ENCHANTED SPACE AND PROSAIC PLACE: TOURISTIC AND NATIVE VISIONS OF THE BAZAAR IN ALEPPO.

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Presentation at ASA conference *Thinking through tourism* April 10-13, 2007.

To walk around the Aleppo bazaar "is like nothing else in the world. Experiencing it is to experience the East at its most romantic: it is the stuff that traveller's tales are made of." This quote, alluding to the romantic East, is from a Syrian guidebook (*Guide to Aleppo* Maysa H. Diab, no date:20).

The following comment, however, made a few weeks ago by a native trader in the Aleppo bazaar, is all but romantic:
"I am afraid! I think and I worry! Should I sell now or should I wait? Will the prices go up or down? My shop has an excellent location here on this corner and it could be converted into a café or small restaurant. But what if the tourists don't come? And perhaps prices will go down and not up with the tourists! So I am afraid and I keep thinking."

The Aleppo bazaar –or *souq* in Arabic - claims to be the largest covered market in the Middle East extending over 10 km, and despite urban growth, it is still central to the economy of the city. Large scale traders and small scale shopkeepers, industrial workshop-owners, ambulant food-sellers, customers and spectators mix and mingle in this covered market. The Old City of Aleppo – the *medina* – where the covered market is situated, covers around 400 hectares. It is on the UNESCOs World Heritage list since 1986 and infrastructural development and urban rehabilitation is taking place in the bazaar and the Old City, partly to attract Western and more regional tourists. Old Aleppo is packaged and sold as a tourist site by underlining its authentic, ancient and unspoiled ambiance; an enchanted place. In the words of a booklet published by the Syrian Ministry of Tourism (1989:147) the covered Aleppo market alleys are

like “living museums which depict medieval life” or where, according to a foreign guidebook, “the traditions of the Arab middle ages do not seem all that remote…. It still works according to the conventions of commercial life unbroken since Mameluke times” (Burns 1994:28). But the people making a living in this market do not support such claims (unless they can make money on them). Although they describe themselves as “traditional” they certainly do not see their businesses as relics from the past eras. They, instead,care about the bazaar because this is where they and others like them meet and work now, in the contemporary world..

In this presentation the tension between claims of ‘enchanted space’ and more ‘prosaic place’ will be discussed in relation to the changes taking place in Aleppo. I will argue that an analysis of native traders’ ‘thinking and talking through tourism’ will throw light not only of their perceptions of space and place, but can, more crucially, be understood as a way in which they work and rework their relations to political power-holders in the city, in the capital but also abroad.

This presentation is based on fieldwork in Aleppo- focusing on trade and traders – carried out in the last decade.

City history

Aleppo is the second largest city in Syria with a population close to 2 million, and it is the country’s principal centre for trade and manufacturing. It is one of the oldest continuously lived-in places on earth (competing with the capital Damascus) and can boast of an extremely rich and complex history. Five hundred years ago Aleppo was an important node in a vast network of trade stretching across Asia and Europe. The city was well-known to seekers of fame and fortune (it is even mentioned in Macbeth!). From the sixteenth to the eighteenth

century it was the most important Asian town in the Ottoman Empire; only Istanbul and Cairo had larger populations. In the long-distance silk trade Aleppo was an important entrepôt and many European silk merchants lived in the city. After the opening of new European-controlled sea-routes to Asia and the gradual decline of long-distance caravans in the eighteenth century, Aleppo intermittently continued to thrive as an important trading centre for the surrounding region, including large parts of Anatolia. After the First World War, when new borders were drawn, it lost its earlier regional trading position. Today Aleppo no longer straddles strategic trade routes, nor is it a centre of production of exquisite textiles. But although the city can now be considered as situated on the margins of the contemporary global economy, its traders and industrialists still have a great many links outside Syria, and the economic importance of Aleppo in the new Syrian republic was, and continues to be, significant.

Profound changes: the flight of the rich and the 'homogenization' of the medina

Aleppo has always been a polyglot, multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian city. But in the last half century the 'cosmopolitan' character of the city has declined (much lamented by the better off Christians and the old educated Muslim elite of the city). Traders, shopkeepers and small industrialists in the bazaar areas have become more homogeneous, linguistically, religiously and ethnically. Christians and Jews used to be very important in the Aleppo market, but the Jewish minority has all but disappeared. Today the market-people are predominantly, or present themselves predominantly, as urban Arab Sunni Muslim and talk of themselves as "traditional and conservative". The people of the market are seen, and see themselves, as epitomizing specific values and attitudes. They condone the separation of women and men on religious grounds and insist that their mothers, sisters, wives and daughters should not work outside the home. Their conservatism, they claim, is grounded in a "fear of God". They

express the opinion that Syrian traders in general, and Aleppo traders in particular, are hard-working and clever. Trade is said to be “the essence of everything”. The overriding aim of traders is to be independent from other traders but mainly from the state.

The medina has been the city’s commercial centre for thousands of years. It is especially important as the centre for wholesale trade, with retail trade mainly geared to rural visitors and urbanites with ‘traditional’ low class tastes. Aleppo is connected to a rich and fairly populous agricultural hinterland which affects its economy and way of life. In the last half-century, however, the change in the use of space has been profound in the old city. Residential quarters have turned into spaces for commerce and industry, and the better-off, in particular, have deserted the medina. This process started already a century ago in the first wave of urban modernization, when ‘Western- type’ houses were built outside the maze-like medina. Since then, successive waves of rural migrants have settled in the increasingly degraded old city environment. The seamless fabric of the covered bazaar has been destroyed by the implementation of several urban plans opening up for new wide roads. Furthermore, and more importantly; although the medina is the uncontested centre of Aleppo, for decades neither the bazaar, nor the residential quarters of the old city, were particularly cared for by its users, or protected by the city-bureaucrats.

My bazaar-informants of the late 20th and the early 21st centuries expressed no specific interest in the abstract idea of the old city, or detailed interest in its long history. They were, instead, staunchly here-and-now oriented. None of them took part in any cultural activities concerned with the heritage of the city. At the same time, however, they expressed strong sentiments about the old city as a place. The spatial organization of central Aleppo is very important for the traders in their everyday lives. The bazaar is inscribed into their activities

and their very personae, just as the bazaar is being formed and shaped by the traders' use of it. Place in Aleppo clearly produces meaning, and meaning is tangibly grounded in place.
Most of my trader-informants talked about their attachment to their own particular section of the market. "This is where we spend most of our time, and we see more of each other than we do of our wives and small children", as one trader explained. To have a shop or an office in the old city was an indivisible aspect of being 'someone', and particularly of being part of the people of the market. It indicated a trading continuity and trade survival and gave a trader a standing in this particular community.

From demolition to urban rehabilitation

In Syria, the urban thinking of the ruling Arab Socialist Ba'th party was for a long time staunchly 'modernist'. While major mosques and more ancient sites were considered an important patrimony linking the present rulers to a glorious past, the old urban morphology and bazaar fabric with its alleys and cul-de-sacs was viewed with suspicion. Such space was associated with inhabitants who represented urban traditionalism and resentment against the far-reaching social, political and economic changes instigated by the ruling party. The *people of the market* were considered both socially backward and politically reactionary, and viewed as allies of the Syrian bourgeoisie. But in Aleppo well-known public figures started to campaign for the preservation of the old city. In 1977 they mobilized the Syrian Board of Antiquities to classify the whole of the old city as a historical monument. The following year this classification was extended to the old Christian quarters outside the historically walled city and by 1980 a UNESCO mission had – at the invitation of the Board of Antiquities – made a report on the problems and the future of the old city. Proposals and counter-proposals were made by various groups during these years. Finally, with a new governor and a new political climate the modernist plans were demoted and instead new smaller-scale more

preservations plans were discussed. In 1986 the whole of the old city of Aleppo was placed on UNESCO's list of World Heritage. New winds were blowing. Conservationist ideals, and the global importance of tourism influenced architects, urban planners and politicians. Many Aleppians quickly came to express pride in the antiquity and continuous use and habitation of their old city.

In 1992 a project for the rehabilitation of old Aleppo was launched. It is run by the city of Aleppo but also sponsored by GTZ, the German Development Agency, and the (Kuwaiti) Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development. This project aims to preserve the character of the old city, as well as to promote its economic and social development. The preservation aspect should not, according to the project, ignore the fact that the medina has constantly changed, and needs to change to enable it to continue as a viable, workable and habitable part of Aleppo. The promotion of economic and social development should not be at the expense of people working and living in the medina today. The tasks of this project are simply staggering, considering the size of the old city and the many people working and living there.

Enhancing tourism

In the late 1990s this project touched many of my trade informants by way of a new sewerage system which was laid down in the old city. Most of my informants in the medina had only a very vague idea of the presence and status of this project, or of its aims, goals and development. Generally speaking, the project was not part of their everyday concerns, nor a topic of conversation. The sewerage system – especially when trenches were dug and never filled in – was discussed, but although it was appreciated ("the sewage has not been improved since the time of the French Mandate") it was generally seen as yet another activity imposed from above, and not as a project activity to preserve and develop their working environment.

Some specialists working for the project thought that users in the old city should contribute economically to infrastructure which benefited them. But others were of the opinion that a system of payment would only increase the corruption which was already rife in Aleppo (and in Syria in general).

Many of my informants in the bazaar were of the opinion that the real the aim of the urban rehabilitation project was to enhance the potential for Aleppo tourism. They all expressed the opinion that tourism in Syria in general, and in Aleppo in particular, should and must increase, and that this would be good for the economy. The number of historical buildings, the rich history of Aleppo, its cuisine, ambiance and low crime rate were put forward as important assets. The Aleppo citadel, impressively situated on a high mound almost in the middle of the old city, and intimately related to the long and chequered history of the city, is the most visited historical site in Syria. An advertisement for the Orient Express from 1925 features a painting of the entrance to the Aleppo citadel! Since inception of Western tourism in the region, Aleppo has had its devoted aficionados. Already in the 1960s certain of the items sold for the internal market in the covered bazaar, such as silk-scarves and traditional cotton cloths and clothes, the silver-thread work done by skilled Armenian silversmiths, the famous Aleppo soap, was bought by tourists. By the early 1990s a special handicraft bazaar – sponsored by the Ministry of Tourism - opened in one of the old warehouses close to the citadel. By the late 1990s the presence of organized tourist-groups had increased and a number of shops had converted their stock from merchandize geared to village and pastoral customers to items thought to attract foreign tourists. In that period I got to know a number of educated young Aleppians who had become certified guides by following a course given by the Ministry of Tourism. Many in the market and outside were optimistic about the future development of tourism. One informant who had travelled extensively in other countries, compared Syria and

Aleppo favourably with what he had seen: “What do these countries have that we don’t have?” Another informant, however, who also travelled frequently abroad, claimed that Syria was not clean enough and did not have enough hotels suitable for ordinary tourists. There were official initiatives and support to increase Arab tourism and tourism by Syrians living abroad but when the traders spoke about ‘tourists’ they typically meant ‘foreigners’, i.e. Westerners.

The enhancement of Aleppo for tourism was in the late 1990s noticeable in the old Christian quarters slightly outside the old city walls. Some intellectual Aleppians worried about the gentrification of parts of these quarters, whereby rich, mainly Christian traders – or Christian traders investing on behalf of Muslim traders – bought property and converted it for the purposes of leisure and tourism. But many more saw this gentrification (and cleaning up!) of the area as a positive sign. A number of the old houses have been converted into smart hotels and locally popular but – from the perspective of the vast majority of Aleppians – expensive restaurants. The restaurants, though different, are all resplendent with ‘Oriental’ designs and furniture. The waiters are dressed ‘folklore-wise’ and they serve elaborate Middle Eastern cuisine. In the hot season there is often live (‘traditional’) music. In the last decade more hotels and restaurants have opened in this quarter utilizing the same ‘authentic’ Oriental concept.

In the last decade more facilities for tourists have developed but the promises of income and economic profits have not been as many hoped for. In 2006 Aleppo was (with Isfahan in Iran) elected Capital of Islamic Culture by the Organization of Islamic Countries. People in tourist circles hoped that this would give an enormous boost to the influx of foreigners, especially from Islamic countries, and increase also local awareness about and interest in the city’s

history. But when I visited Aleppo in April 2006, informants and friends with economic interests in tourism or in history and heritage were upset and disgusted. The year had not taken off as planned at all, and when delegations came, hotels and cultural services were lacking. The city also began major rehabilitation work around the citadel making access to sites of interest quite difficult. This 2006 event was prolonged until the end of March 2007 since the start had been so slow. Yet by now Aleppo as a Capital of Islamic Culture has been literally stamped on to the city centre. All shops have had to pay a fee and have the official cliché painted on their roll-down iron doors, and all over the city there are huge signs and posters announcing the year. And all around the citadel important and large government, governorate and city bureaucracies are being moved to other parts of the city in order to make way for tourist and leisure investments. In an atmosphere of Open Door economy which increasingly has permeated Syria (under the patronage and control of the regime) since the early 1990s, the state is trying to attract foreign capital - mainly from other Arab countries and from Syrians living abroad - for investment in tourism and leisure-activities. In 2007 a huge Sheraton hotel (with capital mainly from a Kuwaiti investor) was partially opened on part of the 9 ha lot where houses were demolished in 1979- as described earlier, radically changing the face of that particular corner of the city.

Hence; many different activities are taking place, and many shops in the bazaar and the old city are now selling the kind things one can find from Istanbul to China. Tourist-merchandize is less and less locally or even nationally produced but of a more generic Oriental character. In the bazaar forlorn cries like “Pashmina ya madame, pashmina!” can be heard.

But where are the tourists? Not since the mid 1970s when I began my frequent visits to Aleppo, have I seen and heard so few foreign visitors in the city. And how do traders in the bazaar and others in the city talk about this state of affairs?

Talking through tourism

First of all there are those like the worried trader I quoted in the beginning of my talk. His shop has such a location that it could potentially become an enormous economic asset. But he is not certain that the conversion from a 'conventional' market street geared towards the local retail and wholesale market to a street based on services and geared mainly towards visitors and tourists will come about, or be profitable. He also said that if this transaction does take place he would have to sell because he cannot see himself as the owner of a small café or restaurant serving others and for him serving alcohol is out of the question. The worried traders underline that the external market cannot support all this emphasis on eating, drinking, sleeping and 'authentic shopping'. They are still not convinced that local better off people will come to the city-centre for amusement. The people in the old city itself are poor and low class people, and thus rich people will not really be attracted to this area outside work, many traders claim.

Then there are hopeful traders who have borrowed enormous amounts of money to start new ventures in tourism-related activities. One informant has invested in a 4 * hotel which will be feasible, he claims, and cater for both foreign tourists interested in antiquities and culture, and more local visitors who do not want to spend a fortune on 5* hotels. He is also going to invest in a tourist village outside Aleppo complete with bungalows, swimming-pools, saunas and a fitness-centre. When I doubted the economic viability of such a venture, he claimed that this village would attract not only local, but also regional and foreign interest. Another informant

has invested heavily in making an old bank into an 'authentic' restaurant and café with a spectacular view of the citadel. "If I get too tired of running it myself , I will sell it. The way property-prices are going up around this area I should make a profit on that alone." This informant is not gearing his business to foreigners mainly but rather to a local public which he felt certain would come. A number of my informants in the bazaar were of the opinion that the 'gentrification' of many parts of the city was a good sign and that this would benefit them economically.

Then there are the many nagging traders who claim that the market in general is so slow that it is hardly worth opening one's shop. And those relying on tourists are in very bad shape. "There are no tourists" one informant in the handicraft market geared to tourists, told me over and over. "And the few who come do not shop. Before the tourists used to buy but now they just look and pass. And we are getting no help and support from the state! We are told that tourism is good, but we have to bear the burden of lack of movement ourselves."

Finally there are the quiet traders who never openly complain about anything but who always rather say – *al hamdulillah* - that they thank God for whatever trade comes along. When I tried (quite hard) to solicit comments about the lack of tourists in the bazaar from one such quiet trader, he explained that the state is working on renovating and rehabilitating. "They do not want to bring tourists now in this state of half-finished repair. But later on tourists will come."

The opinions voiced by travel agents, guides, employees in the directorate of tourism and Aleppo intellectuals concerned about heritage-issues, in many ways differ from those of most bazaar-traders. They see different things and have other interests. For some the coming of

foreign – and discerning - tourists is talked about as a means to safeguard the old city against the exploitative interests of the market-people. Many with a 'professional' rather than 'shop-keeper' interest in tourism claim that the people of the market and public officials are their worst enemies of the long-term viability of tourism in Aleppo. Traders only think about their short-term gains and public officials are corrupt and ready to accept any tourism venture if they can make money on it.

At times bazaaris do criticise their own attitudes and behaviour. For example: In Aleppo shops open later and later. Even in those parts of the covered market that cater to the morning trade of visiting villagers, remain closed until most of the morning has passed. Many of my informants blamed the slack bazaar and the 'frozen' economy, but also admitted that a certain type of laziness had emerged in the Aleppo market due, most people concurred, to the habit of watching satellite television until dawn. (Damascene are said to be much better organized and more tightly controlled as inhabitants of the capital). At the moment most tourists come from Turkey and many arrive in Aleppo quite early through near-by border-crossings. A few weeks ago a small scandal emerged as a group of important Turkish guests arrived around ten in the morning only to find that everything was closed. The governor of Aleppo called for a crisis-meeting with the Chamber of Commerce and said things had to change. By 9 the whole market should be opened. The traders concurred and it will be interesting to see how this issue develops.

But many Aleppians also underline that while local traders and city and national public officials act as obstacles for the sound development of tourism, the influence of outside factors must not be neglected. Traders in the market often bring this out. They reiterate that Syria is put under great pressure and many Europeans are discouraged from coming. The war in Iraq, the instability in Lebanon and the tensions in Palestinian occupied territories all

combine to keep Westerners away. Syria has an undeservedly bad reputation and Westerners do not know the real situation, according to all my informants.

Despite the world and regional political situation, all my trader informants welcome the idea that Westerners should come as tourists and spend money in Aleppo, and they talk of themselves as friendly and hospitable towards strangers and foreigners (this is actually quite true). But there are two interrelated issues where the presence of Western tourists connect to local sensitivities. This concerns gendered public space and the presence of alcohol.

Talking through tourism; gender and alcohol

Aleppo is a spatially differentiated city where gender, age, class (or occupation) and ethnic and religious affiliation have an important bearing on who moves where and why, and who stops where and why. The most differentiated city is that between men and women, and there has been an undisputable increase in public gender segregation in the last decades. The increasingly 'Islamic' character of public space in Aleppo, epitomized by female veiling and a stress on gender differences, heightens the anxieties of many Christians in the city.
The Syrian state give equal rights to Christians and Muslims and women and men are in many ways equal as citizens. But political opposition to the Ba'th dominated state has increasingly taken on an Islamic character expressed particularly through gender separation and styles of dress. The global resurgence of Islamic movements, fed not least by the disastrous US and British policies in the Middle East, have had a great impact also on people in Aleppo.

The question of alcohol has become an increasingly sensitive public issue in the city. Alcohol is produced in Syria, both in state and private factories. But it is mainly sold in stores in the Christian quarters and only Christians are licensed to sell it in stores or in restaurants. Many of my 'conservative' Muslim traders actually drink, but they do so privately among their close

male friends. When tourist projects were discussed a few years ago, or when offers came to invest in hotels, cafés or restaurants, these traders said that they were not interested, as witnessed the worried trader discussed earlier. Another trader told me he had declined the opportunity to invest and become a partner in a new hotel: “I cannot invest in a business where alcohol will be served, just as I do not want to use Syrian banks. All tourist and most leisure ventures involve alcohol because it makes them profitable.”

The lack of interest on the part of many of my informants in taking an active part in such ventures should not, I think, be interpreted as manily against alcohol per se, but as a way to avoid too close contact with representatives of the public sector. Traders who engage in tourist and leisure projects must, almost daily, rub shoulders with and depend on public employees by working out leases of land, building codes, or health regulations. Many of my informants in the bazaar did not like this. Furthermore, most of my trade informants were not advocates of urban life where, among other things, men and women mix for fun and not out of necessity. They, or their out-of-town partners, might enjoy some of the services provided by many modern hotels, cafés and restaurants, but they had no wish to promote them, or the lifestyle associated with them.

Thus the presence of Western non-Muslim tourists, while potentially economically attractive to my Old City informants, also produce differences between ‘the West’ and ‘the Orient’ but both bring out and reproducing differences between local Muslims and Christians, as well as between ‘good Muslims’ and representatives of the (secular) state.

Talking through tourism hence simultaneously brings out a complex set of interrelations between economics, politics and morals where debates about local, national and global issues become interconnected.

The way ahead

It is not surprising, of course, that opinions differ on the future of tourism and leisure activities in the Old City of Aleppo. Apart from the 'optimistic traders' most of my informants in the market talk through tourism as if they had very little active part in what is going on. My medina informants were weary and suspicious of any project which was likely to make demands on them, and which might block their perceived economic prosperity. The great distrust vis-à-vis the state reinforced ideas that traders had better be independent of the state and others fostering a lack of interest in co-operating with generalized others, if they do not see any immediate economic or social gains in that co-operation.

So what lies ahead?

In the best of worlds any rehabilitation, even the most ambitious rehabilitation of old Aleppo would be a daunting task. This is the home of perhaps 120 000 people and every day an estimated ½ million persons visit it for work, shopping or leisure.

In the best of worlds the infrastructure would not be quite so run down and ownership of property would be less complicated facilitating rehabilitation. And most important of all there would be cooperation and trust between the people of the market and the political power-holders.

But even in the best of worlds – if these conditions were fulfilled – tourism widely defined cannot support the whole of the old city. For a viable future a balance between the interests of the generally poor and low class local inhabitants and customers in the old city and the interests of tourists and those catering to their needs must be reached.

The local inhabitants clearly want a sound environment and a functioning infrastructure.

The traders clearly want to make money.

But what do tourists want?

The other day I saw a news and interesting thing. A group of Western tourists came walking in the covered market. A group of Western tourists came walking in the covered bazaar with some kind of listening devices in their ears. They were, in fact, following a recorded guided tour through the bazaar. They were cut off from the real noise and bustle of the market and could thus walk in an enchanted, make-believe, world of the bazaar of long ago.

We are faced, I contend, with a paradox of authenticity: Tourists do not want the old city to be too clean, too neat and too obviously staged for tourists. The enchantment of old Aleppo space for foreign visitors and tourists hinges on its being a continued prosaic place for those making a living in the bazaar and those living in its residential quarters. Pre-recorded guided tours could be the ideal solution to this paradox. This will allow contemporary traders in the market to continue to talk on their mobile telephones about the price of Euro. They can plan their next business-trips to Italy, China or Indonesia or they can simply enjoy their part of the market as if it was still their own, blocking out tourists who do not spend money and only use the traders as stage-props. At the same time tourists can imagine that Aleppo is still part of the silk road where "the traditions of the Arab middle ages do not seem all that remote" (Ministry of Tourism 1989:147).

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