

TRANSREGIONAL MEMORY POLITICS: TOWARDS RESPONSIBLE GEOGRAPHIES OF ABRAHAMIC MEMORY, ABRAHAMIC COSMOPOLITANISM AND ABRAHAMIC TERRITORIAL ETHICS FOR ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

Dr. John Njenga Karugia, Institute of Asian and African Studies, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin
Middle East Forum, Issue 21, January 2024

The territories where Israeli and Palestinian people have witnessed traumatic pain and suffering of armed conflict are characterized by complex transregional palimpsestic memories (Silverman, 2013). This means that there are many layers of transregional memories that have accumulated over past centuries that are important to both Palestinians and Israelis. While some of them narrate intergenerational memories that they have experienced within these geographies (e.g. numerous wars) some narrate connective intergenerational transregional memories (e.g. the Holocaust) including experiences they made elsewhere (Finkelstein, 2018: YadVashem, 2023). Due to the complexity of transregional palimpsestic memories going back many generations, spanning many geographic locations globally and prone to divergent religious interpretations, myriad misunderstandings and disagreements have emerged that have fundamentally shaped collective memory politics of Israelis and Palestinians.

Is there hope for a two-state solution with Palestinians and Israelis living in peace side by side? What I refer to as 'Abrahamic territorial Ethics' offers hopeful insights because, a few years ago, the Abraham Accords would have been unthinkable but now, they are a reality (The Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 2020). Abraham, seen as the origin of the three religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam (Cohen, 2020), is the name-giver and inspiration of the Abraham Accords which are bilateral peace agreements to normalize relations between several Arab States and Israel. With the noble aim of promoting peace across the Middle East and globally, The Abraham Accords Declaration states that participant States "recognize the importance of maintaining and strengthening peace in the Middle East and around the world based on mutual understanding and coexistence, as well as respect for human dignity and freedom, including religious freedom." In direct reference to religion, The Abraham Accords Declaration states that "We encourage efforts to promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue to advance a culture of peace among the three Abrahamic religions and all humanity." The Abrahamic Accords Declaration further emphasizes that, "We believe that the best way to address challenges is through cooperation and dialogue and that developing friendly relations among States advances the interests of lasting peace in the Middle East and around the world." Yet, peace still seems so elusive.

Cosmopolitanism, that is, the idea of being a world citizen is characterized by taking responsibility towards other human beings seriously as well as engaging in deep dialogue to attempt to find solutions to challenging issues (Appiah, 2015). Yet such dialogue is not easy, especially regarding matters that go back several thousands of years, involve religion,

migration, land rights and multiples of traumatic pasts. Till and Kuusisto-Arponen (2015: 291) emphasize their interest in examining what they call “controversial processes of social memory and forgetting at places marked by state-perpetrated violence.” They argue for the creation of “responsible geographies of memory” and note that it is the responsibility of scholars and global citizens – that is, cosmopolitans – to:

- 1) acknowledge that landscapes often function as places of critical testimony for survivors;
- 2) problematize singular claims to the authenticity of place made through universal narratives and seemingly stable material landscapes;
- 3) create safe spaces of listening, wherein stories about place can be articulated and acknowledged by various stakeholders, while recognizing the moral complexities in representing violence through textual, visual and embodied means; and
- 4) recognize the progressive potential of places as cosmopolitan spaces of encounter and learning. They further argue that “by treating places marked by difficult pasts as cosmopolitan, hosts and visitors are invited to engage critically with the unfolding processes of memory politics, and adopt respectful approaches toward justice that includes caring for places and peoples in the past and present.”

A two-state solution will only be achieved through deep dialogue that takes place within “safe spaces of listening” created in a similar manner that delivered the Abraham Accord Peace Agreements. There would exist two States: Palestine and Israel. Due to religious claims of the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), it is prudent to create what I call “responsible geographies of Abrahamic memory” meaning, finding a modality that grants cross-border access to holy sites to Israelis and Palestinians even after statehood is achieved. Every citizen of both Abrahamic States would then have the possibility to travel to religious memory places in either States. Eventually an arrangement similar to European Union’s border-free Schengen Zone (European Commission 2023) should be implemented and named the ‘Abraham Zone’ with the aim of granting access to citizens of both States to travel without restrictions across each other’s territories. Before such an Abraham Zone is created, a lot of work must be invested in public education with the aim of spreading a message that when all is said and done, life is not worth living in constant wars. Whichever form transitional justice takes for the citizens of the then State of Israel and the State of Palestine, public education should aim at instilling new understanding of an Abrahamic cosmopolitan identity and belonging within these Abrahamic territories. It would be a very complex undertaking due to competing existing historical claims, competing religious positions, competing transregional fundamentalisms, and a military industrial complex. But it would still be a worthwhile and prudent undertaking.

Cosmopolitanism encompasses the idea that despite being a citizen of a certain territory, one cares deeply about the well-being, the human rights, the security and the health of other citizens located elsewhere in far off or nearby places. After the Israeli-Hamas war, what I refer to as Abrahamic cosmopolitanism should be invoked through what I call Abrahamic dialogue with the aim of renewed unceasing deep dialogue amongst Muslims, Jews, Christians and other cosmopolitans to remind each other about their

SiameseAbrahamic origins and their indispensably interconnected futures within these Abrahamic geographies of Israel and Palestine. If not for the living, then they should honor the memory of the dead because as Homi Bhabha has emphasized, “even the dead have human rights” (Schulze-Engler, Malreddy and Karugia (2018).

References

Appiah, A. (2007) *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. London: Penguin Books.

Cohen, L. Charles (2020) *The Abrahamic Religions: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Finkelstein, Norman (2018) *Gaza: An Inquest into Its Martyrdom*, University of California Press.

Frank Schulze-Engler, Pavan Kumar Malreddy & John Njenga Karugia (2018) “Even the dead have human rights”: A conversation with Homi K. Bhabha, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 54:5, 702-716, DOI: [10.1080/17449855.2018.1446682](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2018.1446682)

Nets-Zehngut, Rafi (2014) The Israeli and Palestinian Collective Memories of Their Conflict: Determinants, Characteristics, and Implications, *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 20 (2), 103-121.

Silverman, Max (2013) *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film*, Berghahn Books.

Till, K.E. and Kuusisto-Arponen, A.-K. (2015) Towards Responsible Geographies of Memory: Complexities of Place and the Ethics of Remembering. *Erdkunde* 69(4): 291–306.

Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (2020) The Abraham Accords Declaration
<https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/> (last accessed 22.12.2023)

European Commission (2023) Schengen Area
https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen-borders-and-visa/schengen-area_en
(last accessed 22.12.2023)

YadVashem (2023) Holocaust Book Reviews
<https://www.yadvashem.org/education/educational-materials/books.html> (last accessed 22.12.2023)