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The Syrian Crisis and Cultural Memory

Elizabeth Gibbons^[1]

Abstract

Citing news reports from the height of the Syrian refugee crisis and academic papers relating to cultural identity and memory, I will suggest that the diaspora of Syrian people and the loss of their material culture will have extreme repercussions on the current and future identity of the Syrian people. This paper shines a light on the human cost of war and loss of irreplaceable material cultural heritage. I will posit the effects of such cultural trauma on the future of the displaced Syrian people by focusing on individual stories of loss, relocation, and change, using historical examples to validate the experience of the refugee. Finally, I will look to the future, grounding this analysis in scholarly theories of identity and memory to ask the question: what is next for Syrian identity? In May 2015 the terror group, ISIS first overtook Palmyra—a cultural World Heritage Site that dates back two thousand years. The destruction of the ancient Roman ruins was swift and devastating. The European shores have become awash with desperate and soaked Syrian refugees fleeing the war, and while the world is deeply concerned with the threats to human life, I am equally concerned with the material heritage being left behind by those fleeing. The Roman architecture, art, pottery, and massive works of human innovation and creativity that illustrate Syrian culture are literally being blown apart. My historian-self was afraid that this rich chapter of human history would be lost forever. Thankfully, I was wrong. In my research, I discovered archaeologists, scholars, religious people, cultural institutions, and the refugees themselves were working continually to salvage, preserve, and document cultural heritage. I discovered that there are many who share the same conviction that material culture is fundamentally important to identity.

Keywords

Syria, Refugee(s), Memory, Culture, Heritage.

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1. Introduction

Beginning in March 2011, the Syrian Civil War has escalated in violence and scale which now engulfs the entirety of this lush and ancient nation. The war has displaced approximately 13 million Syrians—according to estimates made by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in March 2017. The Syrian Civil War has escalated into a sectarian proxy war with loosely organized bands of fighters, and has now become a fight against global tyranny that rivals the devastation of World War II, albeit confined to a smaller region. The world has watched Syria crumble from a tourist destination teeming with historic treasures and a vibrant culture, into a war-torn wasteland. Syria's borders are bleeding refugees; their cultural identity, material heritage and history are being sold by black market smugglers to continue funding their devastation. This is the biggest wave of mass migration since WWII and the Western world has taken 86% of the refugees—creating a crisis of overpopulation, ineffective government aid, and further destabilization of the refugee population (Kingsley, 2016). The toll is high, those forced to flee must focus on their survival, often at the expense of their material culture, predicating the loss of art, statues, pottery, and many other forms of heritage that hold incredible cultural value and an esteemed place in Syrian identity.

Identity and memory are constructed—by individuals as well as a people—by drawing from ethnicity, cultural influences, and communal narratives (Hall, 2000: 191). “Identity” as a term is too ambiguous and encumbered to be truly useful in analysis and due to the fluid, multiple natures of identity, there is no basis to construct an analysis or use it as a theory to explain events or individuals. However,

the meaning and connotations of “identity” are such that I have found the term useful in my analysis of culture, trauma, and memory. Memory is what sustains a community; it integrates children into the traditions of their culture, and it shapes an individual's idea of themselves in relation to the larger world. Culture, much like identity, is a big word, layered with connotations and assumptions. Throughout this paper, I refer to culture in both the abstract and material sense. Material culture, or material heritage, are the physical remains of ancient civilizations such as art and architecture. The intentional destruction of material heritage is detrimental to collective memory and internalized culture. Scholars can only guess at the consequences the destruction of irreplaceable cultural treasures will have on the Syrian cultural identity for the young generation. The surest way of maintaining cultural identity is by preserving the material heritage itself. Thus, the humanitarian crisis and the cultural crisis are inextricably linked (Danti, 2015).

Material culture represents the roots of a community and is academically crucial to studying ancient worlds. For the international community, understanding and studying the artifacts of Syria is vital to understanding the history and heritage of the region; this history is irreplaceable and its value cannot be overlooked (Loosley, 2005). Abstract culture is more difficult to define; however, I refer to abstract culture as dress, language, narrative, and food. Abstract culture is carried within the individual, making it mobile and adaptable. This culture is also the most subject to change because it is influenced by the individual and the community circumstances. Collective memory, the memory embedded within the community, continuously negotiates between historical records and current social and political agendas; it is very selective and

emphasizes or suppresses aspects of the communal narrative to fit with the lived present of the community (Zerubavel, 1994). The lived present of the Syrian community is violence, displacement, and uncertainty. Communal memory and abstract culture will reflect such turmoil.

Individuals use memory as a tool, to help make sense of the situation they are in and place themselves in a larger narrative that connects the community to their history (Rebillard, 2012). It would be incorrect to assume that the modern Syrian population is one homogenous group with a single narrative and a singular experience. Furthermore, those included in the Syrian Refugee Crisis are not necessarily Syrian. Many refugees are fleeing from the surrounding countries. For this study, a refugee refers to “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence”, as defined by the United Nations on their webpage. The multitude of identities makes it more difficult to assign one experience, one memory, or one narrative to the overarching crisis, let alone to one person. However, ethnic groups are distinguished by a “connection with a specific territory and a shared myth of common descent” (Ibid.: 96). Therefore, I have singled out the Syrian refugees among the many refugees in the world in my attempt to understand cultural memory and how it will be affected by the destruction of material heritage and the displacement of a population. A shared connection allows for communal bonding which can shape identity and memories in new ways. The diaspora of this group will create a new memory of trauma and further inform group cohesion, narrative, and identity.

2. Portraits of Refugees and Material Culture

One photo journalist has had unique success in his coverage of the Syrian refugees as a collection of individual stories that paint a larger picture. Brandon Stanton, a photographer and journalist behind the acclaimed series *Humans of New York*, interviewed Syrian refugees who had made it to European camps, by foot or by boat, in 2015 (Stanton, 2015). He later followed up with a second photo series: interviews with Syrian refugees cleared for resettlement in America. Both series humanize the refugee crisis gripping the western world and highlight the struggles of individuals and families who have fled violence.

One individual spotlighted by Mr. Stanton was Muhammad, Mr. Stanton’s translator and a man who faced incredible hardship to get first his family, and then himself to safety. Muhammad left everything behind after facing extreme violence in Syria. He travelled on fake papers and brought only the essentials, which were thrown overboard by his smugglers when he was crossing the Mediterranean (Ibid). The most common items carried by refugees that have been deemed essential, consist of clothing, medical supplies or prescriptions, non-perishable food, and legal documents. There is very little exception for personal objects, mementos, or objects of cultural value. Those who flee must choose the most important items, out of already critical objects, leaving everything else behind. Material culture—as historians and archaeologists understand it—has been left behind in Syria because of the immediate and violent nature of the crisis.

However, culture can still be wrapped up in essential items such as paperwork, which identifies your nationality and place of origin; and in clothing, which signifies who you are or where you come

from. Muhammad's was not the only bag thrown overboard, nor was he the only refugee to travel on fake papers. By losing their baggage and thus losing markers of their material identity, they lose a part of themselves that was still connected to Syria. Outside of Syria, they will become nameless refugees, part of the 21 million people labelled "refugee." The refugees' *Syrian* individuality has seemingly been lost, but it has been suggested that their identities may be heightened as opposed to silenced, especially after the resettlement process.

Social identity complexity is the way in which individuals understand their relationships with multiple people and groups. Those with a low social identity complexity, defined as those who are surrounded by people just like them and do not have a diverse community, are less tolerant of outsiders. Refugees are inherently defined as "the other" by both the new community and the refugees themselves. War has changed their basis of identification to oppositional, defining themselves against those around them. This oppositional identity and the theory of social identity complexity, which is affected by stress, combined with potential isolation, heightens Syrian identity in the resettled groups (Brewer, et al., 2005; Hall, 1995). While refugees are unsettled, the focus is on basic, immediate needs like food, shelter and medical care. Once the refugees are resettled and stable, they can focus on the loss of their heritage and their culture, which may create an intense awareness of identity. The Syrian refugees have not had the time to truly mourn the loss of their material heritage, however, their cultural memory of pre-war Syria may assert itself and become more important over time. How that will happen or what that will look like cannot yet be determined.

Muhammad had nothing left to his

name when he arrived in Germany. Upon eligibility for Austrian resettlement, he dedicated himself to *becoming* Austrian; he learned the language, consumed the media, and fully immersed himself in the culture (Stanton, 2015). Muhammad rejected his Syrian identity because it was too painful, his family was ripped apart because of the war that forced them to flee their homeland. Austria welcomed him, allowed him to become a citizen instead of a refugee and to rebuild his life. Muhammad shed himself of his Syrian identity and instead became Austrian—symbolically and legally. In the years to come, as the trauma fades, the questions begin as to whether Muhammad will or will not rediscover and accept his Syrian past. Will he tell fondly-remembered stories about his home and history in pre-war Syria, or will his trauma as a refugee change the way he remembers and practices his Syrian culture?

These questions are not solely for Muhammad, they refer also to the 13 million displaced Syrians who have had to give up part of themselves while fleeing the war. Many of the families that Mr. Stanton interviewed spoke about their poverty, not as refugees, but as Syrians. These families were too poor to simply leave, they had to sell every possession in order to pay to be smuggled into impoverished refugee camps across Europe and Turkey. Every class of Syrian society fled, even the educated, wealthy elite. They too, were unable to take anything with them, either because their possessions were stolen or because they fled under the cover of night (Ibid). The act of selling or abandoning every possession speaks to the desperation of those who fled, yet desperation is not the same as willingness. No one becomes a refugee because they want to. It is a forced exodus, tearing people away from everything and everyone they held dear. Those who did

speak about pre-war Syria remembered it as a paradise, filled with sunshine, friends, family, home, and heart. The memories that people focus on and recount, are abstract, emotional connections. The smell of jasmine from a garden, sitting under peach trees, drinking tea (Ibid). None of the refugees interviewed miss the Roman ruins or ancient works of art that archaeologists focus on, they miss their homes. In the limbo of refugee camps, families are more focused on the present feelings of discomfort and fear and long for the security and happiness of a once peaceful society now consumed by chaos. When the dust settles and refugees become secure in their newly resettled lives, then the pressing weight of an irreplaceable history intentionally destroyed will be felt. However, locations and symbols can retain imaginative functions and can continue to serve similar roles in the lives of the communities and individuals, even if the original objects are gone and the community dispersed (Sizgorich, 2004). The material heritage of the Syrian people, namely the art and architecture that has enthralled scholars for years, will again become symbols of culture and identity for the dispersed refugees, even if they have been physically lost to history. That is the striking power of one's memory.

The sheer number of refugees coming by foot and by boat showcases the magnitude of the dispersion of Syrian memory and culture across the western world. If every Syrian refugee embodies Syrian culture, as I believe they do, the diaspora of every social class of Syrians across Europe and North America disperses that culture, thus, diluting it. Cloth pulled too thin will tear; culture spread too widely will lose its meaning as memories fade, new nationalities replace old allegiances, and young Syrian children are raised and educated away from their heartland. This is

not to say that refugees are not nostalgic about the happiness and beauty of pre-war Syria and do not intend on sharing their culture and history with their children (Stanton, 2015). But Syrian culture, as historians have studied it, has been forever changed by this war and mass exodus of people.

The destruction of cultural heritage is a direct threat to the security of any people, and although the humanitarian crisis must take priority, the heart breaking cultural crisis must be a close second. Protecting a community's cultural identity shows respect for human dignity (Al Quntar, et al., 2015). The world remains unanimous in its outrage over such blatant disrespect for global heritage, but those who understand the importance of protecting cultural heritage, especially those on the ground in Syria, are not well integrated into the international humanitarian community to translate such goodwill into tangible results (Ibid). However, Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq Project (SHOSI) are some of only a few international good-will organizations that have proven effective in preserving the cultural heritage of a nation in crisis. The former group educates and works directly with the local population and local professionals to create an integrated and systematic response to such devastation. The humanitarian and cultural crisis raging in and around Syria is very similar to the Jewish crisis of World War II, and although the responses to preserve material culture during WWII have not been systematically evaluated yet, the responses with the best long term results were those that worked within the local community to protect their culture (Ibid). SHOSI has amassed a very similar response, and hopefully one with similarly positive outcomes.

Brandon Stanton is not the only journalist to have used individuals' stories to

demonstrate the larger effects and traumas of the crisis. Patrick Kingsley, award winning author and new foreign correspondent for the New York Times, wrote a book collecting the stories of the refugees streaming towards Europe via the Mediterranean Sea (Kingsley, 2016). He focused on the personal stories of the refugees to show the complicated and dire nature of the crisis. In particular, Kingsley followed one man and his quest for safety, Hashem al-Souki, a man from Syria who fled with his family and, after three years of struggle, began the resettlement process in Sweden. Hashem and his family lived in a town called Haran al-Awamid, famous for the row of ancient Roman pillars that ran through the town. He remembers his children playing around the ruins; the ruins exist as part of the landscape of his pre-war Syria, but he does not necessarily miss them. He is nostalgic for the feel, the smell, the sights and sounds of his home (Ibid). These are emotional memories that focus on the immaterial, which is just as important to culture as the material. Hashem and his family, like many other refugees, were on the move for years before resettlement became an option. Keeping personal mementos that were not key to survival was a luxury that only a few could afford.

The Roman pillars, legacies of an ancient past and a rich cultural heritage, were the backdrop of Hashem's life. They are integral to his understanding of his home, and in a way himself. They are inseparable from the rest of his world but, until he was confronted with their destruction, they were not necessarily unique points of interest. Their loss would have elicited the same sadness as losing the peach trees his family loved. But, like the trees, the pillars are immovable and Hashem and his family only took the essentials when they fled. This is just one example of how

material cultural heritage is being left behind by those who treasured it. It is unrealistic for the international academic community to expect refugees to take material culture with them when they flee. Instead, we must work with those still in Syria who are actively trying to preserve that beautiful culture and we must ensure the protection of human life and the swift end of the war.

3. Looking Forward

Histories of local communities flow from remembered stories, communal memory, and the passing on of these stories from generation to generation, all of which are important in the creation of the individual's sense of self and place of belonging. New narratives are often created across "cultural borderlands," spaces with no hegemonic or dominant forces which allow many factors to influence each other (Sizgorich, 2004). A refugee camp is one example of a cultural borderland—a world stuck in limbo that allows for the creation of new narratives and for the solidification of memories of a lost homeland. Refugees' memory of home changes in order to ground the dispersed community into a shared past and a shared homeland. This occurs in order to validate individual identities and to maintain the autonomy of the individual in the middle of a worldwide crisis. However, if the refugee community is spread across the western world via resettlement, is this new community truly temporary? Will the newly resettled have an opportunity to recreate similar communities around shared culture, religion, or experience in their new homes?

Depending on the resettlement community, the answer to these troubling questions is yes! New communities elaborate on common narratives that bind

them to a wider universe (Ibid). Refugees, as a community, share a similar story with similar images of struggle, loss, and relocation that is specific to them and will act as a unifier, the glue of experience. This shared community is most evident in areas with a large population of resettled refugees, such as Prince Edward Island, Canada where there are, as of early 2017, 250 resettled families in which half of the students at the local elementary school were refugees, although not all were Syrian (UNICEF Canada, 2017). Canada's dedication to accepting many refugees and upholding their dignity as individuals helps create such accepting environments. Communities with a large number of refugees mitigate my concerns of Syrian culture being swallowed by dominant western cultures because of a lack of institutional or social support. However, I do not want to hastily throw these concerns out the window because of one successful case. This is an ongoing reality; it will be interesting to watch communal narratives develop and new identities form as Syrians find their way forward.

Many relocated families are beginning to move forward by reclaiming parts of their culture in their new homes and using food to express cultural identity and memory. For one family in Canada, the Turkish coffee pot was a much needed, and I can only assume much loved, addition to the new home (Lum, 2017). Food is inexpensive, mobile, authentic, and intimate. It is a fundamental human experience that transcends, as much as it embodies, culture. Food is a reminder of home, a link to what has been left behind and is an immaterial, internal expression of culture that brings people together in new communities. One example of this is Newcomer Kitchen in Toronto, Canada that invites newly arrived Syrian women to cook traditional meals for

the public (Lau, 2016). Food can bridge cultural divides and create new communities centered around shared experiences or memories. This is seen in the new Middle-Eastern supermarkets cropping up in places as far from the Middle East as Prince Edward Island, Canada. In these small ways, resettled Syrians are reclaiming their distinct cultural identity and declaring themselves "Syrian," or "Syrian-Canadian" as one little boy said, in their new homes (UNICEF Canada, 2017). These hopeful and healing behaviors will not replace the destroyed and looted material culture that represented centuries of Syrian history and achievement, but it can begin to soothe the frayed edges of a displaced people looking for themselves again.

4. Conclusion

We have explored the importance of material heritage in communal memory and personal identity and what impact the loss of such priceless artifacts may have on the future of Syrian culture. Art, architecture, and irreplaceable archaeology are being abandoned by those forced to flee and are being destroyed, intentionally and accidentally, by the war. This extreme loss of material culture will have long term effects on the Syrian refugee population now spread throughout the Western world. How Syrian culture will change because of the destruction of heritage and loss of community is still unknown. However, in every case I have studied there is one common thread: the tenacity of the human spirit. Despite war, genocide, or ruin, the human spirit transcends all and finds a way to maintain traditions, memories, and identities. This leaves us hopeful for the continuation of the dynamic and vibrant Syrian culture.

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