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# No State, no NGOs: Reflection on Families' Approach in Converting Traditional Houses into Local Museums in Palestine

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## Abstract

What benefits can a family-focused museum approach offer in addressing the everyday challenges faced by local communities in Palestine? If state-funded museums are usually located in urban metropolises and subscribe to universalised approaches to museum practice, what spatiality and regime of values do family-based museums embrace? What memory do they pertain to remember? What histories, written and oral, do they present? What materiality do they exhibit in assembling their family museums? In answering this question, this article explores how families' commitment to protecting and managing cultural heritage can turn their houses into new spatiotemporal spaces: As family museums, they open up the possibilities to restore affection, knowledge, experience, living legacy, success, and doubt in families' experience of preserving heritage outside the realm of quasi-state apparatus like the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and NGOs. It is through the reclaiming of and epistemological accreditation of this agency that families restore their silenced voices. This article intends to implement a shift in how local knowledge is sourced, shared, and represented by exploring the relationship between family and knowledge in a context of occupation. It examines how family-generated knowledge can inform and shape our understanding of the world and can be a powerful tool for preserving, rehabilitating and vindicating cultural heritage under the Israeli colonial regime.

## 1. Introduction

Ali Shreteh's deep interest in cultural heritage and museums has led him to establish a family museum in their ancestral home located in Al Mazra'a al-Qibliya, near Ramallah. Despite their financial limitations, he took the initiative to partially renovate the house to showcase their family's collection. In an interview the authors conducted with him via WhatsApp in October 2023, Ali expressed his passion by stating that 'the museum is no longer a private collection; it is a shared space, a collective space.' Ali Shreteh's family museum illustrates agentic spatiotemporality, one of the most intriguing examples of how subjects can assert their agency in the shadow of the Palestinian Museum at Birziet University's (Cobbing, 2016, p. 155).

If the Palestinian Museum, a Swiss-registered non-governmental association with a branch in Palestine that opened in 2016 in the West Bank, can be considered as a 'space of critique, resistance and decoloniality in the convoluted colonial context of Post-Oslo Palestine' (Toukan, 2018, p. 18), an anticipation of a [quasi]-state-to-come (De Cesari, 2019), a space of *sumud* (steadfastness) (Burke, 2020) or it exemplifies an "Alter-Native conception of self-determination"; as one of the many ongoing experiments with alternative sovereignty (Abu-Lughod, 2020, p. 23), what benefits can a family-focused museum approach offer in addressing the everyday challenges faced by local communities? If state-funded museums are usually located in urban metropolises and subscribe to universalised approaches to museum practice (Mataga et al., 2022), what spatiality and regime of values do family-based museums embrace? What memory do they pertain to remember? What histories, written and oral, do they present? What materiality do they exhibit in assembling their family museums? In answering these questions, this article explores how families' commitment to protecting and managing cultural heritage can turn their houses into museums, and the museums into new spatiotemporal spaces.

The point of departure in answering these questions in this article is a (self-) reflection on families' approach to converting traditional houses in Palestine into local museums that are located outside the realm of the PNA and NGOs. To aid the analysis, three case studies have been presented of Palestinian families converting traditional houses into local museums in villages in the West Bank. The authors family house is among the examples. Utilising diverse research methods, this article thoroughly con-

ducts a self-reflection to Mazen Iwaisi's family project to restore and convert the family traditional house into a local museum. Furthermore, it provides a comprehensive genealogy to enhance the study's context. Through Mazen Iwaisi's diligent involvement, on-site visits, and semi-structured interviews with Ali Shreteh, the founder of the local museum in Al Mazra'a al-Qibliya and Fayege Awais, the founder of the Lam-sat Umi Museum in Deir, Dibwan, near Ramallah, explore how these museums came to exist, how they are supported, what they exhibit, and who visits them.

While the text focuses on the three case studies as a first step in a broader project to map local museums in Palestine, it also conveys broader theoretical literature on the topic: Scholars have conducted thorough research on private and family museums and collections situated in urban centres like Jerusalem, Ramallah, Bethlehem, and Nablus. However, museums located in small towns and villages have not received the same level of attention. Although the focus of this article is not on the different methods of writing history, our writing is informed by Peter Laslett's (1987) and Emma Shaw's (2021) critic regarding celebratory presentations of history, and the strength of family history approaches. Laslett (1987) cautions against interpreting history in a backwards manner and stresses the importance of a more critical approach. Conversely, Shaw (2021) highlights that family historians, that means members of the family writing the family's history, despite their lack of formal training in research methodologies, display a nuanced understanding of the principles of historical analysis when creating and sharing their familial histories. Our study emphasizes the importance of (self-)reflection in avoiding hagiographic presentations of history, thereby promoting a more critical and nuanced understanding of the past.

Similar observations are made by scholars studying other contexts: Our argument is in line with the findings of Mataga et al. (2022: 2) regarding local museums in Zimbabwe. Their study revealed that these museums use unstructured methods and approaches to knowledge production, which are not guided by disciplinary experts. Instead, the community relies on family and local experts who possess a deep understanding of the subject matter. They have a non-linear and fluid conception of time and materiality, making them the preferred source of knowledge within the community.

In doing so, this article challenges the dominant narrative and practice governing museums in Palestine by reflecting on how families assembled their approach in converting their traditional houses into local museums. This article is also a seed of a larger project to map museums that are located in rural areas in Palestine, aiming to explore local approaches in preservation and protection of cultural heritage. The questions that arise are: When families decide to curate and exhibit their private collections, what approach do they follow? What role does their knowledge play in re-shaping the definition of the museum? What challenges do these initiatives face? What is the state's perspective on these efforts? These operational questions are vital to address. Furthermore, more persistent theoretical questions arise. What narratives are established, and what value does scholarship in museum studies add to this debate? Additionally, what are the implications for local communities in terms of cultural representation and the preservation of cultural heritage?

To answer these questions, we rest our argument on local ways of knowing, closely tied to objects and places, that have been marginalised by national museums, often portraying them as mere superstitions. Additionally, we draw from Doreen Massey's conceptualization of the "local" as key to understanding cultural contexts (1994, p. 119). Andrew Fleming's advocacy further corroborates this notion, proposing that 'local matters may engender trains of thought which open much wider issues (the dividend of empiricism)' (2012, p. 461). Mataga et al. (2022, p.3) study proposes that privately owned small or independent museums and cultural centres are sites where emergent perspectives can be pursued. These comprehend a renewed understanding of time and space: We argue that the spatiotemporality of these museums reclaims the family's agentic role.

Based on the experience of three family museums in Palestine, our article demonstrates how museums built from traditional houses can embody the everyday spatiotemporality of a family, and represent an ongoing, dynamic, contested, and evolving process. By speaking of spatiotemporality in family museums we refer to the active and dynamic presence of the family's history, culture and materiality within the museum space. The concept allows for the exploration of personal narratives, the preservation of collective memory, and the creation of a meaningful connection between the past, present, and future. The restored house, as a local museum, embodies the

everyday experiences of families intertwined with Henri Lefebvre's idea that the everyday should not only be studied as a significant object of inquiry and a site of conflicts, but as a realm of transformation (Summa, 2021, p. 61).

To give attention to such transformations in this article, section one examines the uncertainty of the museum as a cultural institution in Palestine amidst the policies and agendas of the (Quasi)-state and NGOs. In particular, we examine the Palestinian Museum at Birzeit University, which received substantial funding of \$24 million for its construction in 2016. While the museum is crucial in showcasing Palestinian culture, its presence has inadvertently diminished the visibility and accessibility of smaller local museums in nearby towns and villages. Meanwhile, section two examines how family reflection allows for a shifting episteme in restoring the agentic spatiotemporal life of family museums in Palestine. 'These small, independent museums present an opportunity for local communities to foreground their cultural selves, curate their own representation, and tell stories from their experience' (Mataga et al., 2022: 2). Therefore, we believe it is essential to provide support for smaller museums, which have managed to persevere despite facing various challenges, including lack of funding, whether from public or private sources. Section three presents three case studies that show the museums as spaces of living practices.

### **(Quasi-) state and NGO and the uncertainty of the museum as a cultural institution in Palestine**

In the past decade, there has been an increase in criticism of museum studies highlighting how national museums in Africa and Asia are direct products of museums established during the colonial era (Chambers et al., 2014). Such interpretation aligns with Mataga et al., stand that 'the narrative of the smaller cultural groups has largely been excluded in the narratives and displays at the public-owned institutions' (2022, p. 20). New critical directions have examined how museums have evolved, how they are perceived, and how they can be improved and sustained. The purposes (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007) and ethics (Marstine et al., 2013) of many museums have become increasingly critical, focusing on transparency, repatriation, and ethical collection practices. Moreover, aims and practices (Vartiainen & Enkenberg, 2013), representations (Moira Simpson, 2012), and the transition of museums from modern to postmodern have challenged the traditional view of communication and education

within museum settings (Mejcher-Atassi & Schwartz, 2012, p. 17). This paradigm shift has resulted in a greater emphasis on visitor experience, multiple perspectives, and the exploration of diverse narratives, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and dynamic museum environment. These changes have been stimulated by new cultural, political, and economic factors and influenced by the shifting interests of the public. Museums have had to contemplate how to fit into an ever-changing world and provide meaningful experiences for their visitors (Falk & Dierking, 2011).

While the literature on family visits to museums has flourished both quantitatively and qualitatively in Europe and North America (Beaumont, 2006; Watson, 2007, 2020; Wu et al., 2010; Black, 2012; Povis, 2017), Arab research on this topic has been relatively underdeveloped (Boushnaki, 2011; Muna, 2015). Collecting practices are often mentioned in studies on the development of modern and contemporary art in the region (Mejcher-Atassi, and Schwartz, 2012, p.18-20). The focus was merely on museums in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Mejcher-Atassi and Schwartz explain that 'the recent museum boom in the Gulf coincides with global developments and raises a number of questions about art production and consumption' (2016, p. 11). Therefore, scholars have an opportunity to examine museums' roles as public spaces in critical discourse as a result of their significance to the broader community. There remains a need to examine the experiences and reflections of Palestinian families and tourists when they visit museums, as well as their perceptions and expectations.

The inauguration of the Palestinian Museum in 2016 at Birzeit University has fashioned the work of many scholars exploring the birth of the museum as being 'the brain-child of a group of wealthy Palestinians from the diaspora' (Cobbing, 2016, p. 155), a 'space of critique, resistance and decoloniality in the convoluted colonial context of Post-Oslo Palestine' (Toukan, 2018, p. 18). Meanwhile, De Cesari's (2010, 2019) comprehensive studies on governmentality suggest how the politics of heritage amount to the cultural struggle for Palestine, arguing that it is an anticipatory of a [quasi]-state-to-come. Lila Abu-Lughod argues that it exemplifies an Alter-Native conception of self-determination; furthermore, as one of the many ongoing experiments with alternative sovereignty (2020, p. 23). The Museum is a space that exhibits Palestinian resistance to Israeli colonialism, according to Burke (2020). When

reading their work, a sense of small room for critical assessment arises. Fortunately, the family reflection approach offers an opportunity for our scholarship to embody locally shaped experience. Such reading is consistent with Mataga et al. (2022: 2) advocacy that the locals develop 'their methods and approach to knowledge production [as being] unstructured and not abrogated by disciplinary experts, preferring the local connoisseurs of knowledge within the community who are organic experts, whose conception of time and materiality is non-linear and fluid'.

Sheila Watson adapts Aronsson et al., (2012) definition of national museums meaning 'those institutions, collections and displays claiming, articulating, and representing dominant national values myths and realities' (2020, p. 3). Such definition is hard to apply to quasi statehood nature of the Palestinian National Authority. '[T]he [Palestinian] [M]useum's trajectory after the inauguration shows both an institutionalizing push and an ongoing experimentation, a dialectics of institution building and institutional critique' (De Cesari, 2019, p. 180). This dialectic of institutional critique will persist, whether it is focused on the Palestinian museum at Birzeit University, the establishment of a national Palestinian Museum, or any other museum. The question of how long this cycle of institution-building in Palestine will last is still unknown. Are we stagnated in the permanency of the status quo of a quasi-state? Felicity Cobbing's article delves into the primary mission of the Palestinian Museum. Cobbing states that 'if it is to be a museum and not primarily a venue for other things, is to collect, research, and exhibit material' (2016, p. 156-7). The museum seems to be struggling to fulfil such a transformation as it is heavily a space of ethnographic-oriented exhibitions and to endorse the digital archive. The museum 'hopes to develop an exhibition on the archaeological heritage of Gaza, using the al-Khouday archaeological collection as its core' (Cobbing, 2016, p. 156-7). Baha Jubeh, a curator at the Museum clarified that the exhibition of al-Khouday collection has yet to come to fruition (Phone Interview, 2024 February). The al-Khouday collection is presently stored a warehouse in the port in Geneva – Switzerland (Iselin, 2023).

Scholars have challenged and redefined various aspects of museums, including their core, such as (post)-colonial identity (Arinze, 1999; Mawere, 2015, Bodenstein et al., 2022). Post-colonial identity in museums refers to the re-evaluation of how museums represent and interpret colonial histories and the legacies of imperialism to acknowl-



edge and address the power dynamics, biases, and distortions of the colonial era and to strive for a more equitable and inclusive representation of diverse cultures and perspectives in museum narratives. The museum was part of institutional development and a step in the process of forming an independent Palestinian entity (Tammari, 2012, p. 85). The critique, however, shows that 'the nation-state has lost its special place in the political imagination' (Abu-Lughod, 2020, p. 23), and the PNA continues to operate on the ground despite all the odds of its reasons and justification for its existence. Another reading pertaining to the Palestinian Museum is linked to Joseph Massad's (2000) description of the 'postcolonial colony' in Palestine, as borrowed by Hanan Toukan (2018). As a point of departure, Toukan (2018, p. 10) examined 'the paradox of living in a state without sovereignty in the West Bank and Gaza under the guise of a diplomatic process leading toward a two-state solution'. While recognising the strength of postcoloniality as a conceptual tool, its blind spots, such as the fluidity and perceived lack of a cohesive single understanding within a theoretical framework, should be recognized (Mataga et al., 2022, p. 9). One limitation of using postcoloniality as a conceptual tool is its inability to capture the complex dynamics and power relations within the Palestinian context. The postcolonial colony avoided examining how such apparatus of the status quo of the PNA survived and became a permanent feature instead of being transitional towards sovereign statehood.

We argue that the clientelist politics (Amundsen and Ezbid, 2002) of the PNA is a more appealing framework to study the socio-economic realities and transformations in Palestine when it comes to studying museums in particular and cultural heritage in general. It provides insights into the dynamics of power and wealth in Palestine and how it is used to maintain the existing status quo. Such an approach has been advanced by Tuastad (2010), who argues that international policy has contributed to the sustaining of internecine Palestinian violence, with the promotion of clientelism over democracy being a key factor. Meanwhile (Arda and Banerjee, 2019) advocated those social relations became dis-embedded from the local context and re-embedded in new relations with international donor organisations, resulting in a depoliticised public sphere. However, we lean our approach towards the recent work by Anas Iqtait, who argues that the economic framework of the Oslo Accords imposed an arrangement on the Palestinians whereby Israel, as the occupying power, main-

tains its supremacy to collect and transfer (or not) to the PA - on a monthly basis - the indirect taxes under the so-called clearance revenue mechanism (2023, p vii). The arrangement illustrates how aid and the public sphere are always politicised, explaining the broader context of control and dependence perpetuating development denial and de-development cycles (ibid). It also shows how different groups navigate this system to their advantage.

The reality of such clientelism is that the Palestinian Museum is still operating in the shadow of Israeli settler colonialism, which imposes an immense impact on its decision-making, funding and operations. Therefore, adopting a clientelist approach to politics looks beyond the needs of the community to the interests and agendas of the political elite. As a result, the museum could lose its ability to serve as a platform for community engagement and expression, limiting its impact and relevance.

In the following section, we explore the difficulties encountered by three family museums situated in small Palestinian towns and villages. These museums are frequently overlooked in light of the bigger and more notable museums located in metropolitan areas. Despite the challenges they encounter, these museums possess countless narratives that are deserving of preservation.

### **Self-Reflection: Moving beyond a Family-based Approach to incorporating the Community.**

In March of 2023, the passing of my grandmother left behind an impressive legacy spanning four generations of her descendants. Although she lived an ordinary life as a Palestinian woman from a small village in the West Bank, the question of what constitutes "ordinary" is up for discussion in regard to how memories and objects of ordinary people find their way to museums. Notably, her dreams or visions before she passed are particularly striking. In the last few days of her life, she shared these dreams with those holding her hands. One vision that stood out was of herself as a bride in a white setting in the attic of my family's traditional house. While my grandmother never lived in that house, it remained a memory for her rather than a physical experience – testifying of the importance of the imagination of this place.

The family approach to the museum exhibits a journey into emotions, sensations, and perspectives that transcend the linear and sequential nature of storytelling. The argument the authors will present goes hand-in-hand with Macdonald's stand that museums are not only structures but also processes and 'contested terrains' (1996, p. 4). In the light of this contest of meanings, museums, according to Lavine and Karp (1990, p. 1), can be seen as sites of negotiation and interpretation, where different interests compete to shape the meaning and experience of the collections they host. Museums are also sites of memory and identity, where exhibitions and displays can evoke powerful emotions and a sense of shared experience. Conversely, the seemingly dry, technical and neutral process of preserving artefacts from the distant – or not so distant – past, is also an operation fraught with political *decisions* and societal *consequences*. The most 'natural' location for the intersection of these forces are the museums with the special places they hold for the *Bildung* and self-image of sovereign nation-states. It is the responsibility of these institutions to collect and preserve objects and to make collections accessible to the general public (Burke, 2020, p. 361). Macdonald and Fyfe (1998, p. 2) argue that 'museums are symbols and sites for the playing out of social relations between identity and difference, knowledge and power, theory and representation' (1998, p. 2): museums are, in themselves, indicators of the history and the powers that built them and of the intentions, the projects that underpinned their material construction and the selection of their 'important' collections.

Made so explicit, these concepts should enable a more holistic and multi-dimensional understanding of museums, shedding light on the nuances, contradictions, and complexities that any such structure should make the public aware of, to have the public a more complete experience of it. In blunt terms: the narrative underpinning the selection of items, the highly curated collections made available to the public is and should not be beyond the scope of examination. In this light, a conscious family approach aligns with what Brooks (2022, p. 19) has recently advocated for in his critique of the dominance of narrative and story-telling over more complex understanding: 'what we need may rather be an analytic unpacking of the claims for narrative, a clearer understanding of what it can and cannot be accomplished'.

By closely scrutinizing the assertions presented in the various narratives implicit in museum assemblage, we can develop a more profound comprehension of how our perception of the human experience is influenced by cultural factors, biases, and assumptions. This analytical approach enables us to interact with museum narratives in a more sophisticated and knowledgeable manner.

To return to the narrative I opened this article with the renovation of my family's house and the plan to convert it into a local museum was *not* initiated with museal intentions. Instead, it had started years before her departure, as she had been watching her grandchildren renovating the house while sitting on a chair in the shadow of the vineyard. These fond memories also remind me of my grandmother's reluctance to sell our grandparents' old traditional house, which was situated right next to ours, to my father. Her argument was that the house should be passed down to my uncle, who lives in Chicago, as his share of the inheritance. As the grandchildren of her daughters, we always detected her bias towards male children. She was always at odds with my father and did not like him as a son-in-law. She also had her own rank of favourite sons-in-law, and it is unclear where my father falls on that list. Despite her biases, my grandmother had a tremendous sense of humour and could mimic almost anyone in the family. She was a skilled storyteller, and we would gather in the courtyard of their house, spanning different ages, to demand that she flavour the evening with her intimate stories. As a grandmother, qualifying as a storyteller of intimate stories was mostly due to her talent and the way she combined imagined and real anecdotes. In her life, our family (the audience) implicitly complied to her legitimacy to be the storyteller and not even my grandfather (her husband) have ever hesitated to undermine that legitimacy or challenging the anecdotes for her stories.



1. 1<sup>st</sup> stage of Renovating Mazen Iwaisi's Traditional House in 2014 (courtesy Monther Iwaisi 2014).





2. Yousef Iwaisi renovating the external walls of the family's traditional House (courtesy Mahdi Iwaisi 2024).

This section explores how the ongoing renovation of my family's house in order to transform it into a local museum raises the question of which memories to remember and preserve and how to do it. This process involves self-reflection and delves into an epistemological apparatus to restore affection, knowledge, experience, living legacy, success, and doubt in families' experience of preserving and managing their cultural heritage. By doing so, families have agency in preserving and managing their cultural heritage. is restored and epistemologically accrediting their silenced narratives.

The family museum, as we have said, is a palace of memories where artefacts are placed to represent certain lived experiences linked to spaces and subjects selected to serve one direction out of so many others. Such reading aligns with what Mejcher-Atassi and Schwartz (2012, p. 17) claim, that “objects [...] combine with the exhibition apparatus to produce a ‘narrative’ that unfolds within a broader social and material context’. In other words, the museum acts as a performance of memories. These

narratives remind us that history is not just a series of facts, but rather a curated selection of them.

For all museums, and especially those focused on family experience, the problem inherent in the selection is how would such a structure enable a multiplicity of fruition, how a typical single narrative – a focus, indeed – can transform itself into a spectrum of knowledge and experience for a wider public. The authors acknowledge here how one of the best solutions in terms of engagement with the public and of available resources would be to intersect one museal line – say, thematic – with any other, be it chronological, interactive or designed for specific public (children, disabilities, minorities). However theoretically positive it may sound or look on a blueprint, one must also recognise the prerequisites, the postulates it imposes on the public: that their existing knowledge will enable them to recognise at any intersection all the possibilities, without falling into a realm of relativistic confusion or a purely sensorial pleasure from the sheer multiplicity of possibilities. A museum is a location of choices – societal, political, economic; but it cannot exempt itself from giving the public some firm grounds to exert their freedom. The deontological rationale for a museum should always maintain at the same time the freedom of the public and the epistemological awareness of the curators toward their choices and those they are offering to the public. Concordantly, a series of questions must be made explicit if we want to hold together the widest possible freedom with an informed public: Can the public handle multiple performances/narratives at once? Is the museum presenting artefacts in a clear narrative direction with a beginning, end, and/or continuation? Does the museum focus more on the ethical or ‘pathetical’ aspects of the narration rather than analysis? Regardless of the narratives presented, does the museum encourage us to reflect on choices, biases, and values. What emotions does it evoke, and what ethical questions are raised?

To lend further credence to these inquiries, we reassert and agree with Peter Brooks's recent sympathetic interpretation of Galen Strawson's 2004 critique of narrativity, 'especially the implicit claim that living is identical to one's telling about living' (2022, p. 19). To the authors of this article, this ‘fictitious’ equivalence seems to be both the power-base and the unfinished bridge of the narrative turn applied to museology. By immersing oneself in exhibits and artwork, one can encounter the full

breadth of the human experience outside the bounds of storytelling. In this manner, museums become a hub for exploring alternative avenues of comprehending and valuing life, unconstrained by the limitations of narrativity. Brooks (2022, p. 19) goes further to argue that 'if narrative can't be the sole tool—as Jakobson's two poles of language suggest—it also can't be dismissed. Strawson's rejection of narrative may be usefully polemical, but it cannot be our resting place'.

As we are delving into the transformation of the family's traditional house into a local museum, we address several critical inquiries. What memories to (ex)include? What artefacts to project and what to store? What stories to tell and what stories to hide? These questions bring back my grandmother's stories in assembling Dar Hassan Ballouta's local museum to question if the museum, be it any museum, can be embarrassed by its artefacts and/or memories. The latter question, moreover, evokes memories of my grandmother's stories and reminds us of Strawson's (cited in Brooks, 2022) critique of the narrativity of our grandmother or any other subjects to be included in our museum - as a family; we recognise that 'the implicit claim that living is identical to one's telling about living' is challenging to be accomplished. Such a claim prompts me to question if a museum, regardless of its subjects, can truly be embarrassed by its exhibits or memories. Does such a sense of embarrassment apply to objects? It is beyond the purpose of this article to answer all these questions, however, it opens the possibility of rooting self-reflection in the context of families assembling their local museums and to regain their active agency in knowledge production.

The materiality of my family's museum, however, is no less important than the memory component. This materiality is manifested in the renovated traditional house and material object for exhibition. The renovation turned to be fully a family job following the failure of several promises by the Palestinian Department of Antiquities (PDA) to partially assist in renovation. Riwaq (Centre for Architectural Conservation) was also contacted to send their experts to supervise, however, both entities failed to get involved. This failure demonstrated to the family the lack of reliability of Palestinian official institutions and NGOs, although I have so many friends in both which I respect. My family started the first stage of restoration in 2014 which included cleaning the exterior stone walls and filling works. We adhered to Riwaq's manual in restora-



tion and the overall budget of 2000 USD was fully covered by my family. In the next few years, we continued limited restoration, but the constraint of budget was the main obstacle in fully completing the restoration. The turning point took place in 2021 when my father purchased two neighbouring traditional houses that belong to our grandfather and his brother. The ownership of 3 houses is of a total area of 450 square-meter, which contain 4 rooms of 30 square-meter each. Such a space re-enhanced the idea of turning the place into a museum if not fully but partially. The purchase of the two houses put again a financial pressure on the family as the overall cost reached around \$30 thousand. However, the fact that the houses belonged to the extended family, a monthly instalment was successful rather than one paying one payment. While adding two houses to our original one was celebrated in my family, the purchase also created tensions and envy in the family that we had to tackle.

In December 2021, I participated in an event organized by the Palestinian Ministry of Culture in Amman, Jordan. The event, named "New Approaches Toward Building a National Historical Narrative for Palestine and the Region," provided a unique opportunity for me and Jamal Barghouth (co-author of this article) to connect with colleagues and experts in the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and the region, both personally and professionally. During the event, I had the chance to discuss the potential support for my family's museum project with the Palestinian Department of Antiquities (PDA). I was successful in persuading PDA to carry out two two-day archaeological surveys in my village, Al-Lubban Ash-Sharqya, which is home to six archaeological sites dating back to the Bronze Age and spanning to the modern era. Besides, the area is subject to Israeli settler colonial biblical claims, which have led to the construction of settlements, confiscation of land, military installations, agricultural activities, and archaeological excavations in collaboration with American evangelical organizations, such as the Associate of Biblical Research. One of the primary objectives of the survey was to investigate the spatiotemporality of archaeological sites, such as Khan Al-Lubban. There is a possibility that the site may be confiscated by Israeli settlers since there are biblical claims attached to it. Thus, the survey team is working on publishing a report and an article to reevaluate the spatiotemporal significance of the site. Prior academic work has adorned the site, with the material culture in the vicinity of the Khan revealing flints and pottery sherds from various peri-

ods. According to previous studies, it is thought that the building is connected to both the Ottoman and Mamluk periods. However, our architectural analysis suggests that such periodisation needs to be reconsidered since the stones clearly belong to earlier periods and their original location (in-situ or off-situ) and their reuse in the structure suggest a new hypothesis.

My family and I signed an agreement with PDA, confirming that they would provide restoration materials and we would provide labor to renovate our house. Unfortunately, PDA delayed the process and failed to fulfil its promises. As a result, my family decided to take responsibility for the renovation and governance of the site. We restarted the process in November 2023 and are hoping to complete it with our own financial support by August 2024. This story highlights the stereotypes surrounding the relationship between the state and family in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, particularly in Palestine as a quasi-state that seems to be trapped in a permanent status. Facing these disfunctionalities, our family resists, demonstrated trust, reliability by taking matters into our own hands and completing the renovation ourselves.

### **In the Shadow of the Palestinian Museum: Ali Shreteh's Family Museum**

The struggle encountered by my family and the ethical considerations related to being a Palestinian scholar in archaeo-politics have prompted myself and my colleague Jamal to search for additional family stories and explore the challenges involved in assembling family museums. It is in this respect that the Ali Shreteh Family Museum stands out as one of the most intriguing examples of how individuals can assert their agency in the shadow of a massive museum supported by the authorities (Cobbing, 2016, p. 155). Ali Shreteh's efforts in collecting objects and documents goes back to the mid-90s. He used his own house to store objects, however, in 2020 no space was left. He turned to the family traditional house, which is still a shared ownership among the siblings to turn it into a museum. The family took responsibility to renovate with no external aid from PNA agencies or from Riwaq. Following a partial renovation of two rooms, Ali moved the collection to the traditional house, which was inaugurated with family, friends and locals from the village gathering in 2020. It needs to be underlined that Ali Shreteh's museum contains more objects than the Palestin-

ian Museum at Birzeit University. The irony of this situation is that the latter "opened without an inaugural exhibition, and debates continue regarding the usefulness of a permanent collection" (Burke, 2020, p. 361). Burke advocates that this situation is representative of how 'the museum has been profoundly affected by the sustained control and violence of Israeli policies, and by the fragmented and compromised abilities of the Palestinian Authority' (*ibid.*, see also De Cesari, 2019, 2010). Burke adds 'as the museums staff and board have explicitly recognized, due to the occupation much of their intended audience are unable to physically visit the museum' (Burke, *ibid.*). This academic rationale on the Palestinian Museum is woven to the concept of *sumud* 'translated as 'steadfastness' (Burke, 2020, p. 361). Yet, we must also acknowledge that *sumud* constitutes a dynamic everyday steadfastness for Palestinians. As long as the Israeli colonial regime remains in place, such *sumud* will be circular: it is repeated over and over again. *Sumud* is a helpful concept when seeking to understand Ali Shreteh's everyday struggle in renovating his family's traditional house and curating his extensive collection in the face of pressure from affluent Palestinians to sell. In a personal communication, Ali Shreteh revealed that the staff and board of the Palestinian Museum approached him to donate his collection to the museum. Ali Shreteh's family museum struggle goes hand-in-hand with Mataga's et al. theorisation (2022, p. 2), that "'private' [and family] museums continue to exist at the margins [and shadows] of the (state) structures and exist at the fringes of normative disciplinary practices". This marginalization presents their uniqueness and also "presents an opportunity for the museum fraternity to rethink the place, role, and function of museums at the community level" (*ibid.*).

Haber's (2012, p. 62) notion of "knowledge from the margins or borderlines" and shadows suggests that the everyday 'takes into confidence local communities, indigenous peoples, popular cultures...weaving relationships, and producing counter-hegemonic theorization from the exteriority of the West" (Haber, 2012, p. 63). Ali Shreteh's family museum is a prime example of counter-hegemonic museology in Palestine. By preserving and showcasing his collection outside of the Palestinian Museum, his museum challenges the dominant narratives perpetuated by the state and NGO apparatus. This resistance empowers local communities to reclaim their own ways of cultural heritage preservation, rather than conforming to national clientelism. Private and family museums have an essential role in redefining the place,

role, and function of museums within the community. This form of resistance and liberation from elitism and normative disciplinary practices is crucial for cultural heritage preservation.



3. A collection of objects from different (courtesy of Ali Shreteh 2023).



4. A collection of coins from the Islamic, Roman and Greek periods in Palestine (courtesy of Ali Shreteh 2023).

Ali Shreteh started his passion of obtaining objects back in the mid-90s. Over 300 objects are exhibited in his family museum. Ali stated that around 60% of them are donated by families and individuals. When Ali was asked about how people come to know about the museum to give their personal objects and documents, he reflected on curators' ethics and trust. He added that people have different reasons to donate or sell their objects and documents. In his case, however, he established his approach as a curator rather than a trader, which amounted people's trust. Meanwhile the rest of the collection was purchased by self-finance. Ali also revealed to us that he managed to obtain from a family member over 500 documents of the village that goes back to Ottoman and British Mandate Period. Ali appealed for his collection to be professionally classified, curated and to work towards supporting his family initiative. The authors agreed to organise a workshop in August 2024 in Ali's family museum and call on local experts to aid his efforts in maintain and potentially expanding his effort. This article is also a seed of a larger project to map museums that are located in rural areas in Palestine, aiming to explore local approaches in preservation and protection of cultural heritage. Lamsat Umi Museum in Deir Dibwan illustrates how curation is borderless and contradicts the perception of the locality as particularism, exclusivity, inherent selfishness and essentialism as opposed to universalism (Massey, 1994, p. 119). Rather, the museum established a link between local and global, making the local narratives available through the Palestinian Museum's digital archive.

### **From California to Deir Dibwan: Lamsat Umi Museum**

The dominant narrative of special collections and artefacts outside the state apparatus, NGOs, and universities in Palestine is often associated with the work of individuals. Tawfiq Canaan's collection of amulets and talismanic objects is a prime example of how the Palestinian intellectual elite preserved such collections. Canaan's family donated his collection to Birzeit University, where it is exhibited in the Virtual Gallery. According to Vera Tamari, 'the significance of Canaan's collection is closely tied to its documentation of the diversity of social and religious beliefs and customs practised in Palestine which reflects the pluralism of Palestinian society' (2012, p.

77). Scholars have conducted thorough research on private and family museums and collections situated in urban centres like Jerusalem, Ramallah, Bethlehem, and Nablus. However, museums located in small towns and villages have not received the same level of attention. In this latest case study, we examine the Lamsat Umi Museum, which is located near Ramallah in the town of Deir Dibwan. Its founder, Fayeq Awais, was inspired to return to his hometown in Palestine after spending many years living in California, USA. His love for his town in Palestine was the driving force behind his decision to return to Deir Dibwan. The traditional family house was preserved as most of the traditional houses in the town, marking the traditional centre of Deir Dibwan as one well-preserved. The restoration was self-funded by Fayeq, and his idea from the start was to establish a local museum. Starting with his mother's embroidery dresses and collections, he has curated a diverse collection of objects and documents. The museum has become a hub for women embroidery groups of all ages, providing a source of income. Thereby, it questions the validity of the argument made by Mejcher-Atassi and Schwartz (2012) that the process of "museumization" of culture led to the transformation of living objects and artefacts into venerated relics. The authors cite the example of Palestinian embroidered dress, which was elevated as a symbol of national identity at the expense of its original complex meanings within the rural context of Palestinian society. This academic research judges the social patterns of dress and customs of a society from an outsider's perspective. The authors do not acknowledge that in recent years, there has been a mass return to embroidery among new Palestinian generations, with large family gatherings dedicated to embroidery work, dresses, arts, and crafts as part of the everyday experience. Women are even choosing to wear embroidered dresses at weddings instead of modern dresses.

Additionally, Fayeq collaborates with the Palestinian Museum through the Diftial archive platform, making it possible for people all over the world to access a wide range of documents related to Deir Dibwanians from different periods. This means that those living in the Diaspora, including the US and South America, can easily access the online archive and connect with their heritage. Fayeq's approach sets as an aspiration to Mazen's family museum to reach out to people from his village who live in the diaspora including most of the family who live in Jordan but do not possess Palestinian ID or passports, which allow them to visit Palestine. Such approach



could also be replicated in other local museums to (re)connect Palestinians in the world to connect the local to the universal.



5. A collection of objects from different periods in Fayeq Awais' family museums (courtesy of Mazen Iwaisi 2019).



6. Fayeq Awais' appears outside his family museums (courtesy of Mazen Iwaisi 2019).

Deir Dibwan is a remarkable archaeological site known as Tell el-Tell, which dates back to the Late Bronze Age. This site has captured the attention of Western biblical scholars due to its possible connection to the biblical 'Ai described in the Book of Joshua. In 2014, the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation - NORAD jointly launched a project to transform the site into an archaeological park. Among the proposed changes was the construction of a small museum that displays excavated cultural artefacts from Tell el-Tell and the surrounding area. Unfortunately, the project has not yet been implemented. However, Fayeq and his family have taken it upon themselves to restore their family museum, preserving a piece of their cultural heritage and that of the village. Additionally, Fayeq has fostered cultural exchange and understanding among the people of Deir Dibwan, both in the town and the diaspora.



## Conclusion

The evolution of museum narratives over the past two decades has become increasingly important to examine, as it is necessary to ensure that museums are equitable and inclusive in representing diverse cultures and perspectives. Museums have had to adapt to an ever-changing world, shifting public interests, and emerging cultural, political, and economic factors. As a result, there has been a greater focus on transparency, repatriation, and ethical collection practices, with the purpose and ethics of museums becoming more critical. Our study demonstrated how the family-focused museum approach in Palestine contributes to curation in non-conformist and non-linear methods, breaking away from traditional museums' standard structures and functions. This approach challenges normative practices such as collection, naming, classification, categorisation, offering a possible future for diverse and inclusive museum practice. It also supports the possibility of reflecting on how the concept of a museum is adapted to meet the preferences of different sectors of society.

This article highlights three local museums situated in rural areas of Palestine. Yet, this is just the start of a larger initiative. Our objective is to comprehensively chart all the local museums and private collections in rural Palestine and to provide a platform for the creators of these museums to share their stories. Moreover, we aspire to disseminate their expertise and know-how on how to curate and showcase exhibitions. In order to involve the local community in the museum initiative, a series of community events and workshops will be held in August 2024 at Ali Shreteh's museum and Mazen Iwaisi's traditional family house. These events and workshops will provide opportunities for residents to actively participate in the curation process. In addition, we are considering collaborating with local schools to develop educational programs that engage students in learning about the history and culture represented in the museums. Furthermore, creating volunteer opportunities for community members to contribute their skills and knowledge would foster a sense of ownership and pride in preserving their heritage.

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