Unfolding Landscape in a Lebanese Village: Rural Heritage in a Globalising World

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Ebel es-Saqi, a village in the southern hills of Lebanon, emerged from 22 years of Israeli occupation in May 2000. In the ensuing years, several development projects took place in the region with the aim of reviving local economies through tourism, enhancing attachment to the land through employment and spreading environmental awareness. One of these projects, the Ecological Park Project of Ebel es-Saqi, is the subject of this paper. Through examining local perceptions and reactions to the Ebel es-Saqi project, this paper explores how local conceptions of landscape evolve in response to political, economic, and social change. The findings of the study, based on in-depth semi-structured interviews, suggest that the village landscape is an enabling medium through which traditional culture is preserved, local identities constructed and rural heritage acknowledged. This paper unfolds a conception of landscape based on the day-to-day lifestyles of the village community, inherited traditional agricultural practices, valued rural heritage and shared village identity.

Keywords: Mediterranean; Rural Landscape; Cultural Heritage; Lebanon; Place; Identity; Traditional Societies

Introduction

Ebel-es-Saqi village is in South Lebanon, 70 kilometres inland from the coastal city of Tyre. The road to the village crosses a series of hills and valleys that run parallel to the coastline. Land cover, typical to the semi-arid Mediterranean, is of sparse degraded scrubland, olive cultivation on hilly terrain, arable farming in the valleys and villages on hilltops. Viewed from afar, Ebel-es-Saqi stretches across two connected hills (see Figure 1). Village houses cluster atop one hill with olive trees cascading down the
hillsides all the way to the Hasbani river valley east of the village. The second hill is covered by the village woodland, which is an impressive landmark in a forestless landscape, its dark green in sharp contrast to the silver-green of olive orchards. The diversity of village setting exemplifies the versatility of traditional rural settings, sustainable agricultural practices and accounts for the distinct landscape character that is much valued locally and nationally.

Ebel-es-Saqi endured years of hardship during the civil war (1975–2000) and Israeli occupation in south Lebanon (1978–2000). However, as the headquarters of the Norwegian, and eventually Indian, Battalion of the United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL), Ebel-es-Saqi inhabitants and the village landscape were spared the ravages of war endured by neighbouring villages. More significantly, the UNIFIL recognised the uniqueness of the village woodland and proposed its protection as one of the many recovery projects following Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000. The aim of the Ebel-es-Saqi Ecological Park, as the project came to be named, was to protect the village woodland as a wildlife habitat, an amenity landscape and as a basis for nature-related tourism to diversify agriculture livelihoods.¹ This paper is an academic follow-up of the project. As the landscape architect for the project, I spent two years visiting the site (August 2002–October 2004). I became aware of conflicting local views of the project. While grateful for the attention of international agencies and aware of the benefits of global investment, many villagers failed to understand why

Figure 1   Panoramic View of Ebel-es-Saqi Community Woodland (Middle Ground).
the project had favoured the woodland. Was not the agricultural landscape – the source of most villagers’ livelihoods – more worthy of attention? Were the project developers not aware that olive orchards were part of Ebel-es-Saqi’s ‘Roman heritage’? The questions raised by villagers illuminated the ways in which the locals experienced and valued their village lands. Were their values changing as a result of post-war global initiatives?

When the project was completed, I decided to explore answers to these questions, building on my familiarity with the village landscape and rapport established with the local community. This paper aims to discuss local community perceptions and views of the village landscape at Ebel-es-Saqi. An underlying aim of the study is to broaden prevailing perceptions of landscape in the context of landscape architecture, an emerging profession in Lebanon. The profession struggles with the absence of an Arabic word for ‘landscape’, which is at once limiting and liberating. The absence forces use of the English term, which is narrowly interpreted to imply visual scenery. Absence of an Arabic word, however, can be seen as an opportunity to search for a word that is meaningful linguistically and contextualised culturally. Until such a time, use of the English word continues in professional and academic circles, which invariably limits the professional scope to prioritise the visual, thus failing to build on the accumulation of a layered meaning of the English word as embracing both tangible, physical reality and intangible, cultural conceptions. By investigating the traditional rural understanding of landscape at Ebel-es-Saqi, I hope to demonstrate that there is a local conception of landscape, even if there is no word for it. I also want to emphasise the value of traditional rural landscapes and vernacular agricultural practices as cultural heritage. The physical landscape, as well as the cultural landscape, embody a sense of place that is specific to the region, and closely associated with Lebanese national identity as a ‘mountainous country’.

The Discourse of Cultural Landscape and Rural Heritage

Landscape is the outcome of people–environment co-evolution; a tangible product of the act of shaping and intangible process of making sense of surroundings through shared meanings and values. In the course of its development, the idea of landscape has been appropriated by many disciplines, each adding a new layer of meaning. The multiplicity of accumulated meanings presently associated with ‘landscape’ account for the complexity and attractiveness of the word. Anthropologists, archaeologists and cultural geographers are increasingly challenging the subjective, anthropocentric Western understanding of landscape by exploring alternative, cross-cultural conceptions. The resulting body of work views landscape as a ‘distinct cultural idea’, an analytical concept closely related to concepts of place, identity and heritage. It implies a collective shaping of the earth over time, reflecting shared beliefs and common social practices.

If we accept a definition of culture as embracing explicit and implicit social patterns of behaviour, embodying traditional, historically derived and selected ideas and associated values, then landscape, by extension, is one such system. Like culture, landscapes
are the collective property of a specific society, its beliefs, practices and values and, as such, its collective heritage. ‘Heritage’ here is ‘an all embracing concept that applies equally to landscape, customs and narratives of identity [to] mediate our relationship with “our past”’.\(^8\) Landscapes can then ‘encode values and fix memories to places’ that then become sites of historical identity and cultural heritage. As a repository of the past and a foundation for the future, a landscape-centred approach to heritage enables the application of historical perspectives to vernacular, archaeological and traditional sites where it is used in the interpretation, planning and management of heritage.\(^9\)

Concern for the protection of cultural landscape, or landscapes shaped and/or managed by people, was formalised in 1992 through UNESCO’s World Heritage Sites initiative.\(^10\) The initiative is especially significant, as after having focused for decades on ‘natural’ landscapes, namely those unaltered by people, it now recognises that landscapes altered by people can also be of value. Recognition is equally evident in the Council of Europe 2000 declaration that ‘landscape contributes to the formation of local culture and it is a basic component of the European natural and cultural heritage, contributing to human well-being and consolidation of the European identity’.\(^11\) Global concern for sustainable development also overlaps with concerns for the preservation of cultural landscape heritage. For example, the impact of agri-environmentalism on policy-making, a direct outcome of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, extends far beyond agriculture and ecology ‘to embrace the cultural landscape’.\(^12\) Concluding, rural landscape heritage needs to be valued with ‘emphasis on interpretation of the environment (landscapes) in terms of relationships across the conventional subject boundaries of nature conservation, human habitation, animal husbandry, agriculture, forestry, industrial activity, etc.’\(^13\) Such broad valuation is, as I shall argue, integral to the discourse of landscape in rural marginal Lebanon.

Rural Landscapes Heritage in Marginal Lebanon

Tilley argues that ‘the idea of landscape is a quasi artefact’, in part nature and in part culture.\(^14\) Nowhere is the duality more evident than in the traditional Mediterranean landscapes. As one of the world’s oldest continually inhabited regions, they have been equally shaped by natural processes as by human agency. As such, landscape meaning and value, social customs and landscape management practices have been handed down through tradition over successive generations to present-day rural society.

The rural landscape in Lebanon is typically Mediterranean. Two mountain chains, Mount Lebanon and Anti Lebanon, dominate a relatively small land area and account for extreme geomorphologic heterogeneity, microclimate variability and exceptional floral and faunal diversity. Historically, mountain communities came to adjust to terrain and climate, gradually transforming the native sclerophyll forest through burning, grazing, coppicing, terracing and cultivation into a diverse human-maintained, cultural landscape.\(^15\) Along the length of the Mount Lebanon Range, north to south, the regional landscape is a diverse and resilient mosaic of remnant woodlands, degraded forestland, perennial cropping of olive, carob and vines, arable farming with stone terraces in valleys and villages strategically located at the peaks. The intertwining
of cultural and natural processes renders the rural landscape at once a natural and a cultural heritage. As a repository of what remains of the native Mediterranean forest, the rural landscape is a natural heritage, its diverse fabric combines ancient woodlands and valuable maquis scrubland, a habitat for the region’s exceptional biodiversity. Traditional rural landscapes are a cultural heritage, a place of identity and a repository of vernacular use, management practices and traditional socio-cultural values and perceptions.¹⁶

During the first half of the twentieth century, agriculture was a key economic sector, agriculture modernisation a national priority. Modernising policies of the 1950s prioritised production, ignoring the specificity of rural culture in marginal landscapes. Rural economies suffered further during years of civil war (1975–2000) and Israeli occupation in south Lebanon (1982–2000). And yet rural culture in marginal Lebanon cannot be valued strictly in terms of agricultural productivity. Rather, they must be appreciated as embodying sustainable agricultural ecosystems, providing habitats for Lebanon’s exceptional biodiversity, and as a repository of traditional land use and traditional rural management practices. Just as significant is the historical impact of village life in the formation of national identity and its role as ‘a main contributor to the cultural development of Lebanon’.¹⁷ Although Lebanon’s population today is predominantly urban. Attachment to rural roots and pride in mountain villages continues to exert strong cultural and political influence. Similarly, mountain villages and rural landscapes are still associated with the ‘image’ of Lebanon as perceived by neighbouring Arab countries.

Following the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000, post-war reconstruction campaigns addressed the revival of local economies and the provision for alternative livelihoods.¹⁸ The Ebel-es-Saqi Ecological Park was one such initiative, which, like other projects that are funded by global agencies, remain oblivious to local socio-cultural values, imposing generic agendas rather than responding to local perceptions of landscape, community needs and aspirations. Researching local conceptions of landscape in South Lebanon becomes a means to uncover the dynamics of social, economic, and political change, encourage holistic and community-inclusive rural development, and acknowledge the significance of the rural landscape as national heritage.

The Rural Landscape of Ebel-es-Saqi

The village of Ebel-es-Saqi in South Lebanon has 3,448 inhabitants of mixed Druze and Christian composition. The village traces its origin to biblical times.¹⁹ The village location and landscape features are typical of Lebanese villages in Mount Lebanon. Village location on high peaks, 600 meters above sea level, ensures visual command of the outlying countryside in response to defence considerations.²⁰ The majority of village houses are of stone and red terracotta roofs, though there is evidence of new buildings using contemporary styles and material. The village has three churches, a religious centre for the Druze community, one primary and secondary school, a clinic and a cultural centre. In the 1960s, Ebel-es-Saqi was considered a model Lebanese village.
The farmer’s house (*bait al fallah*), a folklore museum for traditional agricultural implements, was the pride of the village before its destruction during the civil war. The village square (*saha*) is a prominent feature in traditional Lebanese villages. Two village squares in Ebel-es-Saqi were converted into a public garden in an attempt to modernise the village. One was later converted into a memorial garden dedicated to the Norwegian Battalion of the UNIFIL in gratitude for their efforts to protect the village during Israeli occupation. The square is now referred to as the garden of the Norwegians (*jnaynet al Narooj*). Another memorial garden was established at a later date in honour of the UNIFIL Indian Battalion, the garden of Ghandi (*jnaynet Ghandi*) (see Figure 2). The two war memorial gardens have come to embody the memory of resistance against Israeli occupation.

Village common land (*mashaa*), namely of degraded Mediterranean scrubland, constitutes 40% of the village cadastral area. The village woodland (*Horsch Ebel-es-Saqi*) occupies a mere 5% of the village common land. The existing woodland, a mixture of pine, cypress and eucalyptus trees, was established by the Ministry of Agriculture in the 1970s to replace native oak woodlands that had been destroyed circa 1900. In a rural landscape that had long been stripped of forests and woodlands, Ebel-es-Saqi woodland had by 2000 matured into an impressive landscape. Ebel-es-Saqi agricultural landscape consists mainly of perennial olive tree cropping that occupies 34% of the village cadastral area (see Figure 3). The orchards are privately owned and have specimen olive trees estimated at several hundred years, claimed as the village’s
heritage from the Roman era. Each household possesses an olive orchard, olives being central to the local diet and often the only means of livelihood (see Figure 4). Traditional landscapes have been overlooked by post-war development initiatives. Olive agriculture in general endures difficulties in marketability and competition from cheap imports. The Ebel spring (Naba’at Ebel) lies in a broad valley to the south-west of the village (see Figure 5). The water is used to irrigate fields and, as recently as the 1960s, was the only source of potable water for domestic use. With large popular trees planted along the stone-lined, open reservoir, the landscape of Ebel make it a favourite place for family excursions and picnicking in the summer.

Methodology

Qualitative research, whether in the form of discourse analysis or in-depth interviews, is increasingly being used to investigate landscape meaning and heritage values in traditional communities and environments. Unlike questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews do not restrict the narrative to specific questions but encourage an expanded narrative, which engages the interviewer conceptually with place and local culture. The picture emerging from the survey expands beyond a unilateral inquiry to include the complexity of socio-cultural interactions. Accordingly, I decided to undertake in-depth, semi-structured interviews to investigate the discourse of landscape at Ebel-es-Saqi. In
Figure 4  Family Interviewed during the Olive Harvest.

Figure 5  Ebel-es-Saqi Spring.
the absence of a word corresponding to ‘landscape’ in Arabic, qualitative research methods enabled an oblique approach to the research question, an indirect access to ways in which ‘people make sense of their lives, experiences and their structures of the world’, that is compatible with the search for landscape meaning.23

I conducted a total of 24 interviews over a period of two months (October–November 2004). The participants were chosen based on my judging them able to contribute to an emerging local understanding of the subject matter, landscape. For example, I needed an array of views across generations, gender, educational and occupational backgrounds. So I chose older members of the local community (farmers, the mayor) as well as a younger generation of students (elementary, secondary, college and graduate), and women (teachers as well as housewives).

I accessed the participants in two ways. The first group of interviewees was established through an active resident who I met in the local workshop where I presented the Ebel-es-Saqi Ecological Park Project. A second group of interviewees was selected while I walked around the village and fields during my site visits. I also interviewed two students from Ebel who study at the American University of Beirut to include the view of educated village youth. Data collection proceeded until there was no new information added to the evolving description of ‘landscape’, which meant the data had reached saturation. At that point there was no need for further data collection.

In formulating the questions, the key obstacle, as mentioned earlier, was the absence of an Arabic term that could be used to refer to the village landscape in its totality. To circumvent the absence, indirect reference was made to various components of the traditional village landscape. These components were: village woodland, in Arabic horsh or hima Ebel; olive orchards, saqi, hakli; village spring, Nabaat Ebel; and the Indian and Norwegian war memorial gardens, jinaynat Ghandi and jinaynat al Narouj, respectively. These landscape components had been repeatedly mentioned by local community members in the course of the Ebel-es-Saqi Ecological Project and are recognised in literature on rural culture as the key components of a Lebanese village.

Three questions were posed to the interviewees: ‘Which of these landscapes do you regularly visit? Which of these landscapes do you believe is representative of Ebel-es-Saqi? Which of these landscapes, or any other, do you favour and why?’ The questions were intentionally kept short to encourage elaboration by interviewees.

All interviews were conducted in Arabic, in the vernacular Lebanese dialect. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to one hour, were recorded and transcribed, forming the data for analysis. Field observations were noted during site visits. They did not constitute primary method of data collection, but helped contextualise the interviews and interpret the findings. Data was analysed using thematic analysis through which the researcher seeks themes which emerge from the interview narratives, an ongoing process which requires detecting recurring issues and patterns from the data rather from predetermined codes.24 The data were transformed into a spreadsheet according to the emerging themes and concepts, which showed comparisons and contrasts, while remaining open to alternative explanations for the findings. The outcome is a rich and complex discourse on the conception of landscape in the village of Ebel-es-Saqi.
Unfolding Rural Landscape Heritage

Five mutually inclusive emerging themes dominate the discourse of landscape at Ebel-es-Saqi: functional, environmental, aesthetic, spatial, identity and heritage. Each theme is herein discussed.

The Functional Conception: Landscape as a Source of Livelihood

Traditional rural landscapes are generally managed for their productivity. Arable fields and orchards produce grain and fruits, woodlands are a source of fuel wood and a place to hunt, while degraded scrublands provide grazing for the village herds. A functional appreciation of landscape is understandable considering that landscape productivity is the basis for rural livelihoods. It follows that local valuation of landscape is closely associated with a specific landscape’s usefulness, that is, its contribution to individual and/or community livelihood. The local reference to olive orchards is in fact rizkat (rizkat ‘blessings’ or livelihoods). Three interviewees at Ebel-es-Saqi used the word halal when referring to olive orchards, implying ‘legitimate’ earnings, generally from bodily labour as opposed to interest accrued from commerce and investment.

The meaning of landscape as a source of livelihood is evident in the overwhelming preference for olive landscapes, justified as the main or only source of income for families at Ebel-es-Saqi. A 70-year-old retired male explained that ‘olive trees produce every year; people with no money can earn money (from selling olives or olive oil) so they can buy their winter supplies’. ‘People are attached to the olive landscape not in the same way as they are attached to the Horsch’, explained a 23-year-old male student. ‘Everyone owns olive trees. The Horsch is beautiful, but olive orchards are of more value to the people.’ However, village residents, as well as the farmers, express concern that imported olives and olive oil are undermining olive agriculture and adversely affecting local livelihoods.

Association between landscape valuation and landscape usefulness was not limited to the agricultural landscape, but was also applied in the valuation of non-agricultural landscapes, as in the case of the village woodland. Moreover, a distinction was made between privately owned agricultural landscapes and communal ones in expressing future aspirations. Aspirations for the non-agricultural, communal landscapes—the spring and woodland—were expressed in terms of ‘new’ initiatives aiming at increasing their usefulness to the local community. This confirms that a functional conception of landscape extends beyond usefulness of the landscape to include to a lesser extent the value of landscape in itself. ‘All these [the village landscape] are dear to me. I favour the most productive ones. If a tourist centre is built next to the spring, or if the village woodland is converted into a bird sanctuary, then I will like them more’, said a 70-year-old man. In the case of privately owned agricultural landscapes, however, interviewees asked for government assistance in pest control and product marketing.

The Environmental Conception: Landscape as Nature

Within the context of this study, ‘nature’ implies both a physical, non-human living environment (woodland, scrubland), as well as natural resources (water, soil and...
wildlife). The analysis of the data from Ebel-es-Saqi reveals a twofold association between landscape and nature: the first is *implicit*, where landscape is valued in terms of clean air, serene surroundings, healthy environment, as well as scenery. Another association is *explicit*, implying nature’s bounty as in the harvesting of wild plants and hunting.

Findings from Ebel-es-Saqi village show that the conception of landscape varies with age. For instance, students (aged 11–24) were found to favour the landscape of the woodland and the Ebel spring. This is partly due to the fact that these landscapes are the main venue for the village youth during summer holidays. When asked about reasons for choosing the woodland, a 15-year-old female student answered: ‘I like the *Horsch* [woodland] because of the clean air and the absence of noise. You discover new aspects and enjoy each discovery. It is also an important resource of plants’. Favouring the woodland could also be considered a result of the introduction of environmental awareness into the school curricula. ‘The *Horsch* is beautiful and has good clean air. The pines are good for one’s health and pine tree forests are useful against asthma and respiratory illness’, pointed out a 28-year-old housewife.

Senior community members, on the other hand, appear to be less appreciative of the woodland. The local community resents that the custody of the woodland was taken away by the Ministry of Agriculture. This might account for the lack of interest prevailing among senior members of the village community. The distaste that reforestation was done with pines and eucalyptus trees rather than the native oak, is yet another reason.

Ebel was all green with woodlands, *sindian* and *malloul* [oak species, *Quercus* spp.], *butum* [mastic shrub, *Pistacia* spp.] and *za’rour* [hawthorn, *Crataegus azarolus*]. I still have a *za’rour* in my garden. This house was built on the village *masha*’ by my grandfather a hundred years ago. If you go down to my garden you will see many remaining oaks. This is how Ebel was long ago. Then every one has built a house, removing trees from the communal land. I am afraid that the remaining woodlands disappear like the ones before. (84-year-old male former schoolteacher)

The meaning of landscape as nature was explicitly expressed in terms of benefits accrued from harvesting ‘nature’ and likewise for culinary and recreational purposes. This view was not exclusive to, but common among interviewees above 35 years of age. Fishing and bird hunting is generally practised by males – although a woman above 60 years old was seen with a shotgun, hunting birds in the woodland. Snails are also collected, generally by both sexes, while harvesting wild edible plants is undertaken by females. ‘The *naba*’ [Ebel spring] is common for harvesting water-side wild plants. That is where we gather *rashad*, *habaq-mai* and *korsanneh*. The spring includes also *hawr* [*Populus* spp.], which is used in the construction of houses’, said a 34-year-old female schoolteacher. *Sleeka* is the vernacular for wild plant harvesting (the verb *nsalik* refers to the activity). The wild plants mentioned include: *baqleh* (green purslane, *Portulaca oleracea*), *habaq* (*Veronica anagalloides*), *habaq mai* (*Veronica aquatica*), *korsanneh* (eryngo, *Erynchium creticum*) and *rashad*. Wildlife harvesting is generally place-specific and seasonal. The open scrubland, the village woodland, the olive orchards and the Ebel spring were all mentioned as places for harvesting wild plants.
Valuing landscape as nature, whether explicitly or implicitly, is not unusual in traditional rural societies. The key is to accept that while natural landscapes are Ebel-es-Saqi’s natural heritage, implicit valuation of village natural landscape, for example scrubland and woodland, is equally heritage, albeit a cultural one, that it is worth protecting. The willingness of junior members to learn traditional practices and to preserve the indigenous knowledge is also noteworthy. ‘With the first rain we go to the olive orchards to collect snails and *baqleh*, this is *hindiba* this is *habaq*,’ explained a 21-year-old-female student. ‘This plant is poisonous, the other is not. Mother knows which is which. I often forget, but mother reminds me.’

The Aesthetic Conception: Landscape as a Source of Pleasure

In studying the aesthetic conception of landscape, one notices the overlapping meaning of the notions of ‘landscape’, ‘scenery’ and ‘nature’. The three terms are interchangeably used by non-professionals to express the pleasure gained from enjoying natural, semi-natural or cultural landscapes. Moreover, the pleasure of viewing and experiencing landscape, whether natural or rural cultural, is historically the earliest significance of ‘landscape’.

The data collected from Ebel-es-Saqi indicates that the village landscape is indeed a source of pleasure and enjoyment in three overlapping ways: it is an amenity landscape, a place for promenading and undertaking active sports (the village woodland and the Ebel spring); it is beautiful to behold as scenery; and it is a place where traditional agricultural management practices are enacted year after year and village harvest festivities are held.

A distinction is made between the pleasure derived from ‘experiencing’ the traditional rural landscape, for example the woodland, and passively ‘viewing’ the war memorial gardens. The latter are generally referred to as scenery (*manthar*), ‘beautiful’ to look at but emphatically not for use. Youth and children, whether residing in the village, displaced, and/or returning to the village during the summer holiday, generally favour the woodland and the Ebel spring. ‘I often visit the *Horsch* [woodland]. We used to go there as teenagers to play and practice running and track sports. We had a make-shift basketball court at the top’, commented a 23-year-old male student. On the other hand, local perception of the memorial gardens was categorically a landscape ‘to look at and not to visit’. This is partly because the gardens by virtue of their location in the village centre are ‘exposed’ to the gaze of community members. The woodland in contrast was described as a place that offered freedom to move and do as one pleases.

Valued as they are, the agricultural landscapes are not referred to as ‘scenery’. They are rather experienced and enjoyed by all the community, not only by those that manage them. Olive harvest festivities in early autumn are a very special occasion that engage all members of the village community, regardless of their age, gender, religion, or occupation. Children and students of all ages seem to visit olive landscapes with parents, grandparents and relatives that tend the orchards. ‘I go to the olive orchards during harvesting time. Though the food I might be eating is not particular, by simply sitting there on the ground, tired from work, it seems to taste better to me.’ ‘I have
never planted anything in my life, but seeing my family and the village working on the land is satisfying’, said a 23-year-old male student. The olive landscapes, as such, are a symbol of the village rural heritage and are also a means of maintaining socio-cultural continuity. The excitement, pleasure and memory of the event dominate the discourse on landscape. ‘I loved going to the olive orchards with my grandparents. It is quiet and has clean refreshing air. Astamakh [I get inspired’], said a 14-year-old girl. Globalising influences, whether through war or through post-war development, is increasingly shifting livelihoods away from traditional agriculture. Can traditional festivals survive the shift away from tradition? Their role in reinforcing local appreciation of the village landscape will surely be lost.

The Spatial Conception: Landscape as a Specific Place

The concept of ‘place’ is a profound and complex aspect of how individuals and groups experience significant landscapes in historical, sacred and traditional settings. The overlap between ‘place’ and ‘landscape’ is considerable because both concepts are rooted in physical space and human agency, at once spatial and temporal. Place names reflect this overlap. Naming invests landscape features with human, historical and mythological meanings, transforming them from physical and geographical spaces into historically and socially experienced places. As Tilley notes, ‘In a fundamental way names create landscapes [since an] unnamed place on a map is quite literally a blank space’.

The data analysis from Ebel-es-Saqi reveals a spatially explicit and linguistically articulate conception of landscape as place. A wealth of vernacular place names and landscape-related references emerge in the course of the interviews. Many of the place names appear on the cadastral maps prepared during the French Mandate (circa 1930), but have since disappeared. Depending on the location and use, place names referred to by the interviewees fall into five mutually inclusive landscape features: those that are related to landform, to water, to agriculture, to natural and semi-natural landscapes and to settlement and village (Table 1). Vernacular place names from Ebel-es-Saqi are generally composed of two parts: the first is a generic vernacular describing a specific landscape feature and the second is a proper name that is added to indicate the geographical specificity. For example, wadi is the generic vernacular for seasonal watercourse, while Wadi al-Sheikh and Wadi al-Khoukh are specific to Ebel-es-Saqi—the former refers to ownership and the latter to the produce, in this case, prunes. Place names are closely related to traditional rural and agricultural activities. Changes in traditional agricultural lifestyles affect not only the village landscape, but also the landscape’s meaning and its local perception. One interviewee (female, 80, housewife), regretted that all the village baydars—spaces where harvested wheat would be piled and threshed—had disappeared and were replaced with village houses. This is understandable considering that arable agriculture in Ebel-es-Saqi has declined while the demand for houses has been rising. The process reflects the complex co-evolution of material landscape, its cultural perception, and its changing meaning.
‘Landscape’, ‘place’ and ‘heritage’ are at the heart of the research into ‘identity’. The relationship between the three is evident when considering that maintaining significant places and landscapes, that is through traditional rural practices and social customs, is a means of continuing local traditions and keeping alive the inherited memory of these places. Similarly, as an expression of cultural identity, landscapes have been historically associated with local, regional and national identity. The shift in identity construction at Ebel-es-Saqi corroborates the constructed nature of identity, that their construction is responsive to change and open to formulation and reformulation. As an example, prior to the Ebel-es-Saqi Ecological Park project, the Ebel Spring was the landscape that distinguished the village. This is understandable considering the value of water to agricultural livelihoods. Introduction of the project has increasingly influenced local perceptions to favour the woodland as that landscape feature highlighting the village specificity, vis-à-vis surrounding villages.

‘Heritage’ and ‘identity’ are recurring themes in the landscape discourse from Ebel-es-Saqi, framed within a number of sub-themes. A direct association emerges between individual and communal identities and agricultural landscapes (the olive orchards and the Ebel spring), natural and semi-natural ones (the woodland and the common scrublands) and new ones (the war memorial garden). The woodland and to a lesser extent the spring appear to dominate the discourse on village identity in terms of landscape distinctiveness vis-à-vis the surrounding landscape. ‘The Horsch distinguishes our village more than any other. We are proud of the UNIFIL; our woodland would probably have been burnt like others were it not for them’, said a 28-year-old housewife. ‘The Horsch and nab’aat Ebel date to our grandparents’ generation. They are the reason for the village’s existence. The project [Ebel-es-Saqi Eco-Park] will make Horsch Ebel even more important’, explained a 40-year-old housewife. These features of the landscape become ways of fixing village distinctiveness and evoke an affect among locals; they act as shorthand symbols of belonging.

Another association to the olive landscape is that of collective heritage (the village woodland and the Ebel spring) and individual or family heritage (the olive landscapes). There is, however, some degree of overlap between the two, as in the case of olive landscapes, which are claimed equally as family inheritance as well as part of the village’s Roman heritage. ‘Olives have a sentimental value, they are our heritage, the land handed to myself by my father and his own father’ (25-year-old male student). ‘If you do ask me, I can tell you that [our] olives are 5000 years old. They date to the Romans’ (84-year-old retired school teacher). The awareness of the rural heritage is also expressed through the concern regarding the UNIFIL whose presence has provided alternative work opportunities, away from traditional rural livelihoods.

The discourse on identity at Ebel-es-Saqi, far from being static and a precipitate of the past, is dynamic, open to formulation in response to socio-economic and political influences, whether local, regional or global. ‘War memorial gardens are important to look at, [they] speak of our history’, commented an 84-year-old retired teacher. When I reminded him that the war memorial gardens, unlike olives landscapes and the village
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<th>Landform-related generic landscape references</th>
<th>Landform-related place names</th>
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<td>Areed Al Lawz</td>
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<td>Areed Al Mtaileb</td>
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<td>WadiSeasonal watercourse</td>
<td>Wadi Al Sheikh</td>
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<td>Wadi Al Khokh</td>
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<td>ShiyarVery steep slope, generally of a seasonal watercourse</td>
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<td>RabaaTerracing without retaining walls</td>
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<th>Water-related generic terms</th>
<th>Water-related place names</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nabaa‘Freshwater spring</td>
<td>Ebel-es-Saqi Spring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HilayliIrrigation network, in agriculture and in association with water mills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MighraykaPerennially inundated land</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ShaghuriyaWaterfall</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BihsaysaPebble covered river edge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DindanaStone wall defining water reservoir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1  (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agriculture-related generic terms</th>
<th>Agriculture-related place names</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baydar</td>
<td>Open space used to collect and thrash grain, in or close to the village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jal</td>
<td>Stone terrace walls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shwar</td>
<td>High stone terrace wall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marj</td>
<td>Wheat field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurum</td>
<td>Vineyard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sirah</td>
<td>Fenced herd holding area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rizkat</td>
<td>Olive orchards, vineyards, or any agriculture that is the source of that community’s livelihood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hakle</td>
<td>Field, but also used to refer to orchards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature-related generic terms</th>
<th>Nature-related place names</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hima</td>
<td>Village common land, old term for mashaa, whether coastal, rangeland or woodland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jurd</td>
<td>Large expanses of treeless landscapes, generally rich in native annuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waa’ra</td>
<td>Treeless open scrubland north of the village</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature-related place names</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ebel-es-Saqi Hima</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waara</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
woodland, are ‘new’ and not part of the village heritage and history, he replied that ‘with time they will become old and constitute part of our history’. Village elderly embody the continuity of agricultural heritage. Their identities draw on the traditional rural landscape and referenced by traditional rural practices. In contrast, members of the younger community tend to see the village heritage more closely aligned with the woodland and its ‘natural’ resources. The shift is partly the result of the decline in agricultural livelihoods, increased funding for environmental protection and nature-related tourism and a generation that is increasingly conscious of environmental resources through school education rather than through rural tradition (Table 2). Thus, as income sources shift as a result of educational and vocational differentials across generations we begin to see a different pattern of landscape identification and valuation emerge.

**Conclusion**

The potential of ‘the landscape idea’ lies in it being a ‘medium for the analysis of social identities … as wide as the social and political perspectives of those who use and embrace it’.

The search for landscape conceptions and meanings in the village of Ebel-es-Saqi, the starting point of the survey, has indeed served as a ‘medium’ for understanding the dynamics of rural culture in post-war, post-occupation south Lebanon. Despite the hardship of rural existence under conditions of war and occupation and even though many left the village for the safety of coastal cities, local pride in the village heritage continues to be shared by members of the local community, valued by all regardless of age, occupation, religious and political affiliations. The discourse of landscape from Ebel-es-Saqi demonstrates that landscape is in fact a tangible expression of rural culture, a rich medium for heritage and identity construction. The diversity of components that constitute the traditional village setting, in turn reaffirm local identities and serve as a medium for social solidarity and the transmittance of values across generations. To senior community members, village identity and heritage are rooted in the agricultural landscape and their valuation is directly associated with

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional landscape conception:</th>
<th>Emerging landscape conception:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture related</td>
<td>Environment related</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuation associated with productivity and usefulness, i.e. to livelihoods</td>
<td>Valuation associated with nature and environment, i.e. livelihoods from biodiversity conservation, nature related)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predominantly interviewees age &lt;30–35</td>
<td>Predominantly interviewees age &gt;30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olive orchards and Ebel spring prominent in the Discourse on identity and heritage</td>
<td>Village woodland and war memorial gardens dominate the discourse on identity and heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landscape values are local, passed on within family, extended family and village community</td>
<td>Landscape values influenced by global trends, international projects and environmental education at schools</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2  Shifting Landscape Conception and Valuation in Ebel-es-Saqi
landscape productivity and usefulness. On the other hand, to village youth this identity is increasingly associated with the village woodland, as their conception of landscape readily corresponds with environment and nature conservation. The findings as such confirm the potential of landscape as an expansive investigative framework in design, planning and in formulating sustainable policies for rural development.

The discourse from Ebel-es-Saqi confirms that far from passive container or visual background, the village landscape is an active, enabling medium through which traditional cultural practices are negotiated, contested, modified and/or reaffirmed. Regardless of age, affiliation, or education, the people of Ebel-es-Saqi appear to value all the components of the village landscape, for it is a means of distinguishing their village from the neighbouring ones as much as it is a shared heritage. Moreover, the conception of the village heritage is not limited to traditional landscapes, but it extends to embrace new ones. For example, war memorial gardens are equally negotiated as a shared heritage, one that represents Ebel-es-Saqi’s resistance against occupation. Moreover, rural heritage is not limited to the tangible landscape. Traditional cultural practices and social customs such as hunting, harvesting wild plants and olive harvesting, are similarly valued as a communal rural heritage. Village identity and rural heritage are also maintained through stories and memories relayed by the village elders to children and youth in the diaspora. One interviewee, for instance, was introduced to the village heritage and landscape through stories told by his father. Although he had lived outside the village during his life, for the duration of the Israeli occupation, he expressed his pride of the village’s heritage and his eagerness to return and reclaim it.

Another outcome of the present study relates to the underlying statement on the absence of a word in Arabic corresponding to the term ‘landscape’. The findings from Ebel-es-Saqi confirm that the absence does not reflect linguistic or cultural shortcomings. The findings confirm that even in the absence of an Arabic word there was a spatially explicit and linguistically layered conception of the village landscape. Place names and generic references to landscape features reflect local awareness of landform and landscape resources while indigenous knowledge of wildlife and the related culinary practices reflect alternative ways of ‘engaging with’ rather than just ‘seeing’ landscape. The search for a local conception and linguistic term of/for landscape in Lebanon should perhaps commence from the study of rural culture where rural heritage is still valued, tradition practiced and the language rich and nuanced. Not yet blunted by modernising and globalising influences, village culture can serve as inspiration and exemplar for a contextualised conception of landscape in Lebanon.

Acknowledgements

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editing the first draft and Munira Khayyat for her insightful comments on the final manuscript.

Notes


[16] Traditional Mediterranean rural landscapes, such as those in south Lebanon, fall under Category II, *organically evolved landscapes*, Section ii, *continuing landscapes*, namely, a landscape ‘that retains an active social role in contemporary society closely associated with the traditional way of life, and in which the evolutionary process is still in progress. At the same time it exhibits significant material evidence of its evolution over time’.


[19] The village name is composed of two parts: *Ebel* means camel in Arabic and *es-Saqi* means water and/or irrigation. Translated literally, the village name means the ‘camel watering point’. The name reflects the historical significance of Ebel-es-Saqi along caravan trade routes.


References


