

Palestinian Artist Accuses Israeli Professor of 'Colonizing' His Ideas

Prof. Gannit Ankori wheels along a small black suitcase in the Jerusalem hotel lobby where our meeting takes place. When she talks about "the affair," which she is not at all interested in discussing, tears well up in her eyes and she chokes up. The suitcase holds all the documents and books, which she says vindicate her. In the past four years, Ankori, chair of the Art History Department at Hebrew University, has been involved in a transatlantic battle to clear her name of the allegations by one of the subjects of her study, Kamal Boullata, a leading Palestinian artist and one of the only living Palestinian art historians.

Boullata, 66, who resides in the city of Menton in the French Riviera, contends that Ankori expropriated his research, which he conducted over a period of 35 years, for the first three chapters of her English-language historical survey, "Palestinian Art," which was published two years ago by Reaktion Books. Boullata, however, does not make due with charges of plagiarism; he goes on to include a political dimension, accusing Ankori of the occupier's cultural appropriation of the occupied.

"When I wrote on Palestinian art, it was in response to the call of Edward Said, who urged the members of my generation to reconstruct the Palestinian narrative from our chaotic world," says Boullata in a telephone conversation from Menton. "But this is not an abstract matter for me, and so I don't want to speak theoretically. I spent years conducting field research and publishing my findings. To see someone, whom I was happy to help write her book, publish it as if it were the first study on the subject, when the truth is that a number of books have already been written on Palestinian art, made me very sad. Her book failed to give my work due credit, which is inappropriate both academically and personally, as this was someone whom I considered a friend."

In the letter Boullata sent Al Jazeera in 2004, following an interview it conducted with Ankori about her book, he was even more adamant. "In any civilized society that follows a code of ethics," he wrote in the letter that Al Jazeera did not publish and ultimately made its way to Boullata's blog, Umkahlil, "the appropriation of intellectual property in the academic field is equivalent to the appropriation of land and territory in the world of power and political domination. The audacity by which Gannit Ankori appropriated her information and called it her own follows the very same pattern that one can trace throughout the history of Israeli culture."

And yet, the relationship between Ankori and Boullata was not as troubled as it is

today. "I couldn't help but think about the first time that Gannit came to visit," Boullata related in an e-mail he sent following our phone conversations, in which he emphasized that dredging up the subject again caused him much sorrow.

"She brought two paintings by her son Amir and I hung them in my study until the colors vanished. When I asked her to tell me more about her son, she told me that she took him to see the movie "Gandhi" so he could experience the feeling of a national struggle against colonial rule. It is therefore no surprise that Gandhi's words come to mind: "An error does not become truth by reason of multiplied propagation, nor does truth become error because nobody sees it."

Ankori, on the other hand, argues that Boullata, to whom she dedicated a chapter in her book, harasses her and further accuses him of chauvinism. "I arrive in Amsterdam and New York, and his letters continue to follow me," relates Ankori. "I want him to leave me alone, to get on with his life, to write a book of his own. He wrote, accused and slandered enough, and his allegations proved baseless. There is a principle here [occupier-occupied relations - T.P.] that he is riding on. He knew how to take it there."

Tearing out pages

Ankori expresses disappointment and hurt more than she does anger, and one can reasonably assume she would not have agreed to be interviewed had Boullata's accusations not taken center stage this past year, causing a commotion in the international art world. Two major scholarly journals published reviews of Ankori's book (the British Art Book in May 2007, and the American Art Journal in its fall 2007 issue). The reviewers accepted Boullata's personal and political allegations, trying to prove that justice was on his side. In response, Ankori turned to her lawyers, and they requested in February of this year that the two journals retract the arguments put forth.

Following the demand, the journals reached a settlement plan with Ankori and even published a public apology. Art Journal went one step further, asking its readers to tear out the pages of Ankori's book review from its issue. Ankori additionally received financial compensation, \$75,000 from Art Journal and \$30,000 from Art Book. Presenting a confirmation slip, Ankori says she donated this money, after paying her legal bills, to an organization dedicated to bereaved Israeli and Palestinian families.

Although the matter was supposed to end here, with Ankori's vindication, her settlement with Art Journal last month caused a controversy. Criticism of Ankori was voiced in the United States, in, among other places, the weekly Chronicle of Higher

Education and the Jewish paper The Forward, because she took legal action against a review published in an academic journal and obstructed the possibility of an open academic debate.

Ankori rejects the argument: "A journal has the responsibility to publish truth and there is no justification for libel. This is not academic freedom, but a criminal matter. No one pays tens of thousands of dollars if they think they are right."

According to articles posted on the Web site of the publisher of Art Journal, CAA (College Art Association), the journal was threatened with a British libel suit, which is notoriously plaintiff-friendly. The site suggests that the publisher was compelled to compromise freedom of speech as it feared that it would not be able to bear the financial cost of losing a court case, if one were to have taken place.

Art history professor at DePaul University in Chicago and CAA president, Paul B. Jaskot, recently said: "I don't think anyone can feel good about this affair. As an academic organization, we are accustomed to arguing and the legal action that was taken is difficult for us to accept." He added that, as publishers, "we must adapt to the current variety of cultures and institutions."

'Arafat's whore'

"I must admit I feel disappointment and pain. Innocently enough, I thought that I was a human being and it turns out that as an Israeli, I am not." Ankori says. As a self-professed radical leftist, she was called "Arafat's whore and anti-Zionist, because I dared to even use the term Palestinian," and now, paradoxically, she is seen, in her words, as a colonialist and occupier.

Who, then, has the right to tell the Palestinian story? Did Ankori, as a Jewish Israeli who decided to write the history of Palestinian art, not enter a political minefield from which she had no chance of escaping safely? Can the occupier tell the story of the occupied without appropriating it?

Artist Farid Abu Shakra, who curated the exhibition of Palestinian art currently showing at the L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art in Jerusalem, says that "unfortunately, the other side [Israel - T.P.] determines the narrative, because it has curators, researchers and collectors. We are under colonial rule and so there are those who stand up and determine what Palestinian art is and who the Palestinian artists are. They try to domesticate Palestinian art."

According to him, he did not read Ankori's book. "She gave a lecture in Be'er Sheva and I couldn't read the book. I didn't even want to browse it. A book called 'Palestinian Art' and that focuses on only five artists is an injustice."

Can Jewish-Israelis study Palestinian culture? According to Abu Shakra, "I have no problem with the Other putting me under a microscope; let him put acid on me and see what happens. But I have the right to do the same, and in the present state I can't."

Sami Shalom-Sheetrit, whose Web site published the translation of an article about the Ankori-Boullata case from a Lebanese newspaper, said in Los Angeles: "The ideal would be to train young researchers and give a free hand to Palestinian doctoral students. Ankori's suit was a strong case, even if she is an individual who feels wronged."

Sheetrit relates that he spoke to Joseph Massad, the Columbia University professor who wrote the Art Journal review. "Massad is also a victim because there is no one to support him," says Sheetrit.

Ankori rejects the contention that she would have made a professional-intellectual fortune by riding the Palestinian cause. "Research studies on Palestinian art do not advance academic careers in Israel," she says. "On the contrary: There was a huge risk in handling this subject, and I was more than once attacked for my effort in designating it as a subject worthy of academic research."

Moreover, she adds "she receives letters from students who read the book and want to conduct research, but there are students who are scared to write. They keep away from it and move on to another topic. This book had the potential to increase awareness of the subject and I pray it will still be able to do so. It has become sensationalized by a man who has taken advantage of a political situation. People keep their distance from it like from fire."

In response to the article, Professor Ankori's attorney, Gilad Sher, wrote:

Mr. Boullata made unsubstantiated claims about Professor Ankori's book prior to its publication in an effort to prevent its release. Mr. Boullata's claims were thoroughly and seriously investigated by the book's noted publisher ahead of its release, and each of his claims was rejected as "unsubstantiated" and "false."

After the book's publication, [Columbia University] Professor Massad intentionally repeated the claims that Professor Ankori's publisher had rejected.

In a case such as this, we, Professor Ankori's attorneys, had no choice but to present the true facts to the journal that published the false and unsubstantiated claims.

When the representatives of the journal's publishers were shown the true facts, they were immediately persuaded, without the need for us to take further action, that their clients had not and would never have been able to justify Boullata and Massad's litany of lies.