

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

August 18, 2016

Rosemary Sayigh, ed., *Yusif Sayigh: Arab Economist and Palestinian Patriot – A Fractured Life Story*, American University in Cairo Press, 2015, 376 pp., \$45.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9789774166716.

Because memory necessarily influences social, national, and historical processes, its investigation becomes essential in the understanding of identity, nationalism, power, and authority.¹ Rosemary Sayigh, an oral historian and anthropologist, utilizes these disciplinary methods to document and critically dissect Palestinian identity and culture. In particular, Sayigh uses voice recordings as her main method for data collection. She then reflects on the personal and collective Palestinian experiences she has recorded, weaving them into rich narratives that reveal and even explain the complex realities and politics in Palestine and the lived-experiences of Palestinians.²

In the book under review she likewise relies on voice recordings. However, this time the recorded subject is her husband, Yusif Sayigh. Her status as the subject's wife is a double-edged sword. On one hand, her foreknowledge of most of his life events led Rosemary Sayigh to play an interventionist role, directing the subject to focus on certain events and incidents and thus offering the reader a more dense historical account. On the other hand, perhaps she has compromised the full autonomy and agency of her subject, thereby denying the memoirs of a certain level of genuineness as opposed to what the subject himself might have viewed as essential to address had it not been for her specific line of questioning. For instance, the data collected here and presented in the form of a memoir focuses on the subject's formative years and his political engagement at the expense of a more personal account of his role as an economist. This, however, was also in large part the result of the subject's unavailability at later stages of the data collection process. The editor, nevertheless, reviewed her subject's work as a political economist and provides a reflective analysis of his approach.

Yusif Sayigh (1916-2004) was a Palestinian icon, a patriot, and a symbol for educated classes. His life spanned the history of Palestine during times of great turbulence in which he bore witness to the illegitimate designs for the Zionist state, Al-Nakba in 1948, Al-Naksa in 1967, the first Intifada, the Oslo Accords, and the second Intifada. His memoirs

¹ See: Edward Said, *The Landscape of Palestine: Equivocal Poetry* (Birzeit: Birzeit University, 1999).

² See: Rosemary Sayigh, *Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries*, with a Foreword by Noam Chomsky (London: Zed Books, 1979) and Rosemary Sayigh, *Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon* (London: Zed Books, 1994).

offer a comprehensive insight into Palestinian history, touching upon political, cultural, and social factors. Perhaps because of Rosemary Sayigh's role as his interviewer, with her keen interest in ethnography and what can be discovered through it about the formation of Palestinian national and social identity, these transcriptions of his oral testimonies cover topics ranging from feminism, nationalism, and education to kinship, cuisine, and social structure. Rich in content, the book is divided into three main sections, where the first chapters tackle the cultural and social dimensions of Palestinian life as experienced by Yusif chronologically from 1918 to 1950, leaving two final sections to discuss Palestinian politics and his work as an economist.

Culture and Social Life

The early chapters are comprised of accounts of the formative years of Yusif's life, which emerge with richness and immediacy, simultaneously illustrating the intricacies of a multitude of interpersonal relationships that cumulatively provide an account of Palestinian life and culture towards the first half of the twentieth century. Throughout he vividly describes social and cultural practices such as food, clothing, education, and social events. Chapter 2 focuses on Yusif's years (1925-1930) in Al-Bassa, a Palestinian village in the north of historic Palestine which was occupied in 1948 forcing its population to flee, especially after the news of the Deir Yassin massacre (67). In this chapter the memoir depicts weddings and feasts, as well as the art of storytelling as a form of celebratory entertainment. Life in Al-Bassa reflected simplicity and tolerance. Most inhabitants were farmers who relied on the land as an economic resource. People from different religions lived in harmony with one another and shared similar living habits, although the reader gets a more complicated sense of the village's social constructionism as reflected in spatial distribution and ethnoscares.

One interesting feature of the text is how Yusif's moves from one place to another draws a map of historic Palestine. In Tiberias, where he lived from 1930 until 1938, Yusif's memoirs attend to the architecture and landscape in such meticulous detail that readers can envision the villages and cities as if they were frozen in time. In combination with his accounts of social interactions, we also get a sense of the ways Palestinians used places as markers for identity. For example, his account of his mother's anxiety about being labeled "*Hay Al-shmaliyeb*" [this foreigner] by people in Busrah (33-34), and thus exclude her as "the other" based on her geographical origin, stands in stark contrast to how the people in Al-Bassa would refer to her as Umm Yusif [Yusif's mother] (Chapter 2); place thus becomes "a portion of space available or designated for someone."³

Palestinians' relationship with their homeland, signifying sovereignty and their right to ownership, is emphasized even further when Yusif describes how they were forced to leave their homes. Not only does the reader get a geographic perspective of Palestine, but she is also invited to contemplate boundaries, borders, and identities as systems of power. At times, people traveled from one place to another with ease, reflecting the openness and geographical connectedness in larger Syria (Chapter 4); in later years, however, economic and social flows are interrupted and disconnected, illustrating some of the effects of the Israeli occupation on geographical, cultural, and political segmentation. Billig's theory of

³ Here I cite "place" as defined by Abate & Jewell's Oxford Dictionary, 2001.

nationalism as a spatial ideology is especially apropos here being as it is keenly reflected in the context of Palestinian uprooting and the establishment of the Israeli State.⁴

Education likewise marked an important cultural and social construct for Yusif and his family. In Al-Bassa, people were not well educated. Umm Yusif, however, emphasized the importance of education and made an effort to provide learning opportunities for all her children; for her, education was a moral value and became the last frontier for social mobility within the context of a community that lost the basic means of providing for itself (i.e., land). This was not only a matter of family pride but was considered to have moral value. Access to good education was a constant struggle given the lack of reliable public education systems in Mandate Palestine and the limited financial resources of the family. Not surprisingly, education would remain a major theme in Yusif's life and work, including his economic approach to planning and development.

Palestinian Politics

The second section of the book draws attention to Palestinian politics and nationalism during times of great upheaval and change. Yusif Sayigh's political leanings were apparent early on in his college years as he developed interest in the PPS (The Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party) founded by Antoun Saadeh. The PPS, which was a secular and non-sectarian party that sought to reunite greater Syria, appealed to Yusif based on its political program which included a strong nationalist orientation, its stands against foreign intervention, and the need for Arab unity (Chapter 5). The PPS marked his first involvement with political parties and afforded Yusif, along with many other intellectual figures at the time, the opportunity to formulate a vision towards alternative political futures. However, as the PPS gradually shifted its emphasis toward greater Syria and away from the liberation of Palestine, he withdrew. This coincided with Sayigh's interest in the work of the Arab Higher Committee to unite all parties in Palestine as an effort to stop the growth of the Zionist state. The inclusion of this episode is pertinent to any socio-historical discussions surrounding past and current failures of Palestinian political leadership and to those that remain hopeful that a better political future is on the horizon for Palestine and the Palestinians.

In recounting his torturous years as a prisoner of war, Yusif sheds light on highly influential figures who he engaged about the importance of organization for the liberation of Palestine, including Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, and King Abdullah of Jordan. In later years, near the time of the Oslo Accords, Yusif was assigned to prepare an economic plan for a future Palestinian state. He was highly critical of the Palestinian leadership at the time and argued for the importance of planning for social and economic development. Yusif's insider stories provide a novel perspective on Palestinian leadership, who were in great need of his advice and strategic planning at the time. Nevertheless, they constantly ignored his suggestions and efforts, which eventually led him to quit his position as their economic consultant.

Yusif Sayigh the Economist

In the final chapter of the volume, Yusif reflects on the intersection between politics, justice, and economics. It wasn't until later in his life that Sayigh discovered his passion for

⁴ See: Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage Publications, 1995).

political economy (306). Yusif looked to the public sector and emphasized leadership responsibilities to achieve dynamic policies of social and economic development. His views were driven by his hope for a better Palestinian economy that would act as a necessary catalyst for social justice and national needs. For Yusif, economics was always both political and social. He read widely on political economy, socialism, and social systems. “For dynamic policies of social and political development,” Rosemary Sayigh observes, “Yusif looked to the public rather than the private sector” (302), and therefore to a responsible Arab leadership.

The last chapter gives a whole new perspective on how economic development amid political unrest ought to be practiced. The chapter is named after his book on the socio-economic components of the concept of Arab Nationalism. In his book, Yusif addresses growth and development and answers the social and economic problems of Arab Nationalism. For Yusif, Arab Nationalism could only be achieved with ensuring four main principals: justice; voluntarily acceptance of the new system away from class conflict; rationality in the distribution of economic roles among private and public sectors; and democracy. “Yusif saw the causes of underdevelopment in the legacy of colonialism, the primacy of the agricultural sector, the weakness of manufacturing” (302). Although bread and dignity focused on Arab economies in the 1950s and a bygone concept, Palestinian economic and political landscapes continue to face the same underlying issues as a result of unceasing Israeli prohibitions on social mobility, development of infrastructure, and access to land.

When Yusif was asked to develop the economic strategic plan to be presented during the negotiations that eventually resulted in the Oslo Accords, he produced 8 volumes—which he was forced to reduce and summarize in 15 pages. He also established the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR). His disappointment with political leadership forced him to resign and move back to Lebanon where his health deteriorated and spoiled his final years.

Concluding Observations

Many books have utilized Palestinian oral history as means to tying personal narratives to the formulation of a collective. For examples, one might turn to Adel Yehia’s collection of interviews with Palestinian patriots⁵ or the work of Azzam Abu al-Saud⁶ who uses stories and narratives of Jerusalemites to construct the city’s history. Abu al-Saud’s methods illustrate the history and give a sense of identity and location while at the same time using borrowed names for his subjects. In contrast with Abu al-Saud, Yusif Sayigh’s oral testimony as preserved by his wife Rosemary uses real names and therefore provides a more concrete and authentic understanding of the politics of Palestine, as well as its social structure.

As she has done in her other published works, in this carefully edited edition of her husband’s recollections, Rosemary Sayigh offers readers a window onto the singular experiences of a Palestinian who endured displacement, prison, and social-political upheaval, mourned the death of countless loved ones and compatriots, and fought for freedom and social justice, while also keeping sight of the larger political and social

⁵ See: Adel Yehia, *Between Two Intifadas: The Palestinian Oral History* (Ramallah: PACE publications, 2002).

⁶ A Palestinian author who wrote a series on the history of Jerusalem in the form of literature. See Azzam Abu Al-Saud, *Sabri* (Jerusalem: National Palestinian Theatre, 2008).

contexts. As such, *Yusif Sayigh: Arab Economist and Palestinian Patriot – A Fractured Life Story* is an important contribution to scholarship and will be of interest to anyone working in Palestinian Studies, Middle East Studies, history, anthropology, and memoir.

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Citation Information

Kuhail, Sarah, Review of *Yusif Sayigh: Arab Economist, Palestinian Patriot – A Fractured Life*, *SCTIW Review*, August 18, 2016. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1192>.

ISSN: 2374-9288