

The Hidden Past and Untold Present of African-Palestinians

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Introduction

Whilst visiting the Gaza Strip at the start of a EU-funded project to evaluate and improve maternal and child healthcare to Palestinians, I stumbled suddenly upon a social issue so sensitive that nobody wanted to discuss it. A Palestinian colleague was driving us through a refugee camp when I saw a group of women of sub-Saharan African appearance who were dressed and walked with the demeanour of local people. "Who are they?" I asked my colleague. "They are Africans, we like them", was his cryptic response. Sensing that this was a delicate issue that he did not want to discuss, I asked no more questions, but determined to find out more. Over the next five years my main work was as a Research Fellow on the EU-funded project, but I also obtained a Nuffield Foundation grant to research the origins and social circumstances of Palestinians of black, sub-Saharan African origin.

Most of my colleagues on the EU project found my attempt to address the neglected and sensitive subject of the history of people of sub-Saharan African origin in Palestine distasteful and irrelevant to their contemporary struggle. Although it is acknowledged by Palestinians that the region

has been settled by peoples from Asia, Africa and Europe for thousands of years, contemporary territorial disputes are a more urgent matter than the tracing of roots in foreign soil. Since the establishment of Israel in 1948, Palestinians have had little time or inclination to study their origins prior to settlement in Palestine. Indeed, such studies could be counterproductive as they might pander to Israeli claims that Palestinians are migrants to the region. In recent years, much international attention has focused on the Ethiopian Jews and their position within Israeli society. However, although peoples of African origin other than the Ethiopian Jews have been in Palestine for far longer, there are few accounts of how they arrived in the region or their position and role within Middle Eastern society.

Ethnicity and ethnic origin and identity are highly complex concepts that are subject to change over time. It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into the theoretical discourse on ethnicity. Rather, based on interviews with Palestinians of recognisably sub-Saharan African origins, contemporary accounts of family histories and present-day circumstances are presented as an attempt to reveal a hidden aspect of Palestinian society.

In this paper, the terms relating to ethnicity are those used by Palestinians themselves, and not an attempt to debate the significance and use of terms such as “black”, “white” or “Arab” or “African” in the social sciences. Indeed, it is the use of such specific terms by different groups of Palestinians themselves which reveals local conceptions of ethnicity.

The terminology of identity

As in much of the Arab world, most Palestinians refer to anybody of visibly sub-Saharan or black African appearance as “*abed*”, a word that means, literally, “slave”. Hence, the terms for slave and black person have become interchangeable. Many, but not all, Palestinians with an African heritage avoid the term “*abed*”, and refer to themselves as “*sumr*” (pl.). Hence, most Palestinians of African descent refer to themselves as *asmar* (sing. masc.) or *abid* (sing.), which both translate as “black”. In colloquial Palestinian Arabic, the word *sumr*, meaning the colour black, is favoured over the term “*sawd*” which is considered an uncouth term when applied to either people or things. This is intriguing, as in other Arabic speaking countries “*sawd*” is used for black, while *sumr* means brown. Palestinians with no “black” heritage may refer to themselves as “white”, but only as a descriptor marking the contrast between themselves and Palestinians of African origin, who are also considered to be Arabs. In this part of the world, the primary ethnic distinction that concerns people is between Jew and Arab.

Apart from the tightknit African community in Jerusalem, most black Palestinians do not identify themselves as Africans. Indeed, some professed no awareness of African origins. For these people the national pride that goes with a strong Palestinian identity entailed denial of African origins or identity. All the black people I spoke to considered themselves

Palestinian, regardless of whether they were also Israeli citizens. The Bedouin of the Negev inhabit an area that was Palestine before the creation of the Israeli State. Many of their relatives are classified as Palestinian refugees in Jordan, the West Bank or Gaza. Increasingly, as they have been forced to give up their traditional semi-nomadic lifestyle, Negev Bedouin identify themselves as Palestinian first and Bedouin second. Black people living amongst the Bedouin who are aware that their origins are not in the area may be even less inclined to describe themselves as Bedouin, but identify themselves as Palestinian Israeli citizens. Similarly, the African community in East Jerusalem live in an area that the Israelis occupied in 1967. They see themselves as Palestinian although they are governed by Israel.

Despite both Israel and the southern end of the Gaza Strip having a land border with Egypt, a country on the African continent, there is little sense that the region has any connection with Africa. Egypt is viewed by Palestinians as a fellow Arab nation. In this part of the Middle East being Arab and African are considered mutually exclusive categories by Palestinians. Sub-Saharan Africa, viewed by Palestinians on the television news, is considered a vast and distant region plagued by famine and terrible poverty. Palestinians consider themselves Arab and, as such, to be set apart from sub-Saharan Africans.

This study was made possible by the co-operation of Palestinians living in Jerusalem, Gaza and the Negev. People with a visible sub-Saharan African heritage were approached, often through mutual friends, and were interviewed informally in their homes in either English or Arabic. At the start of the project the “peace process” under the Oslo Accords was in its early stages and many Palestinians were optimistic. However, as the

political situation worsened it became more difficult to talk to people about the highly sensitive and political issues of ethnic origin, the legacy of slavery and their current status as Palestinian or Israeli citizens.

Some older people I spoke to in Jerusalem had been born in Africa, while others in the Negev and Gaza told me what they knew of how their ancestors came to Palestine. For many other people the link with Africa had been lost and all but forgotten. In London I searched libraries for historical accounts of the links between Africa and Palestine. I did not find much. This shortage of historical documentation makes the accounts of the people I spoke to all the more important.

Early contact between Africa and Arabia

Palestine lies at the crossroads of Africa, Asia and Europe and has been subject to conquest and reconquest by the armies of competing empires (Butt, 1995; Lewis, 1996) For thousands of years spices have passed along trade routes through Palestine. Ambergris and frankincense were brought from Somalia and Ethiopia. As well as trade, war, colonisation and pilgrimage all ensured that the peoples and cultures of north-eastern Africa and Arabia mingled (Rashid and Van Sertima, 1995).

In the seventh century there were sub-Saharan Africans living in Arabia, and the Prophet Mohammed's trusted companion, Bilal, was an Ethiopian freed slave. Many, but not all, the Africans in Arabia were slaves (Lewis, 1971; Oliver and Crowder, 1981). It is often forgotten that there were slaves from many parts of the world in the Middle East. For example, Circassian people from the Asia Minor to the north were prized as slaves. Black African male slaves were often soldiers or government administrators and some achieved high rank. Black African women

worked as household slaves or were the concubines of wealthy high-status men. The children born to concubines were not slaves, and some with fathers of high rank became leaders.

With the spread of Islam in Africa, more and more sub-Saharan Africans participated in the annual Haj pilgrimage to Mecca. However, there were also migrations from Arabia to Africa by people who later travelled back to Arabia to perform the Haj.

Africans as guardians of the Holy Places of Islam

European writers and travellers report that slaves of sub-Saharan African origin guarded the Haram As-Sharif mosque complex in Jerusalem (Rogers, 1989; Peters, 1986; Cohen and Lewis, 1978). According to these accounts Africans were deployed by Mamluk and then Ottoman rulers to guard the holy places of Islam (Marmon, 1999). Similar guards also existed in Mecca and Medina. Although the guards were slaves, they were respected, trusted and sometimes quite powerful.

The contemporary African community of Jerusalem has written an account of their history. The following information is taken from a translation of their document entitled "The Palestinian Africans in Jerusalem: Between their Miserable Reality and Hopes for the Future" (Sons of the Africans, 1996).

The Africans living in Jerusalem are proud of their historic role as guardians of the Islamic holy places since the time of the Mamluk in the thirteenth century. They occupy the thirteenth-century Mamluk buildings on either side of Al'a Ad-Deen Street, leading to Al Aqsa Mosque. Originally the two town quarters (*ribat*) were hostels for pilgrims

worshipping at Al Asqa Mosque, the third most holy site of Islam. During the Ottoman period the *ribat* were occupied by Africans who worked as guards of the mosque and *waqf* properties. Because of their honesty these Africans held keys to the gates of the mosque and were responsible for preventing non-Muslims from entering the mosque area. Towards the end of the Ottoman era the *ribat* were converted into prisons.

After the British took over Palestine in 1918 the prisons were closed and responsibility for the buildings was returned to the Islamic *waqf* authorities, who used the buildings for temporary housing for the poor, including Africans. When Imam Hussein, Al Mufti, who led the struggle against the British and Jews until 1948, took charge of the *waqf* in Jerusalem he rented the two *ribat* to the Africans at a nominal rate. Some of the Africans continued their traditions and worked as bodyguards to the Mufti. The descendants of the Africans still live in the two *ribat*, today. In 1971 the care of the tomb of the founder of the quarter, Al'a Ad-Deen Al Busari, restored by the African community, was entrusted to them in a ceremony led by the ex-mayor of Jerusalem and historian, Arif el-Arif. In his speech he stated that: "Members of the African community were devoted guards of Al Aqsa mosque. The African community is steadfast in Jerusalem and they did not leave even in crisis situations." (Jeddah, 1971)

Contemporary Africans in Jerusalem

During interviews with members of the African community in Jerusalem I learnt of the recent history of Palestinians of African origin. Their written account provided additional information. Most contemporary members of the African community came to Jerusalem as pilgrims and workers under the British Mandate of Palestine (1917-1948).

They came mostly from Senegal, Chad, Nigeria and Sudan. They regard themselves as Palestinian and played an active role in the Intifada. Some of the Africans arrived as part of the Egyptian-led "Salvation Army" which aimed to liberate the Palestinian areas held by Jews in 1948. After the defeat of that army and its retreat to Egypt, many Africans returned to their original countries, while others preferred to stay in Palestine. Men who came from Africa to Jerusalem married local women, many of whom were of sub-Saharan African descent. Ties with Jericho, where many "black" Palestinians live, are particularly strong. Others married Palestinian women who have no ties with Africa.

El Haj Jeddeh, who was born in Chad but traces his family origins to Jeddah in the Hijaz, is the headman (*Mukhtar*) of the African community and some other Palestinians living in the vicinity. He has served under the British, the Jordanians and now the Israelis. In addition, he also takes care of the tomb of Al'a Ad-Deen Busari and acts as a spiritual leader to his community (Miles, 1997).

When Israel occupied the West Bank, many Africans were forced to become refugees in surrounding countries, leading to a 25% reduction of the numbers of African Palestinians living in Jerusalem. African Palestinians were particularly active during the Intifada and many confrontations with Israeli troops took place. One day the Israelis arrested all males aged between 10 and 45 years and insulted them, telling them "you are Africans, you have nothing to do with Palestine" (Sons of the Africans, 1996).

Memories of slavery in Bedouin society

Although black Africans have been in Palestine for centuries, most people know little about this migration. For centuries, under

the Ottoman Empire and before, slaves were brought from Africa (Crabites, 1933). Some older people today remember stories told by their parents or grandparents of how they came to be in Palestine. Therefore it is possible to discover something of the later history of slavery. Several people interviewed mentioned that they had heard that there was a big slave market in Egypt and one Bedouin told me that his grandfather had been a slave trader who travelled regularly to Egypt. A vivid eye-witness account of this market in the nineteenth century is provided by Frank (Le Gall, 1999).

Most people I spoke to with any idea of where their ancestors came from mentioned Sudan or Ethiopia. Sometimes they knew the name of the town. Indeed, it is probable that many Africans came from these countries, as they are near to Palestine. However, one woman I spoke to pointed out that “we just say Sudan because we do not know and because the name means ‘place of black people’. It could just as easily have been Congo!” According to history books, slave traders and owners used to make a distinction between Ethiopians (Habash) who they regarded as superior to and other Africans such as the Zanj from the East African Coast.

In Gaza I spoke to people of Bedouin origin who had been living in the Negev prior to 1948. In the Negev I spoke with Bedouin of sub-Saharan African heritage who had stayed in the area after 1948. In Gaza, I also encountered black people of the Al Rubayn tribe (ashira), who were settled Bedouin living around the area of Jaffa, before being driven from their villages as refugees in 1948 when the state of Israel was established. They said that they were unconnected to the Negev Bedouin. Their name derived from Nabi Rubooyin (the prophet Ruben), who thousands of years ago used a well near their home area.

These people of Bedouin origin currently resident in Gaza and the Negev recall being told by their elders how children were kidnapped or bought in slave markets and brought, sometimes carried in the camel saddle-bags, to live with important Bedouin families. This occurred in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. One Bedouin man told me that slaves used to be branded like animals, but that there were no papers concerning ownership or origins. Slave children were often the only blacks living with the family. They looked after animals, grew wheat and barley and performed household tasks. People told me that the Bedouin did not use the girls as concubines, although in the West Bank non-Bedouin did “marry” female slaves. Only big wealthy families owned and traded in slaves. Black people were scattered throughout Palestine, living with families who “owned” them. Some families needed slaves to help in self-defence when they were weak in number. It is possible that within the twentieth century adults were also brought from Africa and sold as slaves. One elderly man reported that in his youth he had come across African men who were strong, bore tribal scars on their faces and spoke little Arabic.

In the Negev the Bedouin had a three-tier social and political system. Sheikhs were drawn from the Samran, the original Bedouin. Attached to them as clients were the Hamran, families who were originally felaheen peasant farmers, but required protection and/or land from Samran families. The abed, the slaves, were on the bottom tier and did not have the same rights or status as free people. In the family unit, there were sometimes also other slaves who were not of sub-Saharan African origins, as well as low status dependants, the hamran. But one man told me that a “white” slave would never have answered to a “black” slave.

Some black slave children were educated along with the other, free, children of the family. Once the children grew up, their masters arranged for them to be married. They never married "white" people, even if they were also slaves. As there were not many black people around, marriage often meant that girls moved away from the master's family. People also reported that, upon becoming adults, slaves could choose to take their chances with freedom or to remain attached to a family who would arrange marriage. This probably only occurred towards the end of the institution of slavery, during the British period, when it was already outlawed.

Slaves did not count in blood feuds between families. Several people told me that if a black man killed a "white" man, the death of that "black" man would not count. Payment (*sulha*) could be made in money or by the giving of a slave of a certain height. If a black man kills a white, the family of the deceased may kill the "owners" of the black man. Recently, in Rahat, a town of settled Bedouin in southern Israel, a black boy eloped with a "white" girl. They were discovered and the girl killed by her family. However, the boy survived and subsequently married a black girl.

Under the old system slaves could not sit in the guest tent, or *shig*, at the same level as their masters. In some places this is still observed, with the role of the black people being to serve tea and coffee to people with no visible or known African heritage. One man told me that there were some *shig* that he would not visit because they would ask him who he "belonged to". But in other *shig* this no longer happens and black and "white" sit happily together. In one *shig* in Gaza, the black sheikh presides, while "white" people take responsibility for serving tea and coffee.

Changes before and after 1948

Slavery appears to have been an active institution under Ottoman rule. The British Mandate of Palestine was established in 1917. Slaves were not given release papers and it appears that the British made little formal effort to end the system of slavery in Palestine. Rather, with the creation of Israel and rapid and traumatic economic and social change, the institution collapsed in some places, but still operated in other areas until the 1950s.

The groups of black people living in the Negev and as refugees in Gaza today are the descendants of slaves of the Bedouin. As the peoples of Gaza and the Negev have been separated by frequently closed borders only since 1948 (when Israel was established and the majority of the Negev Bedouin became refugees in Gaza and Jordan), the various communities retain kin ties.

Prior to 1948 a political and social system of tribal affiliation operated in the Negev. There were four tribal confederations (*gabail*): the Gdarat, the Azazme, the Turabeen and the Dlam. Of these, the Tarabeen probably had the most black slaves. Each confederation was subdivided into tribes or *ashira* (Lewando Hundt, 1978).

According to several Bedouin I talked to, Jama'an Abu Jurmi, of the Tarabeen was a powerful black Sheikh to whom all black people could turn. However, during the war of 1948 the *ashira* of Abu Jurmi was dispersed and is now in Sinai, or possibly Jordan or Gaza.

Many black people in the Negev are now affiliated to the Abu Bilal tribe. There is some confusion amongst many Bedouin as to the origins of the Abu Bilal: some people say that the Israelis invented the Abu Bilal to represent all black Bedouin, and named the

hamula after Bilal, the Ethiopian companion of the Prophet Mohammed, because he was black. However, the son of the current Sheikh of the Abu Bilal tells a different story. Five or six generations ago a child, Bilal, was stolen from Africa and taken to Sinai. The boy became a slave of the family who purchased him, and although his own family found him and asked him to come home, he was used to his new life and refused. He married and had descendants, and up to now, the Abu Bilal have land in Sinai. However, the descendants moved to the Negev.

Bilal's grandson, Sulemain was very clever and a natural leader. During and after the war of 1948 he was appointed as a Sheikh by the Israelis and negotiated with the Israeli Military Authority; and many poor people, both black and "white", asked him to speak on their behalf. This was a time when all Bedouin had to be affiliated with a Sheikh in order to get rations and travel permits. After 1950 Sheikhs, such as Suleman, were formally appointed by the Israelis. In 1952, when a census was carried out, many black people registered as Abu Bilal, despite the fact that they had been attached to other families.

For example, one elderly man told me how he took the opportunity of registering as a member of Abu Bilal, as a means of disassociating himself from the descendants of his grandfather's masters who had anyway lost their land. He explained: "Sulemain Abu Bilal was a very clever and strong man, although he could not read and write. Many went to join him. Before 1948 Abu Bilal was a family. Bilal was a slave living in Sinai." The elderly man told me that he and his family had lived a nomadic existence in the West Bank with the Abu Bilal for about 10 years. That way of life ended with the war of 1967.

In some areas slavery as a way of life appears

to have continued into the 1950s. One black man who came to Palestine as a migrant worker from Egypt and was caught up in the war of 1948 recalls life for black people attached to the Al Huzail. He had been working in the orchards near Rishon in what is now central Israel with black people of the Abu Barakat family. When war broke out they fled back to their home area of the Al Huzail, where Rahat has now been constructed. When the Egyptian man arrived there he found black people growing wheat for Al Huzail. They were given food and, if they requested it for a special purpose, money. Slaves and masters lived separately in black tents. There was no intermarriage and no concubinage. The Egyptian man slept in the Sheikh's *shig* and worked as a shepherd, but received no wages. The Sheikh arranged his marriage to a "white" girl from Gaza. However, after 1952 under the

Israelis, when the census was taken, slavery as an institution faded away.

After 1948 most of the Negev Bedouin lost their land and those who had not left the area to become refugees in Gaza and Jordan were confined to a small military zone around Beersheba. Many Bedouin, including black families, appear to have moved around, working in the orchards to the north around Rishon, Rehovot and 'Atir or labouring or herding animals in the West Bank (Kressel, 1992). One family, now resident in Rahat, told me that they had moved nine times between 1956 and 1958. After the 1967 war it became much harder to move around.

In the late 1960s the Israelis started developing planned settlements to house the Negev Bedouin. Currently, about half the Negev Bedouin live in these towns, while the other half have resisted moving and remain in shanty settlements or in encampments. Many black families moved into the planned towns,

the biggest of which is Rahat. Of about 30,000 people who live in Rahat, about a third are black and are concentrated in three areas of the town. Many, but not all, of these families are registered as Abu Bilal.

Marriage

Everybody I spoke to stressed that they had been told that in the past marriage between black and "white" slaves was not permitted. In addition, there seemed to be no evidence that slave owners took black women as concubines. Rather, black slaves were married to other black slaves belonging to other families. Nevertheless, not all blacks were slaves and most people of African origin living in Palestine have some non-African Arab ancestry. Family histories reveal intermarriage for several generations, at least, between people of African origin and other Palestinians.

In the twentieth century, particularly after 1948, there were changes. Black men of slave descent married non-black women from *fellahen* peasant backgrounds from the West Bank, Gaza or Galilee, but never Bedouin women. Rarely a non-black Bedouin man might marry a black Bedouin woman. Hence, most people who are considered black are of mixed descent. The male line is all-important in reckoning descent. I met one man of black African appearance in Gaza. His family had come from the Negev after 1948. However, he claimed that technically he was "white", because his father's father had been "white". Conversely, I met a man of non-black appearance in Rahat, who was black because his father was black, although his mother was "white".

Black Bedouin also continued to marry other black Bedouin, usually within the tribe, thereby conforming to the cultural preference in Arab society to marry relatives. One man told me that cousin marriage is becoming

more common among black Bedouin. However, after 1956 it became relatively easy for black Nagab Bedouin men to arrange marriages with white *fellahen* women. One result was that left some women without husbands. Therefore black Bedouin have recently started marrying between tribes, for example between Abu Rqaiq and Abu Bilal.

Although the African Palestinians of Jerusalem are a separate community from the black Bedouin, some intermarriage occurs. For example, one of the wives of a man of I met in Jerusalem was from a family of Negev Bedouin originally from Beersheba, but now living in a refugee camp in Bethlehem. However, many of the Jerusalem community have intermarried with families from Jericho, some of whom are clearly of sub-Saharan African origin, although few people seem to know when or how Africans came to Jericho. Several people told me that Jericho suited black people because the weather was hot!

Status and identity

As the Bedouin of African descent have been geographically dispersed and caught up as individuals and families in the enormous political changes affecting the region, there has been little opportunity to develop a sense of identity as Africans. Some are Israeli or Jordanian citizens while others are registered as Palestinian refugees and hold UN papers, but have no nationality. Others were dispersed to Lebanon and Tunisia and have achieved military rank in the PLO. Many families have been broken up and are unable to meet often, separated as they are by frequently closed borders.

Living within such a complex political and daily reality, where ethnic identity and citizenship are so important, it is hardly surprising that most black people do not have a developed sense of being of African descent.

Those still living in the Negev spoke of a changing sense of identity from being Bedouin to being Arab and/or Palestinian. Although they were also Israeli citizens, many said that there was little room for them within the Jewish State.

Many Palestinians of African descent are poor and disadvantaged, even compared with other Palestinians. However, some black people have achieved leadership roles. The roles of Al Hajj Jeddeh in Jerusalem and the Sheikh of the Abu Bilal have already been discussed. In Gaza I also encountered several people of African/ Negev Bedouin or Al Rubayn descent who were prominent local leaders. For example, one elderly Bedouin Sheikh hears cases and settles disputes amongst Palestinians of any ethnic heritage and people from his *shig* in Zuwaida in central Gaza. His wife hears cases concerning women. Until border closures made movement difficult, the Sheikh returned to Tel Sabaa, a town of settled Bedouin in southern Israel, to hear cases. He said that his family had played an important role in dispute settlement since the days of the British. His work is recognised by the Palestinian Authority and since 1995 he has been registered under the Bedouin Association. Another “black” local leader, I was told about but did not meet, is the headman, or *Mukhtar* who lives in the Yaramouk area of Gaza, who settles disputes within the Al Rubayn community. In addition, many black Palestinians of Bedouin origin, in Gaza and in Jordan, continue the military tradition of people of African descent serving in the armed forces and police.

Over and beyond citizenship and rights, many black people associated with the Bedouin talked about the strong affinity and sense of common roots they felt with black people they encountered or saw on television. Indeed, in the Negev and Gaza it is common for all black

men to refer to each other as *khali*, or “my mother’s brother”. One woman explained that the term *khal* indicated respect and affection. If somebody was referred as ‘*am* (father’s brother) it was a sign that the speaker wanted something because there were obligations between these categories of kin that did not exist between maternal uncle and nephew. The term is used to address all black people and is recognition of shared ancestry and common roots. People told me that the term is used in relation to the Black Hebrews, who migrated from the USA to live in Dimona as a Jewish group. However, *khali* would not be used to address Ethiopian Jews, who, although clearly African, were closely associated with the state of Israel.

Black people in the Negev, Gaza and Jerusalem refer to themselves as the *sumr*. This is in stark contrast to many other Palestinians, who persist in referring to all black people as *abed*, a term that has the primary meaning of “slave”. In addition, some older black people still use the term “*abed*” as a means of self-referral, while younger people avoid the term. Yet many younger people know little or nothing of their history. One young woman, upon hearing from her grandmother tales of slavery, was shocked and asked for reassurance that such things only happened centuries ago.

Although some non-black Palestinians claim that “*abed*” is not an abusive name and that any connotations with slavery have been lost, others are embarrassed to even hear the word mentioned. Clearly the issue of the origins, identity and terminology used to describe people of African origin is highly sensitive. When I spoke to some non-black and black Palestinians they denied that black people were ever slaves in the region, and said that, rather, they had been soldiers of the Ottoman Empire. When I pointed out that this was not

the case, one man almost whispered to me "we never talk about it". Yet non-black Palestinians, by persisting in calling people of African origin "*abed*", perpetuate discrimination.

The African Palestinians living in Jerusalem told me that they would fight with anybody who referred to them as "*abed*". They added that this does not often happen as their place within Palestinian society and their role in the struggle is widely acknowledged by the citizens of Jerusalem. They also clearly identify themselves as African and Palestinian.

Conclusion

This research project addressed issues of ethnicity upon which most Palestinians did not want to reflect. Clearly, the Israeli/Palestinian conflict has determined the ways that people living in the region think and talk about ethnic origins and identity. Within the current political climate, as the Palestinians struggle to regain occupied territory, national identity is stressed, while the diverse origins of the people are largely ignored. As such, *abed* or *sumr* (black) people are considered Arab and Palestinian. Yet, Palestinians of sub-Saharan origin are frequently referred to and even addressed as "*abed*". Slave origins in many parts of the world, including Palestine, still carry a sense of stigma. The term *abed* is a constant reminder of low origins, continued low status and "otherness"; hence, the move by many black people to redefine themselves as

"*sumr*". It is clear from the use of the term *khali* that black Palestinians do identify with black people everywhere. However, the contemporary political struggle precludes the development of a strong African identity amongst most black Palestinians. This may change if the Peace Process is successful, for conceptions of ethnicity are socially constructed, and are subject to change and alteration.

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