



Aboud Village: The Denied Potential of Palestinian Heritage

The village of Aboud is in the northwest of the Governorate of Ramallah/Al-Bireh, located within five km from the 1967 border and 20 kilometers from the city of Ramallah, and has a population of about 2,200 (according to the PCBS 2017 population census) Palestinians Christians and Muslims. On 17 December of every year, the village celebrates the feast of Saint Barbara, where the people of the village serve the traditional Palestinian Christian dish known as “burbara” (based on boiled wheat seeds). The natural beauty of the village has made it also be known as the “city of flowers.” Today this symbol of Palestinian heritage is being threatened by the ongoing expansion of Israel’s illegal colonial settlement enterprise, including the Annexation Wall. Aboud remains an example of Palestine’s denied touristic potential.

The Village

There are remains of human settlement in Aboud dating back to 2000 years. The Church of Saint Mary, still under use, was built in the year 394. Among its archeological sites, the village has Al-Maqata, consisting of an ancient burial place and quarry from the Roman Period. Nevertheless, the most relevant ancient site in the village is the church of Saint Barbara. The local tradition believes that Saint Barbara was born and killed in Aboud for converting to Christianity. Therefore the most significant day in the village is the celebration of Saint Barbara’s Day, “Eid al Bourbara.”

There are eight historic churches and one monastery, though only three of them are still in use: the Saint Mary Orthodox Church, Saint Barbara’s Church and Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows Latin Church) in addition to a newer evangelical church (the Church of God). The village also has a Mosque that serves the Muslim population.

Despite the fact that the village has a tremendous potential due to its archeological and religious sites, tourism is almost inexistent as an economic activity. Even though Aboud is located in an area rich of natural resources, agriculture has also been reduced no longer being one of its main economic sectors. Instead, most inhabitants of Aboud depend on work in family businesses, private companies outside the village and the public sector, in many cases having to work outside the village. Aboud has a private clinic (from the Catholic organization CARITAS) and four educational establishments, two public schools and two private schools belonging to the Church.

The Israeli occupation

The total size of the village is over 14,000 dunums (3,459 acres). Yet only 2,462 dunums (608 acres) are classified as Area B, under the Oslo Interim Agreement, and with limited Palestinian control, leaving 12,000 dunums (2,956 acres) classified as Area C under full Israeli control. Two Israeli colonial settlements are built on lands belonging to the

village: "Beit Aryeh" (established in 1981) and Ofarim (established in 1988). Both illegal settlements are under ongoing expansion with a population of approximately 5,000 Illegal Israeli settlers.

The Israeli occupation has also confiscated more of the village's land to build sections of several bypass roads for Israeli settlers; including bypass roads 4460, 4566 and 446. Such roads connect settlements with one another and with the State of Israel. Their existence is an incentive to Israeli citizens to move into the occupied State of Palestine. At the same time, Israel has built sections of its illegal Annexation Wall in the City; taking over almost 30% of the village lands (mainly agricultural land).

The Feast of Saint Barbara

According to the tradition, Saint Barbara was born during the third century with discrepancies on her place of birth. Some accounts would refer to Saint Barbara as having been born in Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, and Palestine. Aboud is known as one of the first villages that converted to Christianity. The local tradition says that Saint Barbara was killed for converting to Christianity and the church in Aboud was built to honor her. This Bizantine shrine from the 6th century was dynamited by the Israeli occupation on May 31st, 2002, with soldiers claiming that they "did not know" about the importance of the place. Late President Yasser Arafat immediately ordered the reconstruction of the ancient church.

In the place, there are several catacombs and agricultural terraces made on ancient stones that testify on the historical relevance of the place. Every year, pilgrims and visitors celebrate the Saint Barbara Day on 17 December. This celebration has become one of the primary and most ancient pre-Christmas traditions in Palestine, alongside the feast of Mar Saba in the monastery outside Bethlehem (18 December), in addition to Saint Nicholas in Beit Jala (19 December); all following the Eastern Orthodox calendar.

In addition to the procession going from Saint Mary's Church to Saint Barbara's Church, the people of the village will serve a sweet pudding called "Bourbara". This ancient Palestinian recipe consists of whole grain wheat with sugar, cinnamon, other spices, as well as dried fruits. Palestinians elsewhere observe this occasion, but the center of the celebrations for Saint Barbara's Day is the village of Aboud.

Tourism – Pilgrimage

Aboud remains one of the key examples of Palestine's denied touristic potential. Having some of the most beautiful landscapes in Palestine, in addition to its religious importance, the village remains invisible from the vast majority of pilgrimage packages. Israel's full control and monopoly over tourism leave little room for tourists and pilgrims to plan visits to places such as Aboud, Taybeh, Nablus or Bourqin, a village close to Jenin, where the tradition says Jesus made the miracle of the lepers (Luke 17:11-19). The same applies to several Palestinian green areas, such as Battir/Makhrour, the Herodian Mountain and the Dead Sea.

In order not to allow Israel's colonial-settlement enterprise from benefiting of tourism, it is crucial for Churches to make guidelines for ethical pilgrimage. Such guidelines, in addition to international tourism guidelines, will contribute to peace building and at the same time provide pilgrims with the opportunity of getting to know more of Palestine's historical places such as Aboud and to meet the people that have taken care of those places: The Palestinian people.