

Identity, Community, and Text: The production of meaning among Palestinian political captives

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From the War of 1967 until 1993, tens of thousands of Palestinians from the occupied territories were imprisoned by the Israeli authorities. Inside the colonial prison these political captives built a community that continuously contested, negotiated, and redefined the boundaries of the Israeli prison, the identities and ideologies of the Palestinian national movement, and Palestinian society in general. This research shows how the almost total annexation of the material environment brought the Palestinian political captives to build a community based on producing meanings. The processes of meaning production were institutionalized formally and informally. Thus, literary production in the Israeli

colonial prison became the main site of praxes for constituting individual, communal, and national identities for the Palestinians.

The political captives' written and oral historical accounts of the building of their community narrate a formative stage based on protest against the material conditions, which are categorized into the living space, the quantity and quality of food, and the medical treatment. In order to organize protest, there was an acute need for communication inside each prison and between the different prisons. Gradually, the captives established communication networks that transcended most of the prison's barriers. These developments were accompanied by formally investing in the organization of a school-like educational system that disseminated meanings to demarcate the community's borders, borders that were gradually formalized to enforce inclusion and exclusion rites, such as the interrogation. While the interrogation was inscribed as an organizational issue, the intellectual and aesthetic textual productions have similar strategies of narrating captivity. These texts address the irresolvable conditions of the colonial context, which they resolve and transcend by contesting, negotiating, and reordering frames of meanings through the community's signification system. This signification system is part of the larger Palestinian national movement. But while it exists alongside other systems in the national movement, in the colonial prison it was seen by the captives as the only way of producing meaning in order to survive captivity. Hence, the crucial importance it occupies in generating old and new Palestinian national identities.