The Bedouin-Arab historical memory: Documenting the silenced voices of the margins[1]

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> We took the children there because we want them to experience the hope. We took our children there so that they know that they had land. They should know where they came from because every person must know these things. The idea is for them to know their history and that they possessed land… (Abu-Shareb).
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> This is not the first time he has recounted our history; he was the one who told it to us all the time. He unfolded the history in each event to explain why we have a problem in Laqiya nowadays… (Abu-Siyam).

As these remarks indicate, the Bedouin-Arab narrative is land-based. The land defines their ancestry along three time-based alignments: the past, which refers to who they are and where they were born; the present, which describes the struggle for their land and territorial culture; and the future, which derives from the past and the present and anchors their hope for physical and cognitive return to their land and their desire to relive their past lives.

The historical discourse of the Bedouin Arab is taking a powerful and vibrant place within their society in the Negev. By recounting their past and telling their history, visiting their ancestors' land and identifying relics from that period, demarcating sites and actively hand down the story to the younger generations, they are reinforcing their children's affinity to their historic land and forming their essential territorial identity.

Documenting these historical voices of Bedouin Arabs in the Negev from the 1948 generation, and of their children, has powerful and significant consequences for their historical discourse and for their struggle as the indigenous owners of the land. It shows how land is the fundamental element that defines Bedouin Arabs, their values and cultural anchors. These are the cornerstones of their land-based worldview, the story of each Bedouin-Arab self, representing their affiliation and, in fact, their home. Thus, the struggle for the return of the lost land, waged in the cognitive and physical spheres and through a variety of spatial practices, is also the struggle for restoration of cultural values that characterize Bedouin Arabs as a society and define that society accordingly. These voices also create an alternative history that challenges how hegemonic Zionist Israeli history in the academic and public sphere excludes them

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and ignores their cultural formation, which helps to represent them as illegal invaders of Israeli lands.

Documenting the silenced voices of margin histories, and amplifying the voices of the subordinate population, helps to reshape their identity in contexts such as sense of place, empowerment and opposition. These voices contribute to changing the way knowledge about the Bedouin Arabs in the Negev is created, by native scholars that write from the bottom up, to understand their identity and cultural needs.

NOTE

1 This short text is based on the author's Masters' thesis, "Exiled in our homeland: The diasporical identity of the Negev Bedouin," and Ph.D. dissertation, "Out of history, hidden voices within gender spaces: Bedouin-Arab women tell the Nakba." It is based on in-depth interviews of men and women from the 1948 generation and their children in the Negev, from recognized and unrecognized villages, who experienced uprooting first hand and related their personal testimonies. Their memories of their previous lives constitute the scientific basis for the documentation.