

Vivien Sansour

Hanan and the People of the Soil

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In Arabic, generous people are referred to as people of the soil – *ahl al thra*. The language has other references to soil as the mother of us all, but the most telling is *zareea*, which means “plant” and “seed,” but is also the word for “children.” Hanan is one of the *zareea*’ whose life was cut short in April 2022.

Hanan, whose name means “tenderness” in Arabic, didn’t have a cell phone when I met her. She was barely eight years old. Wide-eyed and mischievous, she had an eye for photography, so she would often take my phone and snap pictures of flowers and people around the courtyard of her house in the village of Faqua. Though she was a little girl and I was in my early thirties, Hanan was often my foraging guide and mountain companion when I would join her family on Fridays for picnics in the hills. She had a name for every poppy flower and every blade of grass she collected to give me before I left. At the time, I was documenting the stories of people and plants in Palestinian villages, so I always had my camera with me. Hanan always had ideas on what and whom I should photograph. From green almonds to wild thistle, her relationship to the land inspired me, filling my heart with wild optimism that it was still possible to save our bio-heritage. It is young people like her who can carry forward the priceless Indigenous knowledge that only comes from spending time with and being part of the natural world. Needless to say, Hanan and I became research buddies; we loved taking pictures together as much as we loved eating together.

I could never have imagined that only ten years later I would share her photograph in an insufficient eulogy of her short life – a life targeted and eliminated specifically for representing the survival of a way of life incompatible with Israel’s colonial hegemony. While claiming to have made the desert bloom, Israel murders its native inhabitants and destroys their ecological systems – one seed, one aquifer, and one human life at a time.

I first met Hanan when I started visiting my colleague Mahmoud in his family’s village of Faqua. Hanan was Mahmoud’s daughter. Faqua sits atop a solitary hill in the heart of Marj Ibn Amer, the largest plain in Palestine, and is one of many Palestinian villages that has kept its indigenous and ecological features. Many say that Faqua has magic in the air because everyone’s lungs expand when they go there, and that was true for me. Whether in the air, the soil, or the kindheartedness of its people, Faqua was a place where I received large doses of love from all the elements, including children like Hanan who welcomed me without hesitation.

I met Hanan on the first day I visited Faqua. That spring morning, the rugged road up to the

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village was filled with cacti on both sides. It carved through green terraces sprinkled with wild red poppies and yellow and purple wildflowers. The vegetation was lush and gentle at the same time, as if testifying to the deeds of the birds and winds that scattered the seeds across breathtaking terrains. “Don’t be dazzled by the flowers,” said the driver, noticing my eyes glued to the window in the front seat of his eight-passenger Ford bus, as we rode up an incline so endless that it seemed to prepare me for some kind of pilgrimage. “Wait till you see Faqua’s wild mushrooms.”

Wild mushrooms? This guy must be exaggerating. But before I challenged his claims he asked, “Why do you think the village is called Fuqua?” I lowered my head and in a smirking apology said, “Of course, from *faqua*, Arabic for mushrooms.” Then he pointed to a fence running alongside a pine forest and explained, “All of this was for our foraging. We were famous for our mushrooms because we had an abundance of them, but in recent years an Israeli settler came and fenced us off from our lands and started a cow farm.”

After getting off at the center of the village, I walked closer to the fence and was startled by a herd of Holstein cows, with the black-and-white

irregular maps drawn across their skins. They were as foreign to the landscape as the barbed wire, dividing the earth and declaring autonomy over what should never be owned: seed, soil, and people’s freedom to be part of the world of trees. But this was all swept away by the sight of a little girl whose messy black curls bounced with each hop she made as she approached me.

“*Inti Vivien?*” She asked enthusiastically while taking my hand and leading me into her mother’s kitchen. “We’ve been waiting for you for lunch.” Abeer, Hanan’s mother, pulled a chair out for me and ushered me to a table of delicious home-cooked and wild-foraged greens. Hanan began to name each one of them, but asked me to eat quickly so she could show me the courtyard. I spent two years after that with Hanan and her family, who, in many ways, adopted me as one of their own and brought me into their lives. Hanan became my little sister, daughter, and both my mentor and mentee at the same time. I saw myself in her and she saw a role model in me. But how is Hanan’s story relevant to the complexities of our food system? How is this little girl, who grew up to be a diligent young woman grounded in the soil and seasons of her village, related to the future of crop diversity and earth knowledge?



Photo courtesy of the author.

In over a decade working in seed conservation, I have come across many speeches, programs, projects, and publications declaring a commitment to the earth, to farmers, and to Indigenous knowledge. But what is this world we activists for the planet say we want to create? What is this new way of being with the land that we say we must reinvent? The truth is that we don't have to invent that other world because it already exists. It may seem very remote because, at best, it's portrayed as pastoral fiction, and at worst, it's being destroyed. Yet we can find that world in villages like Faqua. We find it in young people like Hanan, who are seeds being murdered and discarded along with their communities. We find it in the wild mushrooms and the forests, which are being replaced by commercial cows subsidized by settler militias that are supported by US taxpayers.

I have traveled across the planet meeting different peasant communities whose lives are being shattered by agro-industry, militaries, and political policies that are designed to eliminate them. The same powers that claim to fight for food justice through US- and European-funded organizations are in fact contributing to the demise of our agro-biodiversity through their cultural and economic hegemony. They destroy our communities and then accuse us of being broken and underdeveloped, whether in Iraq, where war has destroyed the ancient marshes, in Mexico, where the government has sold the rivers, or even in places like Italy, where some farmers have been banned from farming for refusing to follow big-business standards. There is a dark and deep-seated violence inherent in many ecological slogans that create a higher moral pedestal for consuming well-packaged products that claim to save the environment and protect biodiversity, while simultaneously using economic and political means to shame and dominate people.

The reality is that, until the food movement plays a more honest role in telling the brutal stories and histories of the fancy new superfoods we consume, we will never have a healthier diet. Because everything we consume is kneaded with the blood and tears of living beings who allow all of us to have our romantic story about the environment. There is nothing romantic about farmers being removed from their lands or trees being uprooted to make way for settler roads, or water sources being drained for settler agribusiness plantations. Seeds and people are not separate. Every living creature has sprouted from a seed or a spore that allows the continuation of its species. The question of who gets to live from, and who must die for, our food is one that our movement can no longer deny.

Foodies around the world who like to share staged images of their exoticized dishes or their newly forged salads must reckon with the fact that, without a real conversation about the political realities of every geography whose bounties we consume, our relationship to food will continue to be toxic. There is no new green movement without the acknowledgment of the multitudes of genocides that are happening across the globe. From Palestine to Haiti, to Brazil, to India, and to the prairies of America that have been brutally contaminated and emptied of their peoples, our food embodies massive amounts of pain.

Hanan was someone I knew and loved, yet sadly she is not the only example of a young seedling defying the harsh world by choosing to love the poppies and wild mushrooms of her village. She was a carrier of the Indigenous knowledge we all claim we want to preserve. But like many other murders, Hanan's killing was silenced by a food movement caring only about the olive oil her family produced and not the lives that produced it. Very few were willing to tell her story, and some wanted me to just keep talking about food when the conversation became "too heavy." But the conversation was not as heavy as their dismissal, nor as heavy as the silence.

Hanan was shot in the belly by an Israeli soldier as she was riding in a taxi back to her village, taking the same route I took more than ten years ago when I embarked on my seed journey and first visited her family in Faqua. She was also taking the same path of persevering – the one many Palestinian farmers have taken, with little acknowledgement or support from a food movement that refuses to take a political stand yet insists on claiming social justice as a pillar of its sustainability goals.

As another of our beautiful seeds lies in the ground, dead and silenced, I am reminded that being Palestinian means adjusting to grief as a constant state rather than a random incident. People we love, people who inspire us, role models, people we see on TV, our educators, journalists, friends, children, and even our plants and trees – all are subject to murders that go unseen, unheard, unrecognized, and unreckoned with in a world that believes our lives have no value and that we don't even exist. Hanan did not only matter because she was my friend, or because she was Palestinian. She mattered because she represented a whole world and future that is going extinct. Children like Hanan hold in their dreams and in their endurance a hope for our planet. Luckily, hundreds like Hanan still live and persevere in villages like Faqua across our beloved planet. They are the ones who can carry us into a more tender future if, and only if, we find the courage in ourselves to do what it

takes to protect them and their communities.
Anything short of that is empty talk and a false
show of love, because ultimately, we are the
seeds, and we are the soil that we are claiming to
care for.

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