

Yonatan Mendel and Ronald Ranta, *From the Arab Other to the Israeli Self: Palestinian Culture in the Making of Israeli National Identity* (London: Ashgate, 2016), pp. 165.

by Guy Ben-Porat

Zionist and contemporary Israeli leaders have often made clear that the Jewish state would or should distance itself from its Arab surrounding and maintain a western character against the perceived backwardness of the region, a “villa in the jungle,” in Ehud Barak’s often-quoted metaphor. Years ago, it was Ben-Gurion statement, referring to Jewish immigrants from Muslim countries whose presence threatened to blur the imagined boundaries constructed, “we do not want Israelis to become Arabs. We are in duty bound to fight against the spirit of the Levant.”¹ Disdain of and distancing from Arab culture, however, were only part of the Zionist experience, often coupled with settlers’ fascination and attraction with the local or “native” culture in their quest to make themselves at home in the new country. The question “what it means to be Israeli?”, including Israel’s place in the region, has yet to be resolved as Israelis still debate their identity and its boundaries. In this concise and interesting book, Mendel and Ranta explore the complex relations and demonstrate in its four chapters how “many of the cultural, social and gastronomical, items and norms that were labeled as ‘Israeli’ were in fact connected to the Arab world and culture” (p. x).

The Zionist project required not only territory to establish a state but also the cultural components for a modern nation, providing for communal bonds and demarcating boundaries. For Zionists the immigration to Palestine would normalize Jewish existence and create the “New Jew,” proud and self-reliant, attached to the land and masculine. Palestine, the old-new land, was to combine the proud inheritance of biblical times with modern European culture, transforming both the land and the Jewish settler. The relation of the Zionists to the native population echoed European sentiments, describing “a land with no people to people with no land,” or the benefits that Jewish settlement would bestow upon the natives. The actual encounter, however, between European Jewish settlers and Arab inhabitants of the land shattered many of these illusions. While Arabs were viewed with disdain, for their “backward” culture and

¹ David Ben-Gurion cited in Sami Smooha, *Israel: Pluralism and Conflict* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 88.

resistance, Mendel and Ranta claim, they were also admired and envied for being a “natural” part of the landscape, so that newcomers wished to imitate in order to replace. Thus, “adoption through erasure has been a central element in the creation of Jewish-Israeli identity and national culture” (p. xiii).

The desire of the Jewish settlers in Palestine to create for themselves a new identity, replacing the weak diasporic Jewish identity with the “New Jew”, self-reliant and proud, left them ambiguous towards both Europe and the Middle East. The diasporic Jew, the Palestinian native and, soon, the Jew from the Muslim world, were all images and real persons, against which the Zionist movement forged a new identity, in what the authors describe as a “tragic process of internalizing the other through its marginalization and elimination” (p.7). The desire of the settlers to root themselves in their old-new homeland has led them to different attempts of emulation and appropriation that would eventually (so it was hoped) allow them to claim presence and ownership. In the four chapters, the authors trace the presence of Arab culture, resisted or appropriated, in language, symbols and food. The attempt to transform settlers into natives – Arab local *fellahin* (peasants) able to live of the land – included the adoption of lifestyles, culture and symbols, that “once adopted...took a life of their own and were constantly reinterpreted, transformed and re-evaluated by Zionist and Jewish-Israeli society” (p. 22).

Discussing the place of the Arabic language, first among the Zionist settlers and later in the State of Israel, the authors demonstrate not only the ambivalence towards local culture but also how it translated into actual policies. In the pre-Zionist period Arabic was a *lingua franca* of the region, used by both Sephardis and reluctantly by Ashkenazi Jews in Palestine. Initially, Zionists romanticized the Arabic language, much like the Arab way of life – “a romantic reflection of the ancient biblical Jewish self” (30) – and the study of Arabic was part of learning and becoming local. The romantic however has soon given way to the desire to maintain boundaries, especially when Arabic-speaking Jewish immigrants from Muslim countries arrived. A gradual shift towards Arabic and its study took place as relationships became tenser and the general attitude shifted from viewing Arabic as a source for humanistic knowledge and the highlighting of shared history and ancestry, to a more instrumental view (41). The demotion of the Arabic language continued after statehood, becoming a low-status language in Israel. its entry into Israeli vocabulary was mainly from the world of “slang” and includes mostly swear words and daily expressions. The

majority of high school students that matriculated in Arabic reported that they do so in order to serve in the military intelligence.

Discussing the concept of “Israeli food” provides another good example for the contradictions and ironies that national cultures often, knowingly or unknowingly, carry. Eating habits delineate the boundaries that impart a sense of consistency and stability that people use to define their group and distinguish it from others. But, in many cases foods travel, are adopted and appropriated whether it is pizza in America or falafel in Israel. Creating a food tradition in Israel included the adoption of local dishes, often describing them as *Mizrahi* (associated with Middle Eastern Jewish immigrants) or Middle Eastern food, and concepts like “Israeli breakfast” or “Israeli salad” whose relation to local cuisine were omitted. While this chapter is especially interesting and well written it also raises questions about “appropriation”, especially in the contemporary era of global capitalism. The authors seem to ignore the wider changes in Israeli food culture that took place in the past two decades. On the one hand, everything is commodified, repackaged and branded (and the Israeli case is not exceptional) and, on the other hand, originality carries its own value (as the growing interest in “real” Arab restaurants demonstrate).

To demonstrate the process of emulation and appropriation the authors use many examples that are anecdotal rather than systematic. Combined, they provide for an interesting and thought-provoking story of culture and identity. The Jaffa orange, part of the landscape of Palestine, became a symbol of Jewish (Israeli) presence and agriculture a proof of transformation and connection to the land. Zionist settlers claimed the land also by transforming themselves in order to prove their inheritance by identifying themselves with landscape. Walking the land in “biblical” sandals, giving Hebrew names to the plants and flowers, drinking black (“Arab”) coffee and wearing the traditional *kefiyah*, were all part of the process. Unlike material elements, however, symbols are not easily appropriated, as they constantly change and remain open for reappropriation. Biblical sandals, for example, are nowadays proudly worn by religious settlers – who claim to be the heirs of Zionism. The *kefiyah*, conversely, has been for decades the symbol of Palestinian nationhood and resistance.

Guy Ben-Porat, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva