

Representing Jerusalem

An Interview with Suad Amiry

Suad Amiry is Coordinator of the Palestinian team for the Jerusalem program at the Smithsonian Institution's 1993 Folklife Festival in Washington. An architect, Amiry is also a member of the Palestinian delegation to the peace talks with Israel. As Middle East Report was going to press, the Jerusalem program was postponed. The interview begins with Amiry's explanation of the postponement. She discussed the Festival with Penny Johnson, a contributing editor of this magazine, in Ramallah in April 1993.

Why was the Jerusalem Festival postponed?

I could answer in one word—finances—since we arrived at the cut-off date with the Smithsonian far short of their funding target. But I think this needs further explanation. The organizers of the Festival—the Palestinian and Israeli teams and the Smithsonian—agreed to a vision of Jerusalem based on parity and equality. This vision and the shared pool for funds did not attract some funders. Clearly, our funding strategy must also include consciousness-raising and new approaches, both of which require time. Our new vision demands new sources of support and I hope we can find these in the next year.

What Jerusalem are you representing?

Most important is a clear definition and acknowledgement that East Jerusalem is an Arab city, a Palestinian city, distinct from West Jerusalem. The Smithsonian is not stating either that Jerusalem is divided or united, but recognizing two vocabularies. At the festival, Faisal Husseini will represent East Jerusalem. The project, of course, is cultural, not political, but the message is that Jerusalem belongs to other people, not simply Israelis.

Have you experienced any problems in placing a political grid over Jerusalem's living culture?

Our problems are as rich as the city itself. We want to convey the Arab character of the city: our counterparts will certainly be focusing on Jewish Jerusalem. We want to express the richness of East Jerusalem, the variety and plurality of cultures, religions and subcultures. But how to convey this richness for a "walk-by" audience on the mall without losing our message? The visitor who comes to the real Jerusalem comes on many levels—as a tourist, as a pilgrim, as a political person.

Is the "folklife" criterion restrictive or helpful?

The Smithsonian concept of folklife is interesting and challenging but frustrating as well. The goal is to humanize, in a positive way, to show everyday life through people's work, craft and artistic expression. Presenting "normal life" is a challenge in itself. How do we represent the presence of army and settlers? Do we ask a soldier to come with us and set up a checkpoint on the mall? "Folklife" is a concept without conflict. The visitor on the mall wants a moment of enjoyment. But the reality of Jerusalem today is harsh and sad.

One partial resolution is to set up

a learning center, where the history and the conflict can be discussed by Palestinians and Israelis. In the Smithsonian conception, the participants bring the conflict with them in their stories and lives. If we bring a merchant, part of his story is the nightmare of tax collection in the Old City. This was a frustrating part in representing aspects of folklife: crafts are dying in Jerusalem, crippled by taxes, no tourists, shut-downs and a depressed economy. Shall we present these crafts as in their prime? Are we setting up a special place for crafts on the mall that doesn't exist in Jerusalem?

It's a bit like ethnographic museums that display the "best" of cultures on their way to extinction.

I suppose the impulse to preserve and conserve comes when things are dying, or at least in danger. I have felt many times that this is the worst time to present the culture of Jerusalem, after 25 years of occupation, and five years of intifada. Many of the best musicians have left; others have not performed in five years because there are no weddings, no parties, hardly any public events.

Why have you selected the Old City as the center of your representation of Jerusalem?

First, there have been some areas of contention. The Israeli team, for example, wants to represent the Western Wall, and perhaps the Jewish Quarter of the Old City as well. Does this mean we should represent Talbiyya and Bak'a [pre-1948 Palestinian neighborhoods in West Jerusalem]?

Second, Palestinian researchers have tended to slight urban culture and focus on peasant culture. Peasant culture has become a sign of Palestinian identity endurance. Everyone knows about embroidery in peasant dress; what urban women wore is less known. Peasant culture has been idealized, and urban culture ignored.

Has the process led to any discoveries?

It has brought out what occupation has meant culturally. Researchers had trouble locating people, arranging meetings, even reaching Jerusalem. To find skilled craftspeople sometimes required a long search: we looked everywhere for a *sha'nini* [one who weaves the palm fronds for Palm Sunday]. We finally discovered a man who did beautiful work, but he had given it up to be a contractor. It was also difficult to convince people of the importance of participating.

There are positive and exciting aspects. We have begun to collect interesting information in the areas we are researching—crafts, rituals, food, music. It has never been done before. And people love to talk about their work: most have been neglected, and our questions, however ignorant, give some sense of recognition. An Armenian master jeweler, for example, is pleased to take the time to sit with us and explain his craft.

Some areas of representation seem particularly problematic on the Mall, such as religious ritual.

There is a danger of trivializing that which means a lot to people. How can a priest perform the Holy Fire in Washington? We go to the religious people, try to explain and describe the festival, and ask what they think is appropriate and what they would be comfortable doing. The shaikhs are the least hesitant; some have travelled abroad and done readings of the Quran, for example, which is a public act. It doesn't take a lot of paraphernalia. We are trying to figure out how to represent Easter and Ramadan on the mall, both in their sacred and social rituals.

It's also important to balance the sacred and profane. For many abroad, Jerusalem is simply the center of three religions, not a place where people engage in everyday life. It would be a mistake to reinforce this view. We want to express the reality of everyday life, which includes all the mis-



Palestinian farmers sell produce outside the Old City's Damascus Gate.

Maggy Zanger

eries of bad housing, economic problems, distressed youth, and so on.

What about women and women's cultural expressions?

We realized as we went along that our methodology was eliminating women's participation, except in limited areas like food and weaving. We had to ask again what are crafts in Jerusalem, and include the domestic crafts of women, just as we had to redefine rituals and music. But still there is a problem: while men's work was already public and thus more amenable to display, women's work and culture was more in the private domain and extremely hard to transfer to a public festival, to dislodge it from its context. Or take for example the entire culture of women street peddlers. We did a number of interviews, but realistically we know these women are unable to get on a plane to Washington.

What is your most difficult problem?

Contextualization, whether it's representing the occupation or the richness of Jerusalem. Whether it's architecture or politics, the question remains how to bring this rich city to

the Mall without making it look like a caricature of itself. Everyone's expectations of Jerusalem are so high.

What was the role of the Israeli government?

Our conception of the Festival had no role for national governments, although the Smithsonian consulted with municipal leaders like Teddy Kollek on the Israeli side and Faisal Hussein on the Palestinian side. Kollek has not objected to the Festival. The policy of the Smithsonian was not to take government funds, whether Israeli or PLO. One can always speculate about political interference in the fundraising when the issue is Jerusalem. With hard work and commitment, however, I believe we will be able to share our vision of a Jerusalem based on equality in Washington next year.

Was there anything that surprised you as you began to research and represent Jerusalem?

How little I knew. I never expected so many layers to the city, whether the cultural patterns of Hebronites in Jerusalem or the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Behind all the doors there are more discoveries. ■