As the political situation of the Palestinians has changed, so too have the customs and practices of Palestinians in the Diaspora. Using Eric Hobsbawm’s concept of “invented tradition” as a point of departure, this article explores the origins, functions, and implications of some of the elements—including dance, song, and costume—of Palestinian-American wedding celebrations in the New York/New Jersey/Pennsylvania area, which since the first intifada have evolved into occasions for celebrating nationalist as well as communal identity.

It is Sunday evening and the sun is slowly setting. A group of men sings, chants, and flies a Palestinian flag in front of a house on a hilltop. Standing among them are several older women who answer their chants with ululations. Facing them on the front porch, a group of younger women claps, sways to the rhythm of the chants, and occasionally repeats the words of the older women. Only the older women are dressed in *thobes*, intricately embroidered traditional Palestinian dresses. The groom, standing with the men, is at the center of all this attention for about half an hour before the wedding procession is due to begin, in which his relatives carry Palestinian flags. Soon, the group begins to move through the streets to the bride’s home. Once there, the scene is repeated until the bride emerges to join her groom.

As I stand with the women, I am transported to the West Bank—or rather, to what I imagine the West Bank to be like. Only intermittently, when a car drives by blaring reggaeton music, or when a neighbor comes out in sweat pants to watch in amazement, am I reminded that we are in New Jersey. I am probably the only person here who is not a U.S. citizen. Although a Palestinian refugee, I was born in Lebanon and raised in Kuwait, which makes me an outsider to this community. Most of the younger people around me were born in New Jersey or New York, attended American public or Catholic schools, and are (or will become) the parents of the third generation of Palestinian immigrants to the United States.

The immigrant status of this group poses intriguing questions about the wedding festivities. Are the participants trying to hold on to their premigration customs? Does the second generation understand these customs, or are they simply appeasing their parents? Are these rituals an expression of “symbolic ethnicity,” with little effect on their daily lives? It is tempting to conclude that

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the wedding is a private-sphere ritual of ethnic pride and traditionalism. After all, is this not what immigrants do, especially if they are decontextualized? When we delve into the particulars of the ritual and the historical trajectory of the community, however, this conclusion appears premature at best.

This article is based on the findings of an ethnographic study conducted between 2001 and 2007 on Palestinian-Americans living in the “tri-state” area of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. The communities that welcomed me were composed primarily of Palestinian immigrants who came to the United States from the West Bank after 1967—mainly from a cluster of Muslim villages—and their children. Some had arrived earlier as single male students or economic immigrants intent on saving enough money to return to the West Bank to marry. Others came after living in South America for a number or years, again as economic immigrants planning to return to Palestine. It was only after the Israeli occupation in 1967, when difficult-to-obtain Israeli permits were required for trips to the West Bank, that these men realized that “the rest of Palestine was gone” and began to form communities in the U.S. by bringing their families to join them.5

Since then, chain migrations of families have drained some West Bank villages of all inhabitants but the very old and the very poor. Many return to their natal villages at some point during the year, usually in the summer. As life in the West Bank worsens and the occupation becomes harsher, more family members (even distant ones) are being sponsored to come to the United States every year.6 Accordingly, my larger project traces the social networks of Palestinian-Americans and the impact of their transnational relationships on their political identity both as Palestinians and Americans, as well as their relationship to the West Bank. In this article, I restrict my analysis to wedding ceremonies.7

CONNECTING POLITICS TO THE LAND

As the wedding procession, which now includes the families of both bride and groom, wends its way to the wedding hall, we leave New Jersey once again for the West Bank. The groom’s female relatives congregate at the entrance in a circle and resume their chanting, accompanied by a single drum held by one of the women.8 This continues for about 45 minutes, until all the guests are seated and the bride and groom are ready to make their entrance. All the women in the circle are dressed in thobes and chitchas (velvet caps covered with gold coins; the older and wealthier the woman, the more gold coins the caps have). Male relatives join in to serenade the couple before giving the stage to the wedding singer. The couple walks slowly toward the back of the hall, where they are seated side-by-side on two bulky Louis XIV-style armchairs with gold armrests upholstered in white patterned satin. The chairs remain vacant throughout most of the wedding, as the bride and groom are constantly beckoned to the dance floor, together as a couple or individually as members of their respective families. (Occasionally, bride and groom will dance with in-laws to demonstrate alliance with the “new” family.10)
Wedding rituals are highly formalized. A family member, generally on the groom’s side, takes over the microphone and acts as the master of ceremonies, but the guests already know what to do. Community members are very strict about wedding rituals. At the beginning of my research in 2001, a young woman was sharply criticized for moving the armchairs from the center of the hall to a corner. People were appalled: Who did she think she was to change tradition?

An outsider may wonder whether the community could really be worried about the placement of two armchairs. Eric Hobsbawm would explain the community’s preoccupation with such details as part of an effort to “invent tradition.” He defines “invented tradition” as a “set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.” These symbols are all the more effective when, as in the case of the position of two armchairs at a wedding, they have no utilitarian or practical purpose.

The specific past that this community is trying to connect with is that of the Palestinian fellabin (“villagers,” in Arabic). Community members often refer to themselves and each other as fellabin. Among city people, the word is generally pejorative, but in this community it is uttered with pride. The adjective fellabi is defined as a dialect, a traditional way of life, a state of mind—a Palestinian identity. Ironically, farming and tending livestock are absent from the community’s self-definitions—a deliberate omission, because unlike villagers in Palestine, none of these people farms. Thus, a selective past is being reclaimed that does not include a return to simpler modes of livelihood and lifestyles.

Wedding ceremonies in this Palestinian community may seem like folkloric curiosities, yet they pose important questions about the social organization and politics of exile. Under what conditions does a distant conflict become part of a community’s self-representation? How do generations born in a new country attach themselves to such self-representations? Hobsbawm and Ranger’s “invention of tradition” helps identify these questions, but it does not supply the answers, because, in this particular case, the traditions are not so much invented as selectively chosen from a past cultural repertoire and then reified in the present.

Two other lines of analysis are helpful here. The first deals with trust networks, the organization of significant portions of social life around sets of binding relationships that enable people to sustain valued, enduring collective activities. The second centers on nationalism, more specifically, postcolonial nationalism. Palestinian-American self-representations belong to a larger class of beliefs and practices that dramatize the relationship between a people and its oppressors. The extent to which both trust networks and postcolonial nationalism inform Palestinian-American collective life is illustrated in the wedding ritual itself. Indeed, the two strands are apparent even in the songs and chants selected for the occasion. The importance of the music can be gleaned from the prominence given to the wedding band, which is located on a high
stage overlooking the dance floor and is at least as visible as the bride and groom.

The wedding singer offers a fusion of traditional Palestinian wedding songs, Palestinian resistance songs, and recent popular Arabic songs. Regardless of their origin, the songs are adapted to the names of the bride and groom, their families, and their ancestral villages. Sung in distinctly village dialects, they express a longing for the land, extolling the beauty of fields, orange groves, fig and olive trees, valleys and hilltops. In one common zaffa (serenade) to the groom, the singer asks the groom’s mother if she knows where her son “decorated” (prepared) himself. The response is that it was in his maternal uncle’s house in the valley of such-and-such (the relevant village name is included here). The chorus urges the orange, olive, and fig trees to dance for the handsome young groom. The zaffa to the bride is more direct, asking that she be Palestinian like the groom. The listeners are told that the most beautiful women come from Palestine and that they bear Palestinian children. (Such lyrics are apparently taken to heart: When I asked young people why they were intent on marrying another Palestinian, young women immediately talked about courageous and handsome young men, while young men evoked beautiful girls who will bear Palestinian children.)

In some songs, the land (Palestine) and the bride are conflated: In one line the groom will ask his mother to find him a Palestinian girl to marry, and in another he wants to return to drink water from her spring (i.e., Palestine). Time, persons, and places are collapsed in these songs, and no one pays attention to the fact that the groom got dressed in a suburban home where the only plants are in flower pots on the front porch or small patches of grass in the backyard.

Some songs are overtly political, especially those played during the men’s dabka. One of the more popular is titled “We Are Not Terrorists,” the lyrics of which are as follows:

- We are not terrorists
- We are the people of freedom
- Muslims and Christians, our civilization is Arab

- They struck us with rockets
- We struck them with rocks
- They stole al-Aqsa mosque
- They stole the history

- And they call us terrorists
- They preoccupied us with wars
- They divided and scattered us around in societies and societies

- The land of Palestine will maintain its Arab identity
- We want to liberate Palestine
- Palestine is Arab

17 Dabka is a traditional dance and music style performed at weddings and other celebrations.

18 These lines express a strong sense of national identity and resistance to occupation.
A song that became popular after a summer of escalated violence in the West Bank, Gaza, and Lebanon, entitled “Hawk of the Arabs,” speaks of strife and struggle:

Stirring, Arab blood is stirring
And the effort is Arab
No matter how many rockets you fire
The proud people will not budge

Scream out loud
We are a people who are accustomed to death
We do not want wealth or precious gems
We want to live in freedom

Blood begets blood
You will get nothing but grief

At one wedding I attended, this last song was sung six times; at another, it was sung twice, in an extended version. As I watched men dance the dabka vigorously to this song, I noticed that many of the guests were mouthing the lyrics. It doesn’t take long to notice a link between wedding songs and current events in the region. An upsurge in violence in Palestine finds its echo in the number of nationalist/resistance songs performed at weddings.

**MARRYING THE NATION**

The idealization of a pastoral past, the appropriation of birds and plants as national symbols, and even the conflation of woman with the land (e.g., the “motherland”) are integral components of standard models of nationalism. Yet here, this mythical tranquil past is bluntly juxtaposed with songs about violence, the fragmentation of a people, and resistance. Reality intercepts this community’s life even at the level of nostalgic imagining.

The Western model of nationhood and its postcolonial adaptation were used to build or celebrate nations at the macro level. For Palestinians in New Jersey, however, the micro-level choice of venue makes sense both in terms of their national history and the experience of the community. The defining events of Palestinian history have been the obliteration of Palestine as a political entity and the displacement of over half its population by Israel in the 1948 war (the Nabka), and the occupation of what remained of Palestine (the West Bank and Gaza Strip) in the 1967 war (the Naksa). Accordingly, the Palestinian past is permeated by loss, and Palestinians’ lot has been one of mourning, martyrdom, suicide bombers, freedom fighters, terrorists, being a burden on a host society, or themselves being burdened by their predicament. When Palestinians come together, it is to commemorate the Nakba, fallen heroes, and national resistance leaders, and to fundraise for emergency aid for the destitute in the refugee camps under occupation.
Whereas weddings might appear, in the eyes of contemporary North American society, an unlikely venue for songs celebrating national struggle, an entire Palestinian literature of resistance has emerged post-1948, one of whose central metaphors is the wedding that symbolizes the union between the people and the land, and, by extension, their struggle for that land. Probably the most cited poem in this genre is Mahmud Darwish’s “Blessed Be That Which Has Not Come!” In the first stanza, the poet writes:

This is the wedding without an end,
In a boundless courtyard,
On an endless night
This is the Palestinian wedding:
Never will lover reach lover
Except as martyr or fugitive

The association of the wedding and the Palestinian struggle is common in Palestinian popular culture and informs the plot lines of the two most analyzed recent films on Palestinian nationalism—Wedding in Galilee and Rana’s Wedding.

For the Palestinian community in the tri-state area, the national movement and struggle is by no means abstract or distant. The first generation came of age in the aftermath of the Nakba and thus was acutely aware of the suffering of the 1948 refugees. Moreover, as members of the Naksa generation who began their exile in the United States after 1967, they are equally aware of Fatah’s armed response to the occupation of their villages, thanks to their close contacts with the homeland, not to mention actual visits. In contrast to the Palestinian-Americans (mainly of the 1948 generation) who responded to the 1967 occupation (and unequivocal U.S. support for Israel) by forming associations to “create understanding” about the Palestinian cause, these newcomers did not exhibit any overt political activity on behalf of Palestine. Yet they were deeply connected to their homeland, and they have been described as having little connection to their new country. According to a 1988 study of Palestinian women in Chicago, “Palestinians feel like involuntary emigrants . . . For although their bodies are here, their minds and spirits are in Palestine.” And although they did not pursue the activist politics of the elite AAUG and other groups, they nurtured their Palestinian-ness in informal clubs and get-togethers. Moreover, their roots in the West Bank and travels back and forth meant that they were familiar with the factional issues in the occupied territories, and some were affiliated with various PLO member groups.

THE PALESTINIANIZATION OF WEDDINGS

Though the transition of this community to life in the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s coincided with intense activism by the AAUG, the NAAA, and other organizations, the “Palestinianization” or “ politicization” of
Palestinian-American weddings was not the invention of the activist elite or a result of PLO influence. Rather, the transformation seems to have emerged organically in the wake of the 1987 uprising in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The first generation recalls that period as the first time the media positively affected public opinion toward Palestinians by raising critical questions about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. They were proud as Palestinians and pleased that their children (the second generation) watched the intifada unfold on television. Identification with Palestine also needed to be made more enticing for their children, especially since other temptations were strong in the United States; weddings became one of the ways by which younger people were enticed. In the words of a first-generation mother, “1948 Palestinians lived out their lives in sorrow. We want to enjoy and celebrate ours.”

Weddings among these immigrants had always been community affairs, but before 1987 they were much simpler, especially when the newcomers had fewer resources and the women prepared the feast in their homes. The internal cohesiveness of trust networks was reinforced through these contributions in kind.33 Weddings are still community affairs, but they are now elaborate events held in large halls that must be reserved months in advance. No longer limited to immediate circles of relatives, weddings now include almost anyone with a connection to either family. Guests frequently drive long distances to attend.34 The half-dozen weddings I attended ranged in size from 600 to 1,500 guests.

But the change in weddings has involved far more than size. The chibtas or thobes now worn by the bridal couples’ families were rare sights before the late 1980s; previously, the bride wore a white wedding dress, while the guests wore whatever they wanted. There were no flags or kaffiyehs,35 and the music was limited to popular Egyptian music devoid of political content. Today, the Palestinian flag, scarves,36 kaffiyeh-covered rods and cardboard swords, and flag-colored masabih37 have become ubiquitous at weddings and are variously used by men and women while dancing. For instance, during the dabka every man is handed a scarf to wear around his neck, and the lead dancer carries the flag. As these practices emerged after 1987, weddings between Palestinians became Palestinian weddings.

Weddings changed in other ways, too. They used to be celebrated on a single night. Now, it is not enough to have just a wedding party (which itself can last anywhere from five to seven hours); there must also be an engagement party and a henna party. Henna parties prior to the late 1980s were reserved for the bride and her female relatives, who would come together to sing, dance, and paint their hands with henna (herbal dye).38 Today, henna parties, or “hennas,” are effectively second weddings, taking place two nights before the actual wedding festivities in a wedding hall and open to the entire community. Community members still claim that hennas are reserved for relatives, but as...
a participant-observer I can affirm that they are as large as the weddings, from which hennas diverge in a number of key respects, most notably that females of all ages, including the bride, wear traditional thobes. The henna powder itself is laden with symbolic meanings and remains in the baskets used in the bride’s zaffa (serenade performed by women). Hennas constitute the “traditional” celebration and hence center entirely on Palestinian symbols, images, and songs.

Besides reflecting the pride generated by the first intifada and efforts to keep young people close to their Palestinian roots, the “Palestinianization” of weddings is, according to members of the community, partly a response to the failure of the Palestinian resistance and to fears of losing Palestine, figuratively and literally. A community leader offered two interrelated reasons for embellishing weddings: the political void left by the Palestinian factions and the encroachment of religious groups on the community in the United States. He explained that the 1983 PLO splintering in the Middle East was mirrored here, leaving fragmented PLO associations. At the same time, Muslim groups were gaining ground on university campuses by attracting individuals who would have otherwise joined secular political groups. His concern about religious groups falls within the model of trust network dynamics developed by Charles Tilly, who hypothesized that such networks are premised on kinship ties. External entities such as religious groups and foreign governments are perceived as a threat to the unity of the community. The community response to fragmentation and political void is to emphasize its communal/national identity through wedding celebrations. While this view might be shared by a segment of the first generation, there are undoubtedly other factors consolidating identification with Palestine to consider. Of these, travel to the West Bank is salient. At the end of every summer, thobes, kaffiyehs, and dancing beads are all brought back from the West Bank, as are new pendants, wristbands, and songs.

Thus, West Bank Palestinian-Americans transformed their weddings into celebrations of Palestinian-ness that took on some (but not all) of the forms and roles of traditional national celebrations. Most national celebrations have a public audience (if not attendance) and recur annually on specified days. Weddings as Palestinian national celebrations have a private audience and, obviously, varying dates. While this is certainly not a typical form of political mobilization, for wedding attendees the experience is intense. Rather than having a single day designated for rejoicing in being part of a nation, most families average approximately ten weddings per “season.” When the hennas are taken into account, this comes to twenty “national days” each summer, with a few others sprinkled throughout the year. And as the community grows in size, the wedding season is being extended. Those who cannot book a hall and singer early enough are left with the less desirable time slots between October and April.

**Gender Roles and Potential Mates**

Back in the wedding hall, I watch the guests. Anyone who can walk, be carried, or be wheeled in attends. People of all ages are swaying, dancing,
or clapping to the music. Perhaps the only guests who are not fully engaged in the festivities are the infants sleeping in their car seats under the tables. Large numbers of children running around are an inevitable feature of every wedding, despite the havoc they often wreak on the bathrooms and the additional clean-up costs they incur for the hosts. However, as with other details of this “invented” tradition, any attempt to discourage the presence of children would be strongly criticized. Aside from the issue of finding babysitters, bringing young children is seen as furthering the internal cohesiveness of the trust network, emphasizing links to the future as well as the past. For the youngsters themselves, it is an opportunity to dress up and play unsupervised. Meanwhile, adolescents are raised with the understanding that the preferred “marriage pool” is to be found at weddings; with the growth of the community, out-marriage is no longer a necessity. For the young people, then, the events offer the added incentive of seeing and being seen by potential spouses.

However, young women must take precautions not to appear to be on the lookout for a potential spouse. They do not make eye contact or dance with men outside their immediate family (male cousins too young for marriage are an exception). Women never join the *dabka*, although they know the steps and dance it in more private settings. When I asked about this, I received a look of utter disbelief and was told that it would be immodest—not to mention impractical, given the high heels and bouncing dresses. Adolescents are raised with the understanding that the preferred “marriage pool” is found at weddings; with the growth of the community, out-marriage is no longer a necessity. The preferred “marriage pool” is to be found at weddings; with the growth of the community, out-marriage is no longer a necessity.

Young women’s gowns, colorful and shiny, are part-prom dress, part-fairytale. Women either design the gowns themselves, adapting patterns from magazines and taking them to a seamstress, or buy them at the mall and have them altered. Alterations usually include the addition of some sort of sleeves for modesty, even if these are transparent or barely cover the shoulders. Young women spend countless hours gluing rhinestones onto their dresses; combined with the shiny material, the effect dazzles the eye from every direction. The makeup is thick and professionally applied, and the heels too high for comfort (as attested to by the Chinese slippers brought along for the evening’s end). The picture-perfect results of all this labor are romanticized, storybook representations of an abstract ideal. This serves as another instance of the invention that takes place in this community, whereby local/American materials undergo “Palestinianization.” Alternatively, one could suggest that this hybridization brings American customs/fashion into a Palestinian setting. Either way, sweating and energetic dancing might not only ruin this “product” but also symbolically tarnish the image of feminine decorum as well.

Control over body movements and facial expressions on the dance floor derives from considerations of modesty. I initially wondered why young women attendees rarely smiled. Perhaps they were not enjoying themselves? With time, I learned that showing too much emotion was considered immodest. Dancing
too vigorously could earn a young woman a reputation for shamelessness and unseemly attention-craying.44

Men are expected to show respect toward women by maintaining their distance, avoiding eye contact, and stepping aside during the women’s dances. Men are expected to dance the dabka and wear the Palestinian scarf but not the traditional male ombaz and batta.45 Their gendered role includes demonstrating solidarity with other men (men of all ages hold hands), protecting the women (ensuring that no one imposes on female relatives), and having the physical stamina to dance the dabka for 40 minutes.

The patriarchal overtones of these performances are palpable and at times exaggerated for effect. Partha Chatterjee and Craig Calhoun propose that post-colonial nationalism stresses gender distinctions more than Western nationalism because gendered roles and identities belong to spheres of life usually untouched by colonial rule.46 Noting that the emphasis on gender roles in non-Western national movements has been used by Western observers as evidence of women’s oppression in these societies, Chatterjee argues that colonial powers’ domination of the public sphere, which renders any change in formal national institutions virtually impossible, forces the colonized to turn inwards. The consequent reliance on the family and patriarchy in modeling their version of nationalism, in his view, results in the elevation of the “inner”/domestic sphere as the space where nationalism is fostered in postcolonial nations. While acknowledging that this process has unfolded largely at the expense of women’s rights, Chatterjee’s work, in contrast to most others, does not reduce patriarchy to a cultural attribute of the people studied.47

While comparisons with non-Western women’s subjection in the context of national struggles, for instance in Algeria and India, are undoubtedly relevant to the Palestinian resistance movement, they are beyond the scope of the present article.48 What is significant here is the application of these questions to the Palestinian-American community: What is the place of women in the community? Are their rights being compromised in the name of the “national struggle”?

Needless to say, the Palestinian community in the tri-state area is not a postcolonial group but rather part of a Diaspora linked by multiple ties to occupied Palestine. Weddings among Palestinians in New Jersey can be read as a blending of postcolonial and Western nationalism models.49 The “conservatism” of this community cannot be reduced to compliance with “tradition.” In her 1988 study of Palestinian Muslim West Bank women in the Chicago area, Louise Cainkar suggests that anti-Palestinian sentiment in the United States fostered the conservatism of an already socially conservative immigrant group. As a trust network based on kinship alliances predating migration, the community closed itself more tightly around the social structure to which it had become accustomed under Jordanian rule (and, more forcefully, under Israeli occupation). Detachment from institutionalized politics in the United States reinforced the trend toward family-based preservation of Palestinian-ness. Cainkar’s study demonstrates the extent to which culture and
politics were intertwined in the lives of first-generation, post-1967 Palestinians in Chicago. The second generation continues to infuse the cultural with the political.

**DANCE FLOOR MESSAGES AND VIDEO TAPES**

Dance and posture manifest the nation’s gender ideals, but other messages are also conveyed on the dance floor, where family alliances can be signaled, broken, and affirmed by the length of time partners spend together on the dance floor. Older women join younger women to assess them for their sons, with speculation about a possible match sure to follow. Moving away from a partner too quickly or declining a dance is also noted. The consequences of individuals’ actions can affect entire families, sometimes sparking squabbles that last for weeks.

The all-important monetary wedding gift, or nokout, is another important channel of symbolic communication. Wedding guests drop envelopes containing cash or checks into a box as they leave the wedding. Although this simple act is public, the nokout is counted in private by the couples’ families, and the intentions of the giver are duly interpreted. Assessments are weighed against the giver’s financial capabilities, which are often known. Too large a sum could mean that the giver holds the receiver in high esteem, or—if it is an amount that the receiver cannot reciprocate—that the giver feels superior. On the other hand, too small a gift can indicate disrespect or a desire to express displeasure or even to sever ties.

Messages aside, the nokout makes these celebrations possible by helping to cover the wedding expenses and, in some cases, basics like furniture for the new household. The aim is not to “make a profit” but rather to “break even.” The unstated “rules” of the nokout have another effect: The expectation that everyone helps cover expenses tends to standardize weddings, preventing the kind of excess that could destroy community cohesiveness. The nokout also allows couples to marry at a younger age, as they do not have to worry about beginning their lives together in debt.

While nokout-borne messages are unrelated to the “national” dimension of weddings, they reaffirm the trust networks’ boundaries by strengthening webs of reliance, solidarity, obligation, patronage, and services offered internally. For instance, the quarrels that can erupt on the dance floor require community mediation, a key mechanism (aside from ideology) of keeping a nation/group together in the absence of a state apparatus. One may wonder how anyone could notice these messages in such congested halls. The answer is gossip or idle talk (baki fadhi), which serves as the quintessential mechanism of control for this community. When the wedding party ends, people return home and pick up the phone to discuss the evening’s events until the early hours of the morning. They also wait for the wedding videos to get a “bird’s eye” view of the occasion.
Wedding videos have multiple meanings in the community. The first is a sort of voyeurism, whereby attendees can scrutinize one another undetected in the privacy of their living rooms. Young people appreciate this opportunity to evaluate potential spouses. One young woman claimed that the videos are more important than the actual weddings.

A look at the production process and consumption of these tapes supports this assessment. Wedding tapes take up to eight months to produce under the watchful eyes of the bride’s and the groom’s families, who inspect raw footage from at least two cameras and then decide what goes into the final cut. During the process, the unedited tapes are tightly controlled, viewed only by close and trusted family members. Once a final version is made, multiple copies are circulated to relatives in the tri-state area, other states, and back in the West Bank. Thus the audience for the videos—far larger than the number of wedding attendees—has access to more dimensions and phases of the celebration than any one participant could observe at the wedding itself.

“The wedding videos,” a first-generation man in his sixties told me, “bring the community together. They make us feel like we are close together . . . like we never left each other.” Later he added, “We want the future generations to know what Palestine is like so they never forget.” In his voice was a mixture of despair and pride. He recognized the realities of fragmentation and its threat to the community (and the Palestinian nation) but was proud that a means of preserving some of the history and sentiment had been found. David Cannadine, writing on the rituals of the British monarchy, argued that “in a period of change, conflict, or crisis, [ritual] might be deliberately unaltered so as to give an impression of continuity, community, and comfort, despite the overwhelming contextual evidence to the contrary.” Going a step further, one might suggest that the videotapes serve to institutionalize the rituals, communal identity, and social roles by documenting them so carefully. People need not rely on memory or word of mouth; they can simply watch a video and (mis)remember.

CONCLUSION

The Palestinian-American community of the tri-state area sees itself as safeguarding its heritage, remaining true to its traditions, and preserving Palestine and its history. In the eyes of others, this immigrant community exists at the boundaries—at best as neighbors, service providers, or consumers in the marketplace; more often as an ethnic minority that harbors antipathy to Israel, or simply as a group of newcomers indistinguishable from the other post-1965 immigrants among whom they live in urban and suburban neighborhoods. These other immigrants also hail from non-Western nations, whether
Southeast Asia or Latin America, and, like Palestinians, are categorized as “economic immigrants.” Thus the schism between this community’s self-perception as political exiles and the context in which they live is striking. Yet this is neither a form of self-delusion nor exclusion. Palestinian-Americans are very much a part of the American system of employment and residence patterns, access to education, services, and the mass media.

Perhaps the Palestinian community is numerically too small to form an enclave or occupy a market niche. Rather than try to define the perimeters of an enclave and the impact of its absence/presence on Palestinian-Americans, I will return to my second line of analysis, which treats the community as a trust network. Throughout the paper, we saw instances of perceived external and internal threat and community responses aimed at reinforcing internal cohesiveness. It is in this sense that Tilly’s description of trust networks as “ramified interpersonal connections, consisting of strong ties, within which people set valued, consequential, long-term resources and enterprises at risk to the malfeasance, mistakes, and failures of individual members,” applies well to Palestinian-Americans.

Considering the shrinking number of venues for public expression of Palestinian-ness and the encroachment of religious groups—not to mention the enticements (in terms of personal convenience, individualism, and advancement) of assimilation—the community’s determination to sustain its identity, maintain its ongoing attachment to the homeland into the third generation, and encourage young people to marry within the community is remarkable. The proliferation, ease, and fluidity of Palestinian-American wedding receptions are both a manifestation of and a contribution to this trend. Weddings are not about appeasing parents or role-playing. While outside observers may view this community as archaically conservative and/or apolitical, it can be viewed as a trust network whose members have continued to politicize themselves and their children through community practices such as weddings. Whether any political organization (re)emerges to entice them into overtly political activity, or whether internal mobilization will develop, remains to be seen.

Notes

1. Because I have never been to the West Bank, I rely on my readings, people’s accounts, photographs, and news and other media.
2. Parents prefer Catholic schools because they see them as conservative and closer to Palestinian family values, but few actually send their children there because of the high tuition.
4. According to Arab American Encyclopedia, West Bank Palestinians, mostly from the Ramallah-Jerusalem area, comprise the majority of the post-1965 Palestinian immigrants to the United States. The choice of immigrants from Muslim villages for my study was unintentional, a byproduct of the network I happened upon in the tri-state area in 2001. Arab
American Encyclopedia, ed. Anan Ameri and Dawn Ramey (Dearborn, MI: Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services, 2005).


6. Though they see themselves as exiles, Palestinian-Americans arriving after 1965 are legally “economic immigrants.” They entered the United States after the passing of the Hart-Celler Act, or the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which removed national origin quotas, instituted the family reunification clause, and opened the doors to skilled migrants of all nationalities. The West Bank community benefited mostly from the family reunification clause, which has become increasingly narrower in scope. Even so, families still rely on it for chain migration.

7. The wedding described in this article is actually a composite of weddings I attended in the tri-state area, which all followed the same basic pattern.

8. Because of the dialect, I could never understand the words of these chants and assumed that the U.S.-born members of the community could not either, but I was wrong: They not only explained the words but could recite some of the chants by heart. Mainly the songs are about the bride’s beauty and chastity and the groom’s good looks and high morals.

9. Single women don’t own chitchas since they are presented to a woman on her wedding night, though occasionally a single woman will wear a borrowed one.

10. “New” is not an entirely accurate description, because many couples are related at one or more levels.

11. This incident was chosen for its clarity. Omissions of certain dances, the introduction of different dress designs, and smaller-than-usual weddings all evoke community criticism.


14. Because these are Muslim weddings, the signing of the marriage contract occurs in an intimate setting prior to the celebration, with only the immediate family members present.

15. The word “selected” is deliberate, emphasizing the large reserve of available songs and the fact that there are no longstanding (or authentic) traditions in this regard.


17. The dabka—pronounced debcha in this community—is a folk dance where a single line of people holding hands makes circular patterns while rhythmically stamping their feet to complex beats.

18. Two young men brought this song back from a trip to the West Bank several years ago, and it was added by wedding singers to the roster of songs.

19. In the original song, the word is “Islamic,” but the wedding singers I heard changed it to “Arab,” even though the community is largely Muslim.

20. A few weeks after this wedding, several children I was driving to a New Jersey McDonald’s asked me to play this song on the tape deck and sang along. An older community member told me that many young people blast the song in their cars while driving around Brooklyn, adding that “only God knows what ‘they’ [presumably the FBI] would do to them” if they could understand the lyrics.


23. Rogers Brubaker, Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany


26. Much of this literature emerged from Palestinians in Israel in response to vigilant censorship, which caused poets to transform weddings between man and woman to that between man and land/Palestine.


29. *Wedding in Galilee*, VHS, directed by Michel Khleifi (Israel, 1987); *Rana’s Wedding/ Jerusalem, Another Day*, VHS, directed by Hany Abu-Assad et al. (Seattle, WA: Arab Film Distribution, 2002).


33. As the community became upwardly mobile, the wedding contributions shifted from being in-kind to monetary.

34. People in this community think nothing of driving long distances. Even a casual visit can prompt individuals to drive from Brooklyn to North Jersey or Philadelphia and vice versa, on weekdays as well as weekends.

35. The kaffiyeh was seen in public spaces in the United States long before it was seen at weddings.

36. The Palestinian scarf is not “traditional.” A slim scarf made of kaffiyeh material with tiny flags dangling at the
ends and generally worn around the neck or shoulders, it differs from the traditional kaffiyeh, which is a large rectangular cloth with a black-on-white pattern that is worn on the head by village men.

37. “Prayer beads” widely used in secular contexts.

38. Henna nights are cultural events that can be either Muslim or Christian.

39. In 1983, a faction led by Abu Musa broke away from the PLO over disagreement on Arafat’s Lebanon policy. The rupture temporarily affected political organizing among Palestinians in the United States.

40. Scholars of transnationalism have highlighted the impact of lower costs of travel, communications, and the advent of the Internet and satellite TV on strengthening relations between immigrants and their countries of origin. While this has undoubtedly played a role in the prevalence of artifacts, I am not convinced that the transnational factor explains this community’s attachment to the homeland. For instance, Palestinians in refugee camps in Lebanon have had no access to their place of origin for almost 60 years, and their attachment remains strong. Obviously, their presence in refugee camps has provided ample incentive to adhere to their Palestinian-ness, but I would suggest that what these Palestinian-Americans and Palestinian camp dwellers share are strong family networks. As such, I shy away from transnationalism so as not to give it more weight than other phenomena.

41. Many families budget for about ten weddings per summer, although they are often invited to more. If the family must be cost-conscious, not all members will attend all the events, because the family’s monetary gift is calculated on the basis of the number of attendees.

42. At Palestinian weddings I have attended in Lebanon, the dabkas have been mixed-gender, no matter how elaborate the women’s attire. The dabka performed by a West Bank dance troupe at Lincoln Center in New York I attended in 2005 was also mixed.

43. The young women are well aware of the disparity between their performance at the weddings and their daily lives, where they attend coeducational schools and universities and therefore know how to talk to young men who are not family members. At public events such as weddings, the visible conduct of females is closely scrutinized; questions of honor and ‘ird, beyond the scope of this article, are important to this community. However, when a young woman is “secretly” seeing a young man from the community, the family tends to look the other way. In this way, families can maintain the appearance of strictness while allowing young people in the community to meet without having to condone or condemn the relationship.

44. Unless she is a close relative of the bride or groom, in which case she is expected to be visibly festive and animated.

45. Traditional peasant attire for men consisting of a black-and-white striped robe (the ombaz) over black pants and the traditional headdress (batta).


47. Chatterjee, The Nation and Its Fragments.


49. I see this use of both as being analogous to the “bilingual intelligentsia” in Benedict Anderson’s conception of “imagined communities.” However, the discussion on this bilingualism is beyond the scope of the present article.

50. Cainkar’s study (1988) was of both first-generation post-1967 and second-generation pre-1967 Palestinian women from the Ramallah-Jerusalem area. The post-1967 second-generation was too young to be included.

51. Charles Tilly, Trust and Rule.

52. See Brubaker, Citizenship and Nationalism, and Tilly, Identities.
53. Far from being “idle,” this talk serves as a major source of surveillance, bonding, competition, and general closeness. At times it might be criticized within the community as malicious, but most people engage in it.


A groom’s family performs a *zaffa* (serenade) outside his home in New Jersey. (Randa Serhan)