

Saving private David Ben Gurion.

An indigenous narrative

to justify the special ties between the Circassian community and the State of Israel.

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Circassians in Israel – whose population is estimated at 4,000 people- are divided between the two villages of Kfar Kama (Lower Galilee, district of Tiberias) and Reyhanyia (Lebanese border, district of Safed). This population is an unique example of a non-Arab (but Caucasian) Muslim group which claims an active Israeli citizenship and who, contrary to what such a situation might imply, retains very meaningful traditional and cultural elements while enjoying a relative civic integration.

Israelis but not Jews, Muslims but not Arabs, Circassians of Israel face difficulties in finding their right place between the two identitary "titans" competing, without leaving much vacant space, for the legitimacy of a presence and whose stories, disasters and pains confront and compete rather than admit and understand each other.

"Traitors" and "Muslims in the service of Zionism" for some, "second-class citizens" for others, categorizations at work provoke excluding mechanisms for Circassians. The concepts of nationality or religious affiliations, yet commonly applied in the Israeli-Palestinian space, are not efficient enough to define this "minority within the minority", unable to recognize itself within any of the two dominant groups but which also seeks to distinguish from the "third way" embodied by the Druzes. Druzes and Circassians are the two non-Jewish Communities involved in the process of national defense and are usually linked together, in official speeches as well as in the public opinion.

Under the cover of unwavering "loyalty" to the State, an idea mainly fed by the compulsory participation of men from both communities to the army, Druzes and Circassians are given a special treatment which is very different from the one reserved to the Palestinian (Arab)

populations of the country, both in the political management of the villages and in the recognition of their cultural and religious specificities.

The privileges granted by the State to these two populations, continue to feed a ditch from which several effects are ensued. But if Druzes are considered as a sectarian group apart from the Muslim world, this loyalty is considered as an act of betrayal by the Arabs of the country for whom Circassians are traitors to the *Umma*, and are therefore excluded from the community of believers, however, supposed to transcend nationalities, borders and governments.

This article will focus on the early specific relationships between the Circassian community and the Yishuv that can be considered as a proto-State that laid the foundations of the coming State of Israel. After a reminding of the nature of the Yishuv and the links tied with the Circassian in North Palestine, I will present a story that I collected in the Circassian village of Kfar Kama and will analyse the function of its narrative.

Through the successive waves of aliyah: a sociological upheaval of the Yishuv.

The *Yishuv*, whose full name is *HaYishuv HaYehudi beEretz Yisrael* ("The Jewish Settlement in the Land of Israel"), refers to the Jewish community in Palestine. Among this population, established on the territory before the creation of the State of Israel, one can distinguish between two different groups: the "old" and the "new" *Yishuv*. The old *Yishuv* gathered Haredim Jews¹ which dedicated their life to the study of Torah. They mainly settled in the four holy cities of Judaism: Hebron, Jerusalem, Safed and Tiberias. These Haredim were very hostile to Zionism, which they considered as contrary to their religious precepts. The new *Yishuv* was composed of migrants from successive - and different - waves of *aliyah*. "Aliyah", which literally means "the rise", is one of the main foundations of the Zionist demographic policy. Its purpose was to encourage Jewish immigration in Palestine and later on in Israel of the Jews from the *galut* (diaspora), in order to ensure the "gathering of the exiled" (*kibbutz galuyot*). Between 1881 and 1951, there were seven waves of aliyah². The first aliyah is called the "farmers' aliyah" and gathered between 25,000 up to 35,000 people³ that were removed from Russia and Eastern Europe, victims of the pogroms that occurred

¹ Haredim, is the most conservative form of Orthodox Judaism, often referred to as ultra-Orthodox.

² We could add to these waves further phases of migration supported by the State of Israel, especially Moses and Salomon operations involving Jews from Ethiopia (1984-1985 & 1991) and the ex-Sovietic aliyah (1989-).

³ 25,000 according to Claude Klein, 1999: 48 and 35,000 according to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. These early migrants arrived in Palestine between 1881 and 1903: they were essentially idealistic with not experienced with rural life.

In 1897, in Basel, Zionism officially became political. Waves of aliyah started to be organized and the sociology of these immigrants is changing. 35,000 people composed the second aliyah (1904-1914)⁴ also came from Russia and fled the same hostile environment. Contrary to the prior migrants, these ones are characterized by a strong Zionist commitment mixed with Marxist influences. These migrants were the ones who actually implemented the foundations of the future State of Israel, by creating cooperative communities, workers associations, self-defence organizations - including *Bar Giora*, a precursor of the *Hashomer* founded by eight members of the *Marxist-Zionist Poale Zion* ("Workers of Zion")⁵. In 1918, the Jewish population in Palestine was estimated at 83,000 people, soon reinforced by 35,000 more migrants, mostly young and very Zionist, of the third aliyah (1919-1923). This wave of migrants was very active in the work of the land, it is during that time that was established the first kibbutz in Palestine: Ein Harod (1921), at only thirty kilometers from the Circassian village of Kfar Kama.

This rather homogeneous typology of migrants changed with the fourth aliyah, that was even qualified as "bourgeoise"⁶: some 81,000 people - mostly Jews from Poland - were more detached from the pioneering spirit and the work of the land, they had much more urban and commercial than Zionist vocation. The fifth (1932-1939) and sixth (1939-1948) aliyot, the two last ones before the proclamation of the State of Israel, meet fundamentally different contexts. In societies in which they had settled for centuries, Jews faced climate of strong anti-semitism that was no longer hidden and this terrible anti-semitism is the main argument that the Zionist Congress is going to use, successfully, to convince them to leave for Palestine. Even if convinced, these *olim*⁷ are not necessarily and in priori ideologists.

⁴ 40,000 according to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

⁵ While the *Bund* (the "league") that was founded in Lithuania in October 1897 defined itself as revolutionary and Jewish, and is opposed to Zionism accused to represent the interests of the Jewish petit-bourgeoisie, the *Poalei Zion* defined itself as Marxist, nationalist and Zionist. Founded by Dov Ber Borochof in 1906, *Poalei Zion* supported a "practical" zionism with an intensiv colonization in Palestine while struggling, at the same time, for the social emancipation. In other terms, *Poalei Zion* believed that the Jewish workers are the ones that should create the State of Israel and not the dominant classes. Together with the first zionist socialist (non-marxist) party *Ha'poel Hatzair* ("The Young Worker"), *Poalei Zion* would create the *Histadrut* (HaHistadrut HaKlalit shel HaOvdim BeEretz Yisrael (lit. "General Federation of Laborers in the Land of Israel") in December 1920. The two parties will unify in 1930 to create the *Mapai* which will then join the *Mapam* (*Mifleget HaPoalim HaMeuhedet*, "United Party of Workers") to form *HaMaarach* which will become *HaAvoda* (*Mifleget HaAvoda HaYisraelit*), the actual Israeli labor party.

⁶ Claude Klein, 1999: 48.

⁷ The term *oleh* (fem. *olah*, plur. *olim/ olot*) refers to a Jew from the diaspora that made his/her *aliyah*.

First contacts between the Circassians and the Yishuv in Palestine

The closer linkage between Circassians and Jews in Palestine occurred, not around ideological acquaintances but around the cohabitation in a same geographical area. The *t'xhamadas* (elders, wisers, in Circassian indigeneous language) from both Kfar Kama and Reyhaniya do not hesitate telling that their community has always maintained cordial ties with its neighbors. One of them considers a linguistic argument :

We have always had good relations with them, since the beginning (...) the first Jews⁸ that settled in the Galilee came from Russia, we had a common language to communicate together (...) we did not speak Arabic so we were unable to speak with the local Arabs. With the Jews, it was different, we could⁹

Another one argues about economical needs to develop the community:

Since the first Jewish villages were established in the area, the issue of security has always been essential for them (...) and for us, since we arrived, guarding, surveillance and security had been important sources of income. For twenty years, Circassians were reservists and guards for the Ottoman Empire. So they placed their expertise at the service of these new neighbors: Circassian knew how to defend properties, land and people, they were loyal and faithful, you could count on them (...) When the pioneers settled in Ilania, they recruited guards among men of Kfar Kama. Later on, they created Bar Giora in order to put the protection of Jewish villages in the hands of the Jews (...) but since then, Circassians and Jews shared a common destiny, that will continue after the creation of the State of Israel¹⁰

Nonetheless, some authors note that "because of their language, their customs and their loyalty to the Ottomans, the Circassians were not on the best terms with the Arabs"¹¹, while their relations with the Jews were cordials, upon arrival¹².

Whether or not, the Circassians directly took up for these newcomers' cause, the fact remains that they are witnesses of the events taking place in the region. While I was talking with him about the first contacts with the Jewish settlements in the area, another *t'xamada* told me,

⁸ That are not, in fact, the first Jews of the holy cities.

⁹ Interview with K.S, Kfar Kama, August 29, 2007.

¹⁰ Interview with A.T, Kfar Kama, April 21, 2007.

¹¹ Albert Habib Hourani, 1947: 58.

¹² Ori Stendel, 1973.

without omitting a single detail, a story that has marked the village and that I would hear many more times during my fieldwork in the Circassians villages in Israel:

Sedjera has been the first Jewish village in the East of the Lower Galilee, from the very beginning they turned to us to help protecting the village. They hired a guard from Kfar Kama, Daot Gorkhoz (...) One night at Sedjera, while everything was calm and quiet, and while everyone was asleep (...) Daot noticed that there was some light in house, and that it was unusual for that hour. Suddenly, he saw a shadow, he loaded his gun and aimed the target. He said: "Stop, who are you?", in order to know if it was someone from the village, he asked the password. The person answered correctly and when he approached, Daot realized he was one guard from the village. The guard asked Daot why he was here, Daot answered that he had heard a noise and that he wanted to know where it came from. The guard ordered him to return to his position, Daot obeyed. Less than an hour later he heard shouts and cries, he came back to the place, there were some gunfires. All the guards ran and Daot told them: "some people attacked the village, there was a fight between them and David".

David was lying on the ground, he was bleeding. Daot took him on his shoulders and carried him to the house next door to Moshe Korakin's one. He ran to the infirmary of the village to prevent the auxiliary, they returned together to David with a bag full of drugs in order to treat him. The auxiliary said: "we must go for medical assistance immediately, we need to go to Yavnel to advise the doctor, David is going to die". Daot suggested to go there, the guards told him "do not go alone, take someone with you" but Daot told them that it would be better to use all the guards to protect the village and that he was not afraid to go there alone. He jumped on his horse and went right to Yavnel, not by the road, like people usually do, but through the fields because it was faster even if it was dangerous because of the gangs who were holding the fields. But Daot knew he could not waste time (...) nobody was daring to go out at night because everyone was afraid of the gangs.

When he arrived at Yavnel, he knocked on the door of the doctor but all the family was deeply asleep. Then he shouted "open, open" until the doctor opened. Daot explained him that there was an emergency case in Sedjera and that he had to come right now in order to prevent the guard dying in the night. The doctor mounted his horse and asked Daot which way he took to arrive to Yavnel. Daot answered "by the fields", the doctor told him that it was too dangerous and that they should go through the road of Kfar Kama, in order to be secured. When they arrived at Sedjera, the doctor examined David and said that his state of health was very worrying and that he had to be brought to the hospital, in Tiberias (...) David was saved¹³.

¹³ Interview with A.T, Kfar Kama, April 21, 2006.

David, the guard that Daot Gorkoz saved that night was the man who would become the first Prime Minister of the State of Israel: David Ben Gurion.

In his memoirs, David Ben Gurion actually mentions the Circassians from Kfar Kama, when he's telling about the struggle he and other young men from Sedjera led to impose Jewish guards instead of foreigners. But the description he makes of them tends to prove that he actually know badly their history and the disregard he's feeling for them, as for any non-Jewish populations.

He writes:

(...) In Jueda, foreign mercenaries were used for work as well as for safekeeping. At Sedjera, where the work was ours, one hundred percent, would we let the destiny of young Hebrews full of life in the hands of foreigners? Would we be reduced, as we were in Exile, to hire mercenaries to keep our properties and our lives? (...) The guards of the farm were Circassians from Kfar Kama, conscientious men, known for their courage. No *Fellah*, no Beduin, would dare to attack them: *Fish akhbar min Cherkes*, nobody is as big as a Circassians, said the Fellahs. Their center was beyond the Jordan river, in Quneitra area and in Amman. In the Lower Galilee, between Sedjera and Yavnel, they were living in good terms with the Jewish settlements. Nearly all the guard was in their hand: they were protecting the farms, the plantations, the fields (...) Our director was not daring to designate Hebrew guards, afraid of provoking the Circassians (...) ¹⁴

David Ben Gurion did not write a single line about this episode, and if Daot Gorkoz is not mentioned at all, he even does not come back on that night where he almost lost his life. This is actually not surprising when one knows the mythological construction of the strong and invincible new Jewish man driven by the Zionist rhetoric that emphasized the cult of strength and heroism¹⁵. The foregoing quotations taken from David Ben Gurion's memoirs also foreshadows the figure of the "Arab" - in a broader sense of "non-Jews" in a part of the Zionist narrative. Furthermore, we know how ashkeno-centred the vision of Ben Gurion was and the discriminations that would also been led, within its own ethnogroup, toward the *mizrahim* populations, for example¹⁶.

¹⁴ David Ben Gurion, 1974 [French transl.], *Mémoires. Israël avant Israël*, p.31.

¹⁵ Idith Zertal, 2002: 32.

¹⁶ We could, for example, remember a famous speech given by David Ben Gurion: "*The Moroccan Jew took a lot from the Moroccan Arabs. The culture of Morocco I would not like to have here. And I don't see what contribution present Persians have to make. We do not want Israelis to become Arabs. We are in duty bound to fight against the spirit of the Levant, which corrupts individuals and societies, and preserve the authentic Jewish values as they crystallized in the Diaspora*", in Gershon Shafir & Yoav Peled, 2005: 77.

It is difficult to verify the claims of the *tx'hamadas'* story. This story may be a myth but it may also have been overlooked in the construction of the historiography of the State. I was told the story of Daot and David many times during my fieldworks in Kfar Kama. This story belongs to the history of the village and is a fundamental myth still acting as a justification of the specific ties which unite Jews and Circassians. This story was also used by the villagers to explain the special treatment granted to this minority, sometimes considered as a "preferred minority" in Israel.