

The Village of Faqu'a



UNEXPLAINABLE MAGIC

Historically known as *Shafa El Ghour* (Valley View), Faqu'a is only 12 km away from the Jordan Valley and is 425 meters above sea level. Located in the Jenin district, Faqu'a PFTA cooperative was formed in 2004. The 14 members of the coop harvest 598 Dunums of olive groves producing an annual estimate of 15 tons of olive oil. The home of the sweet Palestinian cactus fruit, Faqu'a produces 250 tons of fresh prickly cacti each year.

Stories about the origin of the name Faqu'a vary from one elder to the next but the four dominating narratives are that the name refers to the abundance of *Fuqu'* (Arabic for Mushrooms).

Another story is that Faqu'a got its name after the Roman ruins of *Fuqiqi'e* that can still be seen in the area. Others believe that it got this name because of its numerous small water springs -*Faqaqee'*- that were part of the village before more than half of its land in the northern mountains was confiscated in 1948.

Capturing the magic of the village of Faqu'a can prove almost impossible with pen and paper. It is not just about its rolling hills or its warm natured people, according to many in the district of Jenin, Faqu'a has a heart-capturing secret that is unexplainable. Muhanad Abu Ghanim from a nearby village says, "this is not my village but I cannot understand what it is about this place. I

can only feel beauty when I come here. When my heart is heavy and I come to Faqu'a I feel relieved. Perhaps it's the hills here but I think it is something else."

EDDOWAR, THE CIRCLE

Muhanad is not the only one who feels this way. Almost every inhabitant of Faqu'a shares the same sentiment. Hasan El Asad, who goes by the nickname, *Sibini*, is the oldest man in the village. Born in 1923, he remembers Faqu'a when it was full of *Khirab*, Arabic for ruins. "People lived together and rotated land use. Many lands were *Masha'* - communally owned lots - and families cultivated different areas in the village land." While communal ownership is not as widespread as it used to be, values of communal sharing are still very strong among even the youngest members of this community. In the village center, which is referred to as *Eddowar* (The Circle) teenagers gather in a wide-open room called Café Faqu'a where they play pool, playstation, and table tennis. The café is in the heart of *Eddowar* and outside its doors is where the elders sit in the afternoon chatting away and enjoying several cups of black Arabic coffee.



Children of Faqu'a collecting cactus. Hanan, Yazeed. and Ahmed.

THE SEEDS OF LOVE

This is where Mohammed Abed El Latif, owner of the café says, "we plant the seeds of love in our community. Right here in this circle there is

no division between old and young or rich and poor. This is why we do not have much conflict in Faqu'a. Our grandparents did not plant seeds of arrogance inside us. They planted seeds of love. Even when we want to choose a village elder to represent us we don't have much competition because no one here is so eager for power. But don't think that any of this is by chance. It is impossible for this to happen spontaneously. You harvest what you plant and this is why we are planting the same seeds of love in the hearts of the new generation. Not only at home but also right here in this village circle."



The segregation wall separating the people of Faqu'a from their lands.

Metaphorically as well as literally, planting good seeds is indeed a landmark of Faqu'a. From indigenous varieties of zucchini, lentils, okra, tomatoes, and string beans to healthy olive trees, people in Faqu'a are notorious for their rain-fed crops known in Palestine as *Ba'ali* in reference to the old Canaanite fertility deity, Baal. This ancient tradition of growing rain-fed seeds is what is saving this beautiful village.

Before 1948 the size of Faqu'a was 3600 hectares in which water springs were abundant. Today, its locals struggle to access enough drinking water. Since the loss of most of their land, the people of Faqu'a have access to only 700 hectares, 60 of which were recently confiscated for the building of the segregation wall in 2002. Abu Mahir is a member of the Faqu'a Palestine Fair Trade cooperative. Walking along Faqu'a's quiet roads one can see Abu Mahir's olive groves that now lay behind the segregation wall. "My father planted these trees when I was nine years old.



When they came and took them away from us it felt like our family lost the grove and my father at the same time. He was devastated and would avoid passing by this road so he does not see his trees on the hill where he cannot go. You see, when you work hard on something you become attached to it one hundred percent. My father worked so hard to grow these trees and I was there with him. We can always see our land now but we are deprived from its fruit.”



Zarefeh drinking her specialty goat milk tea.

These olive trees are now 90 years old and just like Abu Mahir and the rest of the people in the village they continue to persevere despite all obstacles. This is part of the reason why in 2004, when the Palestine Fair Trade Association was created, many farmers in the village of Faqu'a were the first to organize and create one of the first PFTA cooperatives.

According to Mahmoud Abbas, a Faqu'a native and a founding member of the Palestine Fair Trade Association, his family has to buy 10 cubic meters of water every two weeks. “Aside from losing access to the water springs, climate

change has caused rain to decrease and yet water consumption in the family has increased with people today using machines to wash cloths and showers that waste so much water. But when I was a kid my father had a cistern where he collected rainwater and women in the village would come and fill their clay jars with water from our cistern and carry it on their heads back to their homes. We used to call women carrying jars on their heads, *El Mallayat* (the water carriers).”

This spirit of communal ownership of resources and cooperation is exactly what attracts many foreigners to come visit Faqu'a. “Since Faqu'a Palestine Fair Trade Cooperative was established many visitors from all over the world have been coming to our village.” Says Itaf who is a member of the women cooperative in Faqu'a. “ We love having people come to our village. Before we felt so abandoned but now we have the opportunity to share who we are and also learn about how others live. Also, when people come to visit us I start to dream of how one day I may be able to travel as well. I learned from Fair Trade people who come here that there are other communities like us in the West and that they too like to live in cooperation and they have cooperatives and work together as producers.”

MILK TEA, SWEETS, AND HENNA

Visiting Faqu'a on a summer evening one can easily see communal harmony in its most celebratory form, the weddings. Weddings in Faqu'a are hardly an extended family affair; they are village events that include everyone from child to elder. Gently tapping on the drum, 89-year-old Zarefeh sings *Tahalil El Arous* the bride's songs while women in the village gather around her and repeat the chorus lines. “Weddings are important for us in Faqu'a” says Zarefeh. “This is the time that people feel how much they care about each other. It feels good when someone you care about is happy and you are part of that moment. And of course the little girls enjoy dressing up and imitating the bride.”



Wedding celebrations typically last three days with proceeding preparations being colorful and full of symbolic details. An equivalent to what brides in other countries call, wedding shower, women who are close to the bride make Henna and sweet cones and they carry them on their heads while dancing around the bride at the same time the mother of the groom distributes the Henna and the sweets to the attendees.

“These beautiful traditions create a bond between people,” says Zarefeh. This is why she made sure all her granddaughters had traditional Henna ceremonies. While listening to Zarefeh sing, one can only feel awe in her ability to pass on not just her singing and Henna customs but also her special recipes such as her tasty goat-milk tea that she makes with heavily brewed black tea and coffee.

Like many in Faqu’a, Zarefeh comes from a family of refugees who were forced out of their village, *Shata*, which is now part of the state of Israel where Zarefeh cannot go. As she sips her milk tea, Zarefeh prays the new generations will not suffer more displacement and that “God will keep us in our homes.”

A growing village despite all political and economic challenges, the winding road that leads up to Faqu’a from the city of Jenin has recently been paved making access to the village much easier for locals and visitors alike. Indeed many visitors come through this charming village every year, between olive harvest festivities and a superb welcome many find it impossible not to return to Faqu’a once they have been there. To Hasan El Asad, “when strangers come to our village and they are sincerely curious, I feel joy.” Perhaps joy is the best word to describe the feeling one gets in Faqu’a. Between the sounds of wedding music, the images of kids flying kites, the gorgeous valley views, and the tens of clinking coffee cups in *Eddwar*, ones heart truly experiences something magical that remains without a doubt unexplainable.

