# Mapping Palestinian *Ahl* and *Hamula* Networks in Analog and Digital Spaces

After the 1948 Nakba, Palestinians were thrust into chaotic conditions, with little guidance or assistance from host states or humanitarian agencies on how to provide for their basic needs. With many states focusing on their own postwar reconstruction, the international community was ill-prepared to handle Palestinian needs. Newly independent Arab states pursued nationalist agendas, and rural Palestinian communities were not easily integrated into their state-building plans (Brand 1988).

Yet from the Palestinian perspective, ambiguous political economic conditions in the refugee camps were not entirely new: Palestinians were inured to shifting regional and imperial political powers with varying levels of oversight (Davis 2010; Hajj 2016). One self-described camp historian at Nahr al-Bared noted: "Some people like to think that the moment we arrived in the camps was our 'first rodeo,' like the Americans say, in surviving bad times. But you know what? Stories from the village and my own dim memories of life before 1948 remind me that our family and village were used to getting things done on our own terms long before we set foot in Nahr al-Bared. We knew how to stay together and find collective solutions to our problems even when the world didn't care for us" (I-57L).

Expanding on this refugee's reflection, I examine the ways in which *ahl* and *hamula* kinship structures served as anchors and the *'adat wa taqlid* moored Palestinians even as political turbulence threatened their survival during Ottoman rule and the British mandate. In particular, I examine pre-Nakba *jana'iz*, or Muslim burial practices, as evidence of how the community strategically used their *'adat wa taqlid* to obtain collective goods and services denied to them by the imperial power.

This communal strategy for solving problems helped refugees survive life in the camps. Palestinian families continued to cluster in village groupings. Over

time, as young scouts migrated for economic opportunity, the community developed what Rochelle Davis refers to as a "geography of the displaced"—a space where the camp community could craft and rebuild their family and village connections (2010). Davis's excellent analysis of Palestinian village history books describes how refugees reconstitute and reconstruct their villages in ways meaningful to their lives in the camps. With the passing of the last generation of Palestinians to grow up in Palestine, subsequent generations have migrated for economic opportunity, relying on digital technologies to remain in contact with family members in the camps.

Palestinian digital spaces offer a new form of the village history books and help sustain—and reshape—community behavioral norms. These digital spaces enable reciprocity and remittances to flourish among transnational diasporas. In the latter half of the chapter, I catalog the vast number of ICT platforms patterned on *ahl* and *hamula* networks. I also describe the type and content of digital posts and the number and activity of users, and map transnational Palestinian refugee diaspora networks..

## STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY COHESION AND MEETING NEEDS BEFORE 1948

Throughout the eras of the Ottoman Empire and the British mandate, Palestinians were accustomed to ambiguous rule and shifting power dynamics. They were adept at managing community needs and solving collective dilemmas t their family and village kinship networks. Farsoun and Zacharia (1997) and Nadan (2006) identify pre-1948 Palestinian village government practices. They argue that patrilineal structures of kinship linked community members in both real and imagined ways, creating the bedrock of community trust that underpinned political and economic transactions in the absence of a state or outside authority (Nadan 2006, 196).

The central patrilineal units of the Palestinian village were the *ahl* and *hamula*. The *hamula*s regulated and guaranteed "access to productive lands and the rights of individuals over them" (Farsoun and Zacharia 1997, 23).These units were both genealogical and imagined, meaning that people could be considered cousins or brothers even if they were not biologically related. One effect of these familial and imagined bonds was to deter family members from actions that would dishonor and shame the family in communal dealings.

Patrilineal kinship ties established norms of behavior and formed the basis of agreements. As Nadan observes, "Patrilineal understandings [of community dealings] were not signed in the manner of official contracts, as this would be regarded as 'ayb or shameful" (Nadan 2006, 196). Nadan found that the Palestinian farmers or *fellahin* preferred to barter rather than push for cash transactions within the community. They trusted that they would be paid, sometimes many months after

an exchange, because they shared kinship ties. "The village barber for instance, was paid in kind for his services once a year at harvest time, and a carpenter would receive measures of wheat in return for maintenance of plows and for other work" (Nadan 2006, 174). *ahl* and *hamula* also protected individuals and kin during external conflicts. "Led by their own *sheiks* or religious leaders, the *hamula*s therefore provided the individual within the nuclear family collective protection in all aspects of his or her life" (Farsoun and Zacharia 1997, 23). An old Arab proverb highlights this way of thinking: "Me and my brother against our cousin, and me and my cousin against the stranger." As a result of these traditions, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, mostly hailing from the rural places studied by Nadan and Farsoun and Zacharia, had easily replicable notions of honor, shame, and loyalty to anchor transactions in the chaos of the refugee camps.

## PRE-NAKBA BURIAL PRACTICES

A close examination of burial practices highlights how Palestinians handled problems and encouraged cooperation using familiar social groupings and shared norms of honor, shame, and loyalty prior to the Nakba. Similar patterns of behavior are evident with regard to the negotiation of endogamous clan marriages (Bowker 1993), business contracts (Farsoun and Zacharia 1997; Nadan 2006), social relations (Davis 2010), and property titles (Hajj 2016). Firsthand accounts and memoirs reveal that the community sought to affirm *ahl* and *hamula* cohesion, steadfastness, and collective self-reliance in the face of shifting political powers. One interesting historical account also suggests that when a Palestinian died while migrating westward for economic opportunity, the family honored the dead, pooled resources to perform Islamic burial practices, and affirmed community village and family ties in preference to seeking state support (Grant 1921). The accounts of pre-1948 burial practices that I share indicate a reservoir of flexible funerary practices from which the Palestinian community could draw in the refugee camps after the Nakba.

My initial understanding of pre-Nakba burial practices developed out of a long conversation with Dr. Anthony Sahyoun, a Palestinian surgeon trained in Britain. As a member of a prominent family as well as a medical professional, Dr. Sahyoun attended many funerals in Haifa during the mandate era. Though he came from a prominent Christian family, he also attended funerals of Jewish and Muslim Palestinians because of his family's business network.

I was particularly interested in his recollections of Muslim burial practices because most refugees in the camps were Muslim. Many Christians stayed behind or found other accommodations as citizens in neighboring Lebanon, Jordan, or Egypt, including Dr. Sahyoun's parents and siblings. Most Jewish Palestinians remained after the war. Dr. Sahyoun recalled the pre-Nakba Muslim burials:

There was no wake for the body like the Christians. The body was washed right away and wrapped in a shroud, and prayers were said by the imam over the body at the cemetery. There was no casket, just the shrouded body. I remember much fewer religious rituals than the elaborate Christian burials. So the burial ceremony was simpler for Muslims. I recall only men attended the funeral for Muslims. We shared a simple communal meal, the entire village paid for it, with family and close friends afterwards. Women were not allowed. If a person was very well known, then more family and friends attended the ceremony of the individual. It was a village- and family-centered practice.

These simple burial practices emphasized honoring the dead and supporting the circle of friends and family above all else.

Dr. Sahyoun's recollections are echoed in the writings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European travelers to the "Holy Land," and Palestine in particular. Although many of these memoirs are rife with orientalist commentary and bias, they still contain useful descriptions of "native" burial practices. Moreover, not all of these travelers identified as entirely "European." The Reverend G. Robinson Lees, the vicar of St. Andrew's Church in Lambeth, spent his youth traveling and serving in Palestine. His book *Village Life in Palestine* (1905) gives a thick description of Palestinian peasant life and practices. Initially, he describes a Palestinian family's anguish at the news of a death: "When the hand of death is laid on one of the inhabitants of a village [in Palestine] the cry of woe pierces the soul and shrieks of distress awake the slumbering people and re-echo through the vales of the surrounding country." The body is quickly prepared for burial: "The clothes of the deceased are removed, the jaws are bound up, and the eyes are closed. The Khateeb washes the body, covers it with a sheet, and places the corpse on a bier. If death took place in the morning, interment follows the same day; but if the deceased expired in the evening the burial is performed on the following morning" (Lees 1905, 128).

In describing the gravesite practices, Lees notes that the Islamic prayers are chanted repeatedly, and the body is buried in a communal burial plot located close to the village. The *salat al jana'iz*, or funeral prayer, and the procession to the graveyard are a *fard kifayya*, a prescribed religious duty that requires a representative part of the community to participate. In this way, family and village cohesion is maintained even in death. "A hole is hastily dug in the cemetery, the resting place of the village fathers nearby; the body is carried on a bier by the men of the family and village, walking at a moderate pace and chanting incessantly the Moslem profession of faith (the shahada): 'La illaha illaha; Mohammed rasool ullah; Sallallahu 'alayihi was sellam.' 'There is no Deity but God; Mohammed is the apostle of God: God Favour and preserve him.' " At the grave, "Words of praise are uttered on the dead in feeling tones as the body is laid beside the tomb, then the Khateeb calls on the spirit of the departed to answer as he would in the presence of God, and say he

has been a devout Muslim. In his stead a relative replies, 'He believed in one God and Mohammed the Apostle of God.' The body is laid in the grave and covered with earth. Day after day the grave is visited until a headstone marks the place of rest" (Lees 1905, 129).

Another account provides a vivid tale of the murder and subsequent burial of a local man from the Khaled family. After a description of an intravillage feud that resulted in the murder, we learn about communal funerary traditions in the midst of violence and crisis. "Less than an hour afterwards the dead man's people came and carried him home." The corpse was quickly prepared for burial: "The body was thoroughly washed, sewed up in a fresh shroud and carried to the tomb that same evening. A dead body must never remain unburied lest the land be defiled" (Baldensperger 1913, 124).

Members of villages from both sides of the feud attended the burial rites: "Friend and foe joined in the procession: some to mourn, others to secretly rejoice." These observances were followed by a remarkable process of communal reconciliation. "The Khaled family provided for the funeral supper given to as many as chose to be present and show their sympathy for the bereaved. Before this supper every man present embraced the other as a token of reconciliation in the presence of death, and the bereft were greeted with the words: 'Salamat Rasak—Your head is safe' " (Baldensperger 1913, 124). This account of a violent death suggests that even at times when clan links might understandably be strained, *ahl* and *hamula* bonds prevailed, and community members cooperated to properly bury the dead man and feed the mourners.

At the time, Ottoman law decreed that Palestinian murder cases should be judged by the tribunal at Jerusalem. However, the family council felt they ought to act alone and to take vengeance as a family to "end the shame" (Baldensperger 1913, 124–25). This observation indicates that the family and village sought to control the narrative of the death rather than surrender that power to the Ottoman Empire.

Elihu Grant describes an early-twentieth-century burial in his book *Peasantry in Palestine*: "Death among peasantry is an occasion for long mourning. The body is wrapped, placed in the ground, and protected from the falling earth as well with the use of stones. On top of the grave the heaviest stones obtainable are packed to make it difficult for the hyenas to secure the body. It is customary to watch the grave for many nights to keep these creatures away." He writes that family and village networks share in the tasks of carrying the body to the grave and in offering communal meals after the interment. The "bearers take turns assistant in carrying the body to the grave and visitors from other villagers come to assist in mourning for the deceased. They are provided with food and shelter while they remain" (Grant 1921, 99–100).

Grant describes a poignant moment when a family learned of the death of their son during his emigration to Mexico.[1] Despite the absence of the body, the community observed the burial traditions. "One of the saddest cases that came

under my observation was that of a young man, who leaving his family, emigrated to America in search of a fortune. . . . When the news reached RamAllah, the grief was keen. It is customary at such a time for the women to go either to the threshing floor or to the cemetery to mourn. But in this case, as the man was buried far away, the women assembled on a small piece of ground that was owned by some of the tribe where there was a fig tree. They sat under this talking until the company increased to over forty women. . . . A circle was formed and the women marched to the accompaniment of the mourning song" (Grant 1921, 100).

The gathering of women from the family and several villages to talk and to mourn the dead man highlights the importance of both honoring the dead and reaffirming village and family social bonds in the face of uncertain conditions. Grant goes on to describe the mourning song about the dead man, Butrus (Peter) and his widow, Na'meh (Naomi). The closing stanza of the song summarizes the community's remembrance of the dead and the strength of kinship ties and values even when a death occurs far from home. The song also reiterates the importance of finding a home with family:

> O ye stranger bearing the coffin, wait until his family arrive.
> O ye strangers bearing the coffin, wait until his kinfolk come.
> The grave of Butrus by the road is in neglect; He wants a guide to lead him Home.
> (Grant 1921, 103)

## THE NAKBA

In November 1947, a United Nations resolution created the state of Israel, a small territory roughly the size of Massachusetts that had been inhabited for 1,200 years by an Arab majority (Smith 2010). On May 14, 1948, Israel proclaimed its independence. Palestinians refer to this historic moment as the Nakba. The partition and subsequent war over the territory between Israelis and Palestinians in 1948 and 1949 prompted the first refugee crisis to confront the newly formed UN and created a catastrophe that persists today. The ongoing codification of Palestinians' dispossession through a variety of legal statutes has worsened their suffering. Contested historical accounts provide different understandings of these events.[2] What is indisputable is that 1948 marks the genesis of the Palestinian refugee crisis and the establishment of Palestinian refugee camps.

The crisis left most Palestinians with few assets and little more than the clothes on their backs (Schiff 1993). Initially, Arab governments bore most of the responsibility for refugee relief. In August 1949, the United Nations Clapp Mission assessed the repercussions of the 1948–49 war and the potential solutions. In total, the mission estimated that there were 726,000 refugees, of whom 652,000 were classified as "in need." The magnitude of the Palestinian refugee crisis prompted the mission to recommend forming an organization dedicated to handling it. On December 8, 1949, UN Resolution 302 created the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for

Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). UNRWA's humanitarian services encompass primary and vocational education, primary health care, relief and social services, infrastructure and camp improvements, and emergency response, including in situations of armed conflict. It officially began operations on May 1, 1950 (Brand 1988, 150).

Originally there was no provision in UNRWA's mandate for determining who qualified as a Palestinian refugee and therefore was eligible for assistance (Takkenberg 1998, 69). A provisional definition of eligible persons developed as relief work was conducted inside the camps (Hajj 2016) and was revised several times over the years. To qualify as a Palestinian refugee, "a person must have lost his home and livelihood and reside in a country where UNRWA operates" (Takkenberg 1998, 68). UNRWA now provisionally extends refugee status to descendants of these refugees, though Takkenberg points out that there is still "no valid legal definition of a 'Palestinian refugee' beyond the provisional definition of UNRWA" (1998, 68). Successive generations of Palestinians living inside the camp and in the transnational diaspora can claim and identify with the title of "refugee" even if they draw no benefits or services from UNRWA.

On December 3, 1949, shortly before the creation of UNRWA, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 319, which established the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The Resolution 319 legal statutes were adopted a year later at the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 28 July 1951, known as the 1951 Convention. The convention established a universal definition of refugee status and prohibited the forcible return of refugees. The definition applied to all refugees after January 1, 1951—with the exception of Palestinian refugees displaced in 1948. Arab states feared becoming responsible for the support of Palestinian refugees if the 1951 definition was applied to them. These states proposed an amendment to the 1951 Convention draft that explicitly excluded Palestinian refugees who were already supported by UNRWA. This created a deliberate "protection gap" for Palestinians. Even today they occupy a legal gray area that prevents any international or regional stakeholder from laying legal claim to the protection of, or legal sovereignty over, Palestinian refugees (Knudsen 2009, 53–54).

### REFUGEE CAMP *FAWDAH*

Describing early life in the refugee camps, one refugee commented, "In the beginning, it was only *fawdah*" (chaos) (I-4L). After the 1948 war, most Palestinians were thrust into unfamiliar surroundings in host countries across the Middle East. Many Palestinians from the Safad region in northern Palestine ended up in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp. For example, the villagers of Samoie, an agricultural farming community near Safad, grew olives and cereals. Their village had a school, a mosque, and a cemetery serving a population of around 360. The village

was ethnically cleansed on May 12, 1948, in Israeli Operation Hiram (Palestine Remembered, n.d.). Villagers were forcibly exiled to the southern Lebanese border, then transferred to Nahr al-Bared in northern Lebanon in 1951 (Hajj 2016). In 1998, the population of Samoie refugees was estimated at roughly 2,208. One refugee recounted:

> I was a young child, but I will never forget what I saw in 1948. I was only five years old, but it is etched in my memory for all time. I came upon a barn in our olive grove and encountered my uncle strung up in a barn and burned. His death was a warning from the Israeli soldiers and frightened all of us. We made preparations to leave as soon as possible. Stories were coming from nearby villages of the violence and death and the looting that was happening at checkpoints. The men and teenage boys went ahead in the night and escaped across the border, and they scouted for a place for us to live near the border in Lebanon. One uncle stayed behind with all the women and children, and he shepherded us and all our stock of goats through the checkpoints. We took turns carrying the young babies because our mothers were also carrying our few valuable belongings. In the bands of the children's underpants they hid their gold and valuables because the Israeli soldiers were taking people's gold at the checkpoints. They rarely checked young children, and that's how we were able to save our gold, which we used to fund the initial year in Lebanon. My mom sewed gold into my underpants. It gives new meaning to the idea of "family jewels!" Ha! But, we made it across all together. Our family and village survived and stayed together. (I-112L)

Besides meeting the refugees' most basic human needs, aid organizations and host states offered little support for governing the camps or rebuilding the community. Palestinians had to manage the transition from rural villages to camp life on their own. Another refugee, now a cinderblock and tile manufacturer, described the early years: "We started from scratch in the camps. There was nothing. We pulled ourselves out of the dirt" (I-28L).

Certainly, Palestinian refugees in the camps lacked material wealth and *wasta*, or connections to elite networks of wealth and political status. According to Dr. Sahyoun, the majority of urban, wealthy Christian and Jewish Palestinians never set foot in the camps. Robert Bowker corroborates this assertion: "Most of the urban refugees in 1948, all of them Christians, and members of the propertied classes from the villages, never entered the camps" (2003, 69). The Sunni Muslim *fellahin* classes were isolated in the camps.

It is not entirely true, however, that Palestinians came to the camps with "nothing." They were adept at deploying familiar patterns of social organization and easily replicable *'adat wa taqlid* to access valuable goods and resources without the assistance of a state or aid agency. Palestinian *ahl* and *hamula* identities persisted even when Palestinians were catapulted into refugee spaces. Rochelle Davis elaborates on this notion, observing that Palestinians have "carried their village and city names, memories, hopes, tragedies, and possessions with them into the diaspora. Despite the destruction of the physical landscape, village names continue to be

part of Palestinians' everyday lives." She notes that streets and businesses inside the camps bear the names of familiar pre-1948 places and sites of memory, which were common vernacular among refugees in the camps (Davis 2010, 3).

In particular, Palestinian camps are patterned on pre-1948 *ahl* and *hamula* groupings (Sirhan 1975, 2). Old village dynamics and patterns of interaction are reproduced in the camps. Though they were geographically destroyed, the camps have kept the villages alive from a social and cultural perspective (Hajj 2014, 2016). For example, map 1 shows how the geography of the Nahr al-Bared camp reflects the residents' origins from pre-1948 villages from the Safad region of northern Palestine, like Damoun, Jahoola, Saa'sa, and Safouri. Samoie villagers also lived together in a cluster of homes, though it does not show up on the map provided because of its small size. Additional maps that illustrate the village living patterns are documented by UNRWA ("Pre-War Urban Fabric of Nahr el Bared," n.d.) Communities stuck together after 1948, for better or worse (Hajj 2016).

With meager resources and little prospect for socioeconomic mobility in the host states, Palestinian villages inside the camps sent community scouts abroad to find jobs and earn money. Young Palestinian men regarded migration to the Arab Gulf states, in particular, as a golden opportunity to earn money in the oil and construction industries and build a better life (Brand 1988; Hajj 2016; Rubenberg 1983).[3] There was a strong communal expectation that these young men would send the majority of their income to family members in the camps. Levitt (1998, 2001) notes that this is a common pressure on early community scouts. Many young Palestinian men shared cramped apartments in the Gulf states and Libya for years to save money for their families. One older Palestinian who grew up in Palestine, fled to the camp in 1948, and was an early migrant to the Gulf states and later to America recalls the pressure he felt to send remittances back to his family and what it was like to feel the weight of the entire community's hopes, dreams, fears, and financial goals:

> I did not have the luxury to choose jobs or school programs that had prestige but offered me little money. I had my entire village to support—I had younger brothers whose entire education was paid for by me. My father's medical bills for a hip replacement—yes, that was also paid for by me. My sister's marriage dowry—yes, that was also supplemented by me. When I came to America for my doctorate, I was offered scholarships to all the Ivy Leagues like Yale and Princeton and Dartmouth. If I was selfish, I would have taken them. I know those names mean something to most Americans. But I also needed more than a scholarship, I needed a large stipend and the ability to have a paid internship at an engineering firm while getting my doctorate in economics. My family and village had placed their faith in me, and so I reciprocated. I negotiated with a scholar at the University of South Carolina interested in recruiting me. He paid me a substantial stipend and secured me a high-paid position at a well-known engineering firm. I was also able to work with the South Carolina Department of Transportation. USC was so good to me, and so was Prof. S. He remained a lifelong mentor because I think he knew the weight of pressures

I faced. Anyways, I worked like a dog and sacrificed a lot of fun that my peers at school probably experienced. But it was the *right* thing to do to honor my family and maintain a good reputation. I know what it is like to starve, to have not bathed in a week, to have no spare clothes, to fear how the family will survive the next day, and I would *never* abandon them, even if I sacrificed some of myself for them. (I-112L)

During interviews, business owners inside the camps said that housing and building improvements were financed primarily by remittances from by family members working in the Gulf states or Libya. Residents revealed that remittances were the primary source of investment capital, especially for startup business loans, because budget constraints and the high demand for loans made it impossible for most businesses to rely on UNRWA or bank loans (I-11L, I-2L). As a result, "most of the money that permitted refugees to initially invest in their homes and business in the camps came from remittances sent by family members" (I-2L).

## VILLAGE HISTORY BOOKS

In Palestinian refugee camps, *ahl* and *hamula* bonds contextualize individuals' place in the world and maintain community ties even in a scattered transnational village. Palestinian refugees have strategically deployed pre-1948 community practices for maintaining cohesion in a changing political and economic landscape that they are largely powerless to control. Even before the internet era, Palestinians used patrilineal kinship ties and norms of behavior to reimagine the Palestinian community. These ties are exemplified in the village history books they crafted after their arrival in the refugee camps.

Palestinian refugees are a population with a common origin story— the 1948 war—and shared aspirations for statehood, but they do not share many contemporary experiences because the population has been fractured and dispersed across the globe. In the face of these strains on connection, village history books provide a cohesive narrative of shared heritage. The books record the pre-1948 history of life in Palestinian villages through written and oral recollections recorded by a village member and then bound into a book. They describe the villages in ways meaningful to those currently living in camps and the diaspora. They provide a way for displaced villagers to reconnect to their geographic home. Davis observes that these books have enabled refugees to participate in creating their present and their future. Capturing their memories in history books was an effort to work against seeing their culture and values as bounded and static. The books portray Palestinian values and ways of life as a pool of memories, ideas, and understandings that can be adapted to meet contemporary challenges (Davis 2010, 3).

Village history books may be thought of as a means of generating connection and reciprocity among the camp and diaspora family and village members. They are patterned on existing village and family networks. For example, a book may

represent one family or one village. The books provide narratives of pre-camp life, with clear expressions of behavioral norms that still obtain. They are generally written by well-educated camp residents, like writers, schoolteachers, and civil servants (Davis 2010, 5).

The creation of these books is a local and collaborative effort that is subject to intense scrutiny, both during the writing process and after publication. The books' authors serve as gatekeepers and enforcers of particular historical narratives and norms of behavior. Davis found that the vast majority of village books are written by men (2010, 34). She acknowledges the limitations of village history books in providing specialized versions of the past that highlight only some stories and very particular values at the cost of a more representative past; but she sees them as effective in reminding younger generations of Palestinians in the camps and the diaspora of their duties to their family and village. The village history book of the coastal town of Salama, for example, describes the tomb of Shaykh Hasan: "It is a holy shrine (*maqam*) for the people of the village; the women made a sacrifice to it and visit it to place candles. This *maqam* fills people with amazement because the Zionist occupation has tried to destroy it a number of times. Their bulldozers break down by some miracle and cannot destroy it. So instead they put a fence around it and left it" (quoted in Davis 2010, 175).

Davis includes these accounts not to assert their veracity but to demonstrate how the community uses the story of tombs "to resist their own destruction and symbolically mark for Palestinians the (failed) attempts of others to erase their presence and history" (2010, 176). The books convey "a set of utopian but not incorrect visions of what was important rather than an event based history" (Davis 2010, 71).

The authors of these histories are explicit in considering the books as a resource, or *marja'*, for the children of today and the future (Davis 2010, 52–53). The books call on the young to struggle against their dispossession by remembering how their ancestors acted and to reproduce those actions. Village history books reinforce norms of reciprocity by focusing on the collective values of "honor, generosity, and cooperation." They emphasize the well-being of the village collectivity, *al awna*, above all else (Davis 2010, 71).

In the history book for the village of Abu Kishk, one man tells the story of the village's relations with the neighboring village of Kafr Thulth. In the story, Abu Kishk runs out of wheat and intends to trade gold for wheat with a family named Dar Hilal (Davis 2010, 72–73). A village member from Abu Kishk sets out with a camel caravan loaded with payment. However, Farha, a wealthy man from the family of Dar Hilal, refuses to honor the arrangement to sell his wheat, and the caravan is turned away. On the route home, the man from Abu Kishk encounters members of Farha's family, who denounce their relative's behavior. Later, a man named al-Hassan from the Dar Shraym family of Kafr Thulth village encounters Abu Kishk's camels. Al-Hassan loads the camels with his wheat and

refuses payment for it. "He wouldn't take any money but instead said, give my regards to the elders [*mashayikh*] of Abu Kishk" (quoted in Davis 2010, 73).

According to Davis, the story "contains within it norms of behavior and the values that the villagers held in esteem, and demonstrates their ability to censure an individual and evoke these norms in order to achieve their ends" (2010, 74). Examples like this from village history books provide a culturally specific blueprint for good behavior and reciprocation, reinforcing traditional norms even in camp and diaspora life (Lybarger 2013).

Although these books are reservoirs of shared stories and values, they suffer from limitations inherent in many analog tools. While they were crafted through collaborative processes, they are largely static representations of the past because the high cost of publication precludes updating them. Also, the books have a limited readership because of the cost of production and the difficulty of disseminating them except through specialized bookshops (Davis 2010, 12, 34–36). Interestingly, in the conclusion of her book, Davis predicts that new digital platforms centered on the village structure and communal norms may help connect the younger generations of Palestinian refugees scattered around the world.

Palestinians in the diaspora have, however, engaged in additional forms of world making. Thea Abu el-Haj asserts that even before "Skype and Facebook were commonplace, these [diaspora] families were in constant contact with relatives 'back home' and . . . often remarked how quickly news of their activities, especially rumors about impending engagements, reached their relatives in the bilad" (2015, 51). Studies have shown that Palestinians in American diaspora communities worked daily to cultivate a sense of their Palestinian "home" connections while living in exile. This connection to home should not be taken for granted or assumed (Cainkar 2006). The sense of being Palestinian is not an "essential" condition of the diaspora: rather, it reflects "everyday, ongoing work that produces" a diasporic culture that affirms the centrality of *ahl* and *hamula* (Abu el-Haj 2015, 46).

One way that scouts with families cultivate connections to their village and family is by reenacting village life in the diaspora. For example, Abu el-Haj shares a poignant story of young American Palestinian couples carrying out village rituals during the wedding season. In late spring, the beginning of the wedding season, Abu el-Haj was schooled by her young interviewees in the etiquette of delivering wedding invitations: "They drew out maps of each house in the neighborhood to which an invitation to Khalida and Leila's sister's wedding had to be—as they explained—hand-delivered. This process of walking around and visiting neighbors while hand delivering wedding invitations felt resonant with small village life in Irdas [their Palestinian village]. In many ways, these young people felt they were part of an extended village" (2015, 52). The young Palestinians were acutely aware of how the village community mapped onto their American neighborhood and of how this network connected to their pre-1948 village structures and norms. These Palestinian diaspora children were part of a reimagined, transnational Irdas village.

CONNECTING IN DIGITAL SPACES

Village history books were used to affirm a common background and shared values among young generations of Palestinian refugees around the world (Davis 2010). These early analog versions of village making helped the community remember their history, share information with extended family, and encourage diaspora scouts to send remittances. But the high cost of producing and distributing these books limited their influence. With the proliferation of ICTs, Palestinians entered a new phase of village making and transnational camp-diaspora connections. Digital spaces offer further opportunities for Palestinians in the diaspora to develop economic and moral connections to their Palestinian family and village.

ICT platforms like Facebook are certainly not a cure-all for collective dilemmas of providing public goods and services, but they do offer a digital space for connection. Scholars of cooperation theory hypothesized that digital spaces would be especially effective for generating reciprocity and remittances when spaces were patterned on familiar social groups, referenced easily replicable norms, provided frequent and repeated interactions, and were managed by "strong reciprocators."

In the following discussion I take a close look at the Samoie village Facebook page. Examining activity and analyzing interactions on the page, I found that the Palestinian refugee camp community primed itself for reciprocity and regular remittance flows by patterning its Facebook pages on pre-1948 *ahl* and *hamula* communal groupings, projecting easily replicable *ʿadat wa taqlid* through accessible images, videos, and sayings, regularly creating new digital content, and eliciting comments and posts from the transnational diaspora.

My initial conversations in the camps regarding ICT usage began with the family of Mayssareh Salah el-Haj, known in the community as Abu Raʾed, a Samoie villager who had lived in Nahr al-Bared since 1950 and the camp's unofficial poet laureate. In 2012, I had my last conversation with Abu Raʾed. In June 2017, a contact in the camp notified me of his death and asked if I had seen a post about it on the official Samoie village Facebook page. I was surprised to learn of his death and even more astounded to learn that there was a Facebook page that documented occurrences like deaths, marriages, births, college graduation celebrations, and shop openings inside the camp. I quickly contacted the family to offer condolences, and after observing the customary one-hundred-day mourning period, I began interviews with the family to learn more about his death and the decision to announce his death online. I was curious to learn whether the digital representation and projection of Palestinian family and village news on Facebook pages was commonplace.

Abu Raʾed's brother explained death observances in Nahr al-Bared and how critical ICTs are for engaging the *ahl* and *hamula* around the world: "When my brother died, we shared the news in a variety of ways. Of course, the local mosques and sheiks declared the news inside the camp. We also called immediate family via cell phones using WhatsApp and Viber. Our relatives and the Nahr al-Bared

internet forum shared the news via their Facebook pages. We alerted the entire village living in Nahr al-Bared and around the world of his death. It was a chance for all of us to come together and mourn him" (I-100L).

Hoping to get a better idea of ICT usage patterns in the camp, I was introduced by Abu Ra'ed's family to another refugee family from Damon village, who had also recently lost a family member. The eldest daughter shared the story of her father's recent passing.

> My dad was born in Damon, Palestine, in 1937 and came to Lebanon during the Nakba. He had a small sundry shop to support our family of twelve. I know, twelve! He had a lot of responsibility with his family, but he never complained and always worked hard for us. He was a really good dad and a really good Muslim, and I am not just saying that because I have to speak nicely of the dead. He was such a good man. Anyways, he died of natural old age in 2016. It was five in the morning when he died at home in bed, and we did not delay in his burial. We buried him the very same day at twelve noon in a grave alone. He is one of very few who had his own plot in the cemetery because he was so old. We buried him fast, this is our Muslim way, and only people living in the camp—his family, friends, neighbors, village—could attend. But even if people could not be there physically, everyone came together. We shared the news of his death through traditional means like the mosque and sheiks and with very modern means too. We used things like WhatsApp, the Nahr al-Bared internet forum, the Damon Facebook village page, and individual family member Facebook pages. The key was that our family and village inside the camp and all the relatives and villagers living outside the camp in Croatia, Sweden, America, Germany . . . could support us emotionally. Some Damon villagers from abroad even paid for the slaughter of animals and the food for mourning meals and gift tissue boxes for the crying women and copies of the commemorative Qur'an that we gave to visitors at the memorial. We all came together, from everywhere. (I-103L)

In order to get a better understanding of how deaths and other camp community events were chronicled online, I contacted the Facebook group manager for Samoie village and requested permission to join the site. A few days later, I gained access to the Official Samoie Village Facebook Group Page. Immediately, a post popped up documenting a recent poetry reading at the camp's meeting hall in which Abu Ra'ed was featured. During his recitation Abu Ra'ed suffered a fatal heart attack onstage. His poetry reading and death were streamed on the Facebook page while camp residents and the Samoie village diaspora watched. After his death, the Facebook page chronicled the entirety of the funerary rites online. (See figures 1 and 2 for examples.)[4] Members of Samoie village around the world could watch the shrouding of his body, listen to the prayers at the mosque, see the burial at the cemetery, and engage with the grieving process. Though the circumstances of his death and its real-time documentation on Facebook may be unique, the chronicling of his death and the response of the wider diaspora are typical of the transnational linkages on digital platforms in refugee spaces.

FIGURE 1. Obituary image of Mayssareh Saleh el-Haj, also known as Abu Raʾed, posted to Samoie village Facebook page on June 17, 2017.

These posts garnered dozens of comments and links from camp residents and the diaspora. The Facebook pages provided a digital space for affirmation of village membership, personal expression, and revitalization of the traditional *ahl* and *hamula* networks. The streaming of the burial linked the transnational Samoie

FIGURE 2. Collage of photographs of the funerary rites for Abu Ra'ed, posted on the Samoie village Facebook page on June 18, 2017.

Palestinian diaspora with their family and village in the camp. Family members could watch the community procession to the grave, eat a communal meal, and share remembrances in real time.

Map 2 illustrates the global distribution of comments on Abu Ra'ed's death and funerary rites in the Facebook group. Many of the comments (indicated with red shading) come from residents of Nahr al-Bared, in the Levant region of the Middle East, but others come from Samoie villagers in Australia, New Zealand, Croatia, Germany, and the United States (including California, Texas, and Massachusetts). A survey of Facebook pages for Palestinian villages and cross-referencing with the digital Palestinian directory Palestine Remembered, which manages village statistics for every single pre-1948 village, reveals that the Samoie village page is not unusual: more than half of all pre-1948 Palestinian villages or family networks maintain active group pages, usually on Facebook. For example, villages from the northern Galilee or Safad region, like Damon, Fara, Safouri, and Saa'sa (all of which are represented in Nahr al-Bared), maintain Facebook or social media groups that replicate pre-1948 patrilineal structures. The group pages are like digital town halls where community members can post information, advertise services, solicit help or feedback, and engage in conversation.

After the Nakba, the majority of Samoie's 360 villagers migrated to southern Lebanon (Khalidi 1997; Palestine Remembered, n.d.). By 1951, they were reset-tled in Nahr al-Bared refugee camp, along with residents of a host of other small
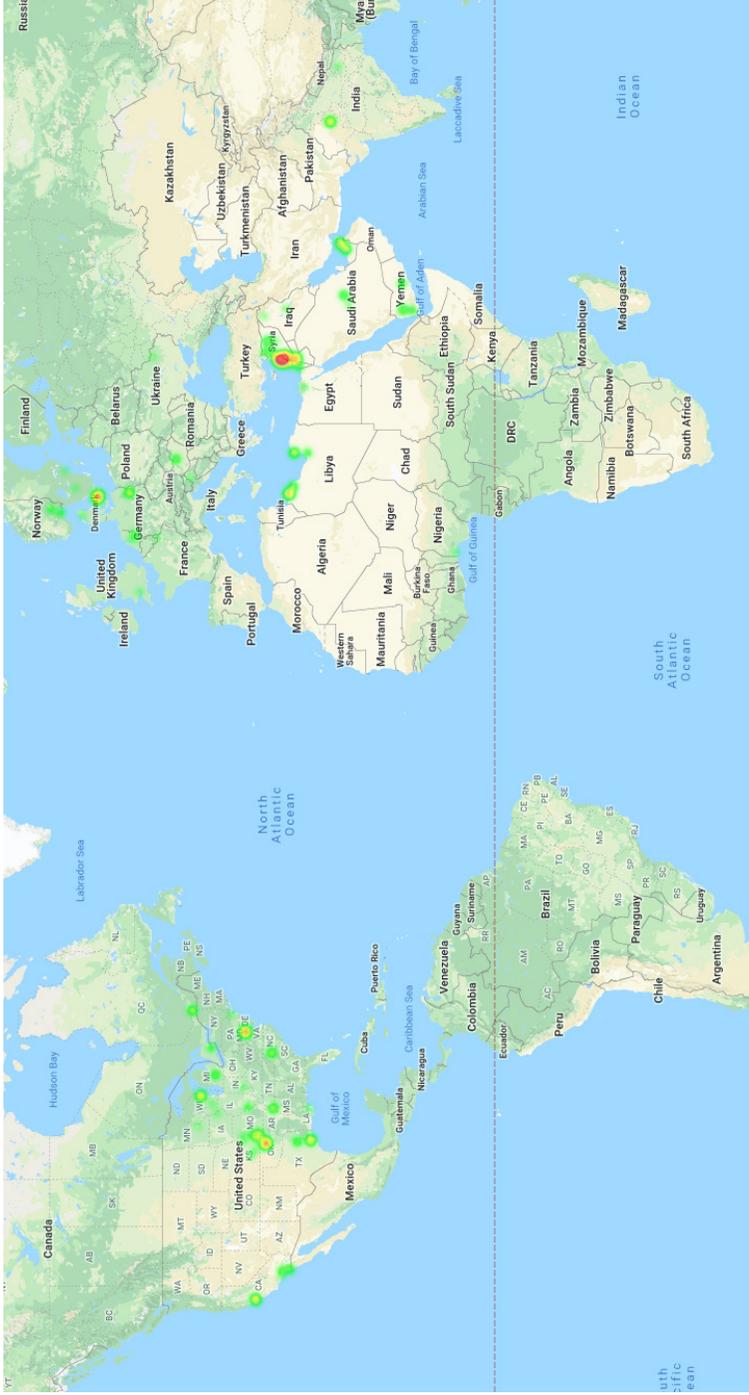
MAP 2. Geographic concentration of transnational users commenting on posts on Samoie village Facebook page. Red indicates a higher concentration of commenters; green indicates a lower concentration.

villages from the Safad area. Many Samoie villagers continue to live inside Nahr al-Bared, though a significant number have resettled abroad. The Samoie village Facebook page had 2,523 followers as of October 2020, representing a wide swath of Samoie villagers around the world (I-122L).

The page is managed by a resident of Nahr al-Bared who works full-time as a teacher at a UNRWA school. I asked him why he had started the page and whether anyone else in his family or village had encouraged him to do it. He responded:

> I started the webpage because I have a passion for digital media and photography. I love sharing my photography and videography projects in the space. I go to most of the camp's weddings and big events and take photos and make music videos. I wanted a public platform to document it all. I didn't start the page with the intention of getting money or starting a business, it naturally grew out of my hobby. I also understood how to create a page and manage the technology. It started as a personal thing, but I like knowing that I can facilitate our people [from Samoie] connecting to one another even though we are very far apart in a physical sense. I think it keeps us feeling close. (I-122L)

By patterning the page on the Samoie village social structures and sharing news of community events, providing a space where the transnational village could mourn and celebrate together, he was unconsciously paving the way for reciprocity and the flow of remittances. The unexpected outcome of his efforts reminds me of Kathleen Thelen's (2004) insight that the architects of institutions or structures may have very different intentions than the interests those institutions ultimately serve. What began as a personal project may provide a space for collective engagement and communal problem-solving. This outcome also affirms Elster's (1989) supposition that individuals may unconsciously pursue activities that affirm structures and norms that benefit the collective.

Regardless of the intentions behind the creation of pre-1948 village Facebook pages, the groups are incredibly active. Between May 2017 and May 2018, the Samoie village Facebook page averaged 19.3 posts a month (see figure 3). Topics range from news of births, marriages, deaths, and national exams for high school students to more entrepreneurial notices of a new shop's grand opening, the advertisements for exam tutorial services, and requests for donations to pay for surgery or educational expenses (see figure 4). Some community members post poetry and images of "home." They scan and share pictures of their pre-1948 villages. In addition, they share links to traditional songs and dance videos and share a variety of religious musings. These posts generate lively conversations between Palestinians inside the camps and those in the diaspora.

Although the majority of the Facebook group's members reside in Nahr al-Bared, they do not dominate the conversations on the page. Figure 3 graphs the frequency of individuals' comments and "likes" on the page by geographic location. It shows that the frequency of posts does not decrease with increasing physical distance from the camp.[5] Though there is clearly sampling bias because
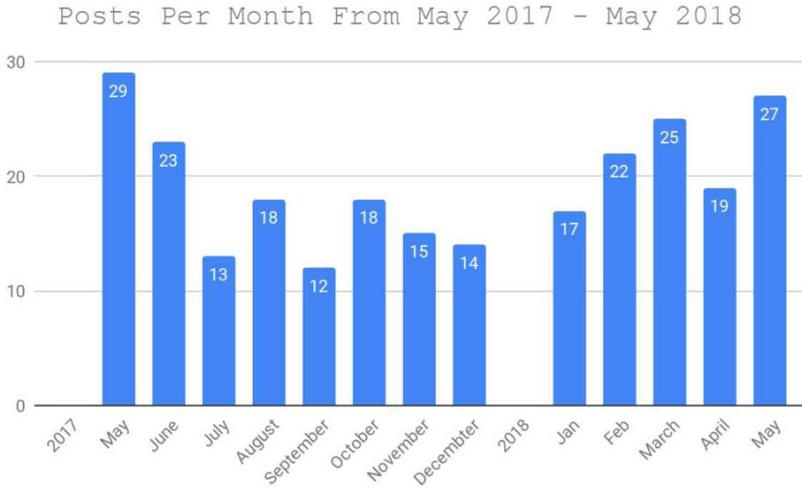
## Posts Per Month From May 2017 – May 2018



FIGURE 3. Number of Facebook posts per month on the Samoie village Facebook page, May 2017–May 2018.
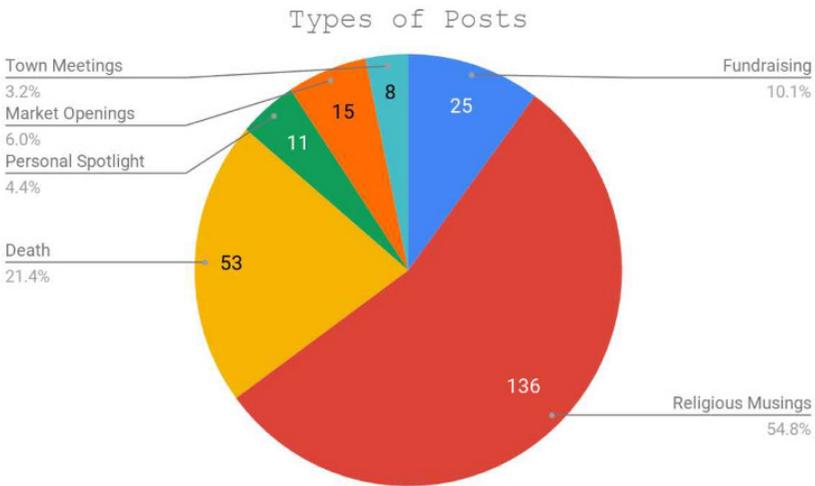
## Types of Posts



FIGURE 4. Distribution of types of Facebook post on the Samoie village Facebook page, May 2017–May 2018.

only interested villagers would join the group in the first place, the data suggest that the page generates connections between camp residents and the transnational village diaspora. In fact, even with a statistical analysis that diminishes the power of outliers, the frequency of an individual's posts is independent of distance from Nahr al-Bared. These data demonstrate regular, sustained engagement among the users with the content on the page.

Interaction Level on the Nahr Al-Bared Facebook Page vs. Geographic Location
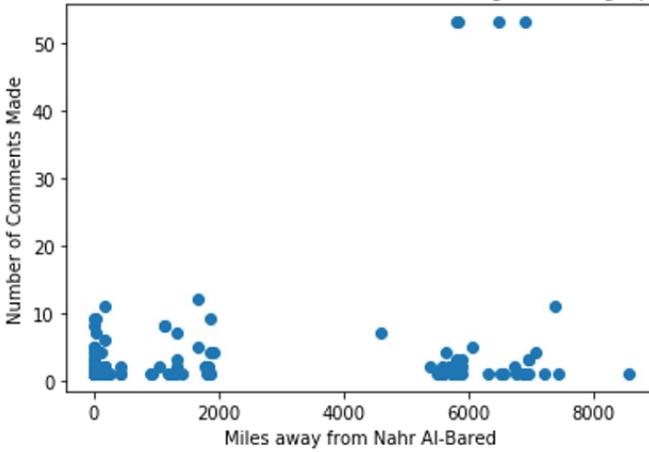


FIGURE 5. Frequency of interactions by user's geographic location on the Samoie village Facebook page, May 2017–May 2018.

These digital spaces are vibrant hubs of activity, focusing on images, videos, and narratives that affirm traditional communal values of honor, collectivism, steadfastness, and loyalty. The chronicling of Abu Ra'ed's death was not just about this particular event, any more than the story of Abu Kishk villagers trying to obtain wheat was just about getting wheat. These posts affirmed the community's *ʿadat wa taqlid* of honoring the elderly in the community, collective mourning, the importance of *awna*, and the duty of feeding mourners. Lucia Volk maintains that praying and gathering at a cemetery is "world making" because it teaches important lessons of solidarity and civic duty to contemporary and future generations (2010, 25). She finds in her study of Lebanese funerals that cemeteries offer a place of unity and cohesion in politically divided sectarian societies. For residents of Nahr al-Bared and other camps, the online documentation of the death of a community member becomes a site of transnational village making in the face of political upheaval and uncertainty. The same applies to the announcements of births, marriages, and business openings: they affirm unity in deeply broken political and economic spaces.

Nevertheless, this abundance of online activity does not provide evidence that transnational digital communities generate any real-world action. They may engender feelings of nearness essential for motivating reciprocity, but neither village history books nor Facebook pages guarantee remittance flows. Technology pessimists might suspect that members of a transnational digital village could easily decline into a group of "smombie slacktivists" (Simanowski 2018), offering digital declarations of solidarity but no practical action, and that the community would suffer the financial remittance decay that plagues many refugee and migrant

communities. However, the robustness of these transnational digital communities is sustained through the representation of precrisis kinship structures and their associated norms. The norms of collective loyalty, honor, steadfastness, and shame that historically organized and enforced individual and collective behavior prior to 1948 and inside the camps are effective tools for generating real-world economic remittances in digital spaces too. The next chapter considers precisely how digital connections motivate continued economic remittance flows from the diaspora to those resident in the camps.