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Soap Factories in Nablus: Palestinian Heritage (*turâth*) at the Local Level

Véronique Bontemps

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Introduction

In an exhibit called Present Tense, the British-Palestinian artist Mona Hatum drew the map of the Oslo Accords on pieces of Nâbulî soap, using small red pins.

More insidious than destructive acts or military invasions, the map is also a form of violence. It underlines here the very violence that emerged from the Oslo Accords,¹ that is, the fragmentation of the Palestinian Territories. The pieces of soap on which the map is drawn represent the essential but fragmented character of Palestinian identity. At the same time, while looking at this strange map, one can breathe the familiar smell of olive oil, and Nâbulî soap is indeed famous for not melting so easily. White and cube-shaped, Nâbulî soap *stays* and does not *change*. Soap, as a metaphor of heritage seems however, to be continuously threatened with dissolution or of being destroyed. The work of art thus discreetly underlines the continuous internal resistance (*sumûd*) that characterizes Palestinian society under occupation. Nâbulî soap is therefore used as a metaphor to express a wider identity: that of the Palestinian people and their resilience on the ground, despite the material and symbolic violence they endure in everyday life. This paper discusses the various levels of Palestinian heritage (*turâth*) through the example of a particular item of Palestinian culture: soap and soap-factories in Nablus. It aims at understanding how this product of a small local industry has been and is still constructed as a material expression of heritage.

When thinking about Palestinian heritage, one immediately sees it within the context of a conflict with the Israeli occupier in terms of territorial legitimacy; yet, this political aspect obscures the fact that Palestinian heritage is itself multi-layered. In this paper, I argue that there is a dissonance between a narrative of national resistance to Israeli occupation, in which Nâbulî soap has recently been included; and local perceptions and representations that show it as an aspect of local, familial and urban heritage. The coexistence between these two sets of discourses reflects the tension between “authorized discourse²” on heritage, as shaped by social and intellectual authorities in Palestine throughout the 20th century on the one hand; and the particular relation to heritage, as constructed in everyday life by local individuals, on the other hand. But it also expresses, as I argue, the inherent “multivocacy”³ of the Palestinian field of heritage through the various levels in which a particular item can be claimed as such: between affirmation of local anchorage, familial belonging and broader claims for national identity.

My argument is that the recent inscription of Nâbulî soap into a narrative of Palestinian resistance (*sumûd*) comes to obscure its importance as an aspect of local, familial and urban heritage. Moreover, by fixing Nâbulî soap-production within a ‘traditional’ identity, it also obscures the issue of its modernization: on the local level, soap-industry is first and foremost an economic activity. But if Nâbulî soap has never really ‘modernized’, it is not only for

¹ More precisely, the Oslo II Accords (September 1995) that divided the Palestinian Territories in three kinds of areas: A, B and C.

² Laurajane Smith, *Uses of heritage*, Routledge, New York, 2006, p. 4.

³ Chiara Di Cesari, *Cultural Heritage Beyond the “State”: Palestinian Heritage between Nationalism and Transnationalism*, PhD, University of Stanford, 2008, p. 107.

economic reasons. It also has to do with local representations of soap and soap-industry, which illustrate a tension between a product of everyday life and a signifier of the past – thus, as I argue, as an ‘in-between heritage’.

Recent evolutions in the uses and reshaping of soap-heritage show however, how the national and the local can be combined in patrimonializing Nâbulî soap and soap-factories, and how subaltern or alternative management of heritage on the part of NGOs or local associations can succeed today in reshaping it, and giving it new meanings. While targeting a particular (i.e. Western) public, these initiatives also promote new conceptions of heritage, which give priority to “adaptive re-use”⁴ rather than to mere conservation of the past.⁵

1°) Nâbulî Soap Industry and Heritage in the Palestinian Context

This section summarizes the development of soap-industry in Nablus.⁶ Besides providing chronological markers, it also gives an idea about the material basis from which Nâbulî soap factories were constructed as a symbol of a local power base for the urban Nâbulî bourgeoisie, and of the changing forces which maintained the need for its continuation, from its ‘golden age’ until its decline in the second part of the 20th century.

1. About Nâbulî Soap

Soap making is a very old tradition in the Middle East, as well as in all the Mediterranean area. It still has a domestic production in villages; women make soap at home using the remaining olive oil from the yearly harvest. It developed in Nablus as an urban industry, as the ruling families of the city invested in this field from the 18th century onward. Following a renovation program of these factories during the second half of the 19th century, soap making became a flourishing industry; with more than thirty soap factories, Nablus was exporting soap in all the Middle East, mostly to Egypt.⁷ This success was mostly due to the fact that Nâbulî soap was made of olive oil, the primary agricultural product of the Nablus district. Nablus is also located near the east bank of the Jordan River where *qilî*,⁸ the second most important raw material for soap, grew abundantly. At the time, soap production was a profitable investment. The impressive soap-factory buildings interspersed throughout the old city of Nablus became symbols of wealth and prestige for their owners.⁹

In the 1930s, Nâbulî soap experienced its first important setback.¹⁰ Two reasons are usually given for this. First, the lack of legal protection for the name ‘Nâbulî’ caused numerous cases of counterfeiting, especially in Egypt. In order to face this problem, the soap

⁴ Ibid., p. 129.

⁵ This paper relies on the fieldwork which I conducted in Nablus for my PhD between 2004 and 2008. I would like to thank PRIO-Cyprus for inviting me to present my research at its annual conference in Nicosia in 2010, as well as Roger Heacock who advised me to submit a paper for this conference.

⁶ For a more extensive historical overview, see Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine. Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus (1700-1900)*, London, University of California Press, 1995, and Véronique Bontemps, *Soap from Nablus. A small history of Nâbulî soap*, http://www.nablusguide.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=42&Itemid=65&lang=en.

⁷ Beshara Doumani, op. cit.

⁸ The *qilî* was obtained by burning a wild plant of the steppe and reducing it to ashes.

⁹ Beshara Doumani, op. cit.

¹⁰ Ali Nusuh Tâher, *Shajarat al-zaytûn. Tarîkhuhâ, amrâduhâ, sinâ'atuhâ (The Olive Tree. History, Diseases, Industry)*, Jaffa, 1947; Husam Sharif, *Sinâ'at al-sâbûn al-nâbulî (Nâbulî soap-industry)*, Nablus, Municipality of Nablus, 1999.

factories constituted themselves as registered companies with brand names¹¹ to ensure the quality of the soap. The second reason was the imposition of taxes on the import of soap by Syria and Egypt. In addition, competition intensified with the Jewish mechanized industry that succeeded in obtaining tax exemptions from the British Mandate.¹² The Shemen factory for oil and soap, in particular, was established in 1922 near Haifa with a capital of 25 000 pounds (that is, almost as much as the 24 soap-factories in Nablus combined).¹³

Power relation patterns between soap-factory owners and workers changed in the 1950s along with the introduction of what has been called ‘green soap’. This soap is made from *jift* oil, in other words, from the remains of pressed olives and pits. It was used to clean floors and for laundry. In turn, this soap made of cheaper oil made it possible for former workers to start new soap factories and produce soap for themselves. The 20th century also saw transformations in the raw materials used in soap production: the *qilî* was replaced by caustic soda in the 1920s and, even more importantly, olive oil is now being imported from Italy, mostly for economic reasons. The traditional process of production, however, has not changed significantly.

The first Intifada marked the final decline for soap-industry. Green soap factories of smaller size were the victims of the introduction of detergents and washing machines. For many of the old city’s factories, the work became dangerous as the old city became the target of Israeli attacks during the first Intifada. Thus, many of them closed in the 1990s. But the most important reason for this decline is probably the competition by cheaper foreign soap products (such as Lux and Palmolive), as well as the introduction of new consumption models that led young generations to prefer shampoo and perfumed soaps.

The situation has even worsened since the outbreak of the second Intifada in September 2000, and the reoccupation in 2002 of the major cities of the West Bank by the Israeli army. This time, however, there was renewed local interest for soap-factories. After they had been targetted by Israeli assaults, new discourses emerged that glorified Nâbulî soap as a symbol of resistance to occupation, thus inscribing it in the broader narrative of Palestinian heritage (*turâth*) where it had not figured prominently until then.

In the next section, I give an overview of the “authorized discourses”¹⁴ on heritage (*turâth*) in Palestine, according to the way that Palestinian folklorists have historically shaped them. This should in turn help us understand the meaning of this belated inclusion of Nâbulî soap and soap-factories into a national narrative of Palestinian *turâth*.

2. Aspects of Palestinian Heritage: From the ‘Nativist Ethnographers’ of the British Mandate to the Struggle against Occupation

In her book about pilgrimages and nationalism in Palestine,¹⁵ Emma Aubin-Boltanski

¹¹ These brands are often symbols or names of animals: *Muftahayn* (the two keys), *al-Jamal* (the camel), *al-Na’ama* (the ostrich), *al-Najma* (the star), *al-Baqara* (the cow), *al-Badr* (the full moon), *al-Asad* (the lion) and others. Slogans were also added on the packaging such as “*al-Sâbûn al-Nâbulî al-Mumtâz*” (Nablus soap extra-fine) or “*al-Ma’rûf*” (the famous one).

¹² Sarah Graham-Brown, « The Political Economy of the Jabal Nablus, 1920-1948 », in Owen, R., (ed.), *Studies in the Economic and Social History of Palestine in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Oxford, St Antony’s College, 1982, p. 88-176.

¹³ Ironically, advertisement for the Shemen soap says that it is made of “100 % olive oil of Nablus quality”, thus establishing the ‘Nâbulî soap’ as a label of quality (Sarah Graham-Brown, *Palestinians and their society, 1880-1946: a Photographic Essay*, London, Quartet Books, 1980, p. 115).

¹⁴ Laurajane Smith, op. cit., p. 4.

¹⁵ Emma Aubin-Boltanski, *Pèlerinages et nationalisme en Palestine. Prophètes, héros et ancêtres*, Paris, EHESS, 2007.

describes the important place of folklore (*fulklûr*) in the Palestinian society. She also underlines the fundamental role of folklorists (these “Palestinian intellectuals and scholars, interested in heritage and local tradition”¹⁶) in the process of constructing an object or a practice as being part of *turâth*. Palestinian folklorists took charge of the formation and shaping of a common national heritage – such an action was all the more important in Palestine, where national identity was both denied and attacked by another national identity related to the Zionist undertaking.

Scholars generally consider that the beginning of a discourse on *turâth* (heritage) in Palestine is to be found in the “Nativist ethnography”¹⁷ of Tawfiq Canaan and his circle¹⁸ during the British Mandate. These Palestinian intellectuals from Jerusalem were writing mainly within the framework of learned societies, addressing the political elite of the Mandate as well as archaeologists and Western historians. They organized what is considered to be the first authorized discourse on *turâth*, through the idea that the Palestinian peasant represents a ‘living example’ of everyday life as it was lived during Biblical times.¹⁹ Convinced that the essence of Palestinian cultural heritage, as personified by its peasant heritage, was endangered by the penetration of Western modernity, they assigned themselves the task and responsibility to collect, classify and describe this already disappearing culture.

The works of these folklorists have been criticized (mostly by Palestinian scholars) for the ‘essentialism’ and ‘reductionism’ of their theses. Nevertheless, they produced a very rich ethnography, deeply sensitive to the “details of local practices, to variations over time (...) and to the interpretation of these practices in their wider social context”²⁰.

These works are to be understood within the framework of what Tamari calls a “proto-nationalist”²¹ context, at a key period (the British Mandate) when Palestinian modern identity was being forged.²² Their works contain elements that would stay at the center of conceptions about Palestinian popular heritage until a very recent date: the idea of Palestinian identity as fundamentally related to the peasant. Even if the latter folklorist movements relied on an ideology proclaiming the existence of Canaanite roots (prior to Judaism) in the reconstruction of Palestinian identity,²³ the idea that the peasant is the authentic soul of the Palestinian nation²⁴ would stay as a key concept in the movements of national liberation in the 1970s and the 1980s.

After the *nakba* (disaster, catastrophe)²⁵ of 1948, but mostly after 1967 when Israel

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 161.

¹⁷ Salim Tamari, “Lepers, Lunatics and Saints: The Nativist Ethnography of Tawfiq Canaan and his Jerusalem Circle”, *Jerusalem Quartely*, Vol. 5, no. 1, 2004, p. 25.

¹⁸ Tawfiq Canaan (1882-1964) was a doctor and the son of a Protestant Lutheran pastor. He published a great number of articles and books (both in English and in German) on Palestinian popular culture. During the 1920s and 1930s, his works, as well as those of his colleagues such as Khalil Totah, Omar Saleh al-Barghouti, Stephan Hanna Stephan and Elias Haddad) were published in the *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*. Canaan and his colleagues did not constitute a proper group but they shared a certain number of attributes, for example, they placed Biblical parallels and references at the core of their observations of the Palestinian popular culture (Salim Tamari, op. cit.).

¹⁹ Emma Aubin-Boltanski, op. cit.; Chiara Di Cesari, op. cit. ; Salim Tamari, op. cit.

²⁰ Salim Tamari, op. cit., p. 39. He in fact adds that the richness of the analysis often contradicts the essentialism of the concepts.

²¹ Ibid., p. 38.

²² Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, Columbia University Press, 1997.

²³ Salim Tamari, op. cit., p. 29. This Canaanite ideology is still vivid nowadays through certain festivals. It has nevertheless been criticized by Palestinian intellectuals such as Zakariyya Mohammad.

²⁴ Nadine Picaudou (ed.), *Territoires palestiniens de mémoire*, Paris, Karthala, 2006 ; Ted Swedenburg, “The Palestinian Peasant as National Signifier”, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 63 (1), 1990, p. 18-30.

²⁵ For Arabs, this name refers to the creation of the state of Israel and the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian from their land, mostly to the surrounding Arab countries.

occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the ethnographic work of Canaan was revived by a folklorist movement intimately linked to the project of national liberation, cultural resistance to Israel and colonization. This movement aimed at collecting all the elements of ‘popular heritage’ (*al-turâth al-sha‘bî*) and folklore (*fulklûr*), including immaterial heritage such as oral literature, songs, folkloric dances, know-how and crafts (e.g. pottery, ceramics and embroidery). The infrastructure of the movement was formed by associations coming from the civil society, which were mostly women’s groups and research centres²⁶ that linked preservation of popular heritage to political emancipation.²⁷ This folklorist movement contributed toward nourishing the image of a Palestinian heritage fixed in a rural and peasant identity. In this respect, while the process of domestic soap-making by women in the village found its natural place in this context,²⁸ folklorists did not pay much attention to soap production in Nablus, an industry mostly run by the urban wealthy bourgeoisie.²⁹

The Nablus municipality published the first comprehensive study about Nâbulî soap industry in 1999.³⁰ If its author, a Nâbulî local historian, wrote it during the first Intifada (1987-1993), the date of publication is significant. The period that followed the Oslo Accords was indeed that of a renewed interest for heritage on the part of the new Palestinian Authority. For the new leaders of a proto-state, it was a means to assert its legitimacy for the purpose of bringing together and unifying diverse elements of a Palestinian national identity.³¹ As Chiara Di Cesari puts it, heritage framed as a ‘national problem’ was deeply intertwined with the broader project of building the Palestinian nation-state:³² its peculiarities and varieties had to find a place in the large spectrum of resources which characterized Palestinian nationalism. Significantly, in the preface of the book, a former mayor of Nablus explains that the Nâbulî soap industry has gained “an international reputation (...) as a craft linked to Palestinian oil”,³³ thus explicitly giving a national dimension to Nâbulî soap through this reference to *Palestinian* and not *olive-oil*.

3. Nâbulî Soap Endangered: Soap-Factories as a Symbol of *Sumûd*

The outbreak of the Second Intifada and the reoccupation of the major cities of the West Bank by the Israeli army were a severe blow to the Nâbulî soap industry. Besides the drop in exportations (from 1,200 to 700 or 800 tons per year), two old soap factories were totally destroyed in the old city of Nablus. This period saw the birth of new discourses on the soap factories, emphasizing the need to preserve their memory as visible traces of the past. Articles

²⁶ The most famous amongst them is *In‘âsh al-Usra* (Revival of the Family), founded by Samiha Khalil at the end of the 1960s.

²⁷ Emma Aubin-Boltanski, op. cit.; Maher Charif, *Le patrimoine culturel palestinien*, Paris, Le Sycomore, 1980; Chiara Di Cesari, op. cit.

²⁸ In 1973, the Centre of Research on Palestinian Heritage and Society in al-Bireh conducted and published a study on popular heritage in Palestine through the example of a specific village in the West Bank, Turmus‘aya. The eleventh chapter in this study entitled: “Popular industry in the village” presents the soap-industry among other villager industries. The first issue of *al-Turâth wa al-Mujtama‘* (“Heritage and Society”), a journal published by the same centre, contains an article on ‘agricultural activities of the Birzeit peasant’; this article cites soap, which was mostly made by women, among the agricultural productions.

²⁹ There is very little mention in the works of the folklorists in the 70s and 80s of Nâbulî soap factories, except for an article in 1975 in *al-Turâth wa al-Mujtama‘*. Interestingly, the *Encyclopaedia of Palestinian folklore* (edited by the famous Palestinian folklorist Nimr Sirha) does not include a single notice on Nâbulî soap, and only shows a single photograph of the pouring process (the *bast*) of soap in one of Nablus’s factories.

³⁰ Husam Sharif, op. cit.

³¹ See Emma Aubin-Boltanski, op. cit.

³² Chiara Di Cesari, op. cit., p. 108.

³³ Husam Sharif, op. cit., preface.

in the local newspapers and on internet started to refer to Nâbulî soap as a vestige of a glorious past, an icon of Palestinian culture and national heritage, as well as the symbol of Palestinian resistance to occupation.

A Master dissertation defended at al-Najah University in Nablus on the architecture of the Nâbulî soap factories asserts that “(...) there is an urgent need to gather information about soap factories before they are totally destroyed and this information lost forever (...)”.³⁴ Later on, the author stresses the need to “preserve Palestinian heritage on the ground, in order to stand up to Israeli politics which try to replace this authentic identity, and to destroy its features”.³⁵ In 2005, in the conclusion of an article entitled “Nâbulî soap, ambassador of Palestinian heritage”, the author evoked a wall of soap that was built by a Palestinian delegation in a congress at the Dead Sea. According to her, it was a way to “(...) show another aspect of this struggling people, and to give a good image of Palestinian heritage”.³⁶

Here, Nâbulî soap became *Palestinian* soap as a symbol of national and cultural identity, in struggle for Palestinian rights: in other words, an example of *sumûd* (steadfastness). This kind of rhetoric referring to the Palestinian heritage as being in danger of destruction is not new. Indeed, as mentioned previously, it was quite a common topic to the discourse on heritage and folklore in Palestine. What is relatively new, however, is the fact of placing soap factories into this heritage, by using rhetorical references of ‘urgency’ and ‘rescue of culture’.

Nonetheless, this ideological discourse which fixes Nâbulî soap heritage as a frozen symbol of resistance to occupation came to obscure its various meanings and significance on the local level, as well as its development through time. Before becoming a symbol, Nâbulî soap was the product of the local industry, as well as a consumer product. It is therefore through these various meanings, as well as the way that the inhabitants of Nablus experience the development of soap as a symbol, that we can seek to understand how it is constructed as heritage through everyday practices and representations.

In the following section, various practices of Nâbulî soap are presented. Both as a local industry and a heritage, it is facing a fundamental dilemma: namely, that it has to modernize to survive. Yet, if it modernized, as the inhabitants of Nablus say, “It would not be Nâbulî soap anymore”. By examining how ordinary people consider Nâbulî soap in their everyday representations and practices, I try to show that this dilemma is constitutive of the meaning of Nâbulî soap-industry as an “in-between” heritage.

2°) Practices of Nâbulî Soap

When I started my fieldwork in Nablus in 2005, soap was still produced manually³⁷ in the three large factories³⁸ which were still operating: the Tûqân, the Masrî and the Shaka‘a³⁹ factories. Around 80 % of Nâbulî soap production is exported to Jordan, relying on old family ties between Nablus and the East Bank of the Jordan River. In Nablus, along with *knâfa* (a tasty pastry made of cheese and sugar), soap is still considered to be a specialty of the

³⁴ Mona Salameh, *‘Amârat al-masâbin wa ‘alâqatuhâ bi-l-takhtî al-‘imrânî li madînat Nâblus al-qadîma* (Soap Factory Buildings and their Relation to the Urban Fabric in the Old City of Nablus), Master in Architecture, al-Najâh University, Nablus, 2003, p. I (my translation).

³⁵ Ibid., Introduction (my translation).

³⁶ Mirvat ‘Aûf, *Sâbûn Nâblus, safir al-turâth al-filasînî* (Nablus Soap, Ambassador of Palestinian Heritage), www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1178724155783&pagename=Zone-Arabic-ArtCulture%2FACALayout (2 October 2009), article from the 22 September 2005 (my translation).

³⁷ Except for some minor transformations. See Véronique Bontemps, op. cit.

³⁸ Some small factories also functioned occasionally.

³⁹ The owners are three large and wealthy families of Nablus.

city. Indeed, it is still renowned in the Middle East for its quality.

In 2005, the soap industry was doing rather poorly. Supplying the factories with raw materials was getting increasingly difficult. Year after year, sales declined and profits fell. Abû Amjad, the accountant at the Tûqân factory, criticized the Palestinian Authority for not protecting this local industry, either by funding it or exempting it of taxes. He also criticized the lack of interest on the part of the owners themselves. He accused them of neglecting their industry: they did not bother to advertise or to open new markets⁴⁰, nor did they try to modernize it.

The reason for this problem lays in the fact that soap-factory owners preserve their factory more for *symbolic* than economic reasons. Indeed, the primary meaning of Nâbulî soap-heritage is related to family honour: for important families in Nablus, soap factories are first and foremost linked to familial heritage, as a marker of their long-established urban identity.

1. 'For the Name': Soap-Factories as a Family Heritage

As for Sabih al-Masrî, his politics on that matter is one of preservation (*hifâz*)... The first thing is that it belongs to our family's heritage... And at the same time, it is the preservation of his father's name.⁴¹

Through the preservation of their factory, big families mean to preserve the name of their family: having a soap-factory is still a criterion of family greatness in Nablus. The soap factory is kept as a souvenir of this greatness, and in recognition of the original activity of the family, which contributed towards building its wealth and social position. It is also a matter of social recognition and family honour within the framework of Nâbulî urban society. As the accountant of the Masrî factory told me:

As I told you, it's also that the soap factory has the name of the family (...) for the Masrî family to close its soap factory is shameful (*'aîb*), in the city... in Nablus... They will say: "Why is the Masrî family closing its factory?"⁴²

Mahdi Ya'ish, a former soap producer whom I met in 2007, told me that the family factory was closed because of security reasons. Indeed, he feared that groups of young people (*shabab*) would enter the factory in the old city and use it as a base for armed operations. He told me:

If it was not for the security situation, I would have it (the factory) re-opened. I would do it for the name. Because the idea is not to make money... I owe it to my grandparents, you know... This is what counts for me, I am not trying to make money.⁴³

The soap factory also has a symbolic meaning: it is a sign of historic urban belonging that is woven into the fabric of the old city, with all the familial prestige that this entails. To own a soap factory, one of the symbolic pillars of the Nâbulî nobility until the twentieth century, is to distance oneself from the nouveau riche and newcomers in the city. Despite its decline, it is

⁴⁰ They relied on the local Palestinian market which is gradually shrinking, and on long-existing exportation networks to Jordan.

⁴¹ Interview with a member of Masrî family, Nablus, 2005 (my translation).

⁴² Interview with the accountant of the Masrî factory, Nablus, 2005, (my translation).

⁴³ Interview with Mahdi Ya'ish, Nablus, 2007, (my translation).

still an important sign of urban belonging because it is linked to the authenticity of the family name.

Today, however, the economic interests of the big families are of another dimension. For example, in 1994, the Hajj Tâhir al-Masrî company started to invest in several fields, along with the arrival of the Palestinian Authority. Soap factories are now only minor branches of the economic activity of the large families which own them. The paradox is indeed that while the preservation of heritage is one of the reasons for the survival of Nâbulî soap factories, it is, at the same time, the reason for their decline. For the Tûqân, Shaka'a and Masrî families, the preservation of familial heritage relies on affective ties and a strong feeling of belonging to their city, but they are not willing to invest and modernize the soap factories, or to promote their heritage. They keep the factory open without trying to keep it alive.

2. "It did not Work": The Paradox of Modernization and 'Authenticity'

Why did the Nâbulî soap industry never really modernize? There have actually been attempts throughout the 20th century to mechanize the production and vary the ingredients, even though some factory owners sometimes seemed reluctant. As early as 1916, Rafîq Tamîmî and Mohammad Bahjat, two Ottoman officials who had been sent to collect information and write a guide about the southern half of the Beirut district,⁴⁴ wrote that the tools used for soap making in Nablus were 'primitive'. They added that the soap-factory owners should introduce proper tools and material in their industry.⁴⁵

In 1927, Antonin Jaussen visited the Tûqân soap factory and made a similar comment. He saw the conservatism of the soap-factory owners as a common feature of the 'Oriental mentality', and their 'narrow-mindedness' as typically Nâbulî.⁴⁶ Later on, in an article on the political economy of the district of Nablus, Sarah Graham-Brown considered the soap industry in Nablus as a perfect illustration of "the effects of the changing structure within which the agriculturally based industries had to operate and of the inability or reluctance of their owners to adapt to it".⁴⁷

In 1923, Hajj Nimr al-Nâbulî was the first soap-factory owner to import machines. Later on, in the 1950s and 1960s, producers from the Nâbulî and the Kana'an families imported machines from England and Germany. During my fieldwork, workers at the Masrî and Shaka'a soap factories showed me samples of soap to testify to the attempts made by the owners to mechanize the work and make soap 'like Lux'⁴⁸ – but in the end, the conclusion was always the same: "It did not work".

It is indeed a widespread opinion in Nablus that "the problem of the Nâbulî soap factories is that they did not renew their work".⁴⁹ 'Renewal', 'improvement', 'development', 'modernization'... a multiplicity of terms are employed, all converging to the same idea: should we look at the fabrication process or at the shape or packaging of Nâbulî soap, the problem of its competitiveness is often attributed to its difficulty to face 'modernity'.

The inhabitants of Nablus themselves often attribute the lack of modernization of Nâbulî

⁴⁴ Beshara Doumani, op. cit., p. 150.

⁴⁵ Mohammad Bahjat, Rafîq Tamîmî, *Wilâyat Bayrût, al-qism al-janûbî*, (The Beirut District: the Southern Part), Beirut, al-Iqbâl, 1916, p. 102.

⁴⁶ Antonin Jaussen, *Naplouse et son district*, Paris, Geuthner, p. 260

⁴⁷ Sarah Graham-Brown, "The Political Economy of the Jabal Nablus, 1920-1948", in Roger Owen (ed.), *Studies in the Economic and Social History of Palestine in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Oxford, St Antony's College, 1982, p. 140.

⁴⁸ In reference to the soap trademark "Lux" (my translation).

⁴⁹ Interview with merchants in Nablus, 2006 (my translation).

soap to a problem of ‘mentality’ (*‘aqliyya*). As a member of the Shaka’a family once told me:

The problem with those people working with soap... they work with the old mentality (*al-‘aqliyya al-qadîma*) of my father and grandfather... Some of them tried to think about how to develop... They tried, they didn’t succeed, they gave up. Amîn (director of the Tûqân soap factory), you tell him to change, he tells you no. He tells you it will not be Nâbulî soap anymore. If you go and see Amîn’s client and tell him that Muftahayn soap⁵⁰ has become like that, he will tell you “No, it’s not Muftahayn soap, I don’t want it”.⁵¹

If Nâbulî soap did not ‘develop’, it is also because changing one or another of its characteristics – in the eyes of a customer who is used to it – would be to change its ‘identity’: “it would not be Nâbulî soap anymore”. In order to better understand the difficulties of modernizing Nâbulî soap, we have to open the black box of its ‘identity’ and authenticity, by presenting some features of this identity that are both material and symbolic. This is not to suggest that Nâbulî soap has an essential and authentic ‘identity’ that should be discovered or unfolded. In fact, what makes Nâbulî soap a form of heritage, and what is constitutive of it, is not so much the object in itself but rather the *relation* that people develop to it, their use of it, and the set of representations that they create about it.

In the next section, I present some local representations about what is – or should be – Nâbulî soap; that is to say, some collective images that define the idea of ‘heritage’ for Nâbulîs. For this I rely on local literature as well as on conversations and observations. Written sources often converge with memories of the inhabitants, creating images and representations that constitute a common base of references, which Maurice Halbwachs calls “social frames of memory”.⁵² Through these frames, which are constantly constituted and reconstituted by the community according to Halbwachs, individuals depict their signs and references in order to organize their memories. These collective frameworks engender representations without being explicitly present in the minds of the people. They often fix Nâbulî soap as an ‘object of the past’, which sometimes contradicts their practices of a product of everyday use.

3. Features and Representations: Nâbulî Soap as an Object of the Past

History books, memoirs and autobiographies on Nablus all have a passage on the soap industry, from Ihsan Nimr’s (the famous local historian) *Tarîkh Jabal Nâblus wa al-Balqa’* (History of Nablus and the Balqa’)⁵³ to the autobiography of Muhammad Darwaza, *Mi’at ‘âmm filastîniyya* (One Hundred Palestinian Years)⁵⁴ to the Nâbulî poet Mâlik Masrî’s *Nâbulsiyyât* (Things of Nablus)⁵⁵.

When referring to Nâbulî soap, these written sources generally evoke several aspects of the industry: the materials and ingredients formerly needed to make soap (that is to say, olive oil and *qilî*); the huge buildings of the soap factories; the soap itself with its basic cubic shape; and, finally, the manufacturing handmade process. Through these representations, the soap (as

⁵⁰ Muftahayn (the two keys) is the trademark of the Tûqân soap factory.

⁵¹ Interview with Mahmud Shaka’a, 2007, (my translation).

⁵² Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1994 (1st edition 1925)

⁵³ Ihsan Nimr, *Tarîkh Jabal Nâblus wa al-Balqa’*, al-Nasr al-tijâriyya, 1936-1961, Nablus.

⁵⁴ Muhammad Darwaza, *Mi’at ‘âmm filastîniyya, Mudhakkirât wa tasjîlât*, first volume, Amman, Palestinian Association for History and Archaeology, 1983.

⁵⁵ Mâlik Masrî, *Nâbulsiyyât*, Nablus, Khâlid Ibn al-Walîd, 1997.

an object) and the industry itself often disappear behind what they ‘represent’: the sacred dimension of the olive tree, the memory of a flourishing city...



Photo 1: A soap-factory in the old city of Nablus



Photo 2: Muftahayn ("two keys") soap

The reference to olive oil anchors Nâbulî soap in a locality as well as in a sacred tradition, as olive trees and olive oil are mentioned in the Quran.⁵⁶ Most people in Nablus actually seem unaware of the fact that Nâbulî soap is no longer made with local Palestinian olive oil. I noticed this when speaking at a conference at the French cultural center in Nablus in 2005: I explained that in the three large factories still operating in the city, soap was produced nowadays with refined olive oil imported from Italy. This information surprised the audience. This example shows the ambiguity of representation and its tenacity: for Nâbulî inhabitants, it is indeed the pureness and quality of olive oil that gives soap its particular characteristics.

The second ingredient traditionally used for soap making, the *qilî*, was a key-element for exchange and trade between the Bedouin tribes and the merchants of Nablus. The evocation of the *qilî* is a pretext for highlighting these commercial relations at a time when Nablus was the capital of the entire region, and a crossroad for caravans.⁵⁷ Some images are frequently and regularly evoked, such as the camel caravans that used to bring olive oil in goatskin flasks into the soap factories until the 1960s.

When remembering the activity of the soap factories in the old city, inhabitants often evoke a reconstructed harmony of social relations, which are supposedly lost today: for example, the habit of some factory owners to freely distribute the remnants of the olive pits which were used for fuel. Through its traditional ingredients, one can see the reconstruction of the prosperity of Nâbulî soap, which was linked to a ‘golden age’ (*al-fatrah al-dhahâbiyya*) of the city itself; prosperity attested by the regular journeys of peasants to the soap factory in town, in order to sell their oil. When referring to ‘their’ soap, Nâbulîs often recall or

⁵⁶ *Le Coran*, sura XXIV “The Light”, Paris, Albin Michel, 1990, XXIV 35, p. 376.

⁵⁷ Ihsan Nimr, op. cit.; John L. Burckhardt, *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land*, London, J. Murray, 1822.

reconstruct a past which is more than often idealized, and which strongly contrasts the current economic situation of their city.⁵⁸ For owners of a soap factory but also for ordinary Nâbulîs, preservation of Nâbulî soap is not the maintenance of a living activity, but rather the memory of a disappearing era.

4. To 'Understand' this Soap: Nâbulî Soap as an 'In-Between' Heritage

The actual decline of the Nâbulî soap industry is also a consequence of the diminution of local consumption: people who still buy and use it today are getting older. While they remain adamant in praising the good qualities of 'their' soap, they constitute a population of mostly persons aged sixty years or more. Younger generations, in particular, prefer to use shampoo or other foreign products that appear more 'modern' and of better quality. As Abû Hishâm, a small soap producer, told me once: "People don't understand this soap anymore. And the more people who understand it are dying... the more our work is diminishing."⁵⁹

To 'understand this soap' is to know its characteristics and to appreciate its quality, which is linked with the purity of olive oil. According to Nâbulî inhabitants, Nâbulî soap is very efficient against dandruff, which makes it an excellent product to wash one's hair. Another characteristic is that it does not foam easily but indeed, only when the skin is perfectly clean.⁶⁰

The *materiality* of this 'identity' itself has a symbolic side: the issue here is not to question whether these qualities of Nâbulî soap are real, but rather to stress the fact that older Nâbulî inhabitants really believe in them, thus defining this "system of regulated dispositions" that Pierre Bourdieu calls a *habitus*.⁶¹ An old Nâbulî housewife polishes her pots with Nâbulî soap – not because it's *nâbulî* but, as she will tell you, because the olive oil gives it a good shine. At the same time, by doing this, she is performing the socially recognized *habitus* of a Nâbulî woman.

The relationship of Nâbulîs to their soap is therefore deeply ambiguous. Many of them do not use it anymore. And for those who use it, Nâbulî soap is far from being an anonymous product that can easily be transformed. It has a deeply affective dimension. For its customers, who are often older Nâbulîs used to the soap's shape and aspect, it expresses the memory of a bygone past, which keeps on surviving through the use of this soap. It is not a mere thing, but it crystallizes ties and time. Considered as archaic or unique, it can also become a sign of nostalgia or of remembrances of the past, "when Nablus was Nablus" as Nâbulî inhabitants like to say.

Krzysztof Pomian considers that an object (a 'cultural good') is established as heritage according to a sequence: first, the object is a simple 'thing' (a good to be used, i.e. a consumer good); it then becomes a 'waste material' when it loses this function (as something to be used); it finally becomes a 'semiophor' which means that "it bears visible characteristics capable of receiving new meanings".⁶² It acquires a new function, which is no longer the utilitarian function of simple 'things', but also a function to recall the past.

⁵⁸ Even if this situation seems to be a bit better today due to the opening, in July 2009, of the main checkpoints closing the city.

⁵⁹ Interview with Abû Hishâm in Nablus, 2007 (my translation).

⁶⁰ People often refer to a joke made by an Egyptian actor invited to Nablus in the 1960s by a member of the Shaka'a family. When offered a piece of Nâbulî soap, he said: « So you have to wash with another soap first, and then use Nâbulî soap! »

⁶¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*, Paris, Seuil, 2000 (1st ed. 1972).

⁶² Krzysztof Pomian, « Musée et patrimoine », in Henri-Pierre Jeudy (ed.), *Patrimoines en folie*, Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1990, p. 177-198.

Today, soap industry in Nablus is in an ‘in-between’ situation: between preservation of its ‘traditional’ identity and the necessity to survive and adapt to a globalized market. Its decline is partly due to the fact that it did not modernize. But if it changed to better fit the more ‘modern’ requirements of everyday use, it would cease to exist as *Nâbulî* soap: “It would not be *Nâbulî* soap anymore”. *Nâbulî* soap thus occupies a liminal space between an everyday object and a heritage symbol: while it is still used as a thing in the present, it is also seen as a symbol of a glorious past. Its transformation into heritage is still an ongoing and slow process, changing little by little, without a central authority that would take this transformation in charge.

3°) Reinventing *Nâbulî* Soap

1. A ‘New Palestinian Past’

In the absence of real investment on the part of the Palestinian Authority or even by the owners themselves, independent structures and individual initiatives tried to take over this transformation of *Nâbulî* soap as an element of heritage. For the past few years, there have been initiatives made by small groups, private foundations and local NGOs, which have decided to invest in *Nâbulî* soap and soap factories.

These various initiatives have something in common: they try to escape the dilemma between preservation and modernization, by following new conceptions of heritage that emerged in Palestine in the 1990s, with the work of NGOs which focused primarily on the architectural heritage of the old urban centers of Palestine. This new generation of architects tried to restore and preserve the important architectural heritage of Palestine both from the erosion of time, and from the destruction caused by the occupation.

This field, which Di Cesari calls a “new Palestinian past”,⁶³ focuses on a close and less essentialized past and on the *re-use for the present* rather than cautious *conservation* of the past. Associations such as the Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation (CCHP) in Bethlehem and the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee (HRC) promote notions, at the core of their projects, like ‘adaptation for public use’ or ‘adaptive re-use’, which allow for the reshaping of heritage according to the needs of present time.⁶⁴ In Nablus, descendants of the famous soap-manufacturer Sheikh ‘Amr ‘Arafât created a small foundation in order to refurbish the old family soap factory. The architect Nâsir ‘Arafat (the grand-nephew of Sheikh ‘Amr) began to restore it in 2005 in order to create a small cultural center for children, with a small space dedicated to a soap museum. The aim of such an initiative is to re-use the factory buildings by adapting them to other practices and activities.

2. Back to the Authentic?

All these initiatives (associations and NGOs) recognize the ‘traditional product’ not as the reproduction of a so-called heritage of the past, but rather as a social construction. They in turn share an assessment: they notice that the only major transformation recently introduced into the soap industry, namely, the use of industrial European oils instead of Palestinian olive oil, led to it being pulled out from its local roots. In order to revive the industry, it has to be re-anchored with its old roots.

⁶³ “(...) a close past, (...) vernacular, lived, small-scale, centred on the home rather than the palace. Rather than displayed in a glass case, this is a past to be creatively put to use for socio-economic development, or, in other words, a site of cultural production for the present » Chiara Di Cesari, op. cit., p. 65.

⁶⁴ See, for example, the site of CCHP: www.cchp.ps.

For these groups, the issue then is less to *preserve* Nâbulî soap than to revive tradition by ‘returning’ to the use of Palestinian olive oil. At the same time, they try to mechanize part of the process, in order to give soap a nicer and more attractive shape and aspect. In their opinion, returning (*i’âda*) to the roots of the industry, along with improving the shape of the soap in order to meet the demand of a ‘modern’ public, could result in a successful ‘revival of tradition through innovation’.⁶⁵

For Hâjj Mu‘taz al-Nâbulî, grand-nephew of the famous soap-maker Hâjj Nimr al-Nâbulî (the first soap-maker to import machines), mechanization of the process linked to the re-use of local olive oil was the key to a possible ‘rebirth’ of Nâbulî soap. Hâjj Mu‘taz al-Nâbulî experimented with a different way to produce soap:

(...) with a shape and weight (100 grams) that would suit the local *and* foreign consumer, which would look like the Lux soap, and yet would be 100 % olive oil, and would have all the advantages of the Nâbulî soap”.⁶⁶

In order to do that, a ‘radical change’ (as he said) was needed in the production process, because he did not want to introduce any material that would not be olive oil.

During the period of my fieldwork in Nablus, I followed the development of his attempts to ‘improve’ Nâbulî soap. He never showed me what he called his ‘laboratory’ (where he made his experiments) but he gave me samples of his new soap, as well as a bottle of liquid soap (as he also did to any tourist passing by). Hâjj Mu‘taz distributed his products in some drugstores, but the price was too high to allow for a proper diffusion.



Photo 3: ‘Improved’ Nâbulî soap

3. A Solution through Export?

One small soap-manufacturer in Nablus told me once: “The Nâbulî client wants something cheap, or he wants his piece of Nâbulî soap.”⁶⁷ Indeed, there seems to be no real market for this kind of ‘improved’ soap in Nablus: in fact, all associations and NGOs involved in reshaping Nâbulî soap turn to exportation. The public targeted by this re-invented product is, above all, a Western public: the idea is to take advantage of the current interest in natural products. In Syria, it is these new export networks toward the West that have allowed the revival and boom of the Aleppo soap industry during the past twenty years.

⁶⁵ For several examples of this process in France, see Christian Bromberger & Denis Chevallier (ed.), *Carrières d’objets. Innovations et relances*, Paris, Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1999.

⁶⁶ Interview with Hâjj Mu‘taz al-Nâbulî, Nablus 2005 (my translation).

⁶⁷ Interview with Mustafâ Tbeîla, Nablus 2006 (my translation).

Unlike those exported by the soap factories of Aleppo, however, the quantities of Nâbulî soap exports are quite limited: two or three tons maximum, ordered by associations in France, Canada and Great Britain which support Palestinians.

In the extremely politicized and controversial context of Palestine, a significant amount (if not all) of the exports go through activist networks, which already import other products like olive oil. The idea is to produce a soap whose shape, aspect and packaging please the Western consumer while, at the same time, let him feel that he is buying a little piece of Palestine. Reference to olive oil, the major ingredient in the soap, enhances here both its *traditional* and *national* character. It engenders representations to a large extent stereotyped for some groups of activists, who have a certain idea of Palestine as ‘authentic’ versus an aggressive ‘modernity’ represented by Israel.

By re-inscribing Nâbulî soap in its very local roots (the re-use of Palestinian local olive oil), these initiatives also promote it, for a Western public, to a national character. It is thus re-embedded within the larger frame of *sumûd*, i.e. daily Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation. Whereas Nâbulî soap and the soap industry, as a representation of fixed heritage, refer first and foremost to the nostalgic memory of the city, it can be reinvested with new meanings that show the malleability and ‘multivocacy’ of Palestinian heritage.

Conclusion

For heritage studies, the Palestinian field often appears like a laboratory in which to observe practices and discourses of heritage in the absence of a proper nation-state. But if there is no Palestinian state, there is nevertheless an authorized discourse on heritage, which was first defined by folklorists and then by the Palestinian National Authority. This authorized discourse is itself far from being monolithic: it is historically defined, more than often in reaction against the Zionist image, and then in relation to the Israeli occupier and the national struggle for a Palestinian state. There are also local, sometimes subaltern practices that appear in opposition to the remolding of this heritage, or simply in dissonance with the authorized discourse that defines the ‘true’ objects of heritage.⁶⁸

Nâbulî soap is indeed a very local heritage that people cherish because they are used to it, because they think olive oil is good for their skin, and because it reminds them of old and better times. It is difficult, however, to totally separate heritage from its political aspects. By examining local representations and practices, I tried to show how ordinary objects can take an officially inscribed national significance, while retaining other values and meanings in daily use, as well as the ways that everyday actions (such as scrubbing the dishes or washing one’s hair) can be infused with overtones of national heritage.

In the last part of this article, I also showed how, in the overwhelming context of territorial conflict, Nâbulî soap is detoured away from its local meaning in order to be turned ‘towards a Western public’ as an image and symbol of Palestine. This is another example of dissonance, but which shows that heritage is far from being a fixed object, and that ‘revival’ or rebirth of heritage often means reshaping and creating by targeting a particular public.

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For the examples of pilgrimages, see Aubin-Boltanski 2007.