



Abu Hassan and the Urghoul

Abu Hassan, one of *Al Ard's* members, personifies the link between the group and the Palestinian heritage it strives to perpetuate. Abu Hassan is 58 years old and is one of very few Palestinians who still play the *urghoul*. He was born in northern Palestine in Naser Al Deen village, near Tiberius, in 1929. He experienced the 1948 war and occupation. Abu Hassan told about these times - fleeing from one village to another, fighting against the British colonialists and the Zionist settlers. He then told the painful story of leaving Palestine, that ended with him and his family living in Khan Al Sheih camp in Syria, near the borders.

Since he was eight years old, Abu Hassan has been interested in the *urghoul*. «When I was a child, I used to sneak away from home and walk -sometimes for hours - through mountainous areas to get to a wedding in another village, just to hear a certain young man play the *urghoul*. Once he arrived, all the others modestly put their *shabbabas* away, and made room for him.»

Abu Hassan followed the shepherds and tended their animals in return for

their giving him *urghoul* lessons. Finally, he decided he would depend on himself. He listened to famous *urghoul* players at weddings and imitated them. When he was sixteen, he was able to play the nicest melodies in weddings himself. By then he knew the music for the *debka* for all the different villages in Palestine. Abu Hassan also taught himself how to make his own instruments. «I used to walk for hours to find bamboo with the right size stalks and no knots. Then I would take a stalk to the instrument maker and sit with him until it was done.» Later he learned to make his own *urghoul*.

In Syria, Abu Hassan worked in construction for two years, and played the *urghoul* at weddings for free. When the demand for his music increased, he began to play professionally.

About his work in *Al Ard*, Abu Hassan said, «I consider myself a fighter in a front for protecting the Palestinian culture from Israeli robbery.» Abu Hassan played with the group when it was in Beirut. It is said that on one occasion, his performance made the audience cry. In the Soviet Union, Abu Hassan played the *urghoul*

in front of the hotel for hundreds of Soviets, after *Al Ard's* stage performance was over. «The Soviet people were very interested in my instrument,» he recalls.

Regarding the *urghoul's* history, Abu Hassan explained that the Canaanites (ancient people of Palestine) were the first to discover that blowing in hollow bones made nice sounds. The instrument was first developed in Al Hemma in the Tiberius district, made from bamboo with holes put in it. Until now, Abu Hassan explained, the Tiberius area is famous for making *urghouls* and other wind instruments. «The length and width of the *urghoul* makes a big difference in the tune.» Abu Hassan has made many *urghouls* for himself, for different occasions. The *urghoul* player must have strong lungs. When he was younger, Abu Hassan played for eight hours straight; now he can play for three or four. Abu Hassan concludes, «More Palestinians need to learn to play the *urghoul*. It is an element of old Palestinian culture, and we want to make sure it never dies.»