hamas movement until May 1988 were widely recognized by Palestinians as facets of a general Israeli strategy of dividing Palestinians along sectarian lines so as to undermine the foundations of the nationalist movement (Litani 1989; Taraki 1989: 31; Schiff and Ya'ari 1990: 233–234; Dumper 1992: 422–423).

Hamas, which then opposed Palestinian nationalism and advocated liberating the entirety of Palestine from 'Jewish' rule so that it can be set up as a trust (*waqf*) for the Islamic peoples of the world, built up a strong following in Gaza after the 1982 invasion of Lebanon on the basis of welfare and education projects funded with moneys from Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Between 1982 and 1988 Hamas orchestrated a campaign of violence and intimidation against the secularist movements which effectively drove them into hiding in Gaza and severely disrupted their activities

¹⁹ Between 1983 and 1987 the 'Pan-Palestinian Scout Movement' expanded considerably. In March 1987 it was working in close collusion with Mubarak Awad's 'Centre for Non-Violence' in organizing a West Bank boycott of Israeli goods (a forerunner of intifada strategies of non-cooperation and resistance). In January 1990 I asked about the scouts and was told by a young Beit Sahouri: 'the scouts have closed up their buildings....they made the connexions, and will open again when they are needed'. After Oslo scout groups reformed, but interviews suggest that their focus has shifted not only to providing young men and women with 'positive' activities but as well to the assertion of communalist identities. Jennifer Dueck has been engaging in research on scout movements in Mandate Lebanon which demonstrates substantial and intriguing differences in the exportation of Baden-Powell's model to colonial and post-colonial situations (Dueck 2006; see also Boehmer 2004)

²⁰ Pena estimated that Beit Sahur in 1984 had a population of 8,900 of which 7,400 were Christian (6,000 Greek Orthodox, 670 Latin Catholics, 500 Greek Catholics, 200 Lutherans and 30 Syrian Orthodox). The 1997 census, which collected but did not publicize figures on religious affiliation, shows a population of 11,250 of which 3,278 were under twelve and 620 over 65 (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 1999: 50 and 55).

on university campuses throughout the Occupied Territories. Even Fatah (the centrist party of the Palestine Liberation Organisation led by Yasser Arafat), which had supported Hamas's Gazan campaign against the Communist Party and the Popular and Democratic Fronts, suffered the onslaughts of the movement just prior to the outbreak of the intifada²¹. Hamas's hostility was, however, directed only against nationalists (who it terms 'communists' or 'secularists') and not against Palestinian communities it is able to accommodate within its religious purview. Palestinian Christians were not attacked as Christians *per se* insofar as they would have a protected status within an Islamic state as 'People of the Book'. Israeli attempts to isolate Christian Palestinians by leading them to think that the Muslims, led by Hamas, were turning against them were, as of January 1990, easily recognized. Christians in Bethlehem, Ramallah and Jerusalem spoke of Israelis who 'dress up as Hamas' to daub anti-Christian graffiti on West Bank walls, and a 1989 'Hamas' communique condemning 'the wealthy Christians of Beit Sahour' for having 'drunk and danced with the Israelis since the beginning of the intifada' was identified by Beit Sahourans as an Israeli forgery.

In large part, the churches of Israel and the Occupied Territories defined the land and its peoples in terms having more in common with the vocabulary of the Islamic fundamentalists than with that of Palestinians engaged in struggling for self determination. Just as Hamas argued that Palestine is holy ground for Muslims and should be kept in perpetuity as an Islamic trust, so the foreign-dominated churches defined Palestine as the 'Holy Land' and treated it as a repository of sanctity for the edification of priests and pilgrims. Since the sixteenth century, when Patriarch Germanos expelled local Christian clergy from the Greek Orthodox Church and transformed the parochial churches into monastic holy places for the Greeks (Bertram and Young 1926: 34-78), the Latin and Orthodox churches had been for the most part indifferent to the condition and fate of local Christians. In the past, when foreign churches needed 'bargaining counters' in diplomatic struggles for hegemony over the holy places, they would 'buy' local Christians into their folds with offers of housing, employment and the like. This was especially true after Ali Pasha opened Palestine to increased western intervention and the western nations, for secular as well as religious reasons, engaged in well-funded programmes to court disaffected Greek Orthodox Palestinians into the protestant, Latin and Russian Orthodox churches (Tibawi 1961; Hopwood 1969; Horner 1989; Scholch 1989). The establishment of the State of Israel and the consolidation of the Occupied Territories (wherein lie most of the sites revered by foreign pilgrims) under its control changed the nature of the struggles. Subsequently the churches found that the best way to maintain and expand their property holdings, gain residence permits for monks, nuns and clergy, and facilitate the flow of pilgrims was to nurture good relations with the state; that meant, even more than before, ignoring the plight of Christian Palestinians²². One man in Beit Sahour, where over eighty percent of the Christian population is Greek Orthodox, told me 'we have two imperialisms here - the Zionists and the Greeks...They [the Greeks] are more interested in religion than in us'.

While the Israeli state, Hamas and the dominant Christian churches strove to impose religious boundaries on a land populated by peoples of different religious affiliations, Beit Sahourans attested commitment to the idea of unifying different religious communities within the

21 The protected status enjoyed by Hamas was reversed in May 1988 when the government outlawed the organization after Hamas activists claimed responsibility for the kidnapping and execution of two Israeli soldiers. The high media profile that Israel had granted the movement in presenting it as a rival to the United Leadership of the Uprising, along with the immunity to prosecution its activists had enjoyed prior to its banning, meant that the Israelis had no trouble pinpointing its leadership when the arrests began; in the last two weeks of May 1988 more than 250 Hamas organizers were jailed.

22 There appears to be a close correlation between properties maintained for the delectation of pilgrims and lack of interest in the local peoples. The Greek Catholic and Anglican churches had few holy land monuments to maintain for foreign visitors and strongly supported their Palestinian congregations under the Bishops of Lutfi Lahan (Lebanese) and Samir Kafity (Syrian). The Lutheran Church, which divides its powers in the holy land between three delegations (German, American and Palestinian), supports Christian Palestinians unless such support interferes with the privileges of its foreign members. In 1985 the Lutherans shut down the 'Austro-Hungarian Hospice', which had served since 1948 as the only hospital in Jerusalem's old city, in order to refit it as a hotel for well-off Lutheran pilgrims.

borders of a single secular state. This was evidenced both in interviews and in their establishment of non-sectarian organisations such as the Pan-Palestinian Scout Movement and the popular committees (the latter provided models for intifada organisation to communities throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip) (Hiltermann 1991). One Beit Sahouran Christian told me 'we are ready in our own state to live as Christians, Muslims and Jews in one nation' and this was echoed in numerous other statements such as that of a Muslim who said 'we hope for liberation with one community with many religions. God is for one, the nation for all. Zionists changed Palestinian Jews to Israelis'. In this rhetoric religious identity is subsumed under national identity. In an interesting temporal reversal of the segmentary system of establishing common identity by tracing genealogies back to an apical ancestor, the nationalist rhetoric posits a common identity by projecting forward to a future moment in which all persons – be they Christian, Muslim or Jew – will share citizenship in a common secular state. The only persons excluded from this process are those who see their national identity as devolving from their communalist identity and thus refuse to allow that their religious identity will be subsumed within an overarching secular national identity. Thus Zionists, who see national and religious identity as inextricably linked, are future foreigners and present day enemies. At the time of my research for this paper the Beit Sahour municipality and political activists within the town had established, and were maintaining, strong links with 'non-Zionist' Israeli communists and peace activists.

The sectarian tendency to define public space and public identities in religious terms was rejected in Beit Sahour. Traditionally mixed Palestinian towns were cognitively divided into the 'Quarters' in which the various religious communities in large part resided. This nomenclature was an inheritance of the Ottoman millet system wherein the various non-Muslim religious communities within the *dar al Islam* (realm of Islam) were granted relative autonomy by the state. Members of those communities would tend to cluster around the residences of the religious leader the Ottoman authorities recognized for each –

as long as they paid their taxes, the minorities, Christians and Jews, were left to administer their own internal affairs within the framework of Islamic law which gave them the status of *ahl al-dhimma* [protected peoples]. Their religious affairs [which included laws pertaining to marriage, property and the like] were regulated by their respective heads of communities (Asali 1989: p. 206; see also Abu-Jaber 1967 and Cohen and Lewis 1978) –

although other 'quarters' might take their names not from the religions of their predominant populations but from markets or other important public sites which 'centred' a sector of the town. The collapse of Ottoman rule rendered the apparatus of the millet system largely extraneous, and that, along economic and social developments which led persons of the various denominations to settle in areas traditionally populated by other groups, made the Quarter nomenclature atavistic (an exception is the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem's old city which, because of planned developments carried out since the 1970s is almost exclusively inhabited by Jews). After the 1982 invasion of Lebanon the Beit Sahour municipality decided to rename sectors of the town not in terms of religious population or economic function but to memorialise locales that war had rendered significant as moments of Palestinian national resistance to Israel. The the highest section of town was designated Shqeef Castle (the site of an important battle) while two other sectors of the town were called after two of the most important Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, Tal el-Za'tar and Shateela²³.

Religious difference, which was not inscribed on the landscape, was also not a factor determining the character of interaction between individuals in public spheres. The following

²³ Shqeef is Beaufort Castle in South Lebanon. *Fateh* held it from 1970 until 1982, even during the Israeli invasion of 1978. Tell al-Za'ter resisted a several month siege by Maronite militia in early 1976 (personal communication from Rosemary Sayigh). Shateela is, of course, one of the two sites of the notorious Sabra and Shateela massacre.

quotations are drawn from interviews with Beit Sahour residents (both Christian and Muslim):

we do not remember we are from different religions unless somebody from outside reminds us...we are Christians and Muslims in spirit and in our hearts, but in public we are Palestinian;

it is you outside who try to make a difference between the Christians and the Muslims. We are a people; we all go to each other's feasts, we visit with each other, we live the same life. We are one people;

my relation with my god is in my heart and my house; it does not concern the public. In the street I am Issa.

These assertions, like numerous others recorded in interviews, signal an awareness of contextual identities and suggest that the programme of constructing a national identity, to which all of the Beit Sahourans I interviewed²⁴ showed a commitment, was precisely one of redefining the contexts in which sectarian identities are manifested. This redefinition created a new public domain in which non-religious, nationalist identities were evidenced.

The repudiation of 'public' markers of religious identity in these quotations does not signal a renunciation of religion itself; it is instead symptomatic of a rearticulation of the place of religion in the formulation of identity. From the evidence I was able to gather in visits to their houses, Beit Sahourans remained committed to the 'faiths of their fathers'. The interiors of the houses in which I listened to the most virulent rejections of sectarianism were dense with signs of religiosity; pictures of the Virgin Mary (in both Christian and Muslim houses) or of Mecca (in Muslim houses) were hung next to photographs of family members and members of neighbours' families who had been jailed or killed by the Israelis. A three foot high statue of the Virgin Mary graced a corner of the living room of one house belonging to an organiser of local committees and a self-avowed secular nationalist. I was unable to uncover evidence of any increase in the extremely rare occurrence of 'mixed' (Muslim-Christian) marriages in the town; unlike in Ramallah, where the incidence of such marriages was perceived as having increased over the past decade (interview with Ramallah resident, April 1990), in Beit Sahour I was told that mixed marriages occur only when a Beit Sahouran emigrates and becomes involved with a member of another community 'outside'. This suggests that religion and sectarian traditions retained hegemony over areas of life such as faith, worship, and marriage and that they there determined the appropriate practices and ceremonials. Thus many of the aspects of communal identity fostered by the millet system were retained within the domain of home, family and kinship relations. What had changed was that another domain had opened up and had come to be seen as constituting another – supplementary yet subsuming – field of identity.

The sectarianism fostered by the Ottoman millet system provided each religious community with a space in which to operate in relative autonomy and insisted, by strictly defining the way the dhimmi (protected religious minorities) could dress and deport themselves in all contexts, that sectarian identity always be emphasized. Most aspects of public life were enunciated within the terms of sectarian identity and few, if any, alternative contexts were available in which to articulate other identities which might allow for collaboration and identification with persons from outside one's own millet (for twentieth century examples see Joseph [1978] on the Lebanon and Webber [1985] and Bowman [1986] on Jerusalem). Even in relations between men in the market place, roles and interaction were choreographed by sectarian identities so that exchanges of goods and services could occur without separate identities being merged. The Beit Sahouran project of

²⁴ It is important to stress that, as a foreign anthropologist engaged in research during a national liberation struggle, I created a particular context for the persons I interviewed. People were keen to present an impression of unity to one they rightly assumed would present Beit Sahour to the world outside. Subsequent research in the town has exposed moments of disharmony and conflict which this nationalist project as an ongoing project rather than a fully realized and sutured new identity (Bowman 2001 and 2006).

rearticulating the religious and the secular led to an expansion of the 'neutral' space of the market (see Gilsenan 1982: 173-177) so that that space came to provide not only for economic necessities but also new modalities of identity appropriate to the situation of occupation.

Chapman, McDonald and Tonkin, following Ardener, discuss the way that the perception of some 'novelty' in a community's experience can impel it to 'pick up behind it a new trajectory to replace or modify the old' (Chapman *et al* 1989: 8). Beit Sahour has a long history of Muslim-Christian interaction and, because there are traditions recounted which trace that admixture back to the town's mythical foundations, it was easy for Beit Sahourans to rearticulate their past in the light of the imagining of the present community brought about by the Israeli occupation (Bowman 1990: 51-52). The new form of 'imagined community' constituted in the context of occupation was, however, substantially different from the identities which had preceded it. In the past Muslims and Christians had worked together but had seen themselves as Muslims and Christians who happened to be involved in economic exchanges rather than as Palestinians who happened to be Muslim or Christian. The new identity - 'we are Palestinians first, then Muslims or Christians' - came not from a market situation which brought them into contact with each other, but from a situation of confrontation which forced them to recognise that 'outside' their realm of cooperation was an antagonist equally threatening to all townspersons, regardless of their religious affiliations. In the light of the struggle against this antagonist certain elements of the town's past were rendered significant, and were memorialized in the production of a 'new' history. Various townspersons told me stories of Muslims and Christians marching together to Nebi Musa (an Islamic shrine in the Jordan Valley which became the focus of Islamic dissatisfaction with British rule [see Friedland and Hecht 1996]) as well as of Baathist, Nasserite and Communist demonstrations against the Jordanian occupation. They spoke, in addition, of the long history of support for the 'Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine' and the 'Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine' during the period of Israeli occupation. What is significant in these histories was not that Beit Sahour had a long history of resistance to various occupiers of the land but that the fractiousness of that resistance, in which residents' allegiances to different factions of the struggles often turned the town into an arena of struggle between parties rather than a united front against the 'outside', was here elided so that the entirety of the community could be constituted as an 'us' which had always resisted the incursions of 'foreign' rule.

The Israeli occupation provided a space for identification that differed from that provided by other occupiers, all of which - as Christian or Muslim regimes supporting capitalist property owners - presented to factions of the Beit Sahour population opportunities for identification and collaboration. The Israeli forces, which viewed 'Arabs' as enemies and saw 'Arab' capitalist successes as a strengthening of 'Arab' power, demonstrated to Christians and Muslims (both employers and workers) that 'there is another who is enemy to us both'²⁵. The portrait of a young man, Basem Rishmawi, was hung on the walls of many houses in Beit Sahour and his name was often mentioned in conversations. On the evening of 11 April 1981 Rishmawi had disappeared while returning home from his fiancée's house. A week later Israeli soldiers had returned his body, severely mutilated, its wrists cut from having been bound with wire. They claimed that he had been killed when a bomb he had been making exploded prematurely. No one had believed the story, and word had spread through the town that he had been kidnapped, tortured and finally killed either by settlers or the army. Many residents considered Rishmawi's death to have been arbitrary; they believed any Beit Sahouran could expect a similar fate at the hands of the occupation's agents: 'it could have happened to anybody, and by chance the victim was Basem' (but see below). Subsequent experiences strengthened that assumption. In 1989 Edmond Ghanem was killed while walking down the main street of the town when a soldier dropped a stone on him from a third floor

²⁵ Yehoshua Porath, who wrote a meticulous study of Palestinian mobilization leading up to the 1936 Revolt (Porath 1977), was quoted in the Jerusalem Post of 12 March 1988 as saying of the intifada that 'this is the first time that there has been a popular action, covering all social strata and groups'.

guard post in the municipality building. The arbitrariness revealed in the tax raids, which Al-Haq has described as constituting 'a sustained campaign of aggression against the town's residents under the guise of compliance with the law' (Al-Haq 1989: 1), exposed behind the mask of occupiers' law the face of a conquering army engaged in pillage. One Beit Sahouran told me amidst the detritus of a neighbour's house which that morning had been 'searched': 'this is plunder, looting, it's indiscriminate....All they want is money from us'. It appeared to the residents themselves that they were all equivalent in the eyes of the occupying forces: 'We see that one day it is one person and the next day another. The following day it may be us, so we say *hellas* (enough) and begin to work to stop it'. The existence of the entire community and the lives of all its members were seen as being at risk, and in that context the differences between individuals, families, religious communities and political affiliations became insignificant:

If I want to throw a stone I will not call to my neighbour to say 'become a Muslim and then we will throw stones together'. We forget our religion; we forget our political groups. The bullets do not differentiate between Christian and Muslim, P.L.O., D.F.L.P., etc.

At issue here was not the continuance of public cooperation in economic projects which had been a central feature of Beit Sahouran life in the past, but the question of the survival of any form of Palestinian community at all on the site. The 'space' of cooperation was thus transformed and extended, and in that space – which was now that in which Beit Sahourans faced an Other across a boundary which had come to mark the difference between 'the community' and 'the foreigners' intent on destroying that community – Beit Sahouran Muslims and Christians became 'Palestinians' mobilized in a struggle for survival against 'Israelis'. It was, therefore, the antagonist which provided the 'novelty' discussed by Chapman, McDonald and Tonkin (1989) and which delineated the 'boundary' Barth (1969) saw as constituting the ethnic group; Beit Sahourans 'invented' an identity which encompassed all aspects of their lives in the face of an antagonist they saw as threatening those lives in all their diversities. As a result, a political project of resistance was elaborated which went beyond the quotidian sectarian co-existence which had characterized intercommunal interaction in the past. The antagonism to the community perceived by Beit Sahourans in the policies and practices of the Israeli state and the settlers it defended had led them to reify the inter-communal cooperation which had marked their everyday life. The diffuse sense of community Beit Sahourans had shared in the past – a loose sense of the communal not unlike that described above as having taken place among Palestinian participants at the feast of Mar Elyas – coagulated, under the mobilizing threat of state antagonism, into an 'identity' which penetrated, constituted and united self, community and nation²⁶. This fixing of identity transformed the elements of everyday community life into emblems of a communal self *per se* and as such all these elements – regardless of whether they were originally Christian or Muslim, sacred or secular – came to signify 'Palestinian life'. Politicisation was fundamental to the constitution of this new, subsuming, identity; the 'Palestinian' entity took form as something which had to be protected, and people envisaged in its survival or destruction not only the fate of the 'imagined community' of Palestine but also their own.

Beit Sahouran's recognition that Israeli occupation threatened the community as a whole led them to redefine the resources of the community so that these could be mobilized against that occupation. The resources of religion, so often used (by themselves as well as by others) to divide and oppose Palestinian people in the past, were appropriated and marshalled in the defence of local and national aspirations. In 1989 many Beit Sahourans sent out printed Christmas cards to

²⁶ The closest thing I saw to this at Mar Ely occurred on the first day of the feast when Israeli police, claiming that the dealers were not properly licensed, began to break up a market in children's toys which had formed along the edge of the road. Only then did people speak of themselves as Palestinians and of their traditional practices, there threatened by the incursion of representatives of the Israeli state, as manifestations of a Palestinian national identity. When the police withdrew, the formulation of identity in 'Palestinian' terms ceased.

churches and embassies throughout Israel and the Occupied Territories which played off the bucolic and auspicious image of Christ's nativity against the darkness of the contemporary situation. On one side of the card was written 'Christmas 1989 in the Third Year of the Intifada' and on the other, beneath a drawing of a group of armed Israeli soldiers massed around a grotto in which an empty cradle beside the prone body of a masked Palestinian, was written 'Silent Night, Holy Night, All is Dark, All is Sad' and 'From the City of Peace we Palestinians wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year'. Like the municipality-organized 'Day of Prayer for Peace' in November 1989, which brought together Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders as well as Israeli peace groups and foreign diplomats, and the address by South African bishop Desmond Tutu to a similar audience at Shepherd's Field Church on Christmas Eve of that year, these cards manifested a public face which Beit Sahourans turn to the 'outside'. In such instances the community presented itself as united in a sort of 'Popular Front' so as to garner support from the world outside the community. Such demonstrations may, of course, only have been organized for the delectation of outsiders and might not be indicative of any changes to internal perceptions of the lineaments of Sahouri identity. As such these would be border phenomena meant to mask to external eyes the fact that the internal community was still riven by sectarian and other divides.

'Palestinian Traditions' and the Shrine of Bîr es-Sayideh

More interesting, therefore, and in the long run perhaps more significant, were transformations effected within the ways Beit Sahourans interpreted the elements of their everyday lives. In January 1990 I was told by a Muslim schoolteacher that 'we must nationalize our beliefs, should rebuild our customs so they reflect our national life'. This 'nationalisation' of religion and custom involved a substantial redefinition of the field of religious belief and practice. Such a redefinition was not always fully visible on the ground because religious belief retained its saliency in personal and familial identity. However, where in the past communal identity – rooted in the distrust of other communities religious hierarchies fostered and fed, particularly in the cities, by financial support from the churches and the *waqfs* – had provided the core of a person's sense of social self, what was occurring in Beit Sahour and other places in Palestine in the eighties and early nineties was a tendency to subsume that sectarian identity *within* an encompassing nationalist identity. Part of this was a matter of the withdrawal (forced or voluntary) of the support of religious foundations as I have mentioned above and as Dumper elaborates in his studies of the *waqfs* under Israel (Dumper 1991; 1992). More salient was the recognition that, for the first time, the survival of both Muslims and Christians was threatened by a common antagonist.

At this stage I can only point to some symptoms of that change. One, which I witnessed on several occasions between 1984 and 1990 during religious festivities in Jerusalem, was the tendency of Muslim and Christian Palestinians of most denominations²⁷ to join members of other religious communities in publicly celebrating religious feasts. One Muslim youth, who joined the riotous march of Christians along Christian Quarter Road to the Holy Sepulchre for the Holy Fire ceremony²⁸ remarked: 'this [the time of religious celebrations] is the only time you see the nation

27 Among the Christian exceptions were some Armenians - both Orthodox and Uniate - who saw themselves as Armenian nationals rather than as Armenian Palestinians, and Protestants of fundamentalist and millenarian groups which defined the future in chiliastic rather than nationalist terms. Fundamentalist Muslims were also, as Lustick asserts, unlikely to wish to pollute their God-given identities at a time when all hope was resting on divine intervention (Lustick 1992: 431). Furthermore, various people who were still substantially patronized by the religious institutions were not likely to see their interests served by violating the terms of that support.

28 The Holy Fire ceremony is a Greek Orthodox ritual which has been recorded as occurring as early as 870 AD (Peters 1985: 261-7 and Hecht 1995). It takes place in the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem at approximately 13:00 on Holy Saturday and is alleged to signal the passage of Christ from hell to heaven. It stands, for Christians, as a sign that Christ's resurrection is promised on the following day. Interviews with attending Muslims revealed that it was also interpreted, by them and by participating Christian Palestinian youths, as an opportunity for Jerusalem Palestinians to welcome their foreign guests to their city. Massive crowds of local Christians and foreign pilgrims collect for the ceremony with occasionally disastrous consequences (Stanley 1889: 464-9; see also Williams 1849: 533-5; Canetti 1973: 185-93).

of Palestine on its streets; I am here to celebrate with my nation'. Such a 'national' interpretation of a sectarian celebration differs substantially from interpretations evident at the Mar Elyas feast. At the latter groups were for the most part constituted around the particular rationales their members had for attending, and whatever sense of 'community' came into play was an accidental consequence of the fact that these motivations were focused on the same site. 'Community' was never recognised as a significant entity in itself, in large part because no antagonism threatened the whole and caused the participants to recognize their equivalence in the eyes of an enemy (the telling exception is referred to in note twenty six). For the Muslim taking part in the Christian Holy Fire ceremony, inter-communal 'manifestations' had come to celebrate a national identity within which particular sectarian identities were incorporated. In this discourse the Palestinian 'whole' is made up of a collocation of differences rendered equivalent by the recognition that all are equally threatened by Israeli state policies. In the context of that antagonism the feast is defined as a manifestation of 'Palestinian' tradition and the gathering seen as an assertion of the insistence of Palestinians in celebrating that tradition in the face of 'foreign' forces which would deny Palestinians the right to define themselves as members of a national community with a rich heritage of traditions.

Religious difference was not, however, elided by a nationalism insisting on full identification by all members of the nation. Difference was maintained, and, while persons of different affiliations would take part in each other's celebrations, they would not participate in other sects' liturgies or rituals when those conflicted with the articles or practices of faith of their own communities. A shift in context led, in other words, to a redefinition of identity; what was interpreted as national and inclusive in a space read as 'public' will be seen as religious and exclusive when participants are interpellated into subject positions (Althusser 1971) emphasizing their identities as members of a specific religious community. Thus, while Muslims would participate in public aspects of Christian ceremonies such as the procession down the Mount of Olives on Latin Palm Sunday or the Holy Fire ceremony during Orthodox Holy Week, they would not take part in the liturgical celebrations of the Crucifixion or Resurrection within the churches. Christian Palestinians, joining Muslims on the Haram al-Sharif (the Temple Mount) to celebrate the birth of the Prophet Mohammed or the occasion of Mohammed's Ascent to Heaven, would, analogously, absent themselves when the Muslims prayed. Palestinians who saw themselves as active members of religious communities maintained the tenets of those communities in situations marked as religious. Distinct religious identities and practices, rather than being homogenised as equivalent forms of 'Palestinian culture', were instead given supplementary meaning by the national discourse. They thus came to be seen not only to signify the particular ways of life of sectarian communities, but also as bearing witness to one of the many facets of the way of life of the Palestinian nation. In such politicised instances, as in many others witnessed during fieldwork, identities were neither exclusively sectarian nor exclusively national but were both sectarian and national.

Another symptom of this change, in which transformations in the field of identity are actually monumentalized on the landscape, is the aforementioned shrine of Bîr es-Sayideh. In 1988 I was taken to an underground cistern in the centre of Beit Sahour which had been the site of the visitation by the Virgin Mary in 1983. The Beit Sahour municipality had built a shrine over the cistern expressly for the use of both Muslims and Christians of all denominations. The exterior appeared distinctly modern, and, aside from the cross surmounting it, it bore less resemblance to a church than it did to a traditional Islamic *makÿm* (a building with a domed chamber characterising a Muslim shrine). Inside, the walls were covered with icons and paintings of Christian subjects given by worshippers²⁹ but, profusely and randomly scattered among these, were a significant number of

29 Icons, which present well-established representations of religious phenomena in traditionally fixed forms and styles, are signs of Orthodox forms of devotion. Paintings tend to be freer and more realist in their desire to inspire a mental 're-enactment' of the scene portrayed, and are most often Latin and, in this area, Franciscan devotional artefacts (Bowman 1991).

gifts, paintings and pictures which, in their avoidance of pictorial representation, appeared to be Muslim. The cross and the predominance of a Christian tone was not surprising; the site was, after all, dedicated to a figure highly revered in Christian worship (although also venerated in Islam). What seemed more important than a more thoroughgoing syncretism was the fact that devotional objects of other religions – which would be rigorously excluded in a church or mosque owned and operated by the religious institutions – appeared here, and that no one visiting the shrine (and there was a constant flow of local people passing through it) seemed offended by evident signs that a community wider than that of their own religious community used the place.

I was told by both the caretaker and the Greek Catholic priest who accompanied me on one visit to the site that religious practices at the shrine reflect this heterogeneity. As the shrine belonged to the municipality, representatives of all local religious communities were able to book time in it. Since the stories surrounding the Nativity of Jesus are celebrated by Muslims and Christians throughout the Bethlehem region as founding myths of the local communities, Muslims and Christians alike gathered at the shrine to celebrate their traditions in a place where the sacred had interacted with their locality. Sometimes these were shared celebrations, nominally organized according to the calendar of one of the religious communities (such as the Orthodox Ascension of the Virgin celebrated on the 15th of August), while at other times local Christian and Muslim officiants carried out ceremonies specific to their congregations. Moreover, as with the blessings available to all at Mar Elyas, water from the cistern in the back of the shrine was taken by both Muslim and Christian Beit Sahourans as a sacred substance for healing, blessing and providing good luck. I asked the caretaker why the Marian shrine was owned by the municipality and not, as one would expect, by one of the Christian churches. He indignantly replied: 'we are here Muslim and Christian, and there are two Christian groups. The municipality builds for all the people, and the people all own and use the well. *Hellas*.'

This statement confirms (as does the shrine's existence) that a new 'space' had been constituted between the communalist domain of faith and family and the boundary marking the separation of the residents of Beit Sahour from 'outsiders' perceived as working to destroy them. The fact that this new discursive space was, in most instances, articulated in terms merging the national and the local (people here identified themselves not only as Sahouris but as well as members of a larger Palestinian community stretching far beyond the municipal limits) points to the role of the enemy in constituting identity. Israeli soldiers and settlers, the most salient symptoms of occupation to the people of Beit Sahour, see and treat Beit Sahourans as 'Arabs' in line with their own constitutive logic of antagonism and identity³⁰. Beit Sahourans, well aware that what they define as a war waged against their town is simultaneously being waged against other communities throughout Israel and the Occupied Territories and further afield into the Palestinian diaspora, are able to imagine a 'nation in waiting' constituted of other individuals and communities 'like' themselves in facing the same enemy. This similitude is not, however, imagined as literal; Beit Sahour residents do not imagine all Palestinian communities have the same demographic mix as their own and realise that many of the identifications and strategies of resistance they have developed are particular to the contingencies of their situation. The equivalence that led them to identify themselves as Palestinians is rendered in the same discursive space as the perception of similitude which impelling them to identify themselves as 'the same' as other Beit Sahourans who, despite being Muslim or Christian, had been forced to engage collectively in a struggle for survival against an external antagonist .

30 I would argue that the threat of disintegration to Israeli unity which Paine saliently points out in his study of Jewish identity in a national state (Paine 1989) is held at bay by a general consensus among Israeli Jews that an enemy (the Palestinian entity) - far more threatening than any other community within the nation - exists 'outside' the fissile national community.

Conclusion (1993)

This particular elaboration of sectarian elements within an encompassing nationalist framework was not the only articulation of religion and politics available to Palestinians under occupation at that time. Hamas, for example, made manifest a drive, itself motivated by the Israeli occupation, to mobilize religion towards the pursuit of political ends. It did not present a programme for returning to traditional Islamic identity but instead, using Western modes of populist organization and demanding conformity with newly invented 'traditions' of Islamicity in markers of identity such as dress³¹, organized a particular 'post-modern' activism attempting to replace the 'modern' project manifest in Jewish-Western political hegemony over the region with another all-encompassing reconstruction of the world, this time in accordance with a vision of a new 'pan-Islamic' order. Hamas's Islam proposed to make the political and religious coterminous through an extension of a politico-theological discipline into all domains of life, from the state to the household, with particular positions and disciplines for non-Islamic populations. Hamas ideologues claimed to draw their model for the theological hegemonization of the political from early Islamic theories of the state (Rodinson 1971: 215-92) but were actually more determinately influenced by the particular anti-Western and anti-colonial articulation of politics and religion propounded by Islamic revolutionaries in Iran (Mortimer 1982: 353-8).

Ironically, Hamas's model of state and religion shared the logic of the Likud right and Gush Emunim sectors of the Israeli population which had provided the agenda for Israeli politics between 1981 and the 1992 elections (Sprinzak 1991: 300-5). Lustick describes the defining characteristic of 'fundamentalism' as the assumption that 'political action, dedicated toward rapid and comprehensive transformation of society...express[es] uncompromisable, cosmically ordained, and more or less directly received imperatives' (Lustick 1992: 431). The Israeli religious right saw (and continues to see) the real stake of the 'redemption of the land' (the extirpation of a Palestinian presence and the full settlement of the Occupied Territories with a Jewish population) as a

metaphysical question of transcendental importance...whether or not the process of God's redemption of the Jewish people, and of the world as a whole, including the advent of the Messiah himself, will be brought to its glorious conclusion in the relatively near future, or whether it will be tragically delayed or even halted (Lustick 1992: 434).

Hamas's project of driving Jews and foreigners out of Palestine calls upon similar metaphysical imperatives; 'the Islamic people has a consciousness of its duties before God in the defense of Palestine, God's blessed country and that of the prophets, eternal property (*waqf*) of the Islamic community' (Legrain 1990: 181). The cosmic certitude these assumptions provided to advocates of each of these 'fundamentalist' movements not only ensured a passionate, and uncompromising, commitment to their respective causes but also allied them with a power far greater than anything available in the profane domain of struggle and politics. For Palestinian Muslims outraged by the constant presence of an antagonistic state and frustrated with the apparent inefficacy of secularist solutions, the appeal of a programme which was profoundly political yet drew its legitimacy from the word of God rather than the formulations of men and women was powerful. The struggle against what the secularists call a 'colonial settler state' here becomes the age-old struggle of the faithful against the demonic: 'religion is...placed at the service of the anti-Israeli struggle, which is depicted as the eschatological combat between Good and Evil' (Legrain 1990: 183). There was,

³¹ Reema Hammami writes that Hamas 'endowed the hijab with new meanings of piety and political affiliation. Women affiliated with the movement started to wear long, plain, tailored overcoats, known as shari'a dress, which have no real precedents in indigenous Palestinian dress. Supposed to represent a return to a more authentic Islamic tradition, it is in fact an 'invented tradition' in both form and meaning. Here the hijab is fundamentally an instrument of oppression, a direct disciplining of women's bodies for political ends' (Hammami 1990: 25). She notes the failure of an attempt by the United National Leadership of the Uprising to halt attacks on women for not wearing hijab and comments that 'since February 1990 the 'hijab campaign' has been renewed with even greater force than before. Now that the imposition of the headscarf has been accomplished, a new goal seems to have been set: the imposition of the jilbaab (full length dress or coat)' (Ibid: 28).

consequently, no need for delicate strategies of compromise and confrontation, since all that is necessary was to take a purely rejectionist stance against co-habiting with the devil and his minions.

Hamas's religious definition of antagonism in terms of the 'pollution' of God's land extended the battlefield beyond direct confrontation with the forces of the Israeli state to encompass issues of Palestinian deportment and moral rectitude. In this struggle to purify the land of 'evil', Jews and Western powers were only one manifestation of the enemy; secular and 'westernised' Palestinians were another. Hamas's redefinition of the field of political struggle as a domain for the extirpation of 'corrupt morals' allowed Hamas activists to feel fully engaged politically whilst engaging enemies far less dangerous than armed Israeli soldiers. Hammami writes that

those who joined [Hamas] were attracted by the possibility of participating in a political community that claims to confront the occupation without (until very recently) exposing its members to danger....Politically unaffiliated *shabab* [youth] who felt left out found harassing these [unveiled] women a safe way to express nationalist sentiment (Hammami 1990: 25 and 26).

Thus Hamas, in the face of a national enemy which showed little sign of having weakened after six bloody years of intifada, rearticulated the confrontation and its appropriate strategies by contending that the reason Palestinian Muslims have not been able to wrest Palestine from the hands of the infidels was that the nation had allowed itself to be weakened by internal pollutants. The first stage of struggle thus became the moral purification of the 'inside', and only after that goal had been achieved could the 'outside' be confronted successfully.

Hamas's redefinition of the struggle was as well a redefinition of the imagined community engaged in that struggle. This shift in the field of identity caused Christian Palestinians to query what sort of role they might play in a Palestinian entity in which a movement which tends to consider 'Palestinian' as synonymous with 'Islamic' has substantial influence. Christian Palestinians, whose religion can in that discourse be seen as a betrayal of their national identity, took little comfort from The Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement which cites a Hadith (written tradition alleging a statement or action of Mohammed) to assert that

The people of [Greater] Syria are Allah's lash in His hand. He wreaks His vengeance through them against whomsoever He wishes among His slaves. It is unthinkable that those who are double-faced among them should prosper over the faithful. They will certainly die out of grief and desperation (Hamas 1988: 12).

A survey taken in 1991 showed that 34.9 per cent of Christian Palestinians in Jerusalem and the West Bank intended to emigrate in the near future (Kreutz 1992: 271, but see also Sabella 1996) and, although most gave lack of job opportunities and a dearth of housing as their primary reasons for leaving, growing anxiety about the increasing influence of Hamas was voiced.

Tamari has argued that a central weakness of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Arab Nationalist movements in Greater Syria (the area which is now Lebanon, Syria and Israel and the Occupied Territories) was their failure to develop a popular culture in which images of secular identity could be celebrated (Tamari 1992). In the absence of such a domain for the recognition of trans-sectarian identities, the identities foregrounded in periods of political struggle can only be those that arise from realms of personal and familial life and these, in a context like that of the Middle East in which religious confession plays such a central role, are almost exclusively sectarian. Antagonists, at such times, need only to exploit the differences between

confessional groups in order to fragment and disperse the forces they oppose³². One of the most telling strengths of Israel, a national community constituted out of a wide diversity of potentially conflicting communities (Paine 1989), has been its state's success in programmatically constructing precisely such a domain of popular national identity (Handelman 1990: 160–233) which, by overarching and subsuming the multiple sectarian identities of its Jewish population, holds the nation together in times of stress.

I have argued that the shrine of Bîr es-Sayideh must be seen as a manifestation of a similar programme, elaborated by a mixed Palestinian community, of creating public spaces in which residents of Beit Sahour recognized and celebrated a binding image of a trans-communal identity. I have focussed on the shrine in part because it was one of many salient manifestations of Beit Sahour's 'national' programme. Contemporary inquiry into the social significance of holy places connects with the work of Durkheim (1915), Halbwachs (1980) and Hertz (1983) elucidating the dialectical process through which social groups reify their sensed community in monuments and markers on the landscape they occupy and in turn recognize the spirit and power of that community when looking upon those edifices. In contrasting the interpretations imposed by Palestinian communities on Mar Elyas and Bîr es-Sayideh, I have shown how the multivocality of a holy place in the interpretations of the diverse communities which approach it can become 'fixed' in periods of intense social conflict by the recognition of the members of those various communities of an external antagonism which endangers the survival of all of them. At such times, a shrine like that of Bîr es-Sayideh not only reifies the new sense of community constituted through antagonism but also stands as a sign of the power of that new 'national' identity to impose its vision of community on the social and political landscape.

Afterword: December 2006

The original of the paper rendered above was written while the Madrid Negotiations were going on and before they were supplanted by the Oslo Accords. Today, in the wake of radical closure, extensive expansion of Israeli settlements, the *al-Aqsa* intifada, the death of Arafat, the erection of 'the Wall', and Hamas's success in parliamentary elections, the situation in Gaza and the West Bank is desperate, and the celebratory tone of the above paean to secular nationalism sounds hopelessly utopic. I cannot deal with the panoply of issues these events and developments throw up, but I will attempt – in focussing on post-intifada developments around the two shrines treated in the paper – to suggest some of the ways in which projects of cross-communal solidarity were undermined and to indicate, despite this, the continuing significance of the images of identity shared sites such as Mar Elyas and Bîr es-Sayideh were able to generate.

Mar Elyas

Between the early seventies and 1991 the Palestinian population of the West Bank had been offered relatively unimpeded access to Israel via its 'general exit permit' policy; while this was only extended to Gazans in the eighties, and restrictions on political activists and other 'security risks' began to be applied during the first intifada, the 'open borders' policy served generally both to strengthen links between Palestinians 'inside' Israel and those in the Occupied Territories as well as to make residents of the Territories increasingly dependent on work in neighbouring Israel (Bornstein 2002: 41–47). In 1991, as the Gulf War loomed, this policy was replaced by a pass card system substantially restricting movement across the 'Green Line' (the 1949 Armistice Line) and plunging the West Bank and Gaza into an economic crisis which has continued to worsen until

32 Porath points out that the British sowed discord between the various Palestinian groups fighting against them in the Arab Revolt (rural and urban, Christian, Druze and Muslim, radicals and moderates, Husseini and Nashashibi) by emphasizing the antagonism of other factions to the particular interests of each (Porath 1977: 249; see also Johnson 1982).

now. Amira Hass, who has chronicled the development and effects of Israel's closure policies since their beginning, notes that

...in March 1993 the entire municipality of East Jerusalem, which Israel greatly expanded and annexed in 1967, was incorporated de facto into the no-entry Israeli territory. Ever since that time, the Palestinian cultural, religious, institutional, economic and commercial capital has been encircled, with ever-expanding bureaucratic measures and regulations forbidding or 'thinning' Palestinian entry into the city. At first, only men under forty needed permits, then women as well, and finally everybody of all ages required them (Hass 2002: 8).

Mar Elyas, which lies between -- and had linked -- Jerusalem's Old City and the Bethlehem District 'from time Immemorial', was from then on on the Israeli side of the border.

In 1994 I spent the summer in Beit Sahour and attended the two days of the Feast of the Prophet Elijah at Mar Elyas (1-2 August). Many Sahouris planned to attend the monastery, and word circulated beforehand that the Israeli military, in acknowledgement of the feast, had agreed to move the checkpoint so as to allow access to the people of the Bethlehem, Beit Sahour and Beit Jala. Despite this, on the day the checkpoint remained in place and buses hired by townspeople for the event (cars were not allowed through the checkpoint) were stopped and their passengers' ID cards checked by soldiers who allowed Christians through but turned Muslims³³ back saying 'what does this feast have to do with you?'. On the 2nd of August the Beit Jala scouts, intent on attending to fulfill their traditional role of assisting at the feast, were detained at the checkpoint for two hours and only allowed through after I -- a foreigner -- engaged in a twenty minute argument with the officer in charge about the illegality of his action (as we subsequently passed through the checkpoint we were individually photographed by another soldier).

During the difficult years of the intifada, when the dictum 'no celebration under occupation' had been in force (or enforced), few if any local people had attended the monastery. Consequently there was great excitement in 1994 amongst those planning to attend about seeing the place, and the festivities, for the first time since 1986. When, however, they disembarked in front of the monastery they found that the extensive olive groves which had surrounded the ancient building had been dug up in the course of the government's building of the 'Za'tara Bypass Road' (a 'settler road' between Jerusalem and Tequ'a neither passing through nor allowing access to or from Palestinian towns or villages); whatever remained of the fields in which picnicking had taken place had as well been fenced off. All that was left of the previously extensive monastic grounds was the small paved parvis in front of the monastery entrance. Debate still rages as to whether the notoriously corrupt patriarch of the Orthodox Church, well known for selling land to Israel, had sold the lands or whether the Israeli state had confiscated them, but regardless the effect was that there was no place for attendees to gather except inside the church itself.

The interior of the church had been extensively refurbished by the patriarchate, and new frescoes brightened the walls and the ceilings. Inside there were substantial crowds of people made up of visitors from the Palestinian diaspora who came back to a site they remembered from childhood, of local Orthodox and Catholic Christians from Jerusalem and Bethlehem districts, of substantial numbers of Russian Orthodox who had emigrated from Russia to Israel as Jews (but who were in fact committed Christians), and of -- of course -- members of the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre. There were no Muslims, and while some said this was because they had been refused access by the soldiers others claimed that Muslims were no longer interested in the place

³³ The identity cards required by the military authorities clearly indicate the religious affiliation of their bearers.

because they were being called on to 'hate the cross' by non-local Hamas activists. While Russian and other foreign Christians perched around the inside of the church through the extensive liturgies, often protecting candles they'd lit and mounted on the floor, visits by Christian Palestinians were short. Local Palestinians would enter and, seeing that they had no access to the chain³⁴, pray and light candles at the iconostasis before leaving either to stand in the dusty parvis waiting for the liturgy to end and the chain to become accessible or to remount their hired buses and return home. For Christian Palestinians, local or diasporic, the experience was a great disappointment and the feeling was that 'their' festival had been stolen. Here though the community imagined as having been violated was distinctly Palestinian Christian; Muslims were seen as having withdrawn into 'their' own spaces.

Over the following years permission to cross the checkpoint to access the monastery became harder and harder to gain whilst interest in the feast diminished, with Catholic and Orthodox churchgoers respectively celebrating the feast of the Prophet Elijah in their own churches according to their own calendars. By 1998 the traditional meeting at *Mar Elyas* by excited crowds from the Bethlehem District of the 'Holy Fire' (*Sabta Nur*) -- brought from the *Anastasis* or Holy Sepulchre on the Saturday of Easter Week -- had been attenuated to the degree that the Beit Sahouri delegation allowed through the checkpoint consisted of two Orthodox priests, the chairman and secretary of the Orthodox Society and a driver. In 2002, with the new Har Homa settlement increasingly crowding the monastery and 'the Wall' rising to seal the ghetto that had been Bethlehem, Beit Sahour and Beit Jala (Bowman 2004), it became impossible to access Mar Elyas for all but the most 'connected', and while the liturgies of the 1st and 2nd of August continued to be held in the monastery they had become 'in church' functions in all senses of the word.

Bir es-Sayideh

During that same summer, 1994, I was taken aback, while talking with my landlady and her husband's mother -- both Latin Sahouris -- to be told by the former that *Bir es-Sayideh* was not owned by the Municipality but was owned and operated by the Greek Orthodox Church. The original version of *Nationalizing the Sacred* had been published a mere nine months earlier, and I was horrified to discover -- so soon after announcing the presence of the 'Municipal Shrine' to the anthropological world -- that I had apparently collected incorrect data and misrepresented the place and the people. Fortunately for my self-esteem and reputation, and interestingly for the topic here discussed, the mother-in-law quickly retorted that the other woman was wrong, that the shrine was municipal property and that, while the caretaker was 'borrowed' from the Orthodox Church, the site was owned by the town and used by members of all its resident communities. At the time I analysed this disagreement as a matter of professional position and of age; whilst the daughter in law was a middle-aged university lecturer her mother in law was an elderly (and devout) housewife. The daughter in law was more involved with the academic community of Bethlehem University than with the local Beit Sahouri townsfolk, and was, furthermore, not likely to visit miraculous shrines in search of cures or blessings.

Over my next couple of visits to the town I frequently visited *Bir es-Sayideh*. It was as often closed as open, but when it was open it was clean and full of gifts given by local people (most often young or elderly women) who would, after saying prayers at the altar, resort to the back where the same old man I first saw there would give them water from the cistern. The town appeared to have more urgent things to do, and worry about, than *Bir es-Sayideh*, but there was nothing to sign to me that the shrine was anything other than one of a number of 'quilting

³⁴ Unlike in the past, the Orthodox clergy took the chain away whilst religious ceremonies were being carried out, and people could only access it when liturgical activities had ceased.

points' (*points de capiton*) where the religiously diverse citizenry of Beit Sahour manifested, and to some degree celebrated, their situational consanguinity.

Two incidents in the spring of 1998 indicated to me, however, that a 'tearing' had taken place. The nephew of one of my chief informants -- the Muslim schoolteacher who had told me in 1990 that 'we must nationalize our beliefs, ... rebuild our customs so they reflect our national life' -- told me in my informant's unresponsive presence that the land where *Bir es-Sayideh* stood had been

confiscated from my family and taken by the community only to, after a while, be handed over to the church. The Muslims, who respect Mary, worshipped that place as well, and we were happy to share it with the Christians as long as they didn't put a cross on top of it -- they did.

In another interview a couple of weeks later, a wealthy Orthodox businessman, who had returned to Beit Sahour in 1991 after being deported from Kuwait in the wake of the First Gulf War, spoke of his newly acquired chairmanship of the *Bir es-Sayideh Committee* and of his plans to buy the market and clear it, creating a park which would surround an enlarged shrine opening in time for *Bethlehem 2000*. For him, the shrine was distinctly Christian (although Orthodox, he had photos of his meeting with the pope on the walls of his office) and there was no room for Muslim participation in his plans: 'the Muslims want to be represented but it is inconceivable -- unacceptable -- that we be concerned with the issues of the mosque'³⁵. He was adamant that Christians in Palestine were being peripheralised in the new political order and had to unite as Christians to struggle against Muslim domination:

We are becoming a minority; things are getting worse between us. We cannot sustain each other....As Christians we must be one hand. I am first Christian; then Palestinian [and] I support Christians wherever they are persecuted.

This Sahouri 'returnee' brought back with him images of persecution in Kuwait ('no crosses allowed on the top of churches...Christians afraid of saying they are Christians') and projected these onto his perceptions of intercommunal relations in Beit Sahour³⁶, proposing as an antidote to what he perceived as Muslim antagonism the construction of a shared *Christian* shrine over *Bir es-Sayideh* which would provide a locus of identity and unite local Christians as 'one hand' raised in opposition to the *new* enemy, the Muslims.

Ironically, just as the Orthodox chair of the *Bir es-Sayideh Committee* was launching grandiose (and, like those of *Bethlehem 2000*, eventually aborted) plans for a site of Palestinian Christian solidarity, the new priest of the town's Catholic church -- a Jordanian national who had a PhD in theology from a prestigious U.S. university -- was telling me that

I won't give masses in *Bir es-Sayideh*, even though I have the right to, because it smacks of superstition. I've told the people that if they want to pray there they can go and do so, but they don't need a priest.

The priest's 'textualist' hostility to folk religion, perhaps symptomatic of a swing towards a fundamentalist literalism affecting mainstream Christian, Jewish and Islamic communities not only in Palestine but as well throughout the contemporary world, defined the parameters of an 'imagined community' (see Anderson 1991 and above) of proper Catholics, and in that imagining there was

³⁵ During this interview I discovered that the *Bir es-Sayideh Committee* was, and perhaps always had been, exclusively Christian; it was made up (at least in 1998, as it is today) of two Greek Orthodox Palestinians, one Catholic, one Greek Catholic and a Municipal representative who 'represents them (the Muslims) even though he is Christian'. Whether Muslims were not represented because of opposition to formal participation by the Muslim religious leadership or because Christians on the Municipality overruled official Muslim involvement is something I will seek to find out this spring on my return to the town.

³⁶ see my 'Migrant Labour': Constructing Homeland in the Exilic Imagination' (Bowman 2002).

no room for the rank superstition promoted by shrines such as *Bir es-Sayideh* or the nearby *Milk Grotto*³⁷. Catholics were in no way prevented from going to the shrine, but, once attendance had been publicly marked as something disreputable and peasant-like, it was far less likely that they would talk about doing so other than amongst close friends and family.

In preparing this paper for *Chronos* I asked a foreign researcher, resident in Beit Sahour, to find out about the current status of *Bir es-Sayideh*. He replied:

According to several sources that I have spoken to so far, the Greek Church owns absolutely everything. They always have owned everything and they don't (and never have) shared anything with anyone.

Waymarks: in Place of a Conclusion

The destruction of Muslim-Christian conviviality around *Mar Elyas* can be directly linked to Israeli actions³⁸; the state's acquisition of the monastic grounds and its sealing off of the site off from its chief catchment areas were, like its subsequent erection of the wall between Bethlehem District and *Mar Elyas*, manifestations of its perduring will to disempower, to divide, to exclude, and to cast out Palestinians. What has led to the fairly comprehensive destruction of sharing and mixing around *Bir es-Sayideh* seems more complex; here a congeries of local decisions, redefinitions, actions, and importations have interacted within the wider contexts of occupation, of thwarted governance and of growing sectarianisms to ensure that what had been celebrated as a site of revolutionary sharing is uprooted from all but covert memory and remobilized towards ends radically different from those envisaged earlier. Nonetheless what has happened at *Bir es-Sayideh* and within Beit Sahour is, like what happened at *Mar Elyas*, also a matter of dividing communities and erecting exclusive barriers across spaces which had previously been perceived as common.

To return once again to the phrase of my late friend Yusuf Qassas (the previously mentioned Muslim schoolteacher), Beit Sahour in its revolutionary phase had striven to rebuild its customs 'to reflect its national life'. Such a project necessitated a vision of a national public and a public space shared by it; as Benedict Anderson argued in his seminal book (Anderson 1991), there was no need for people imagining the nation to know everyone in it -- it sufficed that they could imagine an extensive community of people who were 'like themselves' in sharing conditions of life, experiences of antagonism, and aspirations to overcome the latter. Beit Sahour in the period leading up to, and extending through, the first intifada served for Sahouris as a microcosm of the larger Palestinian nation, and the defensive barriers the townspeople threw up around themselves to keep the Israeli soldiers and settlers out were at the same time both delineations of an 'us' residing together behind them as well as prefigurations of the protective borders of a future sovereign state. *Bir es-Sayideh*, in fact and in rhetoric, was a condensation of that sense of a Palestinian public and its place which not only served a unified and multi-sectarian community but also brought into protective relation with that community a sacred and succouring figure -- the Virgin Mary -- revered by nearly everyone in the town, Muslim and Christian alike.

The contemporary situation as well brings cultural practices into alignment with forms of

³⁷ It is interesting the the historic antagonism between the Greek Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre and the Palestinian 'Arab Orthodox' communities (see above) -- manifest recently in Beit Sahour by the building by the Patriarchate of a 'Greek' Orthodox church at 'Shepherds' Field' to counter the 'Arab' Orthodox church in the town centre -- allows *Bir es-Sayideh* to remain an expression of respectable Sahouri Orthodoxy while it is increasingly spurned by Sahouri Catholics, whose relations with their Patriarchate are far less problematic.

³⁸ In 2003 a Bethlehem woman told me of 'gathering before the return of the PNA at Mar Elyas to greet the Holy Fire. Everyone was cheering and dancing and barbecuing, but the soldiers made trouble for scouts attempting to come from Beit Jala and ended up tear-gassing the monastery. I had to gather my children under a fan someone had set up for barbecuing; for three years after my children would cry with fright when I'd mention Mar Elyas'.

communal life, but today that life has for many ceased to be national and has instead become either communalistic or, in many cases, familial as the fragments of community pull back into the folds of those they feel they can trust. The brief period of apparent opportunity which followed the Oslo Accords -- a period of seemingly unrestrained building and investment literally blown away in 2000 by the Israeli military's response to the outbreak of the *Al Aqsa* intifada -- served to dissolve much of what had remained of the solidarity characteristic of the early days of the first intifada (see Bowman 2001), and various communities of the town, anticipating the exploitation of Palestinian others, consolidated themselves defensively behind sectarian or familial lines. In this atmosphere of mutual distrust, exacerbated by Israeli interventions and P.N.A. misgovernance, communal spaces -- traditionally at risk of falling into desuetude because no one 'owned' them (Zreik 1998: 41-44) -- once again lost their significance as markers of shared identity and were forgotten by some and claimed exclusively by others. In, for example, the 'town planning' agenda in the statements of the *Bir es-Sayideh* Committee's chairman the shrine not only becomes the exclusive property of Beit Sahour's Christians but does so via the eradication of the market, one of the town's central meeting sites. Simultaneously the 'ideal' Catholic community withdraws from shared sites and celebrations into the sanctity of its own spaces whilst the Muslims, resentful of the seeming 'Christian' agenda behind Municipal activities, retract into 'Muslim' spaces to fulminate over lost rights and sites. Stalwart supporters of the nationalist vision, largely leftist activists operating in internationally supported NGOs, continue to assert national unity but they do so in particular contexts and to select audiences; as a recent correspondent asserted

the leftists responsible for the national unity in Beit Sahour in the first place still think it exists. If you listen to them speaking, they will recall, *verbatim*, all the same statements from your text -- 'we are all Palestinian first and Christian second' etc. The primary difference however is that, in the past, they would have said this in front of a crowd at Christmas or something -- and maybe earned a cheer. Today, they only really say it to visitors because everyone else is so uncertain about the future that the statement would be laughed at.

What one sees, in engaging with and observing a particular place or population over an extended period of time, is that things are both determined and unfixed. In the case of Beit Sahour an earlier 'community despite difference' and 'solidarity in resistance' have for the most part dissolved into parochial antagonisms and desperate anomie. This dissolution has been brought about by the corrosive influences of indirect occupation, of corruption, and of the absence of representation in any unifying political *fora*. What the Wall makes evident, however, as it gathers behind itself the fertile valleys and water sources of Beit Sahour and neighbouring towns and villages while enclaving those communities away from Jerusalem and the rest of Palestine, is that the antagonism that provoked the solidarity which made Beit Sahour such a powerful icon in the first intifada is still very much present. Political analysis should be able to make evident to Sahouris and other Palestinians that what divides them into passionately opposed camps and gated communities are the social, economic, and political effects of living under a state which wants their collective disappearance. Such analysis, however, is undermined by the palpability of images of being somehow robbed, threatened, or dishonoured by neighbouring groups³⁹, especially in a situation where the immediate presence of the national enemy has withdrawn from everyday view, leaving only the neighbours to blame for the degradation of one's quality of life.

In such situations it seems vital that counter-images be promulgated, allowing for and

³⁹ See my 'Constitutive Violence and the Nationalist Imaginary: the Making of "the People" in Palestine and "Former Yugoslavia"' (Bowman 2005: especially 131-141).

prompting the imagining of forms of community other than those characterising the present. Utopic images of fantasised futures are not, however, effective if they fail to draw upon historical experiences; images of an ideal future, lacking the freight of some form of memory -- whether positive or negative, float free of the world and of the emotions they should instil. I would here cite, as an alternative formulation of mobilising images, Walter Benjamin's 'chips of Messianic time' (Benjamin 1969 [orig. 1950]: 263) and refer to his conception of moments of history, buried in the detritus of subsequent events, which can be recuperated to show ways in which the present might be seen and experienced differently⁴⁰. Here, I feel, is where it is important for Palestinians and others in the contemporary Middle East to remember *Mar Elyas*, *Bir es-Sayideh* and the forms of community that took shape around them. These places -- these ways of being -- need memorialisation so that the present can be revealed as only one of a number of possibilities of imagining community emerging from the past. Beit Sahouris, by remembering these, can remember themselves as a community, shaping themselves once again into one hand raised against the tyranny of the present.

Glenn Bowman
Department of Anthropology
University of Kent
Canterbury, United Kingdom
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⁴⁰ An exemplar of such utopic remembering is Alcalay's *After Jews and Arabs* (Alcalay 1993).

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