



The Land of Palestine: Early Ethnographers, Late Archives, and Present Law

International Symposium

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Organized by:

- The Palestinian Land Studies Center (PLSC), American University of Beirut
- The Finnish Institute in the Middle East (FIME)
- The Orient-Institute Beirut (OIB)

I. Introduction: Ethnographers, Displaced Archives, and the Law: Toward a New Field of Palestinian Cultural Justice

The International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion of July 2024 reaffirmed that Israel bears a legal obligation not only to return "cultural property and assets taken from Palestinians and Palestinian institutions," but expressly includes within this mandate the restitution of "archives and documents" (ICJ Advisory Opinion, 19 July 2024, sec. 270). The explicit naming of archives is a pointed reminder that archival collections are never merely repositories of paper or objects—they are instruments of cultural heritage, political agency, and legal self-determination. In contexts of foreign domination and dispossession, archives become active sites of struggle: they shape the narratives a people can tell about themselves, the legal claims they are able to substantiate, and the futures they are permitted to imagine.

This recognition invites a broader intellectual and political reframing. Early ethnographers, often working under colonial or mandate regimes, produced knowledge that would later become embedded within state archives, libraries, and legal classifications. Their writings, collections, and fieldnotes—often obtained under conditions of unequal power—continue to influence contemporary understandings of Palestinian culture, society, and territoriality. At the same time, Palestinian archival heritage itself has been fragmented, seized, displaced, or rendered inaccessible through successive political upheavals.

Bringing these elements into conversation—the ethnographic record, the trajectories of displaced archives, and the evolving international legal landscape—creates an urgent interdisciplinary field of inquiry. It forces us to examine how knowledge about Palestinians was created, by whom, and for what ends; how archival materials have been controlled or weaponized; and how international law now provides tools for redress, restitution, and the reconstitution of political sovereignty.

Our aim is to outline this field and to highlight how the entangled work and personalities of early ethnographers, the fate of archives across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and the new legal openings presented by the ICJ's opinion together shape the conditions for a significant intervention. Such an approach not only matters for the future of Palestine—it has implications for the entire region, where questions of custody, memory, and justice converge in similar struggles over archives and the right to self-determination.

II. Background: Historical Coincidence and Confluence

We are starting with this conversation with three early ethnographers – a Swedish-Finnish anthropologist, a German theologian and ethnographer, a German-trained Palestinian physician-turned-folklorist— who all conducted fieldwork around the same time in Palestine, during the British Mandate. In addition to these known long-term residents, there were less known researchers who spent less time in Palestine:

1. Tawfiq Canaan (1882-1964) was a Palestinian doctor from Beit Jala, trained at the Syrian Protestant College and Berlin University, who served at multiple Palestinian hospitals, wrote many books and articles on public



health, and collected amulets and other objects of popular culture, now archived at the Birzeit University Museum.

2. Hilma Granqvist (1890-1972) arrived in Palestine a century ago this year and spent years researching marriages, families, and children in Artas, producing dozens of groundbreaking studies from her fieldwork.
3. Gustaf Dalman (1855-1951) was a German Lutheran theologian and orientalist who produced an 8-volume study on the *Work and Customs in Palestine*, recently edited by Saqr Abu Fakhr and translated into Arabic by Muhammad Abu Zeid for the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies in Beirut.
4. Heinz Helfritz (1902-1995) was a German composer and travel-writer who spent time in Palestine in 1931 to record fifteen wax cylinders of music that are now stored, inaccessible, in Berlin.

These connected yet independent engagements with the land of Palestine and its people form a remarkable historical coincidence and meaningful confluence: each worked to document daily life, customs, and traditions at a time of profound political and social transformation. They were scholars of the time, but their methodologies often resisted the overt Orientalism of their contemporaries. They bequeathed a rich living record of local practices and popular beliefs before the Nakba – one that laid the foundations for the cultural anthropology of Palestine that continues to inform and shape knowledge production and representation today.

III. Collections: Archives, Materiality, and Knowledge

The workshop takes as its central focus the archives and collections emerging from these early ethnographic encounters. Many of these collections – letters, photographs, music recordings, or field notes – are dispersed across regional but also European institutions - from Birzeit University and the Arab Center for Research and Studies to German archives and the British Museum.

We adopt a three-fold approach:

- Person-focused: examining the individual researchers, their positionalities, and their methodological legacies.
- Collection-focused: interrogating the afterlives of their work as recorded, translated, digitized, and reinterpreted materials.
- International law-based: considering the personhood of archives (rights of & crimes against) in light of the current genocide across Palestine and engaging with the laws of restitution.

IV. Current Stakes: Archives, Accountability, Justice, and Decolonization

Digitization efforts, such as those by openjerusalem.org, for example, offer new possibilities for accessibility, yet also raise pressing questions about ownership, interpretation, and the ethics of archival recovery. Other archives kept abroad also raise concerns of coloniality.

Today, the politics of archiving in and about Palestine are inseparable from broader struggles for memory, justice, and decolonization. As archives are increasingly recognized as actors in their own right – bearing recognition of legal, moral, and political personhood – the question arises: what obstacles and responsibilities accompany those who preserve, curate, or claim these collections?

The conference will explore how archives serve as mediums of accountability, extending beyond the preservation of memory to engage the language of justice. It will ask: questions like: What happens when collections are annexed, displaced, or erased? How do archives “vanish” and re-enter the political arena? What does it mean to decolonize the archive in the context of Palestine?

These inquiries resonate amid ongoing debates about restitution, knowledge sovereignty, and the legal futures of endangered archives.



V. Objectives and Format:

The symposium aims to

- Foster academic exchange across disciplinary and institutional boundaries.
- Reassess early ethnographic practices and their enduring implications.
- Explore the ethics and politics of archiving within colonial and decolonial frameworks.
- Build momentum toward collaborative digitization and accessibility of endangered archives.
- analyze the international legal routes available for securing the return of other archives still held by Israel
- recover and reimagine the lived worlds of Palestine before Zionism and Israel.

VI. Broader Significance:

By bringing together scholars, archivists, and artists, this event situates the historical coincidence and confluence of early ethnographers in Palestine within today's urgent debates about the ownership, salvaging of knowledge and legal restitutions. We seek not only to recover lost or dispersed materials but also to critically examine how we engage with them now – as scholars, as institutions, and as inheritors of complex archival legacies. What can these early collections assembled under British colonialism teach us about the politics of documentation today—and how might they be reactivated as tools for justice, accountability, and decolonial scholarship?

We also aim to draw on the knowledge generated in this workshop to advance our work on questions of legal restitution and archival recovery, as outlined in the ICJ Advisory Opinion. For those interested in conversation between law and humanities, please get in touch with us.