

Oral history paper for the IFLA Satellite Conference 14-15 August Bangkok Thailand

Tamer Institute for Community Education- Palestine

Preserving What Might be Lost Oral History Initiatives

Tamer Institute for Community Education is an educational non-governmental non-profit organization established in 1989 as a natural and necessary response to urgent needs in the Palestinian community during the first intifada (uprising). The most important of these is the need to acquire means to help people learn and become productive.

Focusing principally on the rights to education, identity, freedom of expression and access to information, Tamer works across the West Bank and Gaza Strip, primarily targeting children and young people, and developing alternatives and supplements to formal education. Our programs promote reading and writing on national and regional levels, development of children's literature, and creative self-expression and youth empowerment through advocacy and community developments.

Since 1989, Tamer has successfully formed solid partnerships with international non-governmental organizations and institutions, regional organizations and local grassroots organizations across the West Bank and Gaza Strip. With the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1993, we have also worked closely with governmental institutions including the Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Education. In addition, we are member to a number of local, regional and international coalitions, and host local branches of several networks. Tamer regards such partnerships and coalitions as an asset that benefits the institute in implementing its programs and helps us reach a larger number of beneficiaries.

Oral History Initiatives

Since 1996, Tamer has involved in an initiative to revive the Palestinian history through lighting over the experiences of Palestinians who were part of its formation. Oral history, as the voice of the voiceless in certain times, contributes to speak about the untold history of Palestinians, their life style and their human involvements within the broader context of history.

In this sense Children and youth are also seen as contributors to history in Palestine, a learning experience to them side by side to the educational system. Through collecting tales, oral history from elderly and through their readings, children come up with many documentations and stories which join our publications to be shared with others at schools and in public libraries. So far, they have produced a book about one of the many Palestinian villages “Yallo” which have been demolished during the Palestinian Nakba in 1948. They have also organized a book on the city “Jericho” and on “Gaza”, “Hebron”, and most recently on Jerusalem. In addition, in the past 2 years Tamer involved with two initiatives targeting young adults inside schools, and a third one that targets young adults within the youth teams in Tamer Institute.

“From Ebal Mount to the Palestinian Shores: We Sing Our Songs” Initiative

In efforts to promote cultural integration in education Tamer launched the initiative: “From Ebal to the Palestinian Shores: We Sing Our Songs”. The project aims at encouraging the search of the memories of the ancestors by reading the oral history of Palestine; this is achieved through visits to different areas in Palestine, and by supporting young talents in collecting oral history, writing, singing and music. This project encourages a production of knowledge by collecting readings and writings of children these writings emerge around the monuments they visit and stories they hear in their villages, in addition to collecting a vast material of pictures, song and material related to the folklore. The material was reviewed by a team of professionals and then published recently and CDs.

“Valuing and Preserving the Oral History of the Jahalin Bedouins” Initiative

This initiative aims to preserve oral history of the Bedouin (Jahalin); it is a series of workshops in storytelling, creative writing, and illustration. The workshops were given by the storyteller Denise Asad, author Anas Abu-Rahmeh and illustrator Abdulla Qawariq. The animators stressed the importance of self-expression in its various forms and the participating children interacted significantly well- since they live in an area that lacks such cultural activity. The eldest chief (Moukhtar) of the Wadi- Abu- Hindi area was also invited to talk to the children with relation to their tradition and history. The project produced a children's book containing creative drawings and writings of the Jahalin Bedouin children which is to be distributed in schools and libraries around Palestine, the book was translated into Italian and published in Italy. “Hantoush” a story written by Salha at the Jahalin Bedouin community was submitted to the Hans Christian Anderson Award for children’s fiction, and won over among 1200 submissions. The story, written by Salha Hamdin 14 year’s old girl was written during a creative writing workshop conducted by Tamer at the Bedouin community of Jahalin.

The fairytale “Hantoosh”

Written by: Salha Hamadeen

Arab El-Jahalin- Abu Dees-Palestine

My name is Salha, I am from Arab el Jahalin School, I live in a small tent in Wadi Abu Hindi, I am 14 years old and I study at Al-Qasab school, our people built the school out of reed canes because the Israeli soldiers announced our land a military closed zone, which they used to practice shooting in the Zera’a area.

We have 70 ewes living with us, I milk them every day after I come back from the school, and I make cheese in order to sell it to the city people.

The road here is very rugged, because the Israeli soldiers forbid us from paving it. At night they practice shooting, and I hate the sound of pullets, it drives me crazy, so I run away, yes, I run away.

I do not have a bicycle because the road here is rugged, I do not have a car or a plane to ride either, but I have something that I use to escape, come closer, come nearer so I can whisper my secret into your ears; I have a sheep that flies, his name is Hantoosh, he’s black, he has long ears and secret wings which he hides inside his wool, and takes them out when I whisper into his ears: “Oh Hantoosh, get your wings out of your wool”.

I sing into his ears when the Israeli soldiers are training on fire shooting, I ride on his back and fly. Yesterday Hantoosh and I flew to Barcelona. I want to tell you something: in Wadi Abu Hindi, there are no playgrounds, because the land is planted with land mines.

In Barcelona, we met “Messi” the football legend, we played with him for hours, my sheep was the “goal keeper” and I was playing as the offensive player against Messi and his team, and we scored five goals against them.

Messi wanted me and Hantoosh to join his team but we refused, we want to go back to Wadi Abu Hindi because the sheep are waiting for us, no one can milk them except me, as my father is in the Israeli prison, he spent six years and he has 19 other years to go.

I want to tell you another secret, Messi told me that he and his team are going to visit Wadi Abu Hindi in two years, Wadi Abu Hindi will be hosting the World Cup 2014: We will clean the land of the Wadi and make it mines free, and we will construct the biggest football field in the world, which we will call “Hantoosh”, and the sheep will be the logo of the World cup.

You are all welcome in Wadi Abu Hindi, and we are waiting for you.

“Letters to the Present” Initiative

Within the past 10 years, Tamer Institute has launched a program of preserving the cultural identity through oral history in Palestine. Group of youth (15-20 years) involved in series of field trips, meetings and readings about places, figures, and important elements to the cultural heritage. Resulting from it, books were produced and disseminated to as many schools and cultural centers as possible. “Palestinian on the Road” book for example demonstrate the natural historical trip of Jesus Christ from Nazareth down to Jerusalem, when youth were able to explore the settings reflected in history books and the bible, and were also able to interview people in those places. “Letters to the Present” is another initiative that involved around 20 youth in exploring the auto-biography of Najeeb Nassar and many others during the British mandate era; Nassar is important historian journalist in Palestine during early twentieth century.

The recognition of auto-biographies as a rich element of the Palestinian identity mainly in the nineteenth and twentieth century’s, where conveying a rich and fundamental component of the national society. Over 50 auto-biographies of important Palestinian figures in the field of

literature and humanities have been very crucial to the understanding of the Palestinian national identity, yet however, not until this moment realized, nor explored by Palestinian youth. Interacting with elderly to relate auto-biographies to reality, or exploring the contemporary setting through which those auto-biographies have tackled is essential to preserving, analyzing and evolution of the Palestinian cultural heritage.

Challenges

Taking such initiative within a learning society is not attached from challenges. Four main challenges could be summed:

- a) Mobility between places is considered a challenge in face of young adults involving within the oral history initiative in Palestine. Israeli occupation checkpoints restricting the ability to visit Palestinian locations mentioned in the auto-biographies of Palestinians which wrote about life style at places inside the occupied land in 1948. Access to Jerusalem is appearing as a risk. Also access to Gaza Strip is appearing as a risk. Due to restrictions on mobility by the Israeli occupation, only the institute staffs in Gaza Strip are able to coordinate monitor and supervise the activities implemented there. It could have been better to have all the staff able to enter Gaza Strip to ensure the monitoring of the program there. The institute will pay further effort to conduct meetings through video conference, phone calls as well as continuous emailing between West Bank and Gaza Strip in order to ensure better implementation.
- a) Participation of girls is considered a taboo at certain areas, therefore the institute decided to conduct activities for girls alone. By this strategy the institute will help girls express themselves better than not being able to participate completely.
- b) Some of the books that Tamer published or discussed among students and youth contain topics that could be controversial, although the writers are local. While the institute is pleased to raise controversies that will help society to develop better thinking of its capabilities, the institute highly encourages discussions of the books

among young adults. It also raises the media attention to further develop a civilized dialogue on the controversial topics.

- c) Purchasing books from outside Palestine is challenged by the Israeli occupation restrictions. In 2011, Tamer purchased a group of quality literature for children and young adults from Lebanon, but faced huge difficulty in sending them to Palestine due to restrictions put by the Israeli occupation authority.

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Ms. Samar Qutob has been working with Tamer Institute since 2009 as the coordinator for community libraries' network. Ms Qutob has a long experience in capacity building programs for libraries, as well as programs for enriching the librarian's experiences.