

Role of the Landscape in the Preservation of Collective Memory and the Enhancement of National Belonging

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Abstract

This study aims to show the role that landscapes play in the preservation of collective memory and the enhancement of national belonging. The Hojeir Valley in southern Lebanon was chosen as the location for this study, which will concentrate on the different components of the location and on the process of its transformation into an inspirational symbol that strengthens people's sense of belonging while also shaping their national identity. The study will also discuss the related collective memory and the process of its evolution over time as well as the essential elements necessary to preserve it. The study concludes that the collective memory attached to the valley was initially formed because no radical changes had occurred to affect the Valley's physical state throughout history. Furthermore, the study indicates that while the valley experienced historical incidents, these events did not hinder the impact of these incidents on peoples' sentimental consciences but rather facilitated in keeping the collective memory of the people active and fresh.

Key words: Landscape; Place; Place memory; Place identity; Collective memory; National identity; Belonging; The Hojeir valley

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INTRODUCTION

Landscape is a place to which a person becomes attached because of the nostalgia and the memories to which it gives rise.

The landscape concept bears varying definitions according to the varied geographical, environmental and sociological perspectives and backgrounds of the scientific authorities researching or addressing the subject. Accordingly, this paper completes certain definitions that are missing one or more of the aspects necessary to construct an overall concept of landscape.

In this sense, landscape is a relatively new concept that has only been previously explored aesthetically in the arts where its focus was solely on the visible beauty of the scenery and its effect on the spectator. For example, romantic artists recreated nature for inspiration and used it as a mean by which their emotions could be expressed.

In the nineteenth century, geographers approached the concept of landscape objectively as the result of its topographical, geological, climatic, botanical and human components (Vidal de la Blanche, 1908). The study of the landscape concept was further developed when it entered the domain of sociology, where it was defined as an historical and cultural heritage that embodies the interactions of human society with its environment at a defined time and place (Pitte, 1983).

This objective approach in studying the landscape concept continued until the 1980s of the last century when a new approach was adopted. The new approach recognized the personal role that individuals normally reflect onto the landscape and realized that it ought not to be ignored (Bertrand, 1978). That is, the perception and evaluation of a given place differ among individuals according to their habits, cultures and values. Consequently, to better understand the ways in which different social groups regard their landscape, the new

approach values both objectivity and subjectivity in examining the landscape concept.

We see and make the landscape as a result of our shared system of beliefs and ideologies. In this way the landscape is a cultural construct, a mirror of our memories and myths encoded with meanings which can be read and interpreted. (Taylor, 2008)

Since the aspect of subjectivity was introduced into the landscape concept, new related concepts have begun to appear such as collective memory, identity and belonging.

The present study aims to show the role that certain landscapes and places play in the preservation of collective memory and in the enhancement of a national sense of belonging. For this purpose, a valley in southern Lebanon that is rich in physical and moral-valued features was chosen as the focus - the Hojeir Valley. In addition to the beauty of its topological undulations and the rare variations of its fauna and flora, the Hojeir Valley is famous for being the historical fortress for the fighters of Jabal 'Amel Mountain, which begins with the popular national resistance against the French mandate in Lebanon and continues to date against the Israeli occupation of parts of the country. Therefore, in addition to its initial characteristics, the valley has a symbolic and spiritual value that reflects the collective memory of a large group of people.

This study will focus on the different components of the Hojeir Valley and on the process of its transformation into an inspirational symbol for writers, poets and national fighters, thereby strengthening the sense of national belonging of the people and shaping the national identity of the areas. The related collective memory and the process of its evolution over time will be discussed, along with the essential elements necessary to preserve it.

1. METHODS

This study is based on the descriptive analytical approach which relies on gathering facts and information about the phenomenon or problem in hand. This approach was done by collating, analyzing and interpreting data to reach acceptable generalizations.

The research was based on two types of data sources: library research and on-field research.

Library research was conducted by analyzing historical records and documents, reviewing of primary sources (main sources of data, like: data archives, government documents, census materials, and voter registration lists) and secondary sources (supportive data such as books and studies, periodicals and newspapers) to make a critical evaluation of the materials in hand.

On-field research, on the other hand, was based on a case study, direct observations and conducting interviews with experts and locals.

2. SPACE, PLACE, LANDSCAPE

Space is abstract, neutral and timeless. It allows movement and is transformed into place as it becomes more familiar, intimate and valuable (Yi-Fu, 1977)

Originally perceived as a bounded locale or territory, place was reconceived by human geographers during the 1970s as being a creation of emotional attachment, familiarity, and everyday embodied experience (Hubbard & Kitchin, 2011). According to Lefebvre (1991), the notion of place represents a distinctive type of space that is defined by the lived experiences and identifications of people.

Landscape, on the other hand, is the result of the way in which different components of our environment - both natural (the influences of geology, soils, climate, flora and fauna) and cultural (the historical and current impact of land use, settlement, enclosure and other human interventions) — interact together and are perceived by the individual (Scottish Natural Heritage and The Countryside Agency, 2002).

As it may be confusing, Simon Swaffield (2013) distinguishes between the two concepts - place and landscape. He defines place as a distinctive coming together of culture and its accumulated meanings in a particular biophysical setting, while landscape expresses a wider network of relationships between culture and nature and comprises a mosaic of places, biophysical systems, cultural practices and infrastructure.

Accordingly, we can say that place and landscape are interconnected notions and that as it is difficult to differentiate between them, the terms are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to the same thing. While both are the result of interactions between space and culture, the concept of landscape is broader and more comprehensive. Put more simply, landscape can include several places, while place cannot constitute more than one landscape. Thus, in this paper we consider the place to be the main element in the study of landscape.

3. CULTURE AND PERCEPTION OF LANDSCAPE

Meinig (1979) posits that landscape is defined by our vision and interpreted by our minds. It is a panorama that continuously changes as we move along any route, and it becomes real only as we become conscious of it.

We note that the contemporary definitions of landscape possess a substantial degree of subjectivity while including variable factors such as culture, nature, history, which, in turn, affects people's perceptions of the landscape.

Thus, the formation of landscape requires two processes: a) the perceptions of the people, whether locals or visitors, and b) the interactions between these people and the defined place. The ways in which people perceive and interact with a place is essentially endless

in that they are affected by their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. Dan Sperber (1985) claims that as people come from varied cultural backgrounds, they inhabit different cognitive worlds, and accordingly, each individual possesses his/her own criteria of rationality and judgment. As a result, we can conclude that the same landscape at the same time can be perceived differently by different people. Moreover, even the same landscape can, at different times, be perceived differently by the same person.

4. LANDSCAPE, MEMORY AND IDENTITY

A. Duncan and J. Duncan (2010) assert that landscape serves as a vast repository of symbolism, iconography, and ideology. Place, as the main constituent of landscape, is fundamental to the creation of both memories and identities. Since ancient times, place has played an important role in memories. For example, the first step of the method of loci, which is used by Romans and mentioned by Frances Yates in her book “Art of Memory”, is to imprint on the memory a series of loci as a “mnemonic place system” to facilitate mental recall (Yates, 1966).

According to Halbwachs (1925), “it would be very difficult to describe the event if one did not imagine the place”, as “the past is mapped in the minds according to its most unforgettable places” (Hutton, 1993). These places constitute commemorative landscapes composed of *landmarks* that provide spatial and temporal coordinates for remembering. Such landmarks include an array of “particular figures, dates, and periods of time that acquire an extraordinary salience” (Cosser, 1992).

The place, or landscape, appears as a catalyst that is essential for memory. The preservation and the protection of its basic elements are a prerequisite for the continuation and the maintenance of the related memories. On the other hand, the interactions that occur between the individual and the landscape over time lead to the emergence of a sentimental feeling, namely, belonging, which contributes to render the specific place part of one’s identity. This, over time, leads to the formation of place memory, which is a record of accumulated activities and interactive events that occurred in that specific place.

Place and its landscape become part of one’s identity and one’s memory. Its features are often used as mnemonic devices...For all of us in the landscape is replete with markers of the past...that help us remember and give meaning to our lives. (Sack, 1997)

5. THE HOJEIR VALLEY (WADI EL-HOJEIR)

5.1 Location

The Hojeir Valley is situated in the mid-southern part of Lebanon, between the districts of Marje’youn, Bentjbeil

and Nabattieh. Stretching from the Litani River in Qaaqaiyet al-Jisr in the Nabatiyeh district to Aitaroun in the district of Bint Jbeil, the valley is surrounded by a number of villages (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1
A Map Showing the Location of the Hojeir Valley in Lebanon

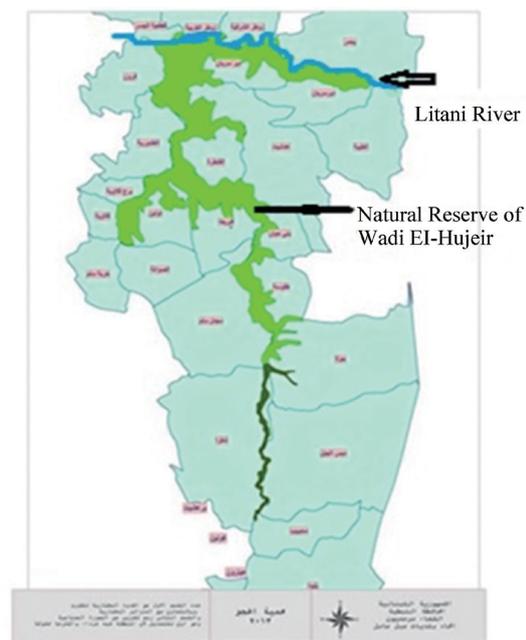


Figure 2
A Map Showing the Location of the Hojeir Valley With Respect to Its Surrounding Villages

5.2 Natural Components

The Hojeir Valley exhibits a beautiful landscape that is rich in thick forestry and possesses a rare variation of biological treasures. It also has a number of streams that run to meet with the Litani River, which begins at the Hojeir fountainhead or the old *Sodun* fountainhead (Figure 3). Also contributing to the unique quality of the area are 4 old mills that have been retained.



Figure 3
The Hojeir Fountainhead or the old Sodun fountainhead That Supplies the Litani River in the Hojeir Valley Depicts the Valley's Richness in Limpid Water

At one time, there were ten old mills, the ruins of some of which can still be seen (Kamel, 2007). The valley is renowned for its ancient olive trees, some of which are more than 300 years old. It was under the shadowy branches of these old trees that the famous The Hojeir Valley Conference was held on the 24th day of April 1920.

Because the land surrounding the valley is still virgin due to its rugged nature and the large number of clustered bombs dumped on it, not all parts of the valley are reachable. As a result, much of the area has maintained its rare and varied botanical and biological life and continues to be inhabited by wild animals such as the fox, the porcupine and the wild pig.

5.3 The Historical Value

On the 24th of April 1920, a general meeting was called by a religious dignitary, Al'allamah Abd El-Hossein Sharaf- Elddine," and was held at the Hojeir fountainhead. The purpose of the meeting purpose was to motivate

the inhabitants of the region to fight against the French occupation. Many dignitaries from the mountain of Jabal 'Amel were present as well as many renowned revolutionary leaders; among them were Khanjar Alssa'be and Sadeq Hamza Fa'our. In his speech, Al'allamah Sharaf- Elddine announced a plan for regulated armed resistance and insisted on national unity and mutual respect between different religious groups (Jaber, 1978). In July 2006, the Hojeir Valley witnessed heavy combat that resulted in the destruction of a number of heavy Israeli tanks, especially the Mirkava tanks. Since that time, the Hojeir Valley has been referred to by some Lebanese and Arab people as the Mirkava Cemetery.

5.4 The Social and Touristic Value

During the Israeli occupation of the region, which lasted more than 30 years, the roads in the Hojeir Valley were primitive and rugged and therefore closed for military reasons. This situation changed after the July 2006 battle, and as a result, the number of good roads to the valley multiplied. Thus, people from the outlying neighboring areas started to visit the valley more often as they sought to enjoy the scenery and take pictures near the old mills (Figure 4).



Figure 4
Tents and Other Temporary Entertainment Constructions by the Water Streams in the Hojeir Valley

More recently, the Hojeir Valley has become a public resort where people come to spend leisure time enjoying its aesthetic natural beauty and the comfortable roads as well as the many streams where they swim and the many orchards where they simply relax among the trees and the old mills, some of which have been refurbished in an attempt to restore them to their original states (Melhem, 2010).

5.5 Strategic Military Value

The Hojeir Valley bears special strategic military importance in the eyes of the Israelis because of its closeness to the Litani River and because it is the second closest region to the frontiers of the Israeli settlements. The Hojeir region also attracts Israelis because its high hills provide a good strategic military positioning that

allows their army to dominate over the alleys of the valley and secure unwanted advancements (Aalaw, 2007).

5.6 Symbolic Value

Martyrs Valley, Leaders Valley, Death Valley, Resistance Valley, Mirkava Cemetery - these are all names given to the Hojeir Valley since the beginning of the resistance movements. These names definitely speak to the importance of the symbolic reserve and the high spiritual dimension that the valley represents to a vast number of people. Notwithstanding the emotional value that this place embodies, especially for the southern Lebanese because of the number of events and glories that it holds for them both consciously and unconsciously, the valley has become the cradle of images and stories that make up a part of their collective memory.

6. THE MEMORY OF THE VALLEY: A COLLECTIVE MEMORY BUILT OVER TIME

6.1 The Concept of the Collective Memory

The concept of the collective memory is a social concept first launched by Maurice Halbwachs in his book *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* (1925). According to Halbwachs (1925), not only do individuals have their private memories, but groups also have memories of their own. He defined the collective memory as being the totality of events or memories shared by a group of people and passed down from generation to generation.

Remembering is a constructive process that requires aids to retrieve the memory. These aids are sometimes organic (such as smell or sound), and at other times, they are social. Accordingly, memories are set in both temporal and spatial frameworks (Halbwachs, 1925), while the images of collective memory focus on particular people, events, and spatial reference points (Osborne, 2001).

Around the end of the 20th century, studies of the collective memory were extended and a new related concept came to life. This was referred to as the site of memory. Pierre Nora writes about the site of memory in his 1984 book *Les Lieux de Mémoire*. According to Nora, a “lieu de mémoire” or site of memory is a distinguished entity – concrete or abstract – that has changed, either due to people’s voluntary will or due to time, into a symbol embodying the cultural heritage of a given society (Nora, 1992). Furthermore, site of memory is a cultural reserve of the memory that has been accumulated and saved because of its historical, spiritual or symbolic relevance (Nora, 1992). Such sites of memory can include geographical places or historical figures, forms of art, architecture, monuments, symbols, etc..

Thus, the sites of memory related to an individual or to a group are places in the memory that generate an

abundance of feelings and sensations because of what they represent with respect to values, meanings, symbols, ideologies, habits and traditions (Hoteit, 2015; Fares et al., 2013; Hoteit & Fares, 2014; Alabi, 2012).

Empirical studies have found that informal meeting places (Oldenburg, 1989), such as places used in childhood or places frequented during leisure activities and natural settings outside of the closer residential area, have particularly high emotional significance to the local residential population (Korpela, 2001), and as such, these places offer a sense of collective belonging (Buchecker, 2005). Other research shows that as the amount of time spent in a place increases, the relationship to the place and, in particular, the attachment, intensifies and becomes deeper (from an “aesthetic experience” to a “part of the place”) (Hay, 1998).

Accordingly, if we apply the above description to the Hojeir Valley, we find that this valley was, for a time that exceeded 100 years, a place where events and activities that cultivated and developed the collective memory of a large number of people occurred. Thus, the Hojeir Valley proves to be a typical site of memory or “lieu de mémoire”.

The most memorable events that occurred within the valley are divided into three stages and discussed along with their role in the formed memory of the valley.

6.1.1 First Stage: Before 1920

Before 1920, the valley was valued by the inhabitants of the region for its agriculture, scenery, suitability for entertainment and leisure. The valley offered fertile and irrigated lands that secured regular seasonal crops for the owners of land and offered extensive orchards of olive trees. The valley also had many fountains and a single river, whose water was famous for staying warm all year. It also became a place where people would gather for relaxation and fun. People came to the valley from different neighboring villages particularly because the valley was not owned by one village municipality but rather was jointly held by seven municipalities. Therefore, people from other areas felt comfortable and felt at home in the valley. Furthermore, the valley was home to a number of mills (ten, which provided additional reasons for people to visit the valley).

As a result, the multiple activities held in the valley (agricultural, commercial, entertainment, etc.) and its aesthetic qualities made the valley a preferred destination to people of the region at the time, and consequently, the valley became part of their memory and their local identity.

6.1.2 Second Stage: Between 1920 and 2006

In 1920, the Hojeir Conference was held. This event gave the valley great symbolic value and high moral significance as a number of important national leaders, such as Al’allah Abdul Hussein Sharaf Eddine,

gathered under its ancient olive trees. Hussein Sharaf Elddine was a religious and national leader who was highly regarded by the Shiite people in the region of Jabal 'Amel. Many other famous national figures were also present at this conference. As these men were well liked by the inhabitants of the region, the locals imitated them and invented legends about their heroism in fighting the invaders and in helping the needy and the poor. Two of the most renowned among them were Sadeq Hamzeh and Adham Khanjar (Kamel, 2005). Consequently, the valley, and especially its ancient olive trees, gained moral, symbolic and spiritual value, which it did not have before. The result was that the Hojeir Valley became a moral patrimony that belonged to the entire population of Jabal 'Amel.

Stories about the importance of the valley and about the heroic acts that were planned and accomplished within it multiplied over the years and were passed down from generation to generation. The stories related the struggles of courageous fighters who fought against the French forces in the valley between 1918 and 1942. National resistance continued during the Israeli occupation of 1978 to 2000, and every time a new incidence occurred, the people would recall more stories from their large collective memory of the valley.

6.1.3 Third Stage: From July 2006 War to the Present

The July 2006 war played a crucial role in the history of the valley and in the volume of memories comprising the collective memory, which had evolved from the collective memory of the region of Jabal 'Amel to become a part of the collective memory of the entire Lebanese nation and of the Arabs and Muslims in general. As the valley witnessed the brutal combat against the Israeli army, and as the modern media reported the news of what was happening, the Hojeir Valley gained in reputation in the Arab and Muslim world, thus affecting the sentimental conscience of the people and implanting in their memories. The collective memory of Hojeir Valley similarly increased as it experienced more glory than ever before.

6.2 The Hojeir Valley Today

The valley is currently a tourist destination for Lebanese and Arabs as it offers the elements of three different types of tourism - traditional leisure tourism (swimming, recreation, etc.) environmental tourism (the exploration of the virgin green landscape) and a new type of tourism that bears interest in the history of the national resistance against foreign occupation. In this last regard, the valley represents an important icon for this recent type of historical tourism.

A new road was constructed in the middle of the valley, which allows people to pass through the valley and enables new generations to visit a region that, though close to home, had previously been difficult to reach (Figure 5). However, these new developments affecting the valley put its natural environment at risk, especially as

buildings are being constructed randomly on both sides of the road (Figure 6).



Figure 5
The New Road That Has Been Constructed in the Hojeir Valley



Figure 6
A Recent Photo of the Hojeir Valley Showing the Construction Works Aiming at the Widening of the Stream

During the July war of 2006, the Israeli army aimed at the systematic destruction of the valley's old mills and ancient olive trees. It was as if their plan was to disrupt the people's collective memory attached to these symbolic and iconic treasures. Moreover, some of the ancient trees were cut down to be sold as lumber. Fire was also an accomplice against the valley, as the valley was plagued by numerous fires, some of which were accidental and some of which were intentional. In addition, an abundance of cluster bombs was dumped on the valley, and these remain where they were dropped as unexploded polluting duds (Y. Fares & J. Fares, 2013; Fares et al., 2014; Fares et al., 2013). Not surprisingly, in the absence of government control, these unexploded bombs restrain people from moving freely in the valley (Al-Ameen, 2009). On the other hand, they protect the natural landscape from further destruction by builders and abusers.

Given the major risks threatening the Hojeir valley's natural environment and the symbolic importance that this valley possesses, a number of the region's deputies

presented a bill to the government requesting a law that would declare the Hojeir Valley a natural reserve. Their hope is that this act will protect the valley's aesthetic, botanical and biological unique characteristics. The bill, which bears the number 121, was approved on July 23rd, 2010.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We contend that both the subjective and objective aspects are primordial in the study of the concept of landscape. A landscape is the result of the interactions between the physical components and the human or social events that occur within the specific location. The events and the daily activities that occur repetitively in a place tend, over time, to become part of the landscape's properties, and they form what is known as the place identity, which, in turn, influences human conduct and forms, over time, a site of memory (Osborne, 2001).

We find that the importance of a place to an individual or to a group is strongly related to the importance of social or historical events that occur within that place. The place's values, as well as the collective memory related to it, tend to grow in accordance with the impact of the events taking place in it. This reality continues to be true even if the place lacks physical or aesthetic value or loses such value over time (Halbwachs, 1925). For example, despite the destruction of the ancient olive trees and the destruction of the mills in the Hojeir Valley, the people continue to appreciate and commemorate the place.

The perception a person has of a place varies according to his/her psychological, social and economic background. Hence, the evaluation of a place differs between groups according to their diverse criteria and ideals (Taylor, 2008). The Lebanese people, especially those from southern Lebanon, have a glorious memory about the valley. For the Israelis, the memory of the valley differs dramatically as it is comprised of their disappointments and failures in the valley.

We contend that the collective memory strengthens relations that connect people in the same country as they share the same memories, including victories, glories, and tragedies. As such, the collective memory aids in strengthening the sense of belonging to the land or to the country as long as the successive generations preserve the memories of their ancestry who fought to defend their land against invaders.

We assert that collective memory also plays a major role in forming the national identity and directing the actions and behaviors of the people. For this reason, national and political leaders often reference, in their speeches, influential images from the national collective memory to direct the people to focus on the realization of a certain short- or long-term goal. However, the choice of such images may vary depending on the

present needs and requirements of the group or the area (Kawtharani, 2006). For example, the Hojeir Valley is an important reference that is usually used in the speeches of political leaders in Lebanon to refer to past victories of the Lebanese.

Thus, we conclude that a strong connection exists between the concepts of national identity and collective memory in that the national identity forms and evolves through the collective memory. As the collective memory is comprised of the important landmarks in the history of a nation, it is these landmarks that are capable of enhancing the sense of national belonging and of influencing the present and future lives of the people.

It is our opinion that the collective memory attached to the Hojeir Valley was formed as the result of several factors. First, because no radical changes have affected the valley's physical state throughout history, it continues to embody the elements that have identified it over time. These include the ruins of the old mills, the ancient olive trees, the fountainhead and the special enchanting scenery. Second, the valley has a rich history of memorable individual and collective activities that symbolize its moments of glory throughout its history. For example, it has hosted important events, participated in historical incidents and engaged in wars that have impacted the sentimental conscience of the people. Accordingly, the fact that these events have continued to occur throughout the history of this valley has contributed to keeping its collective memory active and fresh.

SUGGESTIONS

It is imperative that the Lebanese government joins with responsible civil groups to save the Hojeir Valley's environmental treasures and to protect the collective memory attached to the valley. Cooperation between the government and the civil organizations can ensure effective results in this direction. The government's specialized departments should reject any project that presents a threat to the valley, such as road construction, sewer drains, new buildings, etc.. Furthermore, the joint council of the different municipalities in the area should exert appropriate control regarding the protection of the valley. Civil groups and their councils should assume responsibility for educating the population of the region about the valley's physical characteristics and its moral values. Efforts should focus on the protection of the main characteristics of the valley - rehabilitation of the water streams, restoration of the old mills, and planting more trees to replace what has been cut or destroyed by fire. The protection of the natural scenery of the valley through the conservation of its trees and forests should be prioritized. In the end, a good, healthy and aesthetically pleasing environment in the valley should be protected and maintained.

Overall, the valley constitutes great national and cultural wealth despite the devastation it bears, for it still overflows with enormous capabilities and considerable potential that require protection, which can be achieved through studies and projects designed for this purpose. Furthermore, one cannot deny the collective memory of the valley on a national level. The symbolic significance contributes to reinforcing the sense of belongingness and attachment of the citizens – namely, those from southern Lebanon – to their land in the face of any attempt to detach or displace them from their home.

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