Returned Immigrants: Identity and Self-Conceptualization of Palestinian-Americans

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Abstract

This paper looks into the sociolinguistic ecology including identity, self-conceptualization, and return of Palestinian-Americans living in and around Ramallah and al-Bireh, two adjacent Palestinian cities ten miles to the north of Jerusalem. More than a hundred years after immigrating to the United States, the majority of these Americans of Palestinian descent still conceptualize themselves as Palestinians. At the end of the nineteenth century, many people from Ramallah and al-Bireh and their surrounding villages immigrated to the United Stated. Reasons for immigration included poverty, unemployment, and the unstable political conditions in the region. The waves of immigration continued throughout the twentieth century. In fact, many people from the two cities still seek immigration to the present time. Many immigrants settled and prospered financially in America. They, however, did not lose contact with their homeland. Many of them married people from their native communities but went back with their spouses to live in the United States. These marriages ensured identity sustainability and continuing contact with homeland. Though living in America satisfied these immigrants financially, it did not satisfy them socially, spiritually, or morally. Many of these Palestinian-Americans send their young and teenage children to live in their native communities for different reasons e.g. social, cultural, religious, moral, and linguistic. This study looks into the Palestinian-Americans community of Ramallah and al-Bireh and their surroundings and investigates their self-image and the identity they construct for themselves.

Introduction

Identity is a difficult concept to study because of its complexity, changeability, elasticity, and inconsistency (Maalouf 2000). To May (2004: 40), identity is dynamic, changing, multiple, shifting, contingent, non-monolithic, and invariably hybrid. Suleiman (1997) describes identity as being so wide-ranging in scope and hard to define (127). It is multifaceted as people's identities change in the various situations and times they find themselves in. For example, a Palestinian who identifies himself as Palestinian will identify himself as Arab when the need calls for that identity or Moslem to show solidarity with other fellow Moslems. Good examples for shifting between the previous identities is when, for example, the issue of the invasion of Iraq or the Syrian conflict with Israel or the US is discussed; the person who identifies himself as Palestinian will become Arab, being aware of his ethnicity, culture, and language.

By the same token, when caricatures portrayed Prophet Mohammed negatively in France and Denmark, the Moslem identity became dominant among not just Palestinians or Middle Eastern Moslems, but the entire Moslem world. Time also plays a role in identity conceptualization and change. May (2004) states that particular attributes associated with an identity can change over time as soon as these attributes are no longer conceived significant in the formation of that identity (40). At the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries during the Ottoman rule over the Middle East, the Arab identity was the most prominent among Arab Middle Easterners as a form of resistance against the Turkification policies. Now, however, territorial national identities are more significant (Suleiman 2003). Amara (1999: 87) adds that before 1967, Palestinians' identification with the Arab world was strong. This identification, however, weakened after 1967 to give rise to the Palestinian identity which became significant during and after the first and second Intifadas in 1987 and 2000. Evidence to the unstable identity construction in identity studies can be obtained from the fact that identity researchers offer their subjects who come from the same ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, different identities to choose whichever reflects the image they construct for themselves.

Cohen (1994) points out that identities are given different meanings, each of which depends on personal, social, and cultural experiences and settings. This fluctuation makes it hard to attain a consistent meaning for identity. The current study seeks to understand how members of the two cities define themselves.

Loci of the study

Ramallah and al-Bireh are two adjacent Palestinian cities located in the West Bank; both are about the same distance away from Jerusalem, ten miles to the north of Jerusalem. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2004), the populations of the two cities are 292,120. In the second half of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, massive numbers of people from the two cities immigrated to the United States. Poverty, unemployment, and the unstable political condition were the main reasons for immigration. Reference to the Middle East Studies Center, MESC, (2002: 401) shows that 95% and 80% of Ramallah and al-Bireh native populations respectively are in diaspora and in particular in America. MESC (ibid) adds that the percentage of Americans who originally come from the two above cities and who live in San Francisco, California, or in Jacksonville, Florida exceeds the number of the indigenous population in Ramallah and al-Bireh. It is worth mentioning that Ramallah was predominantly Christian and al-Bireh has always been Moslem predominant. Now the Moslem population in Ramallah is much higher than the Christian. Though large numbers immigrated, many of these immigrants come back to their Palestinian native communities. Reasons for coming back are different including social, national, religious, cultural, moral, and linguistic. This study was initiated by the researcher's observation that English is a common language in the two cities. One can easily hear groups of people speaking American English on the streets as opposed to Arabic, which is the indigenous language.

Methodology

Methods employed in this study include ethnographic observation, questionnaires, and interviews. The early stage of the study was observation. This was followed by the distribution of 100 questionnaires. For more information about the questionnaire used, see Appendix: Questionnaire of the study. All participants and their families were Americans of Palestinian origin. During and after data analysis, interviews with the participants were conducted. This was followed by discussion to obtain in-depth analysis that would help interpret results. Though the inhabitants of the two cities are a mixture of Moslems and Christians, the population of the study is Moslems. It was only after questionnaires were collected and analyzed it became clear that Christians did not participate in the study. This was not on an intended basis. Ease of access to subjects was behind this. Following the discovery that no Christians took part in the study, another study dealing with this finding was conducted. It was intended to find Palestinian Christian returnees to discuss the issue of immigration and return with them. No Christian returnee could be accessed as the researcher could not find any. This prompted the researcher to adopt another path of obtaining information about Christian immigrants. This was in the form of interviews with other Christian Palestinians who live in the two cities researched but have relatives who immigrated to the States; 20 Christian participants took part in these interviews. 15 Palestinian Americans of Moslem origin were also interviewed about the same topic.

Background Information

In search for better living conditions, men, from Ramallah and al-Bireh and their surrounding villages started immigrating to the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. This action has not stopped since then. As they settled in the United States, they were followed by other relatives. These immigrants established ethnic neighborhoods that were positive to other immigrants. They helped new comers to adjust to life outside their homeland. Ethnic neighborhoods also provided both job opportunities to newly arriving immigrants and a social life which minimized the feeling of alienation away from home. Immigration in general transformed many of these immigrants from poor, inefficient people into productive members especially to their native society. They supported their native families financially. Many of them prospered and established their own businesses in America. As businesses expanded, they needed assistance which was supplied by other native members who had immigrated to the United States. Many of those immigrants were married to natives in their towns before immigrating. When they immigrated, they left their wives and children behind. After settling in the States, their families followed them. A point worth mentioning is that males more than females were encouraged to follow; quite often men would go back to America leaving behind wives and daughters in their hometowns; this means that sons, brothers, and uncles followed more than daughter, wives, and sisters. As offspring who was now second generation immigrants reached marriage age, they returned and married women from their native communities.

This kind of marriage ensured continuity of blood relationships between those who lived in America and native relatives. It also guaranteed that their offspring would not melt in the American "melting pot" and that they would still be Arab/Palestinian and Moslem who would hold on to their ethnicity, cultural background, and religion despite living away from native homeland. They believe that marrying from one's native community would act like a safeguard that protects and preserves younger generations from getting lost in a country whose behavioral norms are different from those common in their homeland. This cycle has been going on for generations.

An intriguing sociolinguistic practice for many of these people is their behavior toward their young children. Many of these people send their young children to their native towns to learn the socio-cultural, linguistic, and religious norms from their native kin. Some of those are sent alone at a very young age and others are accompanied by either one or both parents. This usually takes place between the ages of 3-18. It is only after parents make sure that their children have acquired the norms they deem necessary for an Arab/Palestinian Moslem that these young people are sent back to America. Quite often, these children especially girls continue to live in their native communities until they are mature enough “not to be tempted by American lifestyle”, in case they returned to the States.

Data analysis

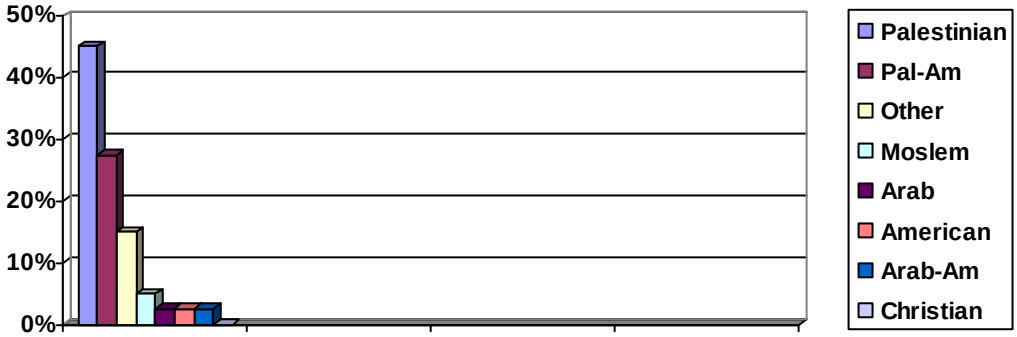
To help frame the discussion on identity and obtain a comprehensive picture about the study population, data collected were analyzed. Based on the analysis of this research, 77.5% of the subjects were females compared to 22.5% males. A plausible interpretation for this wide gender-based distribution is the view Arabs have for females, young and adult. Females in the Arab world are seen as a symbol of honor that must be protected. One way to protect them is to raise them in a conservative society like the Palestinian or Arab society as opposed to the liberal American society. This percentage lends support to the point mentioned earlier that whereas young Palestinian-American males return to the States, young females continue to live in their traditional native communities. This result goes in line with the question about pressure put on girls and boys. 75% of the subjects indicated that more pressure is exerted on females than on males to return to their homelands. In his research on teenage social network in Silwan, a Palestinian village, Abdeen (2002) found that teenage female Silwanis social network is built around their immediate surroundings and families. In the same Silwani community, teenage boys are given more freedom and space. They choose and make friends with less parental or community supervision. Education distribution for the study population shows that 75.6% is for university education; 20% is for high school, either finished or still in high school; 4.4% is for basic education; those who are still attending school. Marital status analysis shows that 64.4% are single; 20% married; 4.4% divorced; and 11.2% are other or engaged.

As mentioned above, many young Palestinian-American, Pal-Am, are sent back at an early age. Subjects were distributed into four age categories: less than 12, 13-16, 17-19, and above 20 years old. In their answer to the question: "How old were you when you returned back?" 65% of the subjects stated they were less than 12 years old when they returned back. 25% were teenagers, with 12.5% for each of the two teenage categories, 13-16 and 17-19. Only 10% were above 20. The fact that many of these children were sent at a young age comes from the belief that young children are still under control and at the same time not exposed to the liberal American lifestyle. Many natives including young returnees' parents believe that control and supervision of their children is easier at this age and in this place, indigenous community.

Analysis in relation to willing return and family role in coming back shows that 72.5% of the subjects returned back willingly and 27.5% unwillingly. The same percentage, 72.5%, is obtained for those who stated that their families played a major role in their coming back. The majority of the subjects included were very young when they returned back, less than 12 years of age. Obviously, this population did not have the ability to decide for themselves or to express their unwillingness to return. When asked for the rationale behind coming back, the majority said: to get to know their homeland and origin, to learn both Arabic and Arab socio-cultural behavioral norms, to learn the commands of Islam, and to get married. Worthy of mention is that only two of the female population who stated that they came back willingly said that they did not come back with the intention of getting married. When discussing the results with other subjects in the presence of these two subjects, one of these two subjects said, "I don't want to be married here. I want to be buried here". When asked where they feel more at home, 77.8% stated Palestine is home compared to 22.2% for America. One of the major objectives of this study was to find out how these people identify themselves. In the early stages of the study, the following identities were included: Arab, American, Arab-American, Palestinian, Moslem, Christian, and Other.

When the first questionnaires were distributed, 5 subjects came to see the researcher. They stated that in the listing of identities included in the questionnaire, an important identity was not among those listed. Upon asking what that identity was, the identity "Palestinian-American" was given. “But ‘Arab-American’ as an identity is included. Is it not the same as Arab-American?” the researcher asked. "They are not the same" was the answer. This discussion made the researcher add the "Palestinian-American" identity to the listing. On the basis of the analysis of this study, 45% of these returnees stressed their Palestinian identify as the most significant, 27.5% as Palestinian-American, 15% as other, 5% as Moslem, 2.5% for Arab-American, Arab, and American each. Figure 1 shows identity distribution among the subjects of the study.

Figure 1: How do you identify yourself?



After obtaining these results, the researcher's aim was to find if there were any bases in the choice of these identities. To many, the Palestinian identity remains the strongest and carries aspirations for achieving national goals. It has sentimental, national, and political values. It enhances vitality and feelings of solidarity and unity among Palestinians. To this group, it is apparent that the sense of macro group ethnicity or the cultural identification with the Arab world is diminishing. Many Palestinians including Pal-Am feel that they have been abandoned by Arab nations and that they have become a minority in the battlefield for freedom. Garcia et al (2006) quote Fishman as saying that “Because ethnic identity is a socio psychological variable, minority become more conscious than majorities of their ethnic identity (35).” Some Palestinians including Pal-Am believe that they have become a minority in the struggle for independence. According to Fishman (1972a: 180), “Primordial ethnicity is a web that comes apart and becomes segmented bit by bit during periods of sociocultural change.” In his study on identity-conceptualization in Arab immigrant drama, Fa'ik (1994) analyzes a play entitled "Portrait of a Suspect". The play depicts the ordeal of a young Arab-American man who was apprehended and interrogated by Americans, Syrians, and Israelis. The man's crime was in reality his identity. Fa'ik concludes that being an Arab-American means you are neither; you are not accepted by anyone or in anyplace. It seems that some of these Palestinian-Americans are aware of this fact, which in turn makes them adopt a territorial national identity.

Pal-Am identity reflects virtually the same outlook Palestinian identity does. It still carries national aspiration. Subjects who called themselves Pal-Am believe this identity carries a double obligation toward both the Palestinian and American societies. Fishman cited in Garcia et al (2006) states that today’s “ethnic identity is contextually constructed” and that “group membership may be multiple” (34). Pal-Am identity combines the wider international American and territorial specific Palestinian identities together. It is a reflection of a collective identity that has two sociolinguistic dimensions. Fishman (1999) concedes, "The global and the specific are now more commonly found together, as partial identities, because they each contribute to different social, emotional, and cognitive needs that are co-present in the same individuals and societies (450)."

This split identity reflects truth. Pal-Am are both Palestinian and American at the same time. They cannot deny either side of their identity makeup. The combination of Palestinian and American in one identity sends out a message about how these people see themselves and also about how they want to be perceived by others around them. The researcher believes that Pal-Am identity carries two aspirations. The Palestinian represents struggle, vitality, and nationhood. Pal-Am are part of this nation. They live its oppression and hopes for independence. Much as they are Palestinian, they feel equally American. America is a superpower. Subjects who view themselves as such share a sense of culture, modernity, and power with Americans.

They seem to have developed a sense of collective identity whose construction is not based on a single ethnic background; it is a combination of two different cultures. This can be felt in the maintenance of a shared sociolinguistic norm with Americans, speaking English. This, however, is not at the cost of losing their Palestinian traits. When asked about the difference between Palestinian-American and Arab-American identities, participants said they were not the same. One subject reiterated, "Of course they're not the same." The former has national, political, and demographic obligations while the second is an identity that does not relate much to our situation. Arab-American is a split identity in which neither side works for the good of Palestine. The Arab identity is a reflection of an exacerbated nation that disappointed Palestinians. Amara (1999: 197) found that to many Palestinians, Arabs are a symbol of backwardness and a reflection of disappointment.

Despite the range of different identities listed, many did not find the identity that reflects how they view themselves. 15% of the study population identified themselves as other. Though most subjects did not give any alternative identity, the identity "Moslem-Palestinian" appeared. Despite this, one can notice that regional and/or territorial nationalism in addition to religious identities are still the axis around which self-conceptualization revolves.

5% identified themselves as Moslem. This identity reflects religious identity. It is a profound global identity that extends beyond regional, territorial, and national boundaries to include the whole Moslem world. It reflects supra-national identity. Moslem identity is regarded as the salvation force of the Arab and Moslem world. It is the only value for the restoration of unity, glory, and victory for Moslems. The philosophy behind this identity is that secular regimes have failed to achieve national aspirations on both regional and territorial levels; the religious bond is the strongest of all factors for unification not just among Arab nations, but Moslems worldwide. If this unity is achieved, national and religious aspirations can be achieved. Regional and territorial identities are remnants of the colonial era whose policy was "divide and prevail" and that as long as these non-Moslem identities are used, Moslems will remain divided nations. When asked what the Moslem identity means, the following responses were obtained: "Islam is peace. The West associates Islam with terrorism. This is a false conception. Islam is a peaceful religion." Another subject added, "What I mean by Moslem identity is an identity that transcends beyond materiality of the West. It is peace with the self and others." Amara (1999) found that the Moslem identity was the strongest among Palestinians in Eastern Barta'a in the West Bank. It is an alternative to the national identity (197). Though Islamic movements have been active in the West Bank since 1948, their role has recently become more significant (Ibid: 88). The role Islamic movements play in the socio-political life of Palestinians has become evident during and after the Intifada which started in 1987. According to Jean-Francois Legari (1994) the opposition to the PLO secular leadership led to the creation of the Islamic movement. This led to strengthening the Moslem identity and at the same time gave an alternative to those who were not satisfied with PLO headship. In general, Moslem identity is seen as a unification force through which national aspirations and goals can be achieved.

As far as the identity American is concerned, only 2.5% identified themselves as such. Pal-Am, identified as Americans, see themselves as part of a modern and more advanced society on political, economic, linguistic, and cultural levels. Some see themselves unfit in the Palestinian society that is socio-politically divided and economically exhausted. In a separate incident that occurred a few years ago, the researcher met a young Palestinian-American teenager who was persuaded to come to his hometown against his full consent. When the teenager returned to his native community, he was eighteen, an age at which his personality had already been formed. This made it harder for him to adapt to a much less advanced society compared to America. He expressed his displeasure at his decision and the role his parents played in his coming back and kept telling the researcher that he did not belong here and that he was American and his place was in the USA. The reason for this low percentage, 2.5%, in the adoption of the American identity is perhaps because many Palestinians blame America for the failure of fulfilling their national aspirations of independence. They feel that the solution to the Palestinian issue is in the hands of the American administration. To them, the American leadership is not concerned in finding a solution to their question.

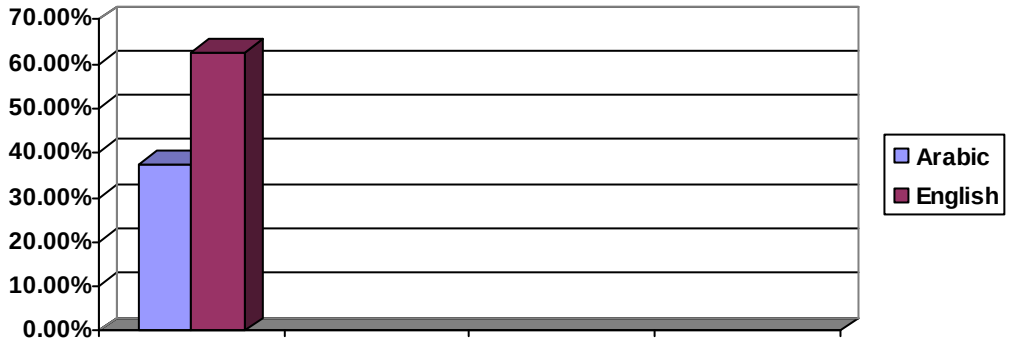
Worthy of mention also is that subjects who called themselves Arab or Arab-American seem to have a wider national and ethnic vision than those who called themselves Palestinian or even Palestinian-American. Whereas Palestinian is associated with territorial national identity that does not extend beyond Palestine, Arab identity reflects membership with a larger Middle Eastern Arab nation.

Despite the disappointment and negative connotation the identity Arab has for some Palestinians, others still envision Arabs as a nation that has potentials of becoming a leading nation that once had a glorious past and conquered the world. They believe that by invoking the past, Arabs can have a promising future.

As mentioned earlier, this study was initiated by the observation that English was a common language that could be heard on Ramallah and al-Bireh streets. One might ask at this stage, "How can these people continue speaking English when they are sent to their homeland to learn and speak Arabic?" In response to the question "What language/s did you grow up speaking in America?", all the subjects stated that they were raised speaking both Arabic and English. English, however, was more widely used as the society and its institutions operate in it. English becomes more dominant when they go to school and start interacting with American peers. A mother who is also a subject of the study commented, "I left the States so that I could raise my children the Arab way and teach them the religion [Islam]. My three older children were in the 3rd, 5th, 7th grades and if I could go back and do it all over again, I would have come when my children had not started school. My children's first language is English, but they do speak and write Arabic. If we had come when they were younger, I believe, Arabic would have been their first language." As can be understood from this comment, the three children speak English as a first language. According to the mother, this is acceptable. This lends support to Eastman (1984: 275) who affirms that ethnic identity can still be preserved despite changes made on the language we use.

Upon their arrival to their native communities, Arabic is expected to rank first and English second. Given the fact that many Pal-Am children come with same-age relatives or find other Pal-Am relatives here guarantees the continuous use of English. But this is also met with the majority of other relatives and community members who speak only Arabic. Fishman (1972b) states that "Language [is] the surest way for individuals to safeguard or recover the authenticity they had inherited from their ancestors as well as to hand it on to generations yet unborn (46). Data analysis showed that 57.5% claimed that Arabic is their first language compared to 42.5% for English. However, 62.5% of these subjects stated that they feel more comfortable speaking English than Arabic. Figure 2 shows subject's reaction as to which language they feel more comfortable speaking.

Figure 2: Which language do you feel more comfortable speaking?



Additionally, 90% stated that they can read and write Arabic and 10% are illiterate in it. All of the subjects who came back after school age said that they were sent to Arab schools in America. In those schools, they learned Arabic, but to many it was not a success because everybody around spoke English. Low achievement in learning Arabic, among other reasons namely religious and behavioral, made parents send their children to their homeland. The fact that a large population in Ramallah and al-Bireh is American of Palestinian descent has made some educators and business people establish schools that follow the American system and teach the American syllabus.

Many of these returned children attend these schools where English is a first language; it is the medium of instruction, while Arabic is taught as a second language. Students who attend these schools do not suffer or face difficulties in learning. However, those who attend Palestinian state schools face a much harder challenge studying in Arabic. Subjects who first attended Palestinian state schools said that they could not manage and were lagging behind before their parents sent them to one of these American schools. Wardhaugh (2006: 119-120) argues that a speech community is not coterminous with language and that it is impossible to determine what is or is not a speech community with reference to language as the sole criterion for uniting people. The single language or single variety criterion in the definition of speech community is a very dubious one.

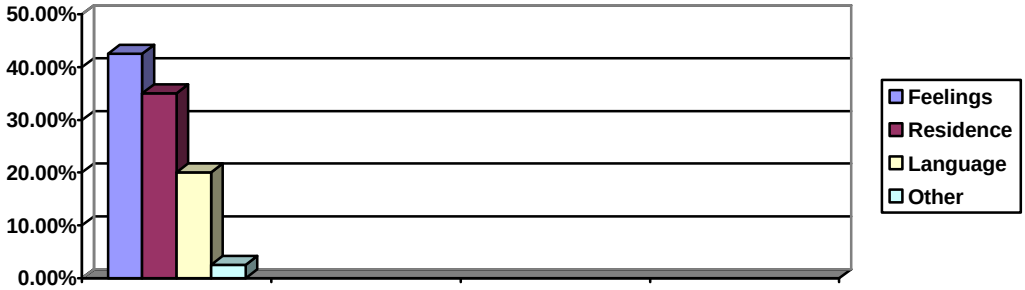
An informative point about this sociolinguistic behavior, return home but continue speaking Arabic, can be gained from the way these returned immigrants view their literacy in Arabic. 90% of the subjects said that literacy in Arabic gives them security that their identity as Palestinian/Arab is not lost. Before coming back, these returnees were constantly reminded of their religion, ethnicity, culture, and homeland and of the need to remember these facts and keep them in their minds all the time. This creates a sense of insecurity for some of these young immigrants as they are away from these sentimental values they are constantly reminded of. When they come back, they feel safe that they now live this heritage. Consequently, the sense of their insecurity diminishes. Living in their native community is a goal that has been achieved. It is a priority and whatever comes next to it is less significant, including language.

Observation, data-analysis, and discussion with these returned immigrants have showed that they regard themselves as fully-fledged members of the Palestinian community despite their use of the English language. Reference to Labov (1972); Gumperz (1982); Milroy (1987); Norton (2000); Pennycook (2001); Wardhaugh (2006) shows that community members can use more than one language. To these researchers, defining speech community with reference to use of a homogeneous code is a dogmatic view. Speech community members can have different ethnic, cultural, political, and social factors that bring them together, including or excluding language. Eastman (1984); Coulmas (1992); Bentahila and Davies (1993); Edwards (1994, 2001) assert that language is a secondary or surface characteristic of ethnicity. Though many of these Pal-Am use English as a first language, they still see themselves as no less Palestinian than those speaking Arabic. One subject commented, "I've been here for 12 years and when I speak Arabic, people ask me 'Are you American? Do you understand Arabic?' To me, that's an insult". Another one said, "People look at me and notice right away that I'm not from here and make immature comments or may stare at me, but I try not to care because I know who I am. Sometimes my Arabic is broken, but I do speak good Arabic." A third stated, "It's a society [Palestinian] that plays a huge role in your identity. At first, many of us [Palestinian-American] if not all of us are not accepted as Palestinians mainly because of our language, clothes, way of thinking and simply because we haven't experienced what they have."

To find how speaking English does not negate the construction of their Palestinian identity within Arabic speaking communities, study participants were asked about the most crucial factor in the formation of their identity. Four factors were given. These included feelings, place of residence, language, and other. 42.5% said feelings, 35% for residence, 20% for language, 2.5% for other which appeared as religion. As can be seen, a feeling for Palestine and with Palestinians is considered as the central criterion for identity. Language is not a key issue in this regard. In a study on identity conceptualization, Abdeen (2002: 241) asked native Silwani members about who they regard to be an original native Silwani and whether speaking the Silwani dialect should be the trait for characterizing the native Silwani. Answers to these questions were that the Silwani is the one who has feelings for Silwan and that the Silwani dialect is not important.

In face of dramatic demographic and sociolinguistic changes in and around Ramallah and al-Bireh, it seems that neither language nor place of residence account for ethnic identity. Labov (1972: 120-121), states that speech community is not defined by the use of one language, so much as by taking part in a set of shared norms among the members of that community. These norms may be observed in explicit behavior or in abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage. Suleiman (2003) adds that place of residence of some members of a certain nation does not alter their being members of that nation. Whether a nation lives on its native soil or in diaspora, members of that nation are still an integral part of its makeup (24). Worthy of mention is that bilingualism/multilingualism has become a worldwide linguistic phenomenon nowadays. Many languages are used within the same community and by the same community members. Figure 3 shows subjects responses to the most crucial factor in the construction of one’s identity.

Figure 3: The most crucial factor in the construction of one's identity

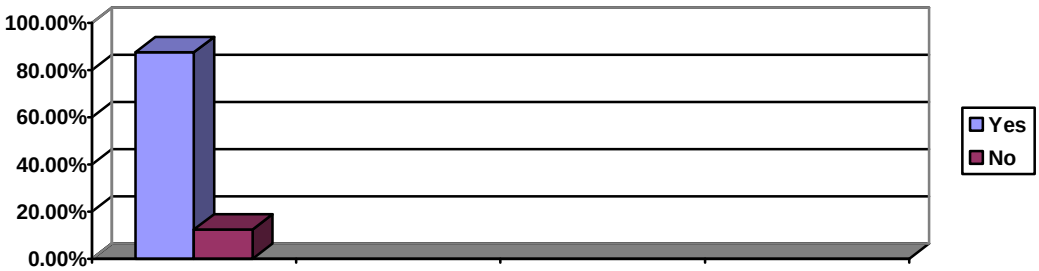


To these Pal-Ams, a Palestinian is still Palestinian even though he or she does not speak Arabic or live in Palestine. What counts is the feeling of solidarity and emotional attachment to the land. In his research on Silwan and upon asking why language does not count as a major factor for Silwani identity, Abdeen (2001: 241) received the following comment, "We can not consider our native Silwani brothers and sisters who immigrated to different parts of the world as being non-Silwanis. They committed no mistake. They are as native Silwanis as we are." Pal-Am seem to have formulated a structure that takes into account both English language use and native distinctiveness. To Ross (1979: 7) ethnicity does not wither with modernity. Speaking English does not change or eliminate the identity of these people. Worthy of mention is that speaking English is also beneficial for mobility and employment for many of these Pal-Am.

To understand the subjects' views on leading a life torn between America and Palestine, they were asked to react to the following questions: “If you were married in Palestine, would you ask your spouse to go back and settle in the USA?”, “Would you settle permanently in the USA?”, and “If you achieved what you came for in Palestine, would you go back to America?” In response to the first question, 55.3% said they would go back to the States after getting married as opposed to 44.7% who do not consider going back. A female subject wrote, "I have learned so much. I am very content about my status here in Palestine but I still would go back." Additionally, only 10% said they would permanently settle in America. 90% reject living in the States permanently. As for the third question, 57.5% said they would go back to the United States if they achieved what they came for including linguistic, religious, social, and behavioral norms. Many commented they would have two lives, here and there. This switch would give them mobility and better opportunities. Homeland is good for social and spiritual life; America, on the other hand, is good for education, employment, and making money.

To find out about the subjects insights and how they feel about the process of returning back, they were asked if they would do the same for their children and send them from America back to their homeland. 87.5% stated that they would do the same thing with their children. In his research on ethnicity, Bourdieu (1991) found that ethnic attitudes are followed inherently by members of the same ethnicity as a result of historical and expected practices. According to Pal-Am, living in their homeland helps construct one’s ethnic identity and behavioral norms. To them, when children return to their native communities at an early age, they grow up knowing about their roots and backgrounds. They accept native norms more easily than when they return at an older age. Their personalities are still not fully formed; they are still capable of accepting native norms. 12.5% said no for sending their children unless the whole family comes back together. Chart 4 shows subjects reaction to the issue of sending their young children to their native communities.

Chart 4: Would you do the same for your children and send them from America back to their homeland?



Returned Palestinian-Americans conceptions about America

Having obtained information about returned immigrant's perceptions of their homeland, the next step was to find how these subjects feel about America. Does returning to their homeland eliminate their American past or experience? Does it alter their conceptions about America? It is apparent that despite returning back and despite living in their native communities, they still consider America home. Parents are aware of the need and importance of the United States for their children; they are conscious to the fact that a day will come when their children go back there. They recognize the benefits of living in America which in reality exceed reward obtained in native communities. A subject commented, "Though we were constantly reminded of our homeland, no negative mention to America was ever made at all." Another one added, "I have more relatives in America than I have here. My father, my brothers, my sister, my brother in law, my mother's family all live there. I'm waiting for a break to go there again. I want to see them all, to go shopping, to see a different place." A third pointed out that it is illogical to give misconceptions about a place you know you need and that one day you will go back to it. A participant commented on his questionnaire, "[I'm American] because I was born and raised there and I can easily fit there." Another one stated, "As a Palestinian who lived in America, I would feel more at home in Palestine if people around me wouldn't consider and look at me as an American. Wherever I go I'm looked at as a foreigner. This doesn't happen in America."

Positive outlooks for the USA are the norm for these people. In fact, some stated that they feel more comfortable in America because they are more accepted there than in their native communities. A subject wrote, "Many Palestinian-Americans face discrimination from other Palestinians. Several members of my family and I had experienced it. There was a time when my sister and I were shopping and a group of children threw pebbles at us saying 'go back to your home'. That was because we were speaking English out loud on the streets." Another one commented, "Wherever I go, I'm looked at as a foreigner." A third wrote, "My life here is suffering because I don't have an ID, [identification card which makes them illegible for residence in the country]." Another conceded, "…. living in the States does give a person more options concerning freedom, education, and business." These quotations bear witness to the fact that many of these Pal-Am are still attached to America. In reality, it is hard to assume that returning back to their native communities would transform all of these people from being American or Pal-Am into purely indigenous Palestinians whose sociolinguistics is simply native as well.

One cannot deny early experiences these subjects have had in America. Regardless of how hard a parent or both parents try to socialize their child in isolation or by constantly reminding them, as children, of their socio-ethnic and socio-religious backgrounds, it is still important to remember that communication and interaction with the wider American society, regardless of how insignificant it might be, is still apt to have effect. No parent(s) would imprison their children or place them in a cocoon. Even if they succeeded in minimizing their child's contact with the outside American world, some exposure would still take place e.g. watching TV, accompanying the child to visit other relatives or friends who might not share that child's parents' philosophy, or just taking the child shopping. All these experience would most probably leave an impact in the child's personality. In fact a 45-year-old Moslem female participant said that sometimes returning back does not yield the results most wanted. She continued, "Some Pal-Am Moslem women came and lived here [home country] for sometime but when they returned back to America, some of them married Americans [Christian Americans]."

Marriage, employment, vacations, education, or visitation are factors that still connect most of these Pal-Am to America. Interviews with them revealed that their views about the USA are constructive and encouraging. Attachment to America takes different forms and reasons. Some see themselves as more fit into the American society than in their local native community. They believe that they do not belong in the Palestinian society and that their place is in the United States. Others are instrumentally attached to America. To them, it is a land of opportunity, business, and money. Still a third group does not have a legal status or official papers that enable them to reside in their homeland. This confines their movement and makes them tied to a small locale. To all these groups, modern American lifestyle and facilities compared to limited services and difficult life in their hometowns make the difference and encourage them to reconsider going back to America.

Christian Palestinians and return

A point worth mentioning in this research is the fact that no Christian participants took part in it. This was not intentional as all respondents were Moslems. When questionnaires were collected, it appeared that no Christian participants were involved. This finding prompted the researcher to investigate the issue further.

The researcher asked Christian friends and acquaintances from the area where the study took place if they have relatives who lived in the States and decided to come back home for permanent settlement; none said "yes". Twenty interviews with those respondents revealed that they all have family members who live in the America, but none of those family members returned back. The interviews dealt with issues regarding immigration, life in the States, and the role Christianity plays in return. The question of the role that religion plays in immigration and return was left to the very end of the interview. It appeared that Moslems and Christians had the same reasons for immigration. However, only Moslems return back. When Christian participants were asked about the role religion plays in returning or not returning back home, most respondents stated that returning back is higher among Moslems than it is among Christians; a point Moslems admitted as well.

The reasons, however, differ. Whereas most Moslems emphasized the role Islam and social conventions play, most Christian respondents stated that the unstable conditions mainly political and economic in The West Bank are the reasons why Christians do not come back. One of the respondents said, "When I think of it, I can't remember any of my relatives coming back." When asked if religion has anything to do with it, she answered that she didn't know, then she said "maybe". Another respondent whose all family members, except for her and her elderly aunt, are in the US leading a successful life claimed that social and health services in the US are the main reasons for her family members not to come back. A third stated, "It's not religion as much as it is security that matters. Life in America is more secure in all aspects than it is here." A fourth added, "Why come back? You [researcher] tell if there is anything worth coming back for; give me reasons for returning. They are successful there leading a wonderful life, money, prosperity, employment… you name it." One respondent responded angrily saying, "I don't like this question.

What has religions and Christianity to do with immigration and living in America?" Most of the respondents said that not coming back does not mean or indicate that Christian Palestinians are less Palestinians. They are as much Palestinians as those living here. It is not Christianity or Islam that makes people settle down in America; it is the bad conditions we have here. This answers the second part of the question which is "How Christian Palestinians perceive and conceptualize their identity". It is apparent from the responses of the Christian respondents that Christian Palestinian Americans perceive themselves as much Palestinian as those living in their homeland. They come for visitation. Many of them get married to other Palestinian Christians from their Palestinian hometowns. They keep in touch with family members and help them financially. They follow up with political issues concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and give support to their cause. To obtain more information about Christians' return behavior, the researcher asked Moslem returnees about Christians return. They gave contradictory answers to the Christians responses as they all confirmed that Christianity is a very crucial factor for assimilation and permanently settling down in the States. They said that they do not know of Christian Palestinians who returned back home for permanent settlement. When asked if Christianity plays any role in Christian Palestinians settlement in the USA, they gave positive answers. Moslem respondents affirmed that Christian Palestinians melt down in the American society as the dominant religion there is Christianity.

A Moslem returnee stated, "Look around, once the Christian population in Ramallah was very high, but when you consider it now and after many of them have immigrated, they form less than 5% of the overall population. This is an indication they don't return back when they immigrate." He continued, "If they returned back, their population would be equal or close to the Moslem." To many Moslem respondents, Christians accept all cultural aspects of life in the States including marriage, food, costume, behavioral norms, in addition to religion of course. These responses lend support to MESC (2002: 401) statistics mentioned earlier which show that 95% of the indigenous population of Ramallah, which is predominantly Christian is in diaspora.

Moslem returnees said that one of the major reasons for their own return is religion; they stated that they want their children not only to know that they are Moslem, but also to get accustomed to religious rites and practices. Many commented that life in the States gives space for practicing religious ceremonies and beliefs, but these practices would be more authentic when practiced in a Moslem country. They added that children and specially teenage girls should be protected because they are a symbol of honor; one way of protection is for them to get married to Moslems. When young girls come back to their parents' indigenous homeland, they get good chances for meeting other Moslem Palestinian guys. Some commented that it is completely acceptable if, for example, a Palestinian Moslem girl gets married to another Moslem even if he is not Palestinian; what matters is that they share the same faith. They added, by the same token, it is fully satisfactory when a Christian Palestinian girl gets married to a Christian American.

As far as the second part of the question which is "how Christian Palestinians perceive and conceptualize their identity" is concerned, Moslem returnees' responses reflected the same viewpoint of Christians' responses interviewed in the study. Moslem Palestinians confirmed that Christian Palestinians are an integral part of the immigrant Palestinian community. They keep up with political, cultural, and social concerns of the Palestinian community back home. Moslems and Christians stand side by side when necessity calls.

Conclusion

Return, self-image, and identity conceptualization are crucial issues for Pal-Am. They are parts of a heritage that has been bequeathed from generation to generation. It is not just about coming back. It is part of a broader frame that includes sociolinguistics, ethnicity, religion, culture, nationalism, sentimentalism, and politics. It is the result of primordial conceptions and what Bourdieu (1991) calls embodied dispositions or ways of thinking and living in the world. All of the above factors appear to display complex connections in the construction of the Pal-Am society. They also help define and understand the sociolinguistic ecology for this population. These old-new sociolinguistic behaviors: return, self-image, and identity, stand for the perceptions and norms of a community that does not seem to give up its native values which represent a tie between people and space.

More than a century after immigrating and living in America, many Americans of Palestinian origin still see themselves as Palestinian. This vision is not just a sentiment or symbol they sustain. It is true at all levels. Parents are convinced that their young children should be raised in their native community. They should learn their native language, culture, religion, and behavioral norms. To them, these values are of prime importance in the construction of one's personality. Parents see this as a moral duty they have for their children. To elevate this responsibility from the verbal or the perceptual levels of who and what a Palestinian should be, actions are taken; these are manifested in sending children to their native homeland. This socio-ethnic burden is not only parents' responsibility; it is also children's load. Children are equally involved in this process. They are constantly reminded of their ancestry, homeland, religion, and origin. This behavior creates a sense of concern and sentimentalism for children. Return to their homeland is an achievement that puts all family members at ease. When children return back, threats of identity lose become contained. Once sociolinguistic and ethnic values are attained, a mutual burden for both parents and children is removed.

It is apparent that religions, Islam and Christianity, play two different roles regarding this behavior. Moslem Palestinian Americans return, Christians do not. Though the first group fits in almost all aspects of American life, they do not seem to fit there from a religious perspective. It is apparent from responses obtained that Christians assimilate more than Moslems. To many Moslem Americans of Palestinian origin, Christianity is the factor for Christian Americans of Palestinian descent to settle down in America.

Pal-Am seem to adopt multiple forms of identity: territorial patriotism, regional or Arab nationalism, religious, and global, each of which has its significance. In identifying themselves, the Palestinian identity was the most salient. This identity reflects national and political values. It reflects vitality, continuity, and ambitions for freedom and independence. This independence is two-fold. The first is from the Israeli control and the second is from the Arab nationalism. The belief that they have been abandoned by other Arabs creates a sense of bitterness among these Pal-Am and helps construct this territorial patriotic identity. It sends out the message that Palestinians are alive. Pal-Am identity comes second. In addition to the national and political obligations this identity has for Palestinians, it also carries both global self-definition and cultural association with America. Those who identified themselves as such are realistic in the sense they can not delimit the American dimension and cultural aspects of their characters. The English language they speak, the life they have led in the USA, and the exposure to American culture they have had are undeniable characteristics in their personalities. Moslem identity reflects an identity that extends beyond national and territorial boundaries. It is regarded as an alternative for the national identity. It is the answer to achieving national and religious aspirations. American, Arab, and Arab-American were the least identities adopted. Reasons for the low profile of these identities among Pal-Am are due to the disappointment and abandonment they have had from both Arabs and Americans.

Even though not all native values may be attained after returning back, a sense of security and comfort prevails among these returnees and among their families. Returned children are expected to learn and use Arabic. This, however, does not always happen. Many continue speaking English as a first language and Arabic ranks second. Both parents and children accept this behavior. They do not see any contradiction or threat in it. To them, they are

still Palestinians even though their language is English. Not using Arabic does not alter their ethnicity, identity, and culture or community membership.

May (2004: 39) states that language does not define us, and may not be an important feature, or indeed even a necessary one, in the construction of our identities. Living in native communities and absorbing socio-cultural aspects is enough to gain membership. Barth (1969: 14) states that ethnicity is about social relationships rather than about specific cultural properties like language. May (2004) adds that cultural attributes become significant markers of ethnic identity only when community members see them necessary or socially effective. Language is regarded as only one of many markers in the construction of identity (40). To Pal-Am, the most crucial factor in one's identity is feelings and attachment to their homeland regardless of the place of residence or languages spoken.

Subject's reaction to retuning back is seen as an appropriate behavior. It helps build their personalities and define their identity. Many stated that when they get married and go back to the States, they will send their own children back to their native communities. They see the results of this process in themselves. They believe that they have developed better and more mature personalities on all levels including social, national, religious, linguistic, and ethnic.

Despite their return to their Palestinian society and despite their absorption of Arab sociolinguistic and ethno-religious values, Pal-Am are still attached to their life in America. Return to native communities does not seem to uproot them from their life in the USA. Though they return to their native homelands, they still feel the need to go back to America. One subject commented, "I really like it here, but it's good to go every once in a while to America." Another one added, "I like living around Arab people because together we share same traditions and values whether Moslems or Christians. However, the current living situation here puts pressure and stress on me. This makes me want to leave sometimes [to the USA]." A third stated, "I just want to go back to the USA."

It is apparent they have developed coordination between two spaces, two sociolinguistic environments, and two cultures. This coordination regulates their perceptions about each space. Much as each identity they construct has significance, each place has its values as well. It seems that each space and each identity represents a worldview. They are aware of the rewards each locale gives. Whereas homeland is good for native sociolinguistic values, America is good for advancement and mobility. A subject stated, "Palestine is always home for me. However, here you feel stuck as if you can't go anywhere. America is always good for business, college education, and better opportunities." This statement reflects the actual reason behind Palestinians immigration, early and recent, to America. Early and to some extent recent immigration has been encouraged by job availability in the USA which coincided with dramatic geo-political and socio-economic changes in the region. The current bad political and economic situations in the West Bank encourage many of these returnees, namely males, to go back to America. Though this research represents a step forward in investigating and understanding identity studies in general and Palestinian-American identity in particular, it is lacking. Further research is still needed to bring research on identity-related topics to a more mature state.

Appendix

Questionnaire of the study

I would appreciate your time and consideration in filling this questionnaire which will be used for scientific study.

Please circle the letter that reflects your belief.

1. **Gender**: a. Male b. Female

2. **Age**: a. Teenage b. 20-30 c. 31-40 d. 41-50 e. above 50

3. **Marital status**: a. Single b. Married c. Divorced d. Other: specify

4. **Religion**: a. Moslem b. Christian c. Other: specify

5. **Education**: a. Basic b. High school c. University

6. **Did you return back willingly?** a. Yes b. No

7. **Why did you return back?**

a. To get to know my homeland and origin.
b. For social conventions e.g. to learn Arab social norms and behavior.
c. For religious reasons e.g. to learn the commands of my religion.
d. For linguistic reasons e.g. to learn Arabic.
e. To be married.
f. Other: specify _____

8. **Did your family play any role in your coming back?** a. Yes b. No

9. **If your family played a role in your coming back, what was it?**

a. To get to know my homeland and origin.
b. For social conventions e.g. to learn Arab social norms and behavior.
c. For religious reasons e.g. to learn the commands of my religion.
d. For linguistic reasons e.g. to learn Arabic.
e. To be married.
f. Other: specify _____

10. **How old were you when you returned back?**

a. Less than 12 b. 13-16 c. 17-19 d. above 20

11. **When you returned back, did you come alone, with one parent, or with both parents?**

a. Alone b. With one parent c. With both parents

12. **Do you believe that more pressure is put on females to return back?**

a. Yes b. No

13. **Where do you feel more at home?**

a. Palestine b. USA

14. **How do identify yourself?**

a. Arab
b. America
c. Arab-American
d. Palestinian
e. Palestinian-American
f. Moslem
g. Christian
h. Other: specify _____

15. What language did you grow up speaking in America?

a. Arabic
b. English
c. Both Arabic and English
d. Other: specify: _____

16. **What is the most crucial factor in the formation of one's identity?**

a. Language b. Place of residence c. Feelings
d. Other: specify _____

17. **If you were married in Palestine, would you ask your spouse to go back and settle in the USA?**

a. Yes b. No

18. **Would you settle permanently in the USA?**

a. Yes b. No

18. **If you achieved what you came for in Palestine, would you go back to the USA?**

a. Yes b. No

20. **If you went back to the States, would you do the same for your children and send them to Palestine?**

a. Yes b. No

21. **What is your first language?**

a. Arabic b. English c. Other: specify _____

22. **Which language do you feel more comfortable speaking?**

a. Arabic b. English

23. **Can you read and write Arabic?**

a. Yes b. No

24. **Does learning Arabic: speaking, reading, and writing give you satisfaction that you are not alienated and that your identity as an Arab is not lost?**

a. Yes b. No

25. **Comments** (please write any comments you would like to add):

_____
_____
_____

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