Gender and Settler Colonialism: Women's Oral Histories in the Naqab

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Project Summary

This feminist oral history project analyses Naqab Bedouin women's changing political activism against Israeli rule from 1948 to the present through women's own narratives. Although Naqab women have played (and continue to play) a crucial role in their community's struggle against Israeli settler-colonial policies, their historical accounts have so far received little attention. Failing to understand that 'the personal is political,' mainstream historiography often misrepresents women as politically inactive, and their accounts as irrelevant, apolitical, or even factually incorrect.

Based on ca. 100 video- and audio-recorded oral testimonies of Naqab women, this project proposes a gendered 'history from below' of the Naqab Bedouin as an alternative to official (largely archive-based) Israeli historiography, as well as other male and elite-dominated master-narratives. Doing so, it contributes to emerging 'indigenous' oral history projects on the Naqab (e.g. Nsasra, 2010), and the broader work of Israeli revisionist historians (Pappé, 1988; Shlaim, 1988). Preserving oral testimonies is crucial: survivors of the Nakba, i.e. witnesses of the 1948 expulsion, are becoming few. Given that Naqab Bedouin culture is largely based on orality, the life stories, historical narratives and cultural knowledge of elderly Bedouin women are likely to be lost, if not recorded now.

The collected data will be analysed through the theoretical lens of settler colonialism. Israeli control relies on the continuous elimination/resettlement of the indigenous population, and re-inhabitation of the land with Israeli settlers (e.g. Yiftachel, 2008). Following recent theorising on gender and settler colonialism (Settler Colonial Studies, 2012b), this study proposes that Israeli military, sedentarisation, modernisation, transfer and other settler-colonial policies have transformed local gender norms and practices. Such a theoretical frame warrants comparison with Palestinian women's activism in the West Bank, which - like Naqab Bedouin's - takes place within and against varying forms of settler colonialism. This comparative analysis, which relies on secondary literature and original fieldwork data collected by the PI during her PhD research in the West Bank, will contribute insights to the burgeoning theorising in the field of gender and settler colonialism.

The recordings will be preserved in the physical and virtual Negev Bedouin Heritage Archive, leaving a local legacy, strengthening the community's cultural, political and historical consciousness, and serving as a widely accessible resource for the general public. Additional outcomes include a documentary film, a community-oriented workshop in the Naqab, two academic/policy-oriented workshops in the UK and US (involving Amnesty International, UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues), an international academic conference (leading to an edited volume of Nomadic Peoples Journal), a monograph, and a journal article.

Proposing a methodology new to this context (feminist oral history) to research an understudied empirical field (the Naqab) from a novel theoretical lens (gender and settler colonialism), the project will make important contributions to gender, settler-colonial, Palestine and broader Middle East studies.