

Antropolojik Yöntemler ve Bir Anı Analizi: Rakka Bölgesi'nde Göç, Geçmiş ve Şimdi*

Annika Rabo^a

Öz

Bu makale, bir Suriye bölgesindeki materyali hem Suriye'deki hem de başka yerlerdeki daha genel bir sorunu da kapsayan bir örnek olarak kullanmayı amaçlamıştır. Antropolojik yöntemlerin, bu bölgede ve başka yerlerde gelecekteki şenlikli ve birlikte yaşama pratiğinin uzlaşma süreçlerini düşünmeye başlama noktası sunduğunu savunuyorum. Katılımcı gözlem, sosyal antropologların kullandığı yöntemlerin merkezinde yer alır. Bu gözlem, umumiyetle, saha olarak isimlendirilen sınırsız ortamda insanlarla (informant veya kendi eşitimiz [interlocutor]) yoğun bir kişisel bağlantıyı ve etkileşimi zorunlu kılar. Bu bağlantı ve etkileşim katı bir araştırma tasarımı tarafından önceden belirlenmemiştir. Bilakis, beklenmedik şeyleri beklemek için eğitildik. Bu sebeple etnografik saha çalışması evvela serendipe müsaittir; yani kendisini aramadığımız önemli şeyleri veya onları aradığımızın dahi farkında olmadığımız şeyleri bulma sürecimiz.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Rakka Bölgesi • Antropolojik yöntemler • Tarih • Anılar • Göç

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a (✉) Annika Rabo (Dr.), Stockholm University, Department of Social Anthropology, 106 91 Stockholm, Sweden. Eposta: annika.rabo@socant.su.se

Anthropological Methods and an Analysis of Memory: Migration, Past and Present in Raqqa Province, Syria*

Annika Rabo^a

Abstract

This text is an attempt to use material in one Syrian region as an example that speaks to a more general problem both in Syria and elsewhere. I argue that anthropological methods offer entry points to start thinking about reconciliatory processes for future conviviality and co-existence in this province and elsewhere. Participant observation is central to the methods used by social anthropologists. Such observation typically entails intensive personal engagement and interaction with people – informants or interlocutors – in the often-unbounded setting dubbed the field. This engagement and interaction is not predetermined by a strict research design. Instead, we are trained to expect the unexpected. Ethnographic fieldwork thus allows for serendipity; that process by which we discover important things for which we were not even searching, or were unaware that we were even searching for them, to begin with.

Keywords

Raqqa province • Anthropological methods • History • Memories • Migration

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^a (✉) Annika Rabo (PhD), Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University, 106 91 Stockholm, Sweden. Email: annika.rabo@socant.su.se

The modern province of Raqqa in Syria is built on and from the ruins of earlier human settlements dating all the way back to the Assyrian and Babylonian civilizations and continuing up to the peak of the Arab Islamic era. Throughout the centuries, the province has experienced intermittent depopulation and repopulation along a continuum ranging from forced to voluntary mobility. When writing this text it is difficult to think optimistically about the future for those people in and from this region. Is it possible to imagine and even plan for resettlement and reconciliation among people in Raqqa province? As a researcher with both anthropological fieldwork experience in and leisurely visits to Raqqa and its countryside between 1978 and 2011, I am, of course, engaged in these questions. This text is an attempt – an *essay* – to use material in one Syrian region as an example which speaks to a more general problem in Syria and elsewhere. I argue that anthropological methods offer entry points to start thinking about reconciliatory processes for future conviviality and co-existence in this province and elsewhere. Entailing intensive personal engagement and interaction with people; namely informants or interlocutors, in the often unbounded setting dubbed *the field*, participant observation is central to the methods used by social anthropologists. This engagement and interaction is not predetermined by a strict research design. Instead we are trained to expect the unexpected. Ethnographic fieldwork thus allows for serendipity; that process by which we discover important things for which we were not looking and often for which we did not even know that we were looking. The material used in this text has been collected, recorded, and remembered for a period spanning an excess of three decades. This allows us to discern not only an ethnographic present frozen in time, but also both patterns and irregularities occurring in social interaction.

The topic of memory is burgeoning, and in the words of Paul Connerton, “ubiquitous” (2009, p. 1). The very ubiquity of the topic calls for great caution, as David Berliner (2005) writes. When memory is everywhere and everything, the concept may lose its analytical value. Sociological and anthropological discussions on memory owe much to Emile Durkheim’s student, Maurice Halbwachs, who was perhaps the first to underline that memory is socially constructed and that we remember as members of various groups. He was also interested in the ways that the past is present in the present. He argued that “collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past in the light of the present” (Cosser 1992, p. 34). Halbwachs made a distinction between autobiographical and historical memories where the first are memories of what we have experienced whereas the second are not remembered directly, and instead rely on records or ritual enactments and commemorations. In this text, both autobiographical and historical memories are important for how my informants have reasoned about themselves and others in the region, in Syria, and in the world. With this being said however, it is equally important to underline my role in the construction of these memories. As discussed by Johannes Fabian,

“remembering/memory turns out to be involved in almost every imaginable aspect of ethnographic research” (2007, p. 132).

Processes of migration and displacement are today one of the most lively fields of research in the social sciences and the humanities. The importance of not only movements, but also roots, is also heavily discussed outside universities. Everywhere, including in the province of Raqqa, people voice opinions on migration – from forced to voluntary - and people are affected by human mobility in every part of the world. People everywhere, including anthropologists, construct memories and historical accounts of mobility, be they “forced” or “voluntary,” as well as rootedness. In this text, the history of mobility and settlement in the province of Raqqa will be used as examples to highlight memories of both conflict and conviviality. In this text, I return to material that I have used in other publications (i.e. [Bahous, Nabhani, & Rabo, 2013](#); [Rabo, 1986, 1997, 2010](#)) as well as to field notes and other records.

Settling and Unsettling in the Province of Raqqa

The present-day province of Raqqa was an important and rich region up until the peak of the Arab Islamic era in the ninth century. The Abbasid caliph Haroun al-Rashid, for example, had his summer residence in Raqqa and was said to have travelled to and from Baghdad shaded by trees. Raqqa was sacked and destroyed by Tamerlane in 1371 AD and by the end of that century, the province’s population and agricultural production were in decline. From the end of the 14th until the beginning of the 19th century, population fluctuations were great. During the 17th and 18th centuries, Bedouin tribes from the Arabian Peninsula migrated to the Euphrates region ([Chatty, 1986, p. 11](#); [Lewis, 1987](#)). In the 19th century, Ottoman authorities attempted to incorporate these tribes into the power structure of the empire not only to make trade routes safe, but also to increase economic and political stability in the region. Peasants from Aleppo and the surrounding area were encouraged to move eastwards and to settle in the Euphrates region.

At the end of the 19th century, Ottoman authorities established a permanent police post in the ruins of Raqqa. By that time, a few Arabic speaking families had already chosen the ruined city as a seasonal base in their yearly migratory movements while grazing their sheep between Urfa, in present day Turkey, and the Euphrates River. Eventually, members of these families stayed in Raqqa, building permanent houses from the building materials found among the ruins. Yet, seasonal migrations were still very common until the 1920’s. When I completed my first fieldwork in the city in the late 1970’s, those who saw themselves – and were seen by others – as the real natives of Raqqa were the descendants of these early settlers.

After the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, Syria became a French mandate. Both the war and the establishment of the mandate had

enormous repercussions on the population in the north and east of Syria. Armenians and Syriac-speaking Christians fled from the massacres carried out in present day Turkey in 1915. Although some did remain, most left the province, Syria, and even the Middle East by way of Aleppo and Beirut. The French opposed the unification of Syria and instead split the country into different “states” (see e.g. [White, 2011](#)). The Euphrates region and the Syrian Desert were ruled directly from Paris ([Petran, 1972, p. 62](#)). This French policy was probably linked to their difficulty in pacifying this “uncivilized” region.

During the French mandate, the political balance of power in the Raqqa countryside changed. The rural population consisted not only of Bedouins, but also of sheep rearing so called *shawai'a* (s. *shaawi*) who were politically dominated by, and paid tribute to the Bedouins in exchange for protection. The French wanted to stop this practice and supported the political aspirations of the *shawai'a* to forge themselves into distinct tribal groups ([Hannoyer, 1980](#); [Khalaf, 1981](#); [Müller, 1931](#)). The French continued the Ottoman policy of land registration, which worked in favor of the tribal sheikhs, both Bedouin and the *shawai'a*, who became owners of huge tracts of land. Initially, this land registration had little or no economic importance because land was still used for collective grazing. Yet, the situation changed dramatically by the end of the 1940's. Irrigated cotton was introduced along the river shores in the region and in the steppe, mechanized rain fed wheat and barley cultivation. Traders from Aleppo leased huge tracts of land from tribal sheikhs along the Euphrates. They installed diesel pumps and started cultivating cotton, often bringing their own workers from the agriculturally more developed Aleppo region. In just a few years, cotton became the most important crop in the Euphrates region. While the tribal leaders became very rich and were nicknamed cotton sheikhs, the ordinary tribesmen remained poor and many migrated from the region to as far as Lebanon and Kuwait ([Meyer, 1984, p. 302](#)).

While diesel pumps revolutionized agriculture along the Euphrates, tractors completely changed the steppe south and north of the river. This change was brought about through urban entrepreneurs who leased grazing land from the tribal heads. In the early 1950's, winter rains were plentiful and harvests were very good. The center of the development of mechanized grain cultivation was northeast of the Raqqa province, close to the borders of Turkey and Iraq ([Warriner, 1957, p. 71](#)). Yet, fortunes were also to be made (or lost) in the province of Raqqa on grain cultivation and speculation. The city itself grew through the expansion of the agricultural sector. Raqqa, like other towns of the northeast, attracted migrants from other regions. From the small town of Sukhne situated on the old trade route between Palmyra and the Euphrates came a substantial number of families establishing themselves as traders in Raqqa. Fleeing drought in their own regions came small scale farmers from central and southern Syria looking for work in Raqqa in the 1950's. In the countryside, *shawai'a* built more permanent houses and established villages.

The incredible agricultural expansion in northern Syria came about through private initiatives. The state did very little in terms of support or constraints. This changed in the end of the 1950's and the beginning of the 1960's when new national policies were formulated. A big land reform limited the size of land holdings and land was taken from the sheikhs and given to their fellow tribesmen. In an attempt to curtail the power of the urban agricultural entrepreneurs and the sheikhs, the Syrian state formed peasant organizations and agricultural cooperatives. It also took control over all areas that had been used as collective grazing by the Bedouin tribes, making most people living in the Euphrates region to leave Syria (Lewis, 1987, p. 193). Many poor rural families joined the Ba'th party after it came to power in 1963 from which time the state took control of the purchase of cotton and grain. In 1961, Raqqa became the capital of a newly established province. This, of course, signaled the importance of the town and its surrounding countryside. This new status meant that the city needed to recruit administrators for the provincial bureaucracy. Although some native townspeople were employed, many came from other parts of Syria.

The 1970's brought new changes with profound implications for mobility and settlement in the province. Syria's largest development project, the Euphrates Scheme, complete with a dam to be constructed and land to be reclaimed, was launched to enhance both industry and agriculture not only in the province itself, but in the country as a whole. The plan was to develop hydroelectric power and to reclaim and irrigate 640,000 hectares in the four northern Syrian provinces of Aleppo, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zhor, and Hassake. Forty kilometers west of Raqqa lied the small municipality of Tabqa, later renamed Thaura (Revolution), which became the location for a huge earth filled dam. Through the creation of the large artificial Lake Assad, more than sixty thousand people from local *shawai'a* tribes had to be moved and resettled with some being offered land along the border with Turkey. This policy can be seen as a continuation of a 1960's Ba'th policy to settle Arab tribes and clans along the border as a means to make this buffer region less Kurdish (see Gorgas, 2007, p. 122). Other *shawai'a* villagers were offered employment on the new state farms within the so-called Pilot Project in which fifteen experimental agricultural villages were created to spearhead the Euphrates Scheme. Many *shawai'a* simply moved further into the steppe relying on seasonal labor migration, especially to Lebanon and Jordan (Meyer, 1984, p. 299). Some moved to Aleppo or Raqqa, leaving only around 10% of the displaced families took up work on the new state farms (Meyer, 1982, p. 556).

While Thaura became the centre for the dam building and the running of the hydro-electric project, Raqqa became the seat of the headquarters of a new land reclamation and irrigation authority, The General Administration for the Development of the Euphrates Basin (GADEB), from which the 20,000 hectare Pilot Project was administered. GADEB needed agricultural engineers, civil engineers, drivers,

office staff, and laborers. By the end of the 1970s, almost one thousand people were employed by GADEB in Raqqa and another thousand were posted outside the city. There were also all the people who had settled in the Pilot Project as farm laborers. By 1999 about 64,000 people were living in the fifteen villages (Ababsa, 2005, p. 3). While many of the unskilled employees and agricultural workers came from the province, most of the civil and agricultural engineers were recruited from other parts of Syria, often coming while still young, fairly inexperienced, and caught up in a spirit of developmental optimism. Their mission was to make the whole province, even the whole of Syria, blossom.

Those who were forcibly moved due to the construction of the dam and the establishment of the Pilot Project were, of course, dramatically affected by the scheme. The villagers who were living on the land to be reclaimed and irrigated were also touched. They were without income from agriculture and men had to leave their families in search of work elsewhere. The impact of the Euphrates Scheme was also felt in the city of Raqqa. Many among the native families were landowners and some lost land due to the scheme. Between 1960 and 1980, the population of Raqqa grew quicker than all other Syrian towns. In 1930, there were only about five thousand people living in Raqqa, while in 1960, the population had increased to about 15,000 and to about 80,000 in 1980. It was around this time when Raqqa became the 6th largest city in the country and at the turn of the 21st century, had about 250,000 inhabitants.

Life in the countryside changed dramatically in many ways during the 1980's and 1990's. In the early 1980's, electricity was made available in villages and tap water was delivered to each house. Later on, municipal planning arrived with lots, roads, and sewage. Education expanded and girls started to go to school on a regular basis. Families started to buy bread from shops that sprang up in the villages rather than having girls and women bake it. While the standard of living in the countryside was raised, an increased reliance on the market and on cash developed at the same time. Old inequalities also began to return, leading to an intensified reliance on seasonal or more permanent labor migration for many. Agricultural expansion came to a halt and water became an increasingly scarce resource. In late 20th century and early 21st century, the ruling Ba'th party made a number of so called Open Door economic decisions (cf. Aita, 2007; Kienle, p. 1994). Agricultural policies in the province of Raqqa can, in the words of Myriam Ababsa, be seen as a case "of counter-revolution that marks the end of the socialist ba'thist ideology" (2005, p. 1). GADEB, along with its Pilots Project state farms, was to be dismantled and land distributed not only to former landowners and peasants in the region, but also to its employees. Those with economic resources and political connections increased their agricultural ventures while many of the less fortunate leased or sold their land.

After years of limited rainfall, 2008, 2009, and 2010 were years of exceptional drought. Wells became dry and rain-fed agriculture came to a standstill. In the summer of 2010, the World Food Program started helping the Syrian state, providing alimentary support to almost two hundred thousand persons in the whole of the Euphrates region. Prior to the Syrian uprising in 2011, an estimated 300,000 villagers from the northeast provinces left their villages in an attempt to make a living in the cities in the region as well as in Damascus and Aleppo.

Debating Mobility, Migration and Uprooting in Raqqa

In 1978, I came to Raqqa to study the effects of the Euphrates Scheme and to understand the relations between the regional inhabitants and those who came to the region as a result of this enormous development project. During two years of fieldwork, I circulated between living with a native family in Raqqa, with female non-regional employees in the GADEB compound on the outskirts of the city, and with a family 40 km east of Raqqa along the Euphrates. Although the focus of my research was on “development,” I could not but take note of debates about migration, migrants, roots, and mobility in every field site. Among the native townspeople, these debates and comments were directly tied into perceptions of regional development. They concerned the increased presence of both rural *shawai'a* and more far away settlers in the city, as well as the pros and cons of uprooting oneself and moving elsewhere, typically outside the country. When the city began to expand and grow, it created new economic opportunities for many natives, but also meant that they no longer dominated public life in the city.

Until the 1960's, villagers from the surrounding countryside did not come to the town in great numbers. Roads were bad and before Raqqa was made into a provincial capital, there were few bureaucracies and services in the town. With the take-over of the Ba'th party, the rural *shawai'a* gained influence and the townsmen lost their positions as patrons and middlemen. The ruling Ba'th party tied the country together through investment in infrastructure and obtaining the support of Syria's rural population by investing in education and by providing new careers for citizens from the countryside. When debating the transformation of the countryside, and of Raqqa itself, the native townspeople talked about the rural *shawai'a* in quite denigrating terms in the late 1970's. They were said to be uneducated, uncultivated, and lacking in religious understanding. Native townspeople would never allow their daughter to marry rural *shawai'a*. Life was just too hard and uncouth in the countryside. Yet, townspeople also underlined that they and the *shawai'a* shared a common provincial culture. They had similar “customs and traditions.” They spoke the same dialect and dressed in similar ways. They enjoyed the same kind of food and valued hospitality and generosity. Native townspeople and *shawai'a* were both from the province and

both belonged to it. It was different with all the employees who arrived with the establishment of GADEB and the expansion of other public services in Raqqa.

Initially, I was told, many natives had been quite enthusiastic about the Euphrates Scheme because they thought it would bring about career opportunities. However, soon it became quite clear that the young and well educated native townspeople did not obtain the kind of jobs to which they saw themselves entitled. The character of Raqqa then began to change as newcomers had little or no interest in the customs or traditions of the native lineages. In the central quarters of the city, where most natives lived, many young men also complained about their own relatives. They said that although lineage solidarity was rhetorically lauded, relatives rarely helped each other. By the end of the 1970's, the expansion of the public sector had begun to slow down considerably resulting in many young men with secondary or tertiary education having great difficulties finding suitable employment. Many parents accused their sons of being lazy or of having too high an opinion of themselves by refusing jobs that they did not think were good enough for them. Instead, many young native townswomen accepted the very public sector jobs that had been rejected by their male relatives. For many unmarried women, employment not only offered money, which they could spend – at least partially – on themselves, but also a way to become more independent.

In the late 1970's, there was a great difference in how Raqqa women and men debated mobility and roots. Almost all men left the province during their two-year mandatory military service. Even if no man enjoyed going to the military, it was a welcome change from home for many. Perhaps the first time they were away from the control of their immediate family and their lineage elders. For young people seeking higher education, it was necessary to leave Raqqa. At that time, there was only a small teacher education college in the town, leading many young men and women to study in Aleppo or Damascus, with others even choosing to continue their education abroad. Romania, Bulgaria, the Soviet Union, and Italy were common destinations. There were official educational exchange programs between Syria and the Socialist bloc, with those students from Raqqa who had established themselves in one university often helping others along. The young women who studied abroad typically followed a brother or another close relative who had already established himself as a student. Students from Raqqa studying abroad commonly pursued education in the pharmaceutical, medical, and dental fields. These were studies that were considered to lead to professions with high social standing and with opportunities to earn money.

Many young men among the Raqqa natives saw emigration as the only way to escape political repression. They constantly underlined how they felt trapped and enclosed in Syria. For some, labor migration, especially to the oil rich countries in the Arab Gulf, was a dream. Relatives and friends with work permits and visas were

asked to help those without. Nobody liked the life they had in the Gulf, and labor migrants were only satisfied with the money that they earned. Young women were much more rooted in the city. Their social circles were limited compared to those of their male relatives. They furthermore had more family obligations in the town, such as taking care of the sick or elderly. Young women left Raqqa only to study – as mentioned – or if they married and their husbands moved elsewhere in Syria. In general, the dreams and aspirations of native townswomen were tied to Raqqa and even to their own quarters of the city. For many middle-aged and older women, the dream of going on hajj was their major aspiration of travel.

In the decades since the late 1970's and early 1980's, I have continuously returned to Raqqa and the village east of the town. Sometimes visits have been quite short – just catching up on news – but longer when I would have the chance to stay to collect material on the development of the Euphrates Scheme or on new topics, such as family law. In Raqqa, I have, in particular followed four adult children of my “original” native family as they (and I) have grown older. I have seen their children, in turn, become adults and form families of their own. Talk of, and memories of movement and rootedness have been common. These families have members who have emigrated for good while others have returned from studies or work abroad. “Lutfi¹ will never come back to Raqqa or Syria, not even for a short visit. You know how stubborn he is. And how hot tempered. He says he could not stand having to put up with the injustices here. But he told us that he might go to Turkey for a holiday and that we could meet him in Urfa later this year.”

These words were uttered by Amina, a woman in her early 60's in the summer of 2010. She was speaking about one of her brothers who had left Syria in the early 1980's never to return. Amina was the eldest of seven children and, like another of her sisters, already married and a mother when I was first introduced to know her, Lutfi, and the other siblings. Lutfi had finished secondary education, studying in a technical institute in another provincial town before returning to Raqqa to live with his family again. He scorned local employment and had no wish to become a laborer in the Gulf. He wanted to leave the country and go to Western Europe, which he had to do soon before he was forcibly drafted into the army. Somehow, he managed to obtain a passport and an exit visa as a student and left for Italy. In that period, it was very difficult to receive an exit visa from Syria, especially for young men, and particularly if they were public employees or had not done their military service. Lutfi came to visit me in Raqqa before he left and although I was happy for him since he was so excited; I also warned him that life in Italy would not be easy. He replied, “I am ready to work with anything there. All I want is to live in peace and with dignity.”

1 All names of informants are fictitious.

Lutfi was not the only young man in his circle of friends who left Raqqa and Syria. A number of his close associates studied abroad and some also married abroad. However, these friends came back and set up offices, clinics, or opened pharmacies in Raqqa. In most cases their foreign born wives did not stay long in Syria. I know of a few cases where the husband has willingly let not only his wife, but also his children, return to Bulgaria, Russia, or Romania. "I cannot deny my children the opportunities offered in the country of their mother," one doctor told me in a sad voice. However, many young men from Raqqa did not go abroad to study, but to work in the Gulf, and most either returned or kept commuting to and from Raqqa. In the late 1970's and early 1980's, Raqqa women were not very enthusiastic when their male relatives dreamed about going abroad. "There are opportunities enough here in their own town or in their own country," Amina used to say. Others said they could not understand why men were willing to go far away to take on work they thought beneath them in their own home town. In the 1990's and onwards, however, many women spoke in a different way.

"There is nothing to come back to. Life has become very expensive here and he has been away too long," Amina stated in 2010 when we talked about her brother in exile. "Work in the Gulf is not as profitable as it used to be," her visiting neighbor added. "People used to be able to save money and come home to invest in houses and other things or even bring along their whole family to the Gulf. Now they can't afford that and life is so expensive back there that saving money is really difficult."

Rural Roots and Uprooting

In 1980, as part of the two-year fieldwork described above, I lived for six months in a village which was fairly close to one of the Pilot Project farms in which a number of the inundated *shawai'a* had been resettled. Their own land along the river had at that time not yet been reclaimed by the Euphrates Scheme, nor had electrical power from the dam reached this village. There was no running water, and girls fetched water from the river or the irrigation ditches. Yet, everyone considered their situation favorably in comparison to that of those working as agricultural laborers in the Euphrates Scheme. The approximately two thousand villagers were divided into 250 households. Almost all claimed to be descendants of the same founding lineage father. The village had been established in the late 1940's during the shift to a more sedentary lifestyle. While irrigated agriculture had become increasingly important, supplemented by rain fed cultivation of wheat and barley, sheep rearing was an important additional income for many families. Still though, many villagers did not have enough land to live on.

In 1980, there were about fifteen male heads of households who were working in Saudi Arabia. A handful had earlier worked in the Jordanian port town of Aqaba. A fairly large group of unmarried young men migrated seasonally to work on building

sites in Damascus or Lebanon. There had been a cooperative founded after the land reform that was no longer in operation. Instead the Aleppo-based entrepreneur who had run and managed the irrigated agriculture venture close to the village had been called in to organize cotton cultivation. The purpose of labor migration, whether inside or outside Syria, was simply to gain cash. Nobody dreamed about settling somewhere else. Both women and men said that while they enjoyed going to Raqqa for a visit to a doctor or for shopping, they were glad to be able to go back to the village. I never talked to those few who had left the countryside permanently. Among the permanent inhabitants and the labor migrants I met now and then, no one said that they wanted to leave and have their family anywhere else. Job opportunities outside the village were limited to menial labor since most adult men could neither read nor write. In the village at that time was a small primary school attended only by boys. Girls started working at home and in the fields at a very early age. Although six years of mandatory schooling for both girls and boys was the law, authorities closed their eyes to the non-schooling of girls in the Raqqa countryside. Parents were divided over the issue of education. Some thought that “too much” education would only make the boys distance themselves from the lifestyle of the village whereas others thought that education was the new ticket to employment in the expanding public sector. Employment in a state bureaucracy could, in their opinion, easily be combined with agricultural or pastoral concerns.

During the next decade and a half, village life changed profoundly when, as noted earlier, electricity became available in the countryside and tap water was delivered to each house and when much of the daily grueling work of the girls disappeared. In other ways, however, the village has remained the same. For instance although some villagers continued to migrate for work, they remained, just as they had been before, tied to village life. Hammoude, a young man with a wife and two children worked as a shepherd in Saudi Arabia. He came back to Syria twice a year during the religious holidays. “His contract does not allow for more,” his wife, Najma, once told me, “and he also needs to save money and send back rather than spend it on travel.” During one of my visits to the village, Najma told me it could perhaps be possible for her to live with her husband. “He will not get a visa for her,” one of her brothers said, “and where is she to stay. With the sheep, like he does? And if that were possible, how would he be able to save money?”

When the Euphrates Scheme started to reclaim land in the village in the early 21st century, agriculture was left at a standstill for three years. Migration then became a necessity for all who had no other assets, like employment or rain fed agriculture. After the reclamation, land holdings were to be consolidated in order to make cultivation more productive, leaving many who had leased small plots from kinsmen without access to land. When I visited during those years I received many requests

to help people find work in Sweden. They were invariably disappointed when I tried to explain the complexity of the job market in Sweden, or that there was no labor migration at the moment. “I am not going to stay forever,” one man said, “I only want to make money and then return to my village again.”

I have now known this village and many of its inhabitants for more than thirty years and during this period I have never once heard people long for a completely mobile past. Some, like Khadija, whose tent I lived in for a few months in 1980, claim to miss the time when they used to set up camp close to their grazing flock of sheep and goats in the steppe north of the village. “Do you remember those spring days with lots of sheep milk and with yoghurt, cheese, and butter preparations!” she often reminisced during my visits. Yet, not even Khadija ever claimed that she wanted a life without the village with its permanent houses and the conveniences that had come about. However, these conveniences – electricity, running water, new kinds of foodstuff, and consumption goods – had to be paid for in cash. Thus, many became pushed to leave the village in search of a steady income. Since the 1990’s and onwards, economic inequalities have more or less returned to the Raqqa countryside, including this particular village. A number of villagers have become agricultural entrepreneurs while also branching off into other kinds of businesses. Still though, many are very land poor and have come to rely on other sources of income, not least because profits in agriculture have decreased since the late 1990’s.

Memories of Conflicts and Conviviality

The imprint of movement has, as discussed, deeply affected the province of Raqqa. People have moved from elsewhere to the region and have historical memories of movement and mobility. The same is true for Syria in general. At the same time, settlement and lack of mobility was also a salient feature of life in the province and in the country as a whole before the current crisis. Syria, like many other low-middle income countries, actually had a low level of internal migration before massive displacements started in 2012. *Khawaja (2002, p. 21)* cites seven different reasons for this. Many rural people still relied on agriculture; most Syrians owned their own house, making them more immobile; rural-urban services were quite similar; wage differences were small in the country; the capital Damascus was a magnet nationally, but also expensive; the country is fairly large; internal migration was not a political priority. The highly important Syrian population registry was, I think, another reason to underline “roots” rather than “mobility.” Children were registered as belonging to the location where their fathers were registered. If they moved elsewhere, Syrians were forced to travel to their “origins” in order to obtain papers necessary for a number of official bureaucratic proceedings. In a city like Damascus, perhaps the majority of its inhabitants actually had their population registry somewhere else. They might be the third generation away from a village, which was still considered their “home.”

This bureaucratic principle fostered strong both imaginary and practical ties to one's "roots" or to the "homeland" of one's father or grandfather. Many of the employees who moved to Raqqa to work on the Euphrates Scheme, for example, stayed for decades in the province while still being registered in their town or village or origin.

Putting down administrative roots was thus not simple in Syria. There are, however, many examples in Syrian history where groups of people have moved, resettled elsewhere, put down roots, and become "original" inhabitants. Raqqa "native" townspeople are a case in point. The town of Salamiyah, for example, situated in central Syria on the fringe of the desert along an old trade route, was established, or resettled, by a group of Isma'ili Shi'a Muslims in the mid-19th century (Lewis, 1987, p. 58). It is still considered an Isma'ili town today although its non-Isma'ili population constitutes perhaps half of the population. Large numbers of Druze from the Lebanese mountains resettled in southern Syria in the 19th century as a consequence of various internal and sectarian conflicts (Lewis, 1987, p. 78). That part of Syria is now called *Jabal Druze* – the Druze Mountain – and considered as the Syrian homeland of the Druze. The Raqqa province and the whole Euphrates region was – as mentioned above – resettled and economically integrated into the Ottoman Empire and Syria from the late 19th century onward.

The period around World War I was one of tremendous political upheaval with enormous population movements from Ottoman provinces into what soon came to be French and British mandated Syria and Iraq. Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, and other Christians were uprooted and resettled; many more than once (cf. White, 2011). All these historical examples of collective uprooting and resettlement demonstrate the importance of kinship, ethnicity, and religion when people move and settle together. These examples also demonstrate how uprooting and settlement have been carried out, with a tension, between political factors of "push" and "pull". And these patterns have continued until today. Kurds, for example, who settled along the Turkish-Syrian border were forced to move through the creation of the so called "Arab line" after the take-over of the Ba'th party. The *shawai'a* from the Raqqa province who were inundated by the Euphrates Dam were, as mentioned, given an option to resettle in this border region in order to make it more Arab and to make it into a buffer zone against Kurds with possible irredentist ambitions. Yet, this "Arab line" was never fully institutionalized, finally becoming defunct when the exceptional droughts between 2008 and 2010 made out-migration common. At the time of writing, the Kurdishness of that border region is seen by many inside and outside Syria as the only safeguard against the onslaught of ISIS.

Discussions and memories of uprooting, settlement, mobility, and migration in the above examples from Raqqa resonate with issues of conflict between different categories of regional inhabitants; between them and outsiders who have come to settle

or for work. Many of the native townsmen who were young in the 1980's claimed that they were pushed away from Raqqa and Syria because newcomers and outsiders took over the city. The memories and discussions in the village have been different. Settled life came late in the countryside, as noted, and in the 1980's the older generation had personal memories of a mobile or semi-settled lifestyle. They also had memories of land conflicts between different clans and between their own clan and their tribal sheikh. To settle and to obtain a title over land was an important mark of village identity back then. This was a period when the political and economic influence of the *shawai'a* increased as the Bedouins largely left the Euphrates region. From the 1970's onward, the migratory pattern of male villagers was mainly conditioned on the need to earn money. While some left the region permanently, most were strongly tied to their native village through links of kinship. Men who migrated often already had village wives or married in the village on vacations from Damascus, Jordan, or the Gulf. Labor migration was generally seen as temporary, even when it stretched over decades.

The memories of uprooting, settlement, mobility, and migration are, however, not only replete with stories of conflict between categories of people. There are also stories and memories of co-existence and of hospitality toward strangers and outsiders. When I first did fieldwork in Raqqa, I was struck by the way that many native townspeople cultivated memories of hospitality to strangers and refugees, especially to Christians. Armenians who had survived massacres and persecution during the First World War were hidden from Ottoman/Turkish authorities in the houses of Raqqa families. Most Armenians left Raqqa, but I was also told that some Armenian women married into native families. Native Raqqa townsmen voiced that such marriages were acts of charity and protection. I have unfortunately no information on the reactions of the women concerned.

Raqqa natives were proud of these memories and many often underlined that they not only read the Qur'an, but also the Bible. When Raqqa started to expand through developments in agriculture, Christians, mainly from Aleppo and the Hassake province, came to settle, as well. In the 1960's, an Armenian Catholic church was built and was used by all Christian denominations in the city until ISIS closed it down in 2014. This church was unsuccessfully protected by the townspeople as a symbol, I think, of the traditional conviviality in Raqqa between Muslims and Christians. The native Raqqa residents' care for Christians can be understood as part of a tribal ethos where hospitality toward strangers is idealized, but also to a kind of Muslim ethos where Jews and Christians – otherwise known as People of the Book – were seen as powerless and thus in need of Muslim protection.

In the memories of native townsmen, their ingrained hospitality was also extended to the small scale farmers fleeing drought in central and southern Syria who came to

Raqqa looking for work in the 1950's. According to townsmen, traders from Sukhne and Aleppo who settled with their families in Raqqa from the 1960's were also treated with welcoming hospitality although their '*adaat wa taqaliid* ("culture and traditions") differed. Native townspeople underlined that women and men were much more segregated in the social interactions among people from Aleppo and Sukhne. The more free association of women and men among native Raqqa people, as well as among regional villagers, was attributed to their pastoral and mobile past. In the village where I worked, the ideal of hospitality made people underline that women of the household would welcome and invite strangers if their menfolk were not around.

Long Term Research to Analyze Memory

How can the anthropological method of fieldwork with participant observation contribute to the analysis of memories and their role in conflict and conviviality? Analysis of and interest in memories has for a long time been an integral part of psychoanalysis and psychology and is commonly linked to explanations of individual trauma or illness. In these disciplines, as noted by [Antze and Lambek \(1996, p. xii\)](#), the metaphors are visual where "layers are excavated, veils lifted, screens removed." They do not reject such metaphors or the disciplines to which they are linked, but as anthropologists, they are instead interested in discursive aspects of memory. Memories, they underline, "are produced out of experience and in turn, reshape it" ([Antze & Lambek, 1996](#)). Memory is intimately connected to identity, but more as understood by modern historians and anthropologists than by psychologists or psychoanalysts. To understand how both autobiographical and historical memories are reproduced and performed, we need, I argue, a long term commitment to our fields and our informants. Memories – the way that the past is in the present and the present in the understanding of the past – need a context that can only be analyzed over time. When returning to people and places, Johannes Fabian notes, "meetings become more productive and enjoyable when they are reunions... Co-presence needs a shared past" ([2007, p. 133](#)).

In his influential book written in 1989, *How Societies Remember*, [Paul Connerton](#) underlines that the present social order is often legitimized through images of the past that are "conveyed and sustained through more or less ritual performances" ([1989, p. 4](#)). In his *How Modernity Forgets* ([2009](#)), he stresses that concomitantly to the contemporary culture of *hypermnesia* manifested through a cultural industry of memories and commemoration, we live in a "*post-mnemonic* culture – a modernity which forgets" ([2009, p. 147](#)). Forgetting, like remembering, is socially produced and a part of human history. Yet, [Connerton](#) argues that there is a particular structural forgetting in modernity ([2009, p. 2](#)). We consume collective memories, but forget the social and economic processes that have shaped our societies. His analysis thus underlines how history and memory are used and abused by people in power.

The sacking of land and the expulsion or massacre of people already living there is a well-known aspect of human history and an integral part of the development of human culture and civilization. We are very familiar with that part of our common history through archaeological remains, as well as through manuscripts, myths, literature, songs, and oral history. The history of Middle East and that of the Eastern Mediterranean clearly stand out in this respect. At the time of writing, Russian and the US-led coalition were conducting airstrikes over Raqqa and its countryside to eradicate ISIS. Support for these strikes, during which civilians become “collateral damage,” have been strong in many countries where people have been shocked by the brutality of ISIS in the Raqqa province (and elsewhere). Yet, the methods and ideology of ISIS can be compared to other conquerors, and perhaps especially those used by Tamerlane and his troops in the 14th century who sacked Raqqa on their way from Baghdad to Aleppo, Damascus, and Anatolia. Hundreds of thousands of people were beheaded and women were carried off as slaves. Christians and Jews were hunted and killed as infidels and Muslims were killed when said not to be righteous enough. The methods used were of course meant to strike terror and intimidate all in their way.

Finding, in the terminology of Halbwachs, historical memories of brutality, terror, and bloodshed is thus not very difficult in contemporary Syria or Raqqa. For that reason, it is exceedingly important to underline that the peaceful co-existence and intermingling of conquerors and those conquered, eventually leading to the blurring of the two, is an equally, or more than equally, salient aspect of human history.

In the province of Raqqa, memories of hospitality and openness discussed above capture an image of everyday living together (cf. Rabo, 2011, p. 123). They constitute what I want to call *conviviality from below* to differentiate it from the kind of historical commemoration fostered from above. Such fostering of common memories – such forgetting of historical processes – is, of course, done by every aspiring political movement and every nationalist regime in an attempt to forge enthusiasm for common goals or to legitimize the current rule. The Syrian Ba’th party was no exception. In the beginning of the 1970s, when the huge Euphrates land reclamation and irrigation scheme was launched, the regional agricultural history was used by the Syrian authorities (cf. Ababsa, 2009, p. 185). With the help of the ruling Ba’th party, it was said, dry and unproductive lands would once again flourish and feed a large population. The Euphrates Scheme would become the motor of Syria’s development and a magnet to repopulate the region. Yet, these bombastic proclamations neither stopped the drought nor the ensuing flight of rural people from the region prior to the uprising in 2011. The official use - abuse really - of history instead made people in the region blame the ruling party and the regime for the situation. The territorial claim of ISIS is infused with references to Islamic history. The link between Raqqa and Baghdad when Haroun ar-Rashid was caliph is obviously not unimportant. Still

though, if the alleged glories of that period are not re-emerging, then the claim will be weakened by those who have embraced it.

Using history, cultivating memories, and setting up commemorative performances and rituals from above is thus a doubled-edged sword. The outcome cannot be predicted by the powers that be. In a detailed probing of memory work in post-Soviet Ukraine, Yuliya Yurchuk underlines the complexity and lack of coherence in these processes. She found that people grappled with ways of finding a pre-Soviet Ukrainian history of World War II through an intensive interaction between private and public as well as local and national encounters involving both grassroots and bureaucrats. Examples from Lebanon and Iraq illustrate two very different, albeit equally problematic, ways to manage memories of wars and conflict.

In Iraq, as discussed by Dina Rizk Khoury in her book on war and remembrance in Iraq, the state had a monopoly on memorialization during and after the long war with Iran. Heroic (and masculine) memories were produced by the Ministry of Culture and Information for propaganda purposes and distributed to the public (Khoury, 2013, p. 185). After the invasion of the US-led forces in 2003 and the rapid devolution of the state and its institutions, there were no attempts in Baghdad or in Arbil “to develop a war narrative in a manner that could forge a pluralistic, non-authoritarian, national consensus on the legacies of Iraqis’ encounter with violence” (ibid:245). But alternative media public debates on both the Iran-Iraq and the Gulf Wars are available and proliferating. These debates, however, are divisive and foster a discourse of conflict and division instead of one of conviviality and co-existence. The Lebanese war memorialization looks to a completely different direction with its long history of fragmentary politics and where sectarianism is built into the political system.

On February 3, 2013, the French channel TV5 aired the program *Maghreb Orient Express* devoted to discussing two new documentary films about Lebanon, Frédéric Laffont’s *Liban, des guerres et des hommes*, and Joana Hadjithomas’ and Khalil Joreige’s *The Lebanese Rocket Society* with the three filmmakers and with photo-journalist Chérine Yazbeck (see Bahous et al., 2013). Laffont said that he was shocked when he realized that there was still no school material teaching school-children about the civil war between 1975 and 1990. He wanted to give a voice to ordinary Lebanese people and their memories of this period. Yazbeck insisted that the people of Lebanon are in a state of collective and permanent amnesia. Joreige, on the other hand, said that neither amnesia nor memories was Lebanon’s problem; on the contrary, history was. “There is no official history of the war. No one has been made accountable for what happened during the war and a general amnesty was given to all combatants after the signing of the peace agreement in Taif in 1990,” he said. Yazbeck underlined that although all Lebanese people and all families have their own

history of the war, an intimate history at that, a common history is rejected. Still, she also wondered if the general Lebanese public wanted to know what really happened during the war, stating that for many people, it might be too painful to relive history.

Educational researcher [Munir Bashshour \(2003, p. 167\)](#) noted that more than a decade after the Lebanese civil war ended and after the Taif agreement, the different Lebanese groups could still not agree on how to write their history. Efforts to unify the curricula went to no avail. More than a decade after Bashshour's research, this is still true. There is "no history" after the Lebanese civil war in the schoolbooks used in public schools. In many private schools, the modern history of Lebanon is simply avoided. The country has a long history of fostering citizens who are able to "combine a very parochial and narrow outlook on Lebanon with an open and inclusive outlook on the world outside the country" ([Bahous et al., 2013, p. 74](#)). This opens for extremely competing memories and political claims on the part of various militant groups and various political parties, as well as among citizens at large.

The Iraqi and Lebanese cases remind us that remembering and forgetting are never neutral processes, but are always linked to relationships of power. Memory, [K. M. Fierke](#) writes, "is less an extension of power than its constitutive condition" ([2014, p. 791](#)).

Conclusion: Cultivating Memories of Belonging and Conviviality

Memory should be historicized, Lambek and Antze remark in agreement with Pierre Nora. There are, he claimed "*lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because in the modern world there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory" ([Nora, 1989, p. 7](#)). Instead forgetting and ignorance are being cultivated. With this being said, Antze and Lambek also remark that Nora romanticizes the crisis of real environments of memory. It is unlikely, they write, that "there ever was a homogenous *milieux de mémoire*, worlds of pure habit" ([Lambek & Antze, 1996, p. xv](#)) in which everything was self-evident and transparent. It is trivial, according to [Fabian](#), to note that memory is selective ([2007, p. 96](#)). "No story can tell it all. If it could it wouldn't be a story" ([Fabian, 2007, p. 98](#)). Though it is important not to encourage an idealization in the memory work on pre-2011 Syria, it is equally important to encourage the pursuit of threads of the past that help make sense of the present. Both researchers and interlocutors need to reactivate and cultivate memories. Since 2013, I have not been able to talk to Amina, Najma, Khadija, or any other of my close friends (and simultaneously "informants") in Raqqa or the village. I have not been able to follow their fates and have only vague news of their whereabouts on which to cling. This terrible lacuna in my memory work has clearly shaped the way I have re-assessed, re-used, and re-remembered material collected during the course of more than three decades.

Memories of the past can be an unbearable burden. Hence, memory work might also entail the work of forgetting, as alluded to by Yazbeck above. This is also echoed by Yurchuck, who discusses the difficulties in Ukraine in managing painful memories and problematic knowledge of war atrocities during World War II. Her discussion is relevant for Syrians today.² Can memories of conviviality from below be found and developed as a prerequisite for processes of reconciliation in the province of Raqqa and elsewhere in Syria? Can memories of peaceful co-existence and the historic intermingling of conqueror and conquered, settlers and already settled be cultivated unencumbered by historical memories forced from above, or by a structural forgetting which negates the experiences of ordinary people? I have to hope that this is indeed possible. Conviviality from below does not mean that people “have to love one another, but they have to accept that they share certain spaces” (Rabo, 2011, p. 145).

In the recent past, Raqqa natives and villagers, as discussed in this text, have experienced movement, settlement, being uprooted, putting down roots, and being uprooted again. They have experienced change, stability, and intense violence. In order to be a real provincial native, in the memories of my informants, you had to have roots in the region, had to have family living there, or be descended from someone who “belongs.” To acquire such belonging or forming such roots seemed next to impossible. But actually, it was not. When I first came to Raqqa in the late 1970’s I was told that real native townspeople did not marry into the families from Sukhne or Aleppo who had settled in the city. Three decades later, however, it was not unusual to hear that such marriages took place. “But are they not outsiders?” I asked one of Amina’s daughters a few years ago. “No,” she answered, “they have lived here a very long time. They are not natives, but they have formed roots here and now they belong.”

To form roots, people have to commit themselves, or at least not be unwilling, to take part in such a process. At the same time, they have to be welcomed, or at least accepted, when doing this. To move, to uproot oneself, and to be mobile is as basic a human activity as putting down roots. For many people, uprooting is a source of liberation and a move away from economic hardship, political oppression, and smothering family relations or, as today in Syria, from violence and armed conflict. For some, uprooting is a means for putting down new and fresher roots somewhere else. It is this duality and their entailing conflicts that we can highlight to hopefully support developments of conviviality for Syrians in the coming decades.

² Peace and reconciliation efforts are becoming an important research topic in many academic disciplines. For an overview of anthropological studies of national reconciliation processes, see Wilson (2003).

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