

The World Humanities Report

Case Study: Khazaaen

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Khazaaen¹ is a digital archive founded in 2016 in Jerusalem that documents “the daily life of the Arab world combined with people’s stories through gathering ephemera material.”² In the context of ongoing occupation, war, and decolonization, this social history initiative aims to counter the dearth of personal and communal histories, many of which no longer exist. The archive includes more than five thousand pieces of indexed ephemera, which date from 1870 to the present and are mostly from Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Gulf. The collection includes newspapers, films, photographs, wedding invitations, letters, labor permits, and family collections. “Khazaaen is active in Jerusalem and Palestine where the Zionist occupation prevails: the number of martyrs increases every day, lands are robbed every day, and the landmarks of the country change every day.”³

The collective’s name, which in English means “cabinets,” recalls the history of Islamic libraries referred to by this name. In Arabic, the word can also refer to vaults, treasure houses, libraries, or wardrobes. Relying on the collective efforts of contributors, as well as materials from family collections, each curator or *khazin/a* establishes their own cabinet of indexed material. Together, the cabinets make up the people’s cabinets or *khazaaen*.

This method of collection and publication reminds Khazaaen’s visitors that archives have authors, and archival materials do, too. The meaning of collected ephemera is not “objectively” determined but are curated, defined, framed, and analyzed by people for a certain purpose. By presenting stories, not “evidence,” Khazaaen avoid voyeurism and “an economy of seeing but not being seen,” in which the technologies appear not as constitutive parts of reality but as windows onto reality: “mere tools for the capturing of knowledge that transcends them.”⁴

Social history emphasizes the narrative experiences of communities and the ways in which they are entangled with one another and their surrounding contexts. Hana Sleiman, discussing the Palestine Oral History Archive at the

¹ See <https://khazaaen.org/en>.

² Khazaaen, “About Us,” <https://khazaaen.org/en/node/1113>.

³ Khazaaen, responses to the Humanities Initiative online survey by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences / World Humanities Report, 2020.

⁴ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 211, 203.

American University of Beirut, insists on “the embraced subjectivities of such narratives,”⁵ stressing that what is remembered and how it is remembered are more important than the illusory ambition of an objective history.⁶ As a movement for preserving the social history of Palestine, Khazaaen digitizes, archives, and saves documents that might not be of academic interest to those writing traditional histories but are vital to preserving narratives of everyday life. This includes details about common practices, conversational language, forms of politeness, art, and so on.

The process of documenting social history involves archiving physical objects. It also requires the collection of oral histories, which are especially valuable for this type of archive. The importance of collecting these tiles in the mosaic of history becomes glaringly significant in Palestine, where “permission to narrate” histories of the Nakba is rarely granted to the subjects of historical commentary.⁷ Instead these stories are “still largely dominated by colonialist and Zionist discourses.” Meanwhile the “points of views and lived experiences of ordinary Palestinians” are rarely recorded. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of social and microhistories, however, social history in the region has not yet been established in universities as an independent, standalone field.

Moreover, primary sources including official, written records remain extremely scarce. Such paucity is evidenced by the Mosaic Rooms of AM Qattan Foundation.⁸ The project gathered photographers to study and analyze Palestinian collections. They found public records of the destruction of photographs between 1947 and 1950, the years of the Nakba. Photographs promoting Zionist state formation at the same time multiplied, threatening to dominate visual memory. Relatedly, if records exist and are preserved, they “remain dispersed over numerous state and private archives to which Arab scholarly communities have little (or no) access.”⁹

“The question of why Palestinians have been unable to narrate their history of Al Nakba is best understood in the lack of memorials on those very sites of

⁵ Hana Sleiman and Kaoukab Chebaro, “Narrating Palestine: The Palestinian Oral History Archive Project,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 47, no. 2 (2018): 65.

⁶ See also “Hana Sleiman: Constructing a Palestinian Oral History Archive,” *The Funambulist*, episode 68, February 15, 2015, <https://thefunambulist.net/podcast/the-funambulist-podcast/hana-sleiman-constructing-a-palestinian-oral-history-archive>.

⁷ Sleiman and Chebaro, “Narrating Palestine,” 65.

⁸ See <https://mosaicrooms.org/>.

⁹ Sleiman and Chebaro, “Narrating Palestine,” 63.

sacred ground.”¹⁰ The scarcity of material points to one of the main obstacles facing Khazaaen: they cannot recover items destroyed by violence, war, Israeli occupation, or the mundane processes of aging. They are left to make sense of fragments and traces of everyday practices, artifacts, and events. In an effort to offer context and significance, they position archived items in narrative form on the Khazaaen blog. One blog entry, titled “Kayfa ẓahara ‘arshīf ‘alī za‘rūr ba‘da ‘arba‘īna ‘āman min ‘ikhtifā’ihi” (How did Ali Zaarour’s archive appear, forty years after his disappearance), presents an Arabic translation of a Hebrew article discussing a personal archive found by the Israeli occupation. The article includes photographs from the archive as well as commentary from Israeli and Palestinian perspectives.

Countering the narrative of a “land without people for a people without a land,” Khazaaen shares archival materials from 1870 to the present day. Meanwhile, the effort to make the history of Palestine visible and offer tools to write more communal and socially just histories continues alongside other allied initiatives. Palestine Open Maps is one such example.¹¹ It provides public access to maps created since the British Mandate of Palestine. In collaboration with other collectives and institutions, they combine historical and contemporary maps with oral histories, photographs, and statistics. The open-source platform seeks to provide the resources necessary to map human geographical transformations and movements in Palestine over the past seventy-plus years. Majd Al-Shihabi, a Palestinian Syrian systems design engineer who works on Palestine Open Maps, says their goal is to achieve “democratic representation of ourselves.” Their overarching strategy is therefore to promote:

openness, with all of its permutations. Whether we’re talking about open source, having access to the inner workings of the tools that we are using, or whether we’re talking about open institutions, having access to archives of the state and having access to data that’s being produced by the state.¹²

Although their ethical and political commitments encourage the security and privacy of family archives, the majority of their content is inclusive and accessible to scholars as well as university students and summer school attendants. They

¹⁰ Sama Alshaibi, “Memory Work in the Palestinian Diaspora,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 27, no. 2 (2016): 30.

¹¹ See <https://palopenmaps.org/>.

¹² Majd Al-Shihabi, “Openness, Mapping, Democracy, and Reclaiming Narrative: Majd Al-shihabi in Conversation,” interview by Christine Prefontaine, Creative Commons, accessed March 22, 2021, <https://creativecommons.org/majd-al-shihabi/>.

prioritize collaboration with local and regional organizations and institutes, as well as more dispersed but allied scholars from the University of Oxford, Birzeit University, and Free University of Berlin.

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