

# A Shop of One's Own



# **A Shop of One's Own**

Independence and Reputation among  
Traders in Aleppo

ANNIKA RABO

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## Corrected Vision

Receding brown road approaches with red  
green blue balloon to check eyes, clarity  
as objects. Uncorrected vision must be  
corrected to avoid headaches some people  
never get, preferring vague outlines, pink  
flowers becoming roses in time.

Bad eyesight requires getting close to people  
to know them all. Trees leaf regardless.

At a distance, a palm is any tree, native  
New Yorkers or Syrian transplant like E  
lying on its longest line is seh in Arabic,  
neither words, unlike I or eyeen rounded  
as a cursive E, Arabic four transcribed 9  
more like the whe of flower or oh  
in the middle of an observation  
of two letters that are and are not  
what you see with or without glasses.

Sandy Feinstein

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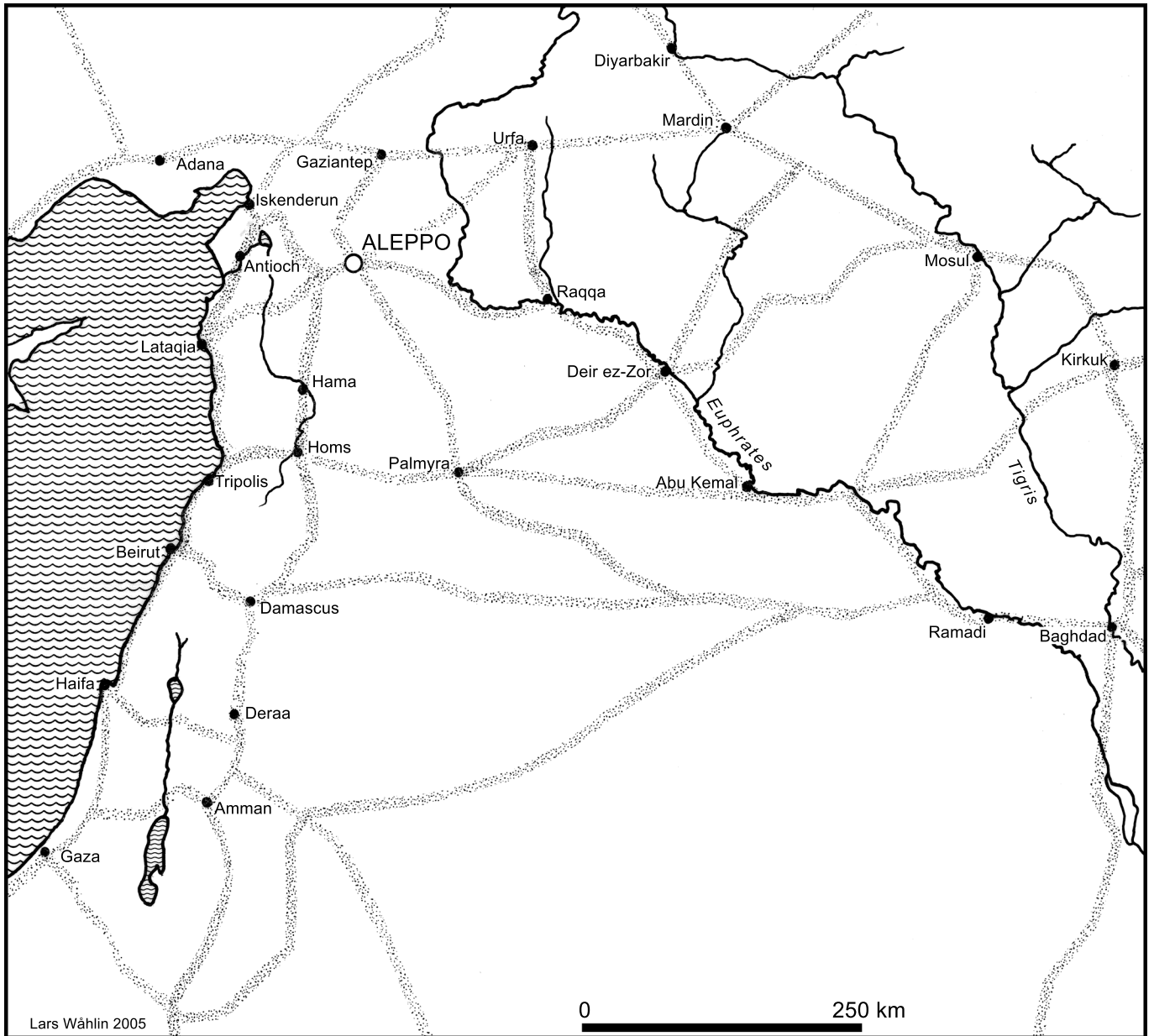
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A note on the transliteration of Arabic. I have used a very simplified form of transliteration, the sole purpose of which is to make the words phonetically readable.

Finally: since the late 1990s 100 Syrian lira is approximately two USD.





## WHAT IS A TRADER?

*What is a trader?*

*'A trader buys and sells. Trade is the essence of everything. A producer might produce, but without a trader nothing will be sold and the producer will not make money. A trader must be nice to his customers. He must smile and talk because nobody likes a nasty or awkward trader. The tongue of the trader must be sweet.'*

This book is about traders in Aleppo. It is based on anthropological fieldwork in that city between June 1997 and March 2002, with the bulk of my stay between August 1998 and June 1999. Trade is the business of buying and selling, but in Aleppo all those who buy and sell are not considered, nor do they consider themselves, as traders (*tujaar*, s. *taajer*).<sup>1</sup> A trader has to be a man, and, in a circular argument, he has to buy and sell in such a way that he and others recognize him as a trader. A trader should be in and of the market in such a way that he, and significant others, agree that he is, in fact, a trader. He should have a shop or an office with a good location, and should establish a long-term presence in the market. To be a member of the market is to share, express, and produce attitudes and values related to the notion that as a trader one is essential to the well-being of the country, and that 'trade is the essence of everything', as stated above by a shop-assistant. In this book these values and attitudes will be scrutinized and discussed in relation to three interrelated contexts; first the local market context in Aleppo, secondly the national context and the Syrian state, and thirdly the context of the traders' many international links.<sup>2</sup>

Aleppo is the second largest city in Syria and the country's principal centre for trade and manufacturing. It is one of the oldest continuously lived-in places on earth and can boast of an extremely rich and complex history. 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 continued to thrive intermittently 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. But the economic importance of Aleppo in the new Syrian republic was, and continues to be, significant, and in the late 1980s and early 1990s Aleppo traders were extremely active in trading with the Soviet (and later the former Soviet) republics.

My interest in Aleppo and its traders did not originate from a concern with the millennia of continuous habitation, nor from the importance of the silk trade. It started from an interest in the complex relationship between the Syrian state and the people in the private sector. For decades the Syrian state has been the main agent for economic planning and control, and the most important actor in industry. But although the country followed a fairly Soviet-oriented development ideology, the private sector was never totally set aside. While the economic power of 'capitalists' was curtailed, private ownership of a 'non-exploitative' kind has been constitutionally sanctioned, and traders in the market have survived. Furthermore, since the 1990s enterprises in the Syrian public sector have been dismantled, and the role of traders and industrialists has increased in the economy of the country. Public sector employees have become impoverished, while many self-employed in the private sector have become better-off. At the same time, there has been political stability, and economic changes have been controlled by the regime. Aleppo traders have thus been, and still are, very much affected by the presence, pervasiveness, and ubiquity of the modern Syrian state.

In the light of the above, I asked myself; what is the political and economic role of traders in contemporary Syria which is undergoing economic liberalization under authoritarian rule?<sup>3</sup> How do they define themselves and how do they view the state? What are their endeavours and ambitions? Aleppo traders exist on the margins of global capitalism, but they are heavily involved in international trade. How do they discuss globalization and economic change? In this book the juxtaposition between Aleppo's continuous urban trading traditions and the shifts in economic policies in Syria, in a period of increased connections with international markets, will be explored and elucidated by focusing on the traders.

## The Market and Its People

Aleppo has one of the largest covered markets in the Middle East, with shops and small stalls crowding the alleys and the narrow streets. In Aleppo there is trading in almost every corner of the more central parts of the city. There are shops, street vendors, offices, as well as workshops and storage facilities. In Aleppo, as elsewhere in the Arab Middle East, the market, *as-souq*, is the concrete place for trade, for buying and selling, where many people meet and interact. But, *as-souq* – like the English word ‘market’ – is also understood as a more abstract system of demand and supply. The *souq* can therefore, from the point of view of traders, be good or bad, slow or busy. As a specific place for trade, the *souq*, in Aleppo, is situated downtown, mainly in the old city centre – *al-medina* – with its covered alleys. Quite often *al-medina* (literally the city) and *as-souq* are used interchangeably by traders and non-traders alike to denote Aleppo’s most important place for trade.

There are over 70,000 registered trading companies in Aleppo and an incalculable number of unregistered traders, sellers and part-time ‘businessmen’. Obviously, I only met with, and talked to, a fraction of these. During the course of my work I got to know around 30 traders well, and I had a greeting and small-talk relationship with over a hundred. Aleppo traders come in all shapes and sizes, but the vast majority are owner-managers of small businesses, and most registered trading companies belong to a single individual. Trade and production in Aleppo are extremely heterogeneous and fragmented, with a quite complex ownership and management structure. Businesses are often jointly owned or managed with brothers, sons or other close relatives. Many are based on investments from sleeping or active partners, and many traders invest in industry and in other traders’ businesses. Most of my informants had shops and could be defined as shopkeepers. Most, however, were not only shopkeepers, but as a rule were involved in other kinds of trading or production activities as well, and most worked in both retail and wholesale trade.

Traders are found everywhere in Aleppo, but they are more densely concentrated in the city centre and in the old historic market. This is where most of my informants work and have their shops or offices. Traders in the old city centre (the *medina*) generally belong to families that have been traders for a number of generations, and consider themselves to be part of ‘the people of the market’ (the *abl as-souq*). They are not, with some exceptions, the ‘old rich’ whose wealth and influence were based on land-ownership, real estate, industry or connections with foreign markets. Nor are they the ‘new rich’ whose wealth is based almost solely on political connections. Rather, they are people whose

names and destinies are tightly bound to the market and to trade. In every major Syrian (and Middle Eastern) city there is a core of such people. They usually belong to large families whose names are well known – inside and outside the market – as traders and as rooted in the market. Compared with ‘traders’ (*tujar*), *abl as-souq* is an even more amorphous term. Like ‘traders’ it is a term that cannot be defined by specific criteria, yet Aleppians ‘know’ who to include or exclude from this categorization. For the most part, my trader informants did not classify themselves or others as part of the ‘people of the market’. Just like the term ‘trader’, it was obvious to them who were and who were not, at any particular time, part of the people of the market.

Aleppo used to be a polyglot, multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian city. Compared with the situation in the 1940s the people of the market have become more homogeneous, linguistically, religiously and ethnically. Today the traders in Aleppo, and especially the people of the market, are predominantly, or present themselves predominantly as urban Arab Sunni Muslim. Christians and Jews used to be very important in the Aleppo market, but the Jewish minority has all but disappeared. The large Christian minority in Aleppo is divided among more than a dozen denominations, all with their own separate churches. The most numerous is the Greek Catholic, followed by the Armenian Orthodox church. Kurds are the largest ethnic and linguistic minority in Aleppo today, most of them quite recent migrants from the predominantly Kurdish rural areas to the north and northwest of the city. Many of the rural customers in the covered market are Kurds coming in to shop.

Among Aleppo traders, the people of the market are seen, and see themselves, as epitomizing the values and attitudes of the Aleppo market. The *abl as-souq* claim that Aleppo traders – and they themselves in particular – are ‘traditional’ and ‘conservative’. They condone separation on gender grounds and insist that their own 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, as expressed above, is ‘the essence of everything’. The overriding aim of traders is to have shops of their own. That way they can be ‘settled’ and ‘independent’. They commonly claim that a good reputation is a trader’s most important asset. Although the market is not like it used to be, trade in Aleppo is still based on ‘trust’. Many express a strong attachment to their particular section of the market, but they have little interest in the long-term history of Aleppo or the *medina*. In this book such Arab Sunni Muslim



traders working in the *medina*, who can be classified as *abl as-souq*, constitute the bulk of my informants.

### **Markets, Souqs and Bazaars**

In the anthropological study of markets and trade, Malinowski's work on the Trobriand Islands forms an important point of departure.<sup>4</sup> His analysis of the Kula trade ring drew attention to issues that are still debated in anthropology. Malinowski described the Kula trade as vast, extremely complicated and largely ceremonial, but linked to a more prosaic trade in basic necessities. He also claimed that the Trobrianders had no notion of the Kula as a total system, or of the functions of the Kula in integrating tribes over enormous distances. To most anthropologists, the study of markets, trade and exchange, while interesting and important, is not an end in itself,<sup>5</sup> but it is part of a broader endeavour to compare and reflect upon human experiences and activities in space and time. While some anthropologists have been inspired by classical or neoclassical economics, most anthropologists see 'the economy' as embedded in culture and society.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, anthropologists typically stress the need to analyse critically the taken-for-granted views of 'natives'/informants, but also emphasize the need to scrutinize scientific assumptions. These strands of thought have converged in critical studies and analyses of the modern market. There is a growing anthropological literature scrutinizing assumptions based on neoclassical economics, and a growing literature questioning both academic and popular understanding of 'the market' or 'the economy' in the contemporary world.<sup>7</sup> I join that critical scrutiny by asking: How do traders in Aleppo talk about the market and the economy? What can this tell us about their understanding of themselves? In what ways does this affect their relationship with non-traders and with the state, as well as vice versa?

The study of specific and concrete peasant marketplaces has a long tradition in social anthropology.<sup>8</sup> Such a vantage-point may be important in scrutinizing circuits of exchange of goods and services, and in analysing how peasants are dependent on middlemen and patrons to connect them to outside localities. But not very much has been done on souqs (or bazaars)<sup>9</sup> in the Middle East, either inside or outside anthropology.

What is a souq – except, to the outsider a crowded, confusing, colourful, and Oriental place for buying and selling? In the late 1960s Clifford Geertz started collecting material for his well-known and extremely influential anthropological study on the bazaar economy in

Sefrou, a quite small town in Morocco with about 600 shops.<sup>10</sup> He noted that, although social scientists recognized the importance of merchants and the bazaar in the Middle East, very little research had been undertaken.<sup>11</sup> In his detailed study Geertz stated that bazaars are found in many parts of the world, as economic and social institutions, but each bazaar also has a particular cultural expression. Geertz saw the souq as a leading institution in the Arab world, where goods of varied quality are sold under seemingly chaotic circumstances. He also asserted that the Sefrou market was able to illustrate 'what is Moroccan about Moroccan commerce'.<sup>12</sup> The focus of his account of Sefrou's bazaar was on negotiations and encounters between sellers and their customers, the general impression being that the bazaar has features which are little changed by time. He analysed it as a communication system, where 'information is generally poor, scarce, maldistributed, inefficiently communicated, and intensely valued'.<sup>13</sup>

The importance of the bazaar as a concrete place for trade and for social interaction has been particularly stressed in research on Iran. In a recent critical study Arang Keshavarzian<sup>14</sup> divides the bulk of research on Iranian bazaars into two categories. The bazaar may first of all be viewed as a symbol of tradition, and as a market which operates not only in economic terms. Secondly, it may be viewed as part of the class system, where the bazaaris can be classified as part of the national or the petit bourgeoisie. Proponents of the first view often underline the importance of the close ties between the bazaaris and the Iranian clergy. They also, rather tautologically, claim that the bazaar has resisted modernization because it is traditional. The class background of the bazaaris is used to explain the underdevelopment of Iran, and the position of the country in a global capitalist system. But although the bazaar is invariably seen as important, 'it does not always receive critical reflection'.<sup>15</sup>

The bazaar-as-tradition view can be found also in popular writings for a mainly Western audience. In a book combining text and photographs from the markets of many Middle Eastern cities, Walter Weiss claims that the bazaar is not only a marketplace but also 'a city within a city, with its own economy and way of life and a spiritual background', now threatened by 'Western industry and technology'.<sup>16</sup> This view of the bazaar is echoed in a locally published guidebook about Aleppo. To walk around the 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'.<sup>17</sup> In a booklet published by the Syrian Ministry of Tourism the covered Aleppo market alleys are said to be 'living museums which depict medieval life'.<sup>18</sup> In the covered market, 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'.<sup>19</sup>

In the present study such a nostalgic position will not be propagated. On the contrary, I assert that, although the Aleppo souq is enormous and houses a vast number of traders and others, its 'economy' and 'way or life' cannot be radically distinguished from the rest of the city. The aspirations (and the lifestyles) of the traders, as will be reiterated throughout the book, are also shared by many others in the city. The souq is, however, extremely important to most of my informants. It is the place where they spend most of their time, and where they perform their 'trade-ness'.

The historical importance of Aleppo as a city of trade, and the availability of court records and other source material, are reflected in a number of important studies.<sup>20</sup> There is also research on the social history of the city, in which the market is scrutinized along with other urban institutions, or studies focusing on specific topics, such as the family, in an urban and trade setting.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, there are interesting historical studies of merchants in other parts of the Arab world, which set trade into a wider context.<sup>22</sup> All this research points to a considerable complexity and flexibility of urban social institutions,<sup>23</sup> and all implicitly or explicitly question my contemporary informants' description of themselves as 'traditional and conservative'.<sup>24</sup> One should ask: traditional in relation to what, and conservative in relation to whom? How traders, and especially the people of the market, talk about themselves and others in the city, I shall show, needs to be understood in a local context, in the context of attitudes towards the state, and how they see their role in the contemporary world. I shall argue that by talking about themselves as traditional and conservative they distance themselves from public employees and political power-holders – on whom they depend – to gain or maintain a shop of their own.

### *Petty Bourgeois or Entrepreneurs?*

The bazaar-as-tradition view, then, has very little, as I see it, to offer in the analysis of Aleppo traders. Perhaps a class analysis can deepen an understanding of the traders? If bazaaris or *abl as-souq* are characterized as petty bourgeois, they can be compared with other market people across time and space. In the Marxist tradition, this class, or stratum, is positioned between the bourgeoisie – the owners of production – and the dispossessed proletariat. Like peasants, they own their own means of production, and they are usually self-employed. The emergence of a petty bourgeoisie depends, in the classical tradition, on the emergence of the

bourgeoisie. They are dependent on, and commonly allied to, the owners of the means of production. The ideology and the political activities of the petty bourgeoisie have been characterized as both shifting and shifty. The very concept 'petty bourgeois' came to be, and still is, associated with narrow-mindedness, an anxiety to cling to propriety, and fear of change and the unknown.<sup>25</sup>

The complexity of class in Syria and the Middle East generally is brought out in research where a class analysis of the state, rather than an analysis of ethnic or primordial ties among the ruling strata, is crucial to understanding the political and economic developments in each country.<sup>26</sup> The Syrian state, as argued, for example, by Volker Perthes, has ushered in a new bourgeoisie which has reaped the largest benefits from the various spouts of economic liberalization.<sup>27</sup> In classical Marxist literature the petty bourgeoisie was thought to disappear. Instead, its resilience has been obvious in many countries and discussed by many scholars. In Syria, for example, the petty bourgeoisie expanded in the 1970s and the 1980s. The majority lives from trade, construction and services.<sup>28</sup> Detailed class analyses thus point to the importance of the petty bourgeoisie in the Middle East and underline how the state – even, as in Syria, under the banner of Arab socialism – has contributed to the growth of this class. Syria is, or has been, a political anomaly, because institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have not been able to dictate the economic policies of the Syrian government. But economic liberalization has taken place, and has contributed to the decrease in public spending and the increase in small private firms.<sup>29</sup>

Most of my informants can, in fact, be classified as petty bourgeois, and such a classification has some usefulness in understanding Aleppo traders in a comparative perspective. But some of them have expansive businesses, and in the political economy tradition a petty bourgeois is seldom cast in a heroic future-oriented role. Perhaps they should be classified as agents of change; as entrepreneurs?<sup>30</sup> Since the late 1980s, and not least since the fall of the Soviet Union, small entrepreneurs have been highly valorised among neo-liberal market advocates. They have been lauded as a harbinger of change in stagnant state-controlled economies. While busily lining their own pockets, entrepreneurs would simultaneously contribute to political development, that is, to civil society and liberal democracies. Empirical studies from the Middle East do not affirm such a valorisation.<sup>31</sup> What about the Aleppo traders? In this study I shall show that the activities of traders in Aleppo, including those who could be classified as entrepreneurs, have not paved the way for 'more' civil society or support for drastic political change. Traders, I

shall argue, see themselves as victims of corruption in the public sector, but, as will be discussed, use mediation or pay bribes to safeguard their enterprises. The multi-faceted relationship between traders and the state is crucial to understanding the political views of traders in Aleppo.

Entrepreneurs can also be studied in history, as demonstrated by Gunnar Dahl. He has studied late medieval Italian merchants engaged in overseas trade.<sup>32</sup> In this fascinating material, based on merchants' diaries, Dahl analyses the simultaneous presence of economic rationality and the importance of honour and personal reputation. These merchants reasoned in ways very similar to those of many of my informants. They certainly wanted to make money, to achieve profits and to gain wealth. Yet they also advocated modesty and moderation. Interpersonal trust was crucial because returns were of necessity delayed in overseas trade. Dahl's material can be used to speculate about the 'budding modernity' of the medieval Italian traders, but also about the 'lingering backwardness' of the contemporary Aleppo traders. In such a reading the 'European' medieval traders point to a future Economic Man, while the 'Oriental' Aleppo traders tie into a past where honour and reputation were important. Such a perspective is also voiced in the bazaar-as-tradition line discussed above, where the souq or the bazaar is more than a market, and where traders or bazaaris have more than economic ties to the market. This view assumes that there are (Western/modern) markets where relationships are solely economic and where the entrepreneur expresses nothing of his private self. James G. Carrier is critical of such an assumption, which he sees as a cultural representation of the market.<sup>33</sup> Entrepreneurs are much more multi-faceted. He underlines how emotions and sentiments were essential to the American entrepreneur he studied. But such a narrative of 'the sentimental self'<sup>34</sup> he also sees as part of a Western glorification of the market. My informants, as will be shown, also contribute to a glorification of their understanding of the (abstract) market through their intense personal engagement in and on the Aleppo souq.

In nineteenth and twentieth century Europe, small-scale production, trading and retailing tended to increase when industrial employment decreased.<sup>35</sup> The same process can be discerned in current worldwide efforts to make people start their own businesses. Also in Syria the lack of public sector industrial or administrative employment partly explains the increase in the petty bourgeoisie, referred to above. In Aleppo small grocery shops are frequently opened by people with a small amount of capital and no prior experience of retail trade.<sup>36</sup> Before the Industrial Revolution retail selling in England needed skill in a particular trade as noted by Dorothy Davis, and traders served as apprentices before they

were able to open a shop of their own.<sup>37</sup> Retailing has changed enormously in the last hundred years. Now retail selling is no longer skilled work, while it has become organizationally complex, with large enterprises, brand names and numerous employees, she claims.<sup>38</sup> Retail selling in the souq, according to my informants, also needs less particular skill, compared with earlier times because products are more standardized. But in the souq the individual enterprises have retained their relative organizational simplicity. Most enterprises are small and are managed without elaborate book-keeping. Most also operate within what some would characterize as the informal sector, or economy.

Despite the enormous interest in, and concern about, the so-called informal sector/economy,<sup>39</sup> there is little agreement about how it can be defined, analysed and understood. Are informal economies part of any economic system, or an integral part of the capitalist world economy? Are people forced into the informal economy, or do they choose informal activities rather than formal wage labour?<sup>40</sup> What is the role of the state, not only in defining an 'informal' sector outside its control, but also in perhaps promoting such a sector? Despite disagreements, researchers concur that the 'informal' economy should no longer be regarded as an anomaly in underdeveloped countries, en route to disappear through economic development. Informal economic arrangements can even today be deemed 'progressive' and as an asset in developmental processes; epitomizing an entrepreneurial spirit.<sup>41</sup>

My Aleppo informants did not conceptualize their economic endeavours in a formal-informal dichotomy. Traders' networks, vital for their survival and prosperity, might be classified by professional economists as 'informal', but are, from the point of view of the traders, both formal and binding. In the Aleppo market most transactions may have an 'informal' aspect. Labour arrangements, utilization of space in the market, import-export, the selling of products and the production process itself, crisscross the formal/informal dichotomy, blurring the lines between the two. There are rules and regulations governing both the 'informal' and the 'formal' economy, and there are transgressions of these rules in both the 'formal' and 'informal' economy. From the point of view of traders, as will be shown, representatives of state bureaucracies and institutions do not represent 'formal' law, rules and regulations, but rather erratic obstacles they have to overcome.

The 'informality' of the souq hinges to a large extent on the use of family labour. Historians have underlined the ambiguous role of the 'family' for the petty-bourgeoisie and their businesses. On the one hand, small firms have been established to support 'the family', and on the other hand cheap or non-remunerated family labour has been the basic

asset of such firms.<sup>42</sup> But what does ‘family’ business mean? Gulliver and Silverman, in a historical anthropological study of a quite small Irish market town, insist that such a concept is not self-explanatory and should be the starting-point of an analysis. They sketch a number of different, but overlapping, meanings given to the ‘family shop’, which have to be looked at in the light of an empirical investigation. To understand the role of unpaid family labour, they stress the need to differentiate between regular and irregular participation, and to scrutinize the developmental cycle of the family. They also point out that researchers need to clarify if the ‘family-shop’ means that ‘family-members have normative rights in its resources’, or simply if such a shop should be kept in the family, or if the shop is a symbol of ‘so-called family centeredness’.<sup>43</sup> Among most of my informants the ‘family-shop’ typically means all of the above. As will be shown, ‘family’ is practised in different ways among my informants, but to have a family – i.e. to have sons – is an implicit goal in the souq. It is a symbol of market settlement and an instrument for gaining independence. Yet relationships between fathers and sons are also commonly fraught with tension.

As can be seen from the above discussion, researchers focusing on class – often in a political economy perspective – or entrepreneurs – often in a microeconomics perspective – clearly lean on very different theoretical inputs. But they are similar in a kind of utility orientation. The contribution of specific classes, or specific individuals, to economic or political development is measured, questioned and analysed. When trying to understand traders in Aleppo, both ‘petty bourgeois’ and ‘entrepreneur’ are concepts that are ‘good to think with’ in the Levi-Straussian sense.<sup>44</sup> Both concepts have also informed my research. But my work is not oriented towards the ‘contribution’ of Aleppo traders to some larger societal goal. I do not ask: what are Aleppo traders good for? I reject forcing my informants into a trajectory where they will represent a ‘reactionary’ or ‘progressive’ voice/force in the inevitable march of history.<sup>45</sup> Not only assumptions about ‘the market’ need to be scrutinized but also the tendency to attribute specific roles to specific economic actors. Arturo Escobar, critically discussing models of development, stresses that so-called ‘alternative models’ are typically based on the same premises as the ones currently in fashion. But alternatives ‘can most fruitfully be gleaned from the specific manifestations of such alternatives in concrete local settings’.<sup>46</sup>

It is in such a light that this account of Aleppo traders has been crafted. I want to make an ethnographic contribution by filling a gap – that of Syria in general and traders and *abl as-souq* in particular. But I also want to contribute to the anthropological analysis of how contemporary

global economic and political processes are shaped by and articulated through values and aspirations among a certain set of people in a specific locality. Aleppo traders, and especially the *abl as-souq*, do manifest alternatives to the neoclassical model of the market. Thus they are 'good to think with' when ruminating over, or analysing the role of petty bourgeois or small entrepreneurs globally. In Aleppo, the endeavour towards *a shop of one's own*, and the endeavour to be *settled and independent* and their concern about their *reputations*, are found among a great many non-traders. But unlike many others, the traders are able to embody and exhibit such wishes. How they muster the resources to do this, is of general significance.

### Fieldwork in the Aleppo Souq

The Aleppo souq is a place where many different kinds of people meet, co-operate, compete, buy and sell. City-dwellers, villagers, rich and poor, men and women, Muslims and Christians, Arabs, Kurds and Armenians all meet in the market. Traders in Aleppo are part of a continuous tradition of regional and transnational economic networks where its souq has been one important link in long-distance trade. The Aleppo souq thus opens itself to various kinds of research questions. It is a site where commerce takes place, where commodities change hands, where consumption is negotiated and desires are displayed, shaped and changed. It is an ideal place to study how space is transformed into place. My interest, however, was not focused on that particular locality as a totality. I started my field research looking for '*tijaar*' in the old covered souq in the *medina*, and understanding trade in the old covered souq in relation to trade in other parts of the city. I came to spend most of my time in the covered souq and in the central part of the city, where my informants had their shops and offices. But, with the help of a short-term assistant, I also made an inventory of trading activities in the less central parts of the city.

Initially I had the intention to find informants with a variety of trading interests and various levels of income or wealth. But, as I quickly realized, it was extremely difficult initially to assess the amount of business, the turnover of the manager-owner, or the prospects of a particular establishment. A dusty hole-in-the-wall in the souq, with a ragged-looking owner-manager, could be extremely successful, while a larger or more elegant shop could have an owner on the verge of bankruptcy. At the outset, it was also difficult to assess the precise nature of the trading and business interests of a particular trader. He might sell textiles, but also be investing in the production of candy, or have a



sleeping partner with an import–export business. My main informants simply came to consist of about thirty traders for whom my presence was apparently no imposition. I never asked these traders about their incomes, but as I got to know them better, it was possible to gauge their wealth by indirect means. Did they have a car? What part of the city did they live in and how long had they lived there? Were their sons and daughters getting married and how were they provided for? Did they have assets that were invested in new ventures or were they liquidating assets to repay loans? But as my fieldwork progressed it became less and less important to know the income and wealth of my informants, and instead it became more and more interesting to understand their attitudes towards money and wealth, by analysing how they talked about these issues. Most of my informants and souq acquaintances talked about the ‘frozen’ souq and most complained about the lack of ‘movement’ in the market. Such complaints are linked to relations with other traders. To boast about wealth or about ‘good trade’ is considered shameful in the souq, and it may also bring out envy in others. But such complaints are also related to traders’ relations with the state. These issues will be looked at more closely in the following chapters.

Most of my main informants were middle-aged and all but two – both Christians – were married. Trade and industry linked to cloth and textiles dominate Aleppo. Many of my informants work in these sectors but others do not, as can be seen from the examples below, chosen to illustrate the heterogeneity of backgrounds and ways of making a living:

Abu Samer<sup>47</sup> (with one of his brothers) runs one of their father’s two shops in the souq. He sells all kinds of nuts, raisins and cereals, both retail and wholesale. It was his grandfather, who migrated from a village close to Aleppo, who started in this particular branch of trade. A third and fourth brother manage the second store, while the fifth brother is not in trade at all but supports himself doing various things. The nuts and raisins are partly local and partly imported.

Abu Munir is from a family with trading interests. He has four stores in the centre of Aleppo selling men’s clothes and shoes. The stores all have different stock and price levels, and are geared to different kinds of customers. Four of his brothers have stores in the vicinity in various branches. Abu Munir also has a small factory making suits (operated with a partner), and he also owns a fruit and sandwich stall. Abu Munir has close links to Romania where he lived for a while. He still goes there frequently to supervise his commercial interests. Abu Munir imports walnuts from Romania and exports Syrian cookies and chocolates, arranging the transport himself, and also takes along products from other traders and producers.

Abu Khaled is from a large and well-known family of traders who for generations have worked mainly in textiles. His father had a small shop in the main covered market. Two brothers studied in Western Europe, and settled there after the completion of their education. Abu Khaled was a very good student and did not plan to become a trader when he was young. He obtained a government scholarship to study in the Soviet Union in the early 1970s and continued with postgraduate studies, and began to trade by selling Syrian products to the USSR. When Abu Khaled came back to Syria, he worked for the government for a few years and then quit. He bought a small shop in the souq, close to one of his brothers, and in proximity to many other relatives, and started selling textiles. By gradually expanding, he bought another shop. During the early 1990s with the expansion of trade with the former Soviet Union, Abu Khaled bought a storage facility in the souq and used this for the export of textiles. During this busy and lucrative period he also invested in real estate. He used to commission the manufacture of cloth or clothes, alone or with partners.

Abu Imad has a shop for sheets, bedspreads and towels in the souq. The shop of his late father – opposite his shop – is managed by Abu Issam, one of his brothers, with the help of a third brother, who worked in Saudi-Arabia for twenty years. A fourth brother, the youngest, buys and sells to other stores. Abu Imad invests in various enterprises when he is able. He used to export to Russia, but did not find this very profitable.

Jibrán and his two brothers have inherited a vast business in spare-parts for cars and agricultural machinery. They have shops close to each other in one of the 'spare part' areas of the Aleppo souq. One brother is a medical doctor and a major importer of medical instruments. Another brother worked for many years in Western Europe. Jibrán is also the agent for many foreign companies for particular spare parts. With a partner he opened an Italian name-brand store in Aleppo a few years ago. This is run as a franchise from the mother company. Most products sold in this store are made in Syria.

Abu Khalil, with a partner, has a factory producing picture frames and a shop selling the frames. Abu Khalil spends most his time in the shop in the centre of Aleppo. His father sold yarns and thread in the souq, but Abu Khalil became a painter's apprentice and specialized in decorative house-painting. After more than a decade of strenuous (and dangerous) work, he thought that picture frames would be more lucrative. He and his partner import most of the raw material from Russia and have started to export to countries in the vicinity.

During my fieldwork the market was never very brisk, and most of my

informants had time on their hands. But I had no monopoly on their attention. Customers, neighbouring traders, relatives, friends, and officials would pass by and vie for attention as well. Usually so many things were happening in a shop, or an office, that it was not possible for me to follow everything that was going on, let alone lead a discussion or decide what should be talked about. I had no formal questionnaire, nor did I tape any interviews. Usually I took no notes while in the souq, but wrote them up from memory when I got home.<sup>48</sup> Sometimes I sat for hours with informants, sometimes just for a few minutes. They were too many to observe, sit, or discuss with, every single day, and the souq was too vast to even walk through and casually observe every day.

There were no typical field-days. I often set out in the mornings with the intention of seeing a number of specific traders or walking through a specific section of the market. In the market I tried, in a casual sort of way, to follow the intentions of each particular day, but always with an open mind to a change of plan. Traders I wanted to see might not be available. Many issues I discussed repeatedly with the same trader, or with many traders, checking on information in a roundabout way. Most of the traders I met only in the market, but some of them I visited also in their homes, or met in other settings in Aleppo. I know the wives and daughters of some traders, and the sons of more. This study is male-biased since Aleppo *tijaar* are men.<sup>49</sup> Women, however, are important customers in the market, and they constitute a visible majority in many shopping quarters of Aleppo. The wives and female relatives of the traders are also very much part of the souq, although they seldom make an appearance there.

Not only the way the field material was collected plays a role in how this particular account has been constructed. Specific national and international events – outside the control of the souq – became an important part of my analysis. Between August 1998 and June 1999, when the bulk of my material was collected, Syria had municipal, parliamentary and presidential elections. These elections provided inspiration for many talks with traders. Visits by tax collectors and the ubiquitous petty corruption provided the back-drop to a great many, often heated, discussions among, with, and about traders. In June 2000, while I was revisiting Aleppo, President Hafez al-Asad – in the thirtieth year of his reign – died and was, within a month, succeeded by his son Bashar. The process of the transfer of power was, not surprisingly, the single most important issue in Aleppo that summer, and was quietly talked about in every corner of the market. Questions of democracy, accountability and reform became accentuated that summer. In March 2002 my Aleppo visit was coloured by the Israeli attacks on the West

Bank. All these incidents, and the way my informants talked about them, appear in the book.

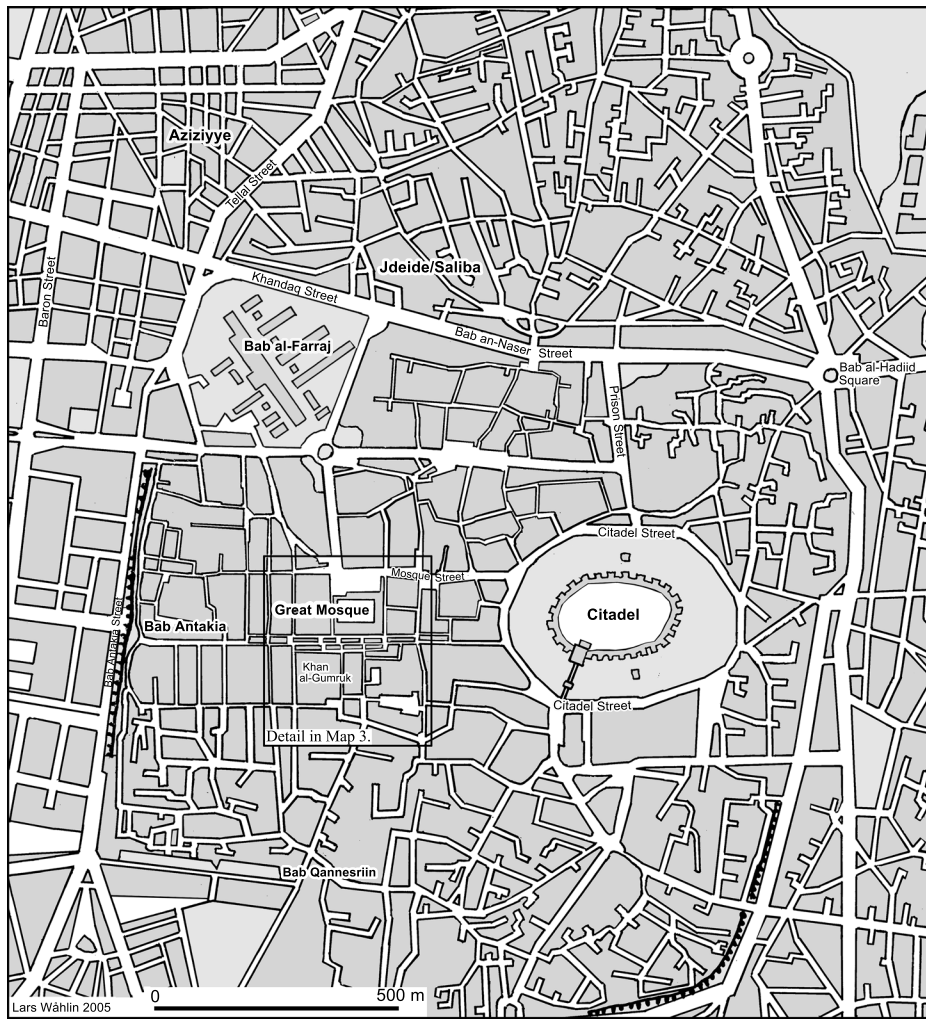
## The Chapters

The focus of this book is on traders, and especially on *abl as-souq*, rather than on the souq as a place. The souq, however, is inscribed in the everyday lives of my informants, just as it is being formed and shaped by their use of it. The importance of the souq, the *medina* and the city will reiterated throughout the book. How traders and others use space and transform it into place will be looked at in the next chapter, 'Space, Time, and People in Aleppo'. The old city centre – the *medina* with its souq – has retained its economic importance in Aleppo and my informants prefer to have their shops and offices in the city centre which they see as an excellent commercial location and the arena on which to display their *tajer*-ness. Gender, class and ethnic and religious affiliations are important in how people move and live in the city. The Aleppo market is still very much tied to the regional rural hinterland. The *medina* depends on rural customers, and seasonal cycles affect the economy of the city.

The overarching aim of the traders – a shop of one's own – will be looked at more closely in Chapter 3, 'Trading Independence'. A shop is both a symbol of and a means to gaining and maintaining independence, of being free and not taking orders from others. But in order to become and to stay independent, traders are heavily dependent on others for credit and for partnerships. Such strong interconnections are both reflections of, and contribute to, the fragmentation of the market. Traders generally shun involvement with the state and public bureaucracies, and do not admit that they have profited from policies of economic liberalization. The focus of Chapter 4, 'Trading Names', is on the importance of reputation in the market. Traders commonly claimed that their 'good name' – their reputation – is their most important asset. While they typically talked about their reputation in absolute terms, names on the market are relative and contested. On the one hand traders claim that each person has to achieve a name of his own, yet on the other hand, they acknowledged the importance of family and descent. Religion is also crucial in how reputation is presented and discussed in the souq.

Chapter 5, 'Aleppo Events' depicts how public spectacles, like national elections and an urban rehabilitation project affected my informants. These events linked traders to non-traders in Aleppo, but they also underlined that citizens are differentiated in how they face authoritarian

regulations from the powers-that-be. Traders' ability to stay relatively independent of calls to manifest political loyalty publicly, reinforced their interest in having a shop of their own. Chapter 6, 'Trading on the Margins', focuses on the international links of my informants and how they discussed these in the light of the relative autonomy of the Syrian state. How traders debated regional and international politics and how bribes and corruption were condemned but utilized will also be looked at. Finally, 'Traders of the Twentyfirst Century' summarizes the arguments of the book, and sets my informants in a more comparative light.



## SPACE, TIME AND PEOPLE IN ALEPPO

Aleppo is Syria's second largest city with a population of over 1.5 million. Although the city has grown tremendously in recent decades it is still talked about as a village, where everybody is said to know everybody else. In contrast to many other old cities in the world, the economic importance of the historical city centre has not been destroyed in Aleppo. The medina, and the quarters close to it, still constitute the uncontested centre of the city. Here a heterogeneous array of people meet to buy and sell, stroll, window-shop, eat, pray, and visit government offices. The medina is especially important as the centre for wholesale trade, with retail trade mainly geared to rural visitors and urbanites with 'traditional' tastes. Aleppo is connected to a rich and fairly populous agricultural hinterland which affects its economy and way of life.

The spatial organization of central Aleppo is very important for the traders in their everyday lives. The souq is inscribed into their activities and their very personae, just as the souq is being formed and shaped by the traders' use of it. Place in Aleppo clearly produces meaning, and meaning is tangibly grounded in place.<sup>1</sup> As in any largish city, the pattern of movement and use of space are mediated by age, gender, occupation and wealth. In the case of Aleppo they are also mediated by religious and ethnic affiliations. Aleppians, like other urbanites, use space related to who they 'are', or who they present themselves as being. The meaning attached to specific quarters by Aleppians and frequent visitors, as in any other large city, is not fixed but fluid through the daily interactions of individuals.<sup>2</sup> The use of space, moreover, changes over the day and through the year in a cycle related to seasonal changes and various civil and religious holidays. Aleppians and visitors read the city through the buildings, the traffic, the shops and the services they encounter. In the city they also read each other through subtle, or not so subtle, signals of dress, of speech and of body movements. All together, this forms an integral part of the urban environment. For Aleppo traders the reading

of their customers, or potential customers, is, of course, an essential part of their professional skill. This chapter is thus mainly about the local and very specific context and its enormous importance for traders' sense of selves. The use of space and the making of space into place by many kinds of Aleppians will be looked into. The imprint of a cycle of seasons on the city and especially on the traders will also be described.

### Utilizing Space

Aleppo is an open city. At the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s there were no visible boundaries, or borders, restricting individuals' use of 'public' space. In principle any Aleppian (or visitor) could move about town at any hour of the day. According to all my informants, public security was very good, and was, in fact, constantly brought up as something particular for Syrian cities in general, and for Aleppo in particular. Aleppians stressed that women could leave wedding parties in the early hours of the morning wearing jewelry worth a fortune, without fear of being robbed.<sup>3</sup> Assault was said to be a very unusual crime, and people in the souq casually carried large sums of money in the ubiquitous Syrian black plastic bags. Public theft was rare and traders stressed their appreciation of public security, which they said they contributed to by caring and looking out for each other. Many, however, claimed that the ability of the state to protect its citizens and their property was crucial to retaining its last vestiges of legitimacy in the eyes of the traders.<sup>4</sup>

There were, however, numerous invisible boundaries working to police access to and utilization of public space. Space managed or owned by the Syrian state or the Aleppo council, such as streets, squares and gardens, can be defined as 'public space'. But such a delineation covers only a small part of such a concept. Mosques are publicly managed but not churches, yet churches are clearly not 'private space'. Most mosques are not open to the general female public, but are very accessible to the male public. Aleppo Christians do not visit mosques, except as tourists, and very few Muslim Aleppians have ever visited a church. A shop in the souq is a private space, in that it is controlled and managed by an individual. But this shop is also public, in that the shopkeeper, in general, tries to attract 'the public' to his shop. At the same time a shopkeeper is not trying to attract an undifferentiated 'public', but rather specific customers. A shopkeeper organizes his shop space – and in the souq habitually more than his shop space – to attract customers. It is, however, also true that shopkeepers use their shops as 'private' space. This is where they may have 'private' meetings, where they may eat, take naps, or read the newspapers. Space becomes place through use and



activity. Space becomes infused with meaning through relations between people. The public-ness or the private-ness of place is relative to who inhabits it and for what purpose. Aleppo is a spatially complexly 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.

### *Gendered Space*

Most adult men and women use the city space in very different ways.<sup>5</sup> In general, Aleppo men fuse into the city. The city is theirs and it is right to be a man in most places. In most ways the city works for and through men, especially in the daytime. Men are naturally in the city centre because of their work. They man offices, shops and workshops, they work in transport and they serve other men in the souq. Their presence is self-evident and legitimate. They may also be idle, hang about, or take a stroll. They may visit other men in their offices and shops for coffee, tea and gossip. They may go to the mosque to pray and to meet with other men. Women are also very much present in the city centre, but their presence has somehow to be explained and accounted for. The ideal for most Aleppians – male and female – is that women should not be employed, nor have their own enterprise, nor in other ways work for money.<sup>6</sup> According to this view, a woman has the right to be supported by her husband. It is his obligation to earn money to feed the family, and also to shop for food, and it is the obligation of the wife to make the house into a home. According to this view, married women are not obliged to leave the matrimonial house. Above all, women should have a purpose for leaving the house. Yet women are very much present in the Aleppo city centre. In the morning women and men from the rural hinterland come to shop in the souq. Retail trade in the medina is heavily dependent on Aleppo's hinterland, and especially before weddings the relatives of the bride and groom come to Aleppo to buy the bride's trousseau and her gold.

Aleppo women also visit the medina, especially those from the 'popular' (*shā'abi*) and nearby quarters. Aleppo women shop more in the afternoon than in the morning, and the early evening hours are peak-time for business in the shopping quarters close to the old souq, where women constitute the vast majority of customers. Women seldom shop alone, but come in groups of two, three or more. The city is more naturally Aleppian female in the afternoon and evening. This is considered a better time for going to the doctor, for paying visits and for

shopping, since the chores at home are done and the villagers have left the city. Better-off women are driven by car by their husbands, brothers or sons to various places in the afternoon and evening. Others take a taxi or the cheaper collective so-called micro-buses. Some drive their own cars. The evening is also the peak-time for the young men's strolling, shopping, cinema-going, or hanging about in the city centre. Parties and visits in connection with weddings are very important for Aleppo Muslim women, the most important taking place the night before the consummation of the marriage, and continuing into the early morning, when the bride is taken off to her new home. Today such parties are often arranged in a rented hall if the family can afford it. The men celebrate separately after their womenfolk have been escorted to the party.

The wives and daughters of my informants are very dependent on their male relatives and their husbands to escort them on their visits and errands. Most of my informants have moved during their life-time, from the medina or relatively central city quarters to modern quarters away from the city centre. They no longer live in proximity to many relatives or close friends. In the process of this residential mobility, the telephone has become an important medium of 'stationary mobility' for many Aleppo women. The wives of all the married traders I know call or are called by their husbands and their sons many times every day, evening and night. Men routinely ask women what is needed at home and they also report their own whereabouts.

Aleppo space is not gendered in any uniform way. Pre-puberty girls and older women can be much more mobile than young women. Young unveiled girls are sent on errands in the quarter. Older women control their time more than women of child-bearing age. Poor women and highly educated (and sometimes rich) women are more mobile than others. Highly educated women can move around the city for job or professional purposes. Kurdish women move around the city more than Arab Muslim women, due partly to poverty, but also to other notions of gendered space. There is also a general difference about gendered space between Muslims and Christians. Thus, there is no generalized male public to which a generalized female public is accountable in how they move and where. Women orient their use of space or signal this orientation according to the boundaries of propriety set by the ethnic or religious group they are, or want to be, identified with, or the stratum/class they identify with, or aspire to.

None of the traders I know, and none of my close informants, are married to women who are employed. But they, and others in Aleppo, know and sympathize with women who have to support themselves,

their children, their natal families, or their husbands. The majority of Aleppo's working women need the money. But there are also women who could afford to stay at home but prefer not to. My informants can accept this as well. Traders, for example, like their daughters to be taught by female teachers, and hence they accept teaching as a suitable female profession. They also like their wives to be treated by female doctors, and hence accept medicine as a possible female profession. But they do not want their own daughters, sisters or wives to work outside their homes.

House-cleaning is a fairly common job for poor Aleppo women, and this entails moving from one place to another. A great many poor uneducated women also work in their own homes at low-paid, mainly textile, farmed-out work, engaged on a piece-by-piece basis and picking up and delivering their work to a 'master' (*mu'allim*) in the souq, or directly at the numerous small workshops in the medina or the industrial quarters. The mobility in space for such women is often related to paid labour. Many other women work in their own homes in direct conjunction with the economic activities of their husbands, sons or brothers. When, for example, Zuheir started his textile workshop nine years ago in his own flat, his mother and sisters helped him by operating the sewing machines. Now his business is doing better, he has bought an adjacent flat and employs male non-relatives instead. He said that he preferred to employ men, although it was more expensive; but if he employed women he would constantly be asked by their families to be responsible for where they went and when.

Many Aleppo women use public 'leisure' space. With their children, grand-children or with a large family group they visit parks and areas planted with trees. Furthermore, they may well, with female relatives and friends, visit private 'farms' or orchards with swimming-pools, close to Aleppo; such places are owned by well-off traders and industrialists. But a great many, perhaps the majority, never go to restaurants, cafés, the cinema or public swimming-pools. Many such women are married to men who do not visit such places either. But many men do go to restaurants and cafés, to mingle with their male friends, business partners or associates. The Muslim traders I know do not take their wives to such places. But some, who can afford it and who like to, take their family along on outings to resort areas or the coast, especially in the summer, where they eat in restaurants and sometimes stay in hotels, or a *shaleh* (Fr. chalet/'cottage'). Most of my Muslim informants would never take their female relatives or their wives to a public restaurant where alcohol is served. Men might reject certain leisure spaces, but their range of choices is much wider than that for women.

*'Ethnicity' on the Move*

Syria is, and has been, an area of great ethnic, religious and linguistic heterogeneity.<sup>7</sup> Many minorities have clustered in specific regions, but most towns and cities today have attracted migrants from all kinds of ethnic and religious backgrounds.<sup>8</sup> Among the Syrian powers-that-be issues of ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity are highly sensitive. The ruling Ba'th party embraces an ideology of pan-Arab secularism, whereby all ethnic and religious differences are publicly under-communicated. All Syrian citizens are said to be equal and all are supposed to be equally Arab. A large ethnic and linguistic minority like the Kurds in northern and northeast Syria, with possible irredentist ambitions, is viewed as a possible threat to Arab unity. Yet the Ba'th party was originally more successful among Syrian (rural) minorities like the Druze, the Alawites, and the Christians. It was a party aiming to overthrow the mainly Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslim elite – an urban elite also with vast interests as landowners in the countryside. Since the Ba'th takeover in 1963, the ethnic composition of party members has both broadened and narrowed. More and more public employees have been obliged to join the party for career purposes, broadening the membership. But at the same time putsches have narrowed the 'membership' of the behind-the-scene's holders of power.<sup>9</sup> Analysts and popular opinion, both inside and outside Syria, have for decades claimed that the Ba'th party, the army, and the secret services are under the control of the Alawites.<sup>10</sup>

The sectarian composition of the regime, and its possible 'ethnic interests', is a highly complex issue, not directly related to the themes of this book. Suffice it to note that the ruling party, and the regime, have not been successful in their goal of eradicating religious and ethnic differences in Syria. On the contrary. People in Syria, especially in the cities, are exceedingly aware of such differences. They also produce and reproduce such differences through talk in their daily lives. Official policies of ignoring and negating difference have instead contributed to turning religious and ethnic sensitivities into vehicles for the presentation of selves and other. In such presentations gender plays a central role, which will be looked at more closely in Chapters 4 and 5.

The traders in Aleppo, especially those in the medina, present themselves predominantly as urban Arab Sunni Muslim. Compared with fifty years ago, the *abl as-souq* are today less ethnically, linguistically and religiously heterogeneous. However, Aleppo is still a polyglot, multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian city. Kurds are the largest ethnic and linguistic minority in the city, most of them quite recent migrants from the predominantly Kurdish rural areas to the north and northwest of Aleppo. There are large concentrations of Kurds in quarters on the

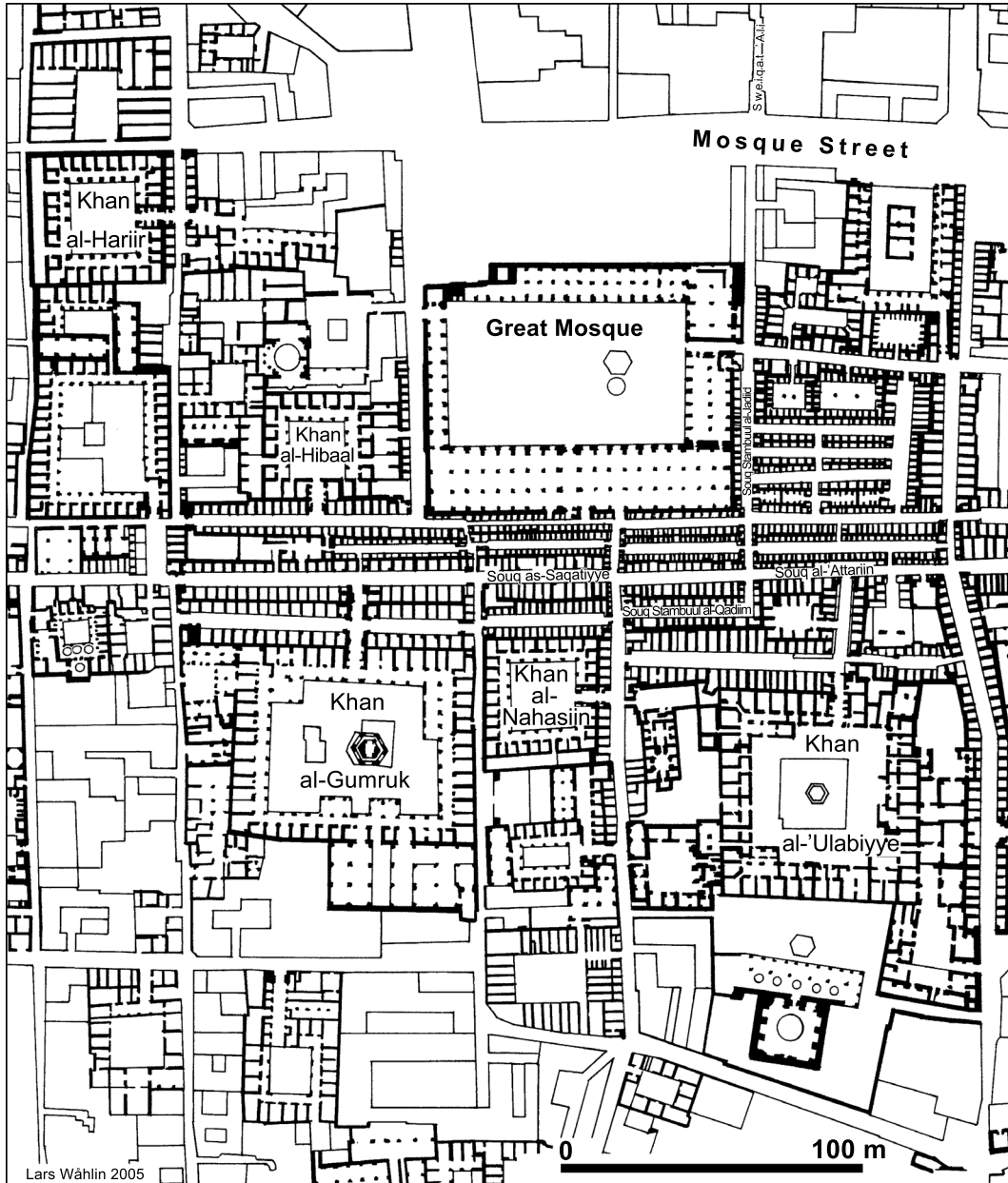
northwestern edge of the city. Many semi-rural Kurds, with no Aleppo abode, live with their families on construction sites as guards and caretakers. Many living in the northwestern quarters of the city work in construction and stone-masonry, often as free-lance labourers. Local lore claims that almost all waiters in restaurants and a great many taxi-drivers are Kurds. Kurdish women work in all kinds of domestic service and in home industries. Many of the rural customers in the medina are Kurds coming to shop. Arab Aleppians often stereotype Kurds as rural, poor and uneducated, and clichés about Kurdish stubbornness abound. Such clichés are commonly expressed about all rural migrants, as will be discussed in later chapters. Kurdish women, whether rural visitors or urban dwellers, do not, in general, cover their faces, nor wear the long black coat (*jilbaab*) typical of Aleppo female Sunni Muslim Arabs. Well-off or middle-class and educated Kurdish women veil themselves to a lesser extent than Arab women. Most Kurds in Aleppo, for their part, stereotype Arabs as small-minded and fixed on controlling the female use of space. There are Kurds in every walk of life, and Kurds move all over the city. But in the souq they are more often customers than traders.

In the seventeenth century Christians constituted about a fifth of the Aleppo population. Today the percentage is smaller, but is still higher than the Syrian average of perhaps 12 per cent, and higher than the share found in Damascus. Aleppo Christians are divided among more than a dozen denominations, all with their separate churches. The largest group is the Greek Catholic followed by members of the Armenian, Syrian and Greek Orthodox churches. Aleppo Christians are 'ethnically' divided into Arabs and Armenians. While Kurds are not allowed to establish separate schools nor to teach Kurmanji, the dominant Kurdish language in Syria, Armenians have been allowed to set up their own separate schools. Armenians have lived in Aleppo as traders since the Middle Ages. Larger communities, mainly from present-day Iran and Turkey, settled in the city from the seventeenth century onwards. But the large influx of Armenians came at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the persecution of Armenians took place in present-day Turkey. The Arab attitude towards Armenians in Aleppo is somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, people are impressed by what is seen as the fantastic work ethos and skill of Armenians. Many Christians admire and envy their ability to set up schools, newspapers, mutual aid groups and culture clubs. On the other hand, they are often seen by all others as clannish and self-contained, since Armenians rarely intermarry with other Christians.

Christians in Aleppo, more than the Kurds, have varied backgrounds

and life-styles. There are poor Christians living in close proximity to, or inter-mixed with, Kurds. There are very rich Christians who live in Christian 'enclaves', but also in 'mixed' quarters, close to the university, or in an older bourgeois quarter nearer to the centre. Muslims tend to classify Christians as 'well-off', because some of the extremely rich Aleppians are from well-known Christian families. Christians tend to see themselves as better educated than Muslim Aleppians, and many Muslims would agree with this. Aleppian Christians have previously, before the nationalization of the private schools, had access to a great number of schools under foreign and often religious sponsorship. Today this is no longer so, but the idea that 'Christians love education' still prevails in Aleppo (and in many other parts of Syria). The old, rich Christian elite families have amassed their fortunes in trade, industry and real estate. In the early 1960s in connection with the takeover by the Ba'th party, large private enterprises were nationalized and Christians and Muslims alike were affected by these policies. The Christian 'new rich' are traders/industrialists, just like their Muslim counterparts.

A few decades ago retail shops in the predominantly Christian quarters of Aziziyye, Sleimaniyye, Tellal Street and the Jdeide/Saliba quarters were generally owned and managed by Christians themselves. Aziziyye and Tellal Street were the 'modern' shopping areas of Aleppo, especially geared towards female shoppers. Tellal has now become a shopping area for mainly Muslim low and middle-class customers, while Aziziyye and the surrounding area is more mixed. Its back streets are where many young male and female Christians take a stroll in the evening, buying soft drinks or snacks from the numerous stands. But many of the shopkeepers in these 'Christian' quarters are now Muslim, partly due to the increase in the number of shops in general, but also to the decrease in the ratio of Christians to Muslims. Christians, in general, marry later and have fewer children than Aleppo Muslims, and they have migrated and left Syria at a greater rate. But there are also different opportunity structures for Muslims and Christians, with the latter, where possible, seeming to prefer to open offices or work-shops, rather than to work in retail. Christian traders in the covered souq have all but disappeared. Only a few decades ago, for example, Christians in general, and Armenians in particular, used to dominate the large gold market in the central covered souq. Now Sunni Arab Muslims dominate this market. There is still, however, a majority of Christian/Armenian silver- and gold-smiths in the historical Christian quarter of Jdeide. The 'ethnic composition' of Aleppo is thus both complex and dynamic. While Aleppo can be characterized as a divided city, it is important to underline



that class and the rural-urban division in many ways cross-cut religious and ethnic affiliations.

### The Medina Environment

Aleppo vies with Damascus, the capital of Syria, as one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. The city's icon is the citadel,<sup>11</sup> which is situated on a high mound in almost the dead centre and straddles the old city, thereby imprinting a continuity of use of space in the old city centre. The medina has been the city's commercial centre for thousands of years. But the change in the use of space has been profound, not least in the last half-century. Residential quarters have turned into places for commerce and industry, and the better-off in particular have deserted the medina. The seamless fabric of the covered souq has been interrupted by the construction of modern straight roads.

The main covered souq area stretches from the citadel mound to the west down to Bab Antakia (the Antioch Gate), along a street almost a kilometer long, with several shorter parallel and numerous perpendicular streets and passages. This, with some exceptions, is not a residential but a business area, consisting of shops, workshops, storage facilities, offices and service activities. Shops and offices can be either rented or bought. In the suburbs the vast majority of the shops are the property (*mulk*) of the shopkeeper or office-owner. In the medina and some parts of the 'modern' city centre renting a shop or an office is very common; in such cases the property is commonly owned by an old charitable institution (*waqf*).<sup>12</sup> In the medina there is not much noticeable selling and buying of properties or tenancies.<sup>13</sup> Traders always stressed that nobody sold a shop unless he was desperate for money.

Each part of the souq has a specific name (or more than one) usually corresponding to what used to be produced or sold in that particular part of the market. Retail shops in the souq are in general very small. The souq close to the citadel is, today, more and more geared towards tourists with tablecloths, silk scarves, *galabiyaat*, silver and jewelry being the main articles sold. But there are still some of the 'traditional' shops specializing in tent and household utensils for the bedouin. Where the old crafts and production disappear, cloth and manufactured clothes usually appear. Further down there is the Souq al 'Abi (the men's woollen capes, mainly used in the countryside), turning into the important Souq al 'Attariin, the old spice market which is still very lively. This is the busiest part of the souq, at an intersection of alleys and streets running into the souq. Here customers can buy a great variety of spices and herbs, but also custom-made herbal 'Arabic' medicines which are



prepared and mixed by many shopkeepers. Many shops sell the soap made of olive-oil and laurels for which Aleppo is still famous.

Souq as-Saqatiyye is further down, specializing in foodstuff, meat, and the sale of nuts. Further along the exit towards Bab Antakia there are shops selling tin pots and pans, a great many materials shops, and shops for cheap ready-made clothes. Close to the gate there are more general groceries, geared to rural customers arriving at the busy bus station near by. Along Bab Antakia Street, and along what remains of the old city wall, there are khans – old warehouses cum hotels – for grain storage, and a great many shops selling foam-mattresses and plastic mats, as well as shops selling dry lentils, beans, tea and coffee; all in close proximity to the means of transportation.

Entering the souq along the eastern wall of the Great Mosque one arrives at the busy Souq Stambul al Jadiid (the New Istanbul Market) where, for example, fripperies, bridal dresses and costume jewelry are to be found. To the east of this part of the souq there are many alleys running at right angles specializing in women's articles and the large gold market with around one hundred shops. There is also the tailors' market where men can have *galabiyat* and jackets made. Souq Stambul al-Qadiim, (the Old Istanbul Market), south of the main souq axis, is where material for women's dresses are sold. As in the gold souq, strong electric lights are used to attract customers and highlight the goods. From here one can continue to Souq an-Nahasiin, which used to be the market of the coppersmiths. Now it specializes in towels, blankets, bedspreads and sheets. Around the Khan al Gumruk, the largest khan in Aleppo, finished in 1574, cloth is sold, mainly wholesale. One of the oldest parts of the souq is the rope market, behind the southern (back) wall of the Great Mosque.

The souq is equally, if not more, busy to the north of the mosque. Here there are modern buildings packed with shops along what the Aleppians call Mosque Street, Citadel Street and Prison Street. Entering Sweiqat Ali (the Little Souq of Ali) from Citadel Street one finds a souq specializing in household utensils, glass, porcelain and plastic. The market streets in the medina are generally closed at night and only one road in the main souq is open for night-time traffic. The khans are closed with enormous wooden doors and the gold souq is also sealed off. To the north and south the souq blends into more residential quarters.

The medina is, as already stated, the uncontested centre of Aleppo, but not all Aleppians shop or conduct their business in the medina. Today the covered souq, which occupies the lion's share of the medina, has become more socially and ethnically homogeneous. Most of the retail customers are villagers and Aleppians from the lower classes, and most

of the *abl as-souq*, including the wholesale traders, are Arab Sunni Muslims who talk of themselves as traditional and conservative. My souq informants expressed no specific interest in the abstract idea of the medina, or detailed interest in its long history, as will be discussed in Chapter 5. They were staunchly here-and-now oriented. At the same time, however, they expressed strong sentiments about the medina as a place. To have, or to have access to, a shop or office in the medina is an indivisible aspect of being 'someone', and particularly being part of the people of the market. It indicates trading continuity and trade survival and gives a trader standing in the community which he deems important, as will be discussed in Chapter 3.

### *Shop Location*

Specialized gold markets, clothes markets and furniture markets have grown up in many parts of Aleppo to cater for people who are unable, or unwilling, to shop only in the city centre. Shops in such locations fetch high prices. Most of my informants argue that 'trade brings other trade'. One gains more from being located in a specialized souq, than one loses from competition from neighbours selling much the same things. One shop does not make a souq, nor do two, but, with three or more shops of the same kind, customers and prospective customers start to see the location as attractive, interesting and worth a visit. Traders, therefore, like to be where everyone else is. The medina is thus generally still thought of as a specially good location by many traders. However, one street differs from another, and one alley from another, depending on accessibility and on the briskness of the surrounding trade. The souq streets close to the Great Mosque are very good locations because they offer easy access into, and out of, the souq, and they are always very crowded.

*A Case of 'Excellent Location'*. Abu Jamil's shop and Abu Faris's office, and the shops, warehouses and offices of many of their relatives, are in the Sweiqat Ali, situated on an ancient axis from the medina centre to Bab an-Naser (the Gate of Victory). The location was considered excellent by Abu Faris and Abu Jamil. It is a case of 'trade brings trade', because shoppers know that if they need household utensils 'everything' will be found in this specialized market. Wholesale trade is interspersed with retail and many of the shops deal in both. Lorries and cars have access to the shops. Abu Faris and Abu Jamil also expressed an attachment to this part of the medina. This is their turf where they are surrounded by friends and relatives. Umm Jamil once complained that her sons were

too attached to this souq. 'Every day as soon as school was out they rushed to the souq to be with their friends. Nothing else mattered'. Her sister-in-law Umm Yousif added, 'My son Yousif just could not wait to be old enough to start working in this market. That was all he ever wanted'. The Sweiqat Ali was, from the 1920s onwards, the point of distribution for many new imported mass-produced consumer goods.<sup>14</sup> Now many of the products sold are produced in Syria.

*A Case of 'Bad Location'*. Abu Sleiman has a shop selling textiles in the Bab an-Naser souq. In the late nineteenth century Khandaq Street, along the northern edge of the old city wall, was opened for horse-drawn trams. The street, which had been created out of the rubble from the old city wall, following a devastating earthquake in 1822, was the broadest in Aleppo and an important entry point to the medina. All traffic from the east and the north was funnelled through this street. When motor-vehicless made their entry into Aleppo, garages were situated close to Bab an-Naser, making its souq a prime location, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. Abu Sleiman, now in his mid-eighties, reminisced: 'Thirty years ago there were more than eleven shops selling textiles, close to me. Now I am the only one left. Before the religious holidays it was so crowded one had to force one's way through. There used to be many tailors here as well, and shoemakers making nice shoes. Now there is nothing left of these quality handicrafts. This souq is dead'. The new city plans of the late 1950s included the destruction of part of the medina to make way for more traffic arteries. Part of Souq Bab an-Naser suffered from these new streets, cutting it off from the flow of traffic into the heart of the medina. Abu Sleiman had to rely on 'local' customers, while previously the whole souq had been much more geared to rural and intra-regional trade. Neither of his sons was planning to take over his business. One had a workshop producing textiles, the other worked on a truck distributing water. Later one of his neighbours, a tailor, sold his shop for less than a prime location would fetch in many of the more suburban residential quarters. The shop had been bought by a trader with a furniture shop in the same souq, and he planned to sell furniture in this one as well.

A good shop location, therefore, is where both customers and competitors thrive. Traders were seldom irritated by the presence of itinerant vendors, or stall-vendors selling pretty much what the shops sold, right on their door-step.<sup>15</sup> Typical responses from shop-owners were: 'God gives a living to everyone' or 'Everyone has a right to make a living', or 'They don't really compete with me. There is a customer for every seller, and every seller finds his customer'. Street vendors, stalls

and carts, from the point of view of my informants, contributed to drawing customers to a location, adding to the generally 'trade-conducive' atmosphere. 'Trade brings trade but customers also bring customers', as Abu Sabri commented one day. His shop had been empty of customers for a long time. Suddenly some came, and then another batch, and another. 'Customers prefer to stop at a shop where there is a crowd. They think that a shop with many customers must be a good shop'.

Location, in the medina, has to be assessed in terms of the activity in a souq as a whole. A 'good' location for a particular retail trader may have become a comparatively bad location if his souq is deserted by other retail traders. Industrial production and wholesale trade have encroached on the residential quarters of the medina and the quarters surrounding the old city. Wholesale traders, in their turn, are often highly dependent on the proximity of other wholesale traders. Many factory owners have a warehouse and/or office or shop in the medina where customers, clients and business partners can come. Many traders complain about the difficulties in loading and unloading products, or about the congested traffic in the part of the medina where motor vehicles are allowed. Yet, most who are established here prefer this central location to any other.<sup>16</sup> This stated preference is, quite naturally, due partly to habit; traders say they prefer to stay where they are, because they are used to it. But this preference is also a reflection of seeing themselves as part of the people of the market, and as a way of being in the centre of the market for information.

#### *Collection and Exchange of Information in the Souq*

One can characterize the whole of Aleppo as a market for information, where both demand and supply are amply available. The medina is the hub of such a market for information.<sup>17</sup> For traders, the collection, exchange, and selection of information are part of their profession. They need information to calculate risks and opportunities, and they need to bind and connect others to themselves as clients, customers and colleagues. But information is not used solely, or perhaps mainly, to further one's immediate business interests. This collecting of others is clearly an instrument for economic independence and settlement, but it is also a means of expressing oneself in capacities other than money-making. The two aspects cannot be separated in the praxis of the souq, because in the unfolding of souq interactions they flow into each other. Greetings like 'Good morning, hajj Taha, how is your health, what are your news?', or 'Welcome, welcome Abu Mustafa. How are your

children? Congratulations to the marriage of Mustafa' are laced into comments about buying and selling like 'Yes, bring us only fifty more of those chairs, they sell well these days' or 'Your price is no good. I cannot work with you.'

Greetings are obligatory among souq colleagues, often many times a day. Customers may greet a trader, or a trader may greet customers. In general, the interchange of greetings is between men. For a customer a greeting may act as a signal to attract attention. It is always correct for a trader to call out 'welcome' to any male or female presumptive customer. Not only greetings are many and varied, but also how people address one another in the souq. There is a myriad of greetings and responses to be used for all kinds of occasions, not only in the Aleppo souq but in Syria generally. The most common greeting in the souq is a 'hello' with a response of 'two hellos', 'good morning' with a response of 'morning light', or the more Islamic 'peace be upon you' always responded to with a 'and peace upon you'. Trader neighbours and friends, like Syrians in general, commonly call each other by their 'abu-name'.<sup>18</sup> If a person has been on pilgrimage to Mecca, they are frequently called *hajj* plus their first name (or *hajja* and their first name if it is a woman). The hajj/hajja title is also a respectful way of addressing older people in general,<sup>19</sup> especially if they are not well known to you. Many traders call their older customers 'hajj' or 'hajja'. Many customers do the same with traders. Customers can also call a trader or shop-assistant 'teacher'/'master' (*mu'allim*). This address is a polite 'cover-all' in many situations, and can be used when addressing all kinds of craftsmen and service people and even some professionals.

Traders in the souq typically exchange handshakes with other traders and with friends and acquaintances many times daily. Retail traders in general do not shake hands with customers, unless they already have – or in the process of buying and selling want to have – multi-stranded relations. Traders often kiss men they are close to – two to three pecks on alternate cheeks – especially if they have not seen each other for some time. Younger men often kiss the hand of older men, especially close relatives, or men they respect or revere, like sheikhs. In the souq traders usually avoid physical contact with women. The urban-rural division in the souq makes Aleppo traders much more circumspect towards, and much more bodily controlled in the presence of, urban Aleppo women.

How traders and shop-assistants greet each other, how they talk, how they move and sit, and how they dress reflect, in many ways, a personal style. But different parts of the souq also call for different verbal expressions, different degrees of bodily restraint and different dress. This, clearly, is not unique to Aleppo. Generally speaking, it is noticeable

that the more expensive (or extravagant) the merchandise, the more the need for a clean, smooth and restrained appearance. Not surprisingly then, traders and shop-assistants selling fripperies, luxury cloth, and more up-market ready-made clothes, are cleaner, neater and control their bodies more than traders in the markets selling lentils, spare parts or ropes. In the New Istanbul souq, where fripperies for women are sold, traders are invariably nicely dressed with clean trousers, shirt and often tie. In the rope, wool or cotton souqs, traders are more rurally or casually dressed. A 'closed' and covered body is a sign of urbanity, modesty and control. Retail traders with mainly female customers or 'female' merchandise and whole-sale traders with offices will not, generally speaking, spread their legs, slump on their counter, display their feet, unbutton their shirt, yawn loudly, spit or scratch their crotch.

Just as there are (patterned) differences in speech, dress and posture, there are, of course, great differences among traders in how intensely they participate in the receiving and spreading of information. The location of one's shop or office is important for the sheer number of people passing by, and thus, obviously, for how quickly information is spread in face-to-face encounters. Abu Sleiman, the old trader with a shop in the now rather peripheral location of Souq Bab an-Naser, has few passers-by or customers to talk to. Situated on a busy corner of Sweiqat Ali, Abu Sabri's shop, on the other hand, is in a good location for 'collecting others'. But location is not always relevant for the amount of talk a trader is engaged in. For many wholesale traders the telephone is essential in their work, and in general it is an important medium for spreading information in the market today. Traders can sit in fairly quiet corners of the souq and still be centrally involved in the goings on of the market and the activities of others. Some, like Abu Faris, combine both face-to-face talk with talk on the telephone. His office is usually crammed with visitors, but he is equally busy talking on the phone.

A busy location clearly increases the sheer amount of talk a trader is surrounded by, and increases opportunities for verbal exchanges. The spice market, on the main east-west axis of the medina, for example, is usually packed with people. But traders differ in how they use these opportunities. Some sit quietly at the back of their shops and often speak only when spoken to. Others stand in the shop doorway, or sit outside the shop hailing passers-by, known or unknown, opening up opportunities for extended conversations. But no matter how remote or quiet the location of a shop or an office, and no matter how quiet the trader, news, views and information travel quickly and constantly in the market. Even the most quiet and restrained trader in the souq is 'informed' and contributes to informing others.<sup>20</sup> To assess the

information of others is often quite difficult in the medina. Rumours, large and small, related to economic, political and social issues, thrive in the medina (as well as outside it). The souq ambiance fosters a spirit of exaggeration, partly to jest and joke, and partly as a response to uncertainties. Trade, even in the most stable of markets, is a game of uncertainties, and skilled traders hedge their economic commitments.

In the market there are a great many highly mobile people working in a service capacity. A shopkeeper is often tied to his shop, but many others are not, and such mobile people tie the market together. There are men with carts, selling seasonal fruits or vegetables, or nuts, candy, sweets and bread. There are coffee and tea-makers, with fixed stalls who are called on to deliver drinks to shops or offices. There is a newspaper seller wandering about in the medina. There are also numerous people transporting goods from one place in the market to another, with donkeys, small lorries, bicycles or wheelbarrows. Such people are important sources of information because they are of and in the market. Traders may ask if 'Abu Hassan' or 'Abu Ali' has opened his shop, or if so and so has returned from a trip. Young shop-assistants are often sent on errands and bring back news and also spread news of their employers. The children of traders who come on after-school visits in the medina are important in bringing and spreading information. They will return to their shop in a hurry to inform their employers, or their fathers, that the 'price-police' are making visits in such and such a place, or that the 'orderpolice' are checking that goods are not spread out into the street or the alley. Such a warning will immediately start a flurry of activity for retail traders in the medina. Price-tags are found, or blocking goods removed.

Some traders, like Abu Munir who has many shops, a workshop and an export business, are very mobile themselves. They move from place to place both collecting and giving information. The most stable unit for the exchange of information for retail traders is usually their neighbours. But customers, especially if they are regular customers, are also important bearers of news. Others, who are traders themselves, or owners of workshops – and thus of the market- are very important for retail traders. In the medina there are also other people who are neither ordinary customers, traders, or 'service-people' nor intrusive (or helpful) public employees. They are none the less part of, and contribute to, the souq ambiance. There are sheikhs, prayer-leaders and caretakers of the many mosques. And there are fools, madmen and beggars, whose livelihoods depend on the charity of the traders. The collection and exchange of information in the souq does not set it apart from other places in the city where trade takes place. The souq is not 'a city within a

city'. But in the souq this exchange and collection are quicker and more concentrated, because of the intense use of space.

### **Aleppo Time**

The daily use of space in the medina by the many people working or shopping there serves to give structure to the collection and exchange of information. Time can be seen as an integral part of space to organize the rhythm of the city. Public life in Aleppo affecting traders unfolds through at least three overlapping yearly cycles. There is the seasonal cycle with winter, spring, summer and fall. Trade and traders are very much affected by this seasonal rhythm, and the lifestyle among Aleppians at large changes according to the season, affecting public life and shared spaces. Aleppians recognize four distinct seasons, but the change from one to another, and the relative coldness, wetness, or hotness of a season vary. There is also an Islamic yearly cycle affecting both trade and citizens at large. This is a cycle of fasting, pilgrimage and religious feasts. Finally, there is a state cycle based on the Western (Gregorian) calendar regulating, for example, when schools and universities open.

### *Aleppo Seasons*

Aleppo trade does not ever really close down. There are different daily rhythms in the city depending on what merchandise or services are sold and bought. The wholesale market for vegetables, for example, close to the western edge of the medina, has its peak trade long before the retail souq opens up. In the central quarters of Bab al Farraj, there are shops selling foodstuffs which are open until early in the morning. Medina traders in the covered souq, however, close their shops around sunset. Winter closing hours are thus earlier than closing hours in the summer. But many continue their trade talk and go on doing business outside the medina at night. In the medina Thursday is the day when debts are settled, and Friday is the day off when the medina is closed. In other parts of the city, notably the Christian quarters, traders and shopkeepers may close on Sundays instead. The shops around Aziziyye are usually open on Fridays. Many shoppers, especially women, find this very convenient and on Fridays the streets in these quarters are usually very crowded. Shops should be closed one day a week, but many shops actually open every day. Shopkeepers can claim that they have both Muslim and Christian employees and that these choose when they want to be free. Christian traders may elect to close on Friday because their partners and customers take that day off, and for some Muslim traders



Sunday is a slack day because their trade might be connected more to export.

All traders recognize seasonal variations in trade. Obviously trade in agricultural products and in foodstuffs is closely related to the seasons. The trade depends on availability. Interest in food, in the preparation of food, and in eating is prevalent all over Syria. To collect and prepare provisions (*moune*) when they are in season is very common. During the late 1970s and early 1980s basic consumer goods were often either scarce, lacking, or poorly distributed, and the collection of provisions was absolutely essential for Syrian families. Provisions were hard currency and could be used for barter, or as an important aspect of gift-giving. In those days many Syrians insisted that the shortages were induced by the state. Today the availability of food is much more secure, but out-of-season foodstuffs are often very expensive and poor families still depend on laying in stocks. Aleppians claim that Aleppo is the food and eating capital of Syria, and they have endless discussions about the merits of their variations *kibbe* and *kebaab*, as opposed to those of Damascus or Hama, and frequently talk of how much they enjoy eating. While some Aleppians simply claim that Damascenes are too busy, too 'modern', or have too many female employees to care about food the Aleppian way, others say that Aleppians are not busy enough to care about anything but food. However, to lay in provisions is still a sign of good husbandry and is especially the duty of a good housewife.

Traders discuss not only food and eating in general, but commonly talk of the passing of each season in terms of food. In the winter hot, heavy, fat, sweet food is more prevalent than in the summer, when cold, light food is preferred. In the medina, as elsewhere in the city, ice-cream and cold drinks are sold in the summer, while these are less available in the winter. Many traders are also preoccupied with the drawbacks of over-eating and frequently discuss slimming and diets. A great number of my informants did regular check-ups and were told to watch the fat, sodium and carbohydrate content of their food and to exercise. 'Man should eat to live, and not live to eat', my informants often said, adding 'but we really like eating'.

In Aleppo it is, in general, the men who shop for food, as already mentioned, and in the medina traders have lengthy discussions with their wives over the telephone and amongst themselves about what to buy, from where and at what price. Many of my informants asked me over and over about Swedish cuisine, about agricultural products and food habits, and boasted about the versatility of Aleppo products. When foodstuffs important for provisioning appear on the market, not only traders in those products, but the whole of the medina seems to be

involved. A trader with links to the countryside may give olives to his partners. Another may buy large quantities of hot peppers – to be prepared into a paste – and distribute them among friends and relatives. In the early spring milk and cheese products are prepared for provisions. In some years wild desert-truffles appear in great quantities and are sold in Aleppo. In the late spring rose-petals, to be prepared as jam, are found on the market. Later apricots appear, eaten fresh or made into jam, continuing into the season of summer fruits and berries. In the summer watermelons are sold in enormous quantities at street-corners in the residential quarters. Some families collect the seeds, dry them, roast them, and later eat them. Other families still dry vegetables and herbs. In early fall the eggplants used for stuffing and canning appear. Then walnuts are also sold in great quantities for the stuffing. Later on the olives have their season and onions and garlic are bought and stored. All through the year there are ample opportunities to discuss and compare provisions, preparations and eating!

But the seasonal changes affect more than food consumption and issues of provisions. Seasonal variation affects the souq as a whole. Rural weddings usually take place in the summer season. If the harvest has been good, weddings increase, according to traders, and villagers come to spend their earnings on dowries and trousseaux. This affects those who trade in gold, in household utensils, furniture, clothes and textiles. The change from summer textiles to winter textiles, and vice versa, draws customers to the medina and to other shopping areas of Aleppo. The weather and the temperature also affect the number of customers and when they prefer to shop. Villagers, according to traders, are 'strong' and tolerate both heat and cold, while urban customers are more 'sensitive'. In the winter, especially if it rains, many avoid shopping. To avoid the summer heat, many try to shop at night, when the medina is closed. Public life in parks, streets, and restaurants also differs from season to season. In the winter people stay indoors, huddling close to stoves and heaters. In the summer they leave their houses at night when the sun has set. Parks are crowded, outdoor cafés and restaurants are filled with people and people stay up very late. Traders, like other Aleppians, are also part of these different modes of seasonal socializing.

### *Religious Seasons*

The religious yearly cycle is equally, if not more, important than the changes of the seasons. The two major Muslim feasts are celebrated with great gusto in Aleppo, as elsewhere. '*Aid al adba* (the Feast of the Sacrifice) is celebrated in the middle of *dhū al hijja*, the peak season for the pilgrimage to Mecca. '*Aid al fitr* (the Feast of Breaking of the Fast) is

celebrated at the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting. In 1998 Ramadan started in the latter part of December. The beginning of Ramadan is immediately noticeable in all public places. The pace of city life changes dramatically. Many shops open later than usual, because owners and employees stay up most of the night. Traffic is much less congested in the morning, but an hour or so before sunset it becomes terrible, as the whole city centre empties when everybody has to get home to break the fast. In the evening many people visit their local mosque for Koranic recitals. Most neighbourhood mosques erect a sheet, or a screen, so that women may participate in these readings at the same time as men.<sup>21</sup> Only foreign and native Christians use cafés and restaurants in the daytime. The myriad of ready-food sellers and sellers of coffee and tea in the souq close down, and start to sell vegetables, fruit or sweets instead.

Discussions take on a more than usually religious turn, because believers are supposed not only to fast but also to contemplate and count their blessings. Talk in the souq, as elsewhere, is also more than usually focused on food. The breaking of the fast at sunset, celebrated each day after one hears three cannon shots, is an important family event. What dishes to serve to break the fast, and what courses to continue with, are commented upon in the souq. Many of my informants sighed about putting on more weight during Ramadan. 'What you lose by not eating in the daytime you gain by over-eating at night. But I can't resist all those wonderful dishes', Abu Imad complained. The food markets have their best season during Ramadan, because even poor people spend more than usual. On the first day of Ramadan traders (and others) greet each other with a 'may you be blessed every year'. This greeting is also used on the feast-days after the fast, and at other religious celebrations.

*'Ramadan is Good'*. My Muslim informants invariably said that Ramadan was good because it reminds the rich of how it feels to be hungry. But some complained that people contemplated too little and became more selfish than usual. 'People drive like crazy in the day-time during Ramadan. They should behave with decorum. But many of the taxi- and busdrivers get crazy when they can't smoke.' The younger traders, or sons of traders, joked about the older men who slept all day in order to shorten the fast. 'It is not the food or the water my father can't live without, it is the cigarettes', Abdel Latif told Jalal when they were commenting on abnormally late souq appearance of their fathers.

Abu Faris had an office crowded with friends, customers, and partners coming to visit. But during Ramadan his office was strangely quiet. The

ordinary throng of visitors stayed away and only those with important business came during the day, he said. I asked if the lack of drinks and cigarettes acted as a deterrent to visitors and he, a chain-smoker for the rest of the year, laughed: 'Ramadan is my favourite time of the year. I am forced into order. I go home every day for breakfast and see my wife and children. I get calmer and think better when I don't smoke and drink coffee all day. Yet during Ramadan I need glasses to read, because my brain is not stimulated enough! But I enjoy the terrible crush and the traffic-jams. I see it as part of the customs and traditions of Aleppo Ramadan.'

Abu Samer explained that Ramadan is good for family cohesion. 'We eat breakfast together every night, my father, my mother and my brothers and their families. The first breakfast we always take at my father's house. Then we each take a day in turn. When there are no more relatives, we just eat by ourselves. This is part of our family tradition.' During Ramadan people visit each other a lot after breakfast, but they also enjoy the television more than at other times of the year.<sup>22</sup>

The souq becomes increasingly busy throughout Ramadan. By the last week of the fast temporary stalls crowd the city centre. Around the medina entrances, around Bab al Farraj, Baron Street and Tellal Street, one has to shove to get through the crowds. Cakes, sweets and clothes are important merchandise. Many of these stalls have no permit, but as the holiday approaches, the police do not bother to fine the owners, according to some traders. Others, however, said that the police have great days fining stall-keepers and cart-sellers, and putting the money in their own pockets. Not only the city centre, but also busy shopping streets in the more residential quarters are very crowded by the end of Ramadan. Most families try to buy new clothes at least for their younger children, and food for the feasting has to be bought. Most traders stressed that the end of Ramadan is very important for them. Charitable associations collect money from traders and distribute it to the poor before the feast. 'Even the poor shop', Abu Jamil told me, as he signed up for various charities. 'We can't give as much as we would like, but we are obliged to give as much as we can'.

The medina stays open almost until midnight before the feast. Shopkeepers, their sons, and employees take turns to eat breakfast and hurry back to the medina. Employees have three days off for the feast and many shops close for the whole period. Relatives and friends visit each other and enjoy the festivities. Ramadan is the most public and sociable of the Muslim duties. Many believers, who do not normally pray five times a day, will fast, or at least try to. In Aleppo, as elsewhere, the public upholding of the fast is strictly followed among Muslims. To fast

during Ramadan is a prolonged public act of faith, but also an intensely social activity binding people to a common goal.

Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, is also an important season for the Aleppo traders. All male pilgrims have to prepare themselves by buying the ritually prescribed white clothing. This, and other paraphernalia, is sold in the medina. Before the hajj season, and afterwards, Aleppo is visited by foreign pilgrims passing through Syria in buses or converted lorries, on the land route to and from Mecca. Such pilgrims often sell specialties from their country to finance part of their trip. The pilgrims are appreciated, according to my informants, because they remind them of the vastness of the Muslim community. All those who want to go on hajj need a special visa, and each country is issued with a limited number. Prospective pilgrims have to apply to the Syrian passport administration which becomes more than normally crowded when the applications forms are issued.<sup>23</sup> Just like the last days of Ramadan, the last days before the Feast of the Sacrifice are marked by great market activity. People shop for clothes, sweets and food. Decorations are sold and artfully arranged in parts of the medina. In families with a pilgrim the inside – and often the outside – of the house is decorated before the return of the hajj or hajja. Also money is now collected for the poor and the shops stay open very late, before the four-day holiday.

The two major Muslim feasts are official Syrian holidays, but there are also other religious celebrations taking place during official workdays. The Prophet Muhammad's birthday is such a day which is celebrated in the medina. All shops and all souq streets and alleys are decorated. In the morning many shopkeepers hand out food and sweets to their neighbours and to customers. Many of the mosques in the medina stage birthday celebrations with chanting and recitations, and in the Great Mosque there are celebrations at the noon prayers. Every year one of my informants sponsors an early evening celebration in one of the medina mosques.

The medina has perhaps fifty larger and smaller mosques and most of my informants regularly visit one close to their shop. The call to prayer, from the larger mosques, is part of the daily rhythm, often giving reason to stop talking, silently invoking God and the Muslim credo, and to contemplate quietly for a few moments. The medina is also dotted with 'saintly' graves to which many urbanites, mainly women, still make visits (*ṣiyaara*) asking for intercessions and help. Many who pass behind the Great Mosque read the opening verse of the Koran and recite a blessing for the Prophet Zakaria <sup>24</sup> (who is reputedly buried in its grounds) and all other prophets. When a funeral procession passes through the medina or the city-centre all Muslim traders and customers read the opening verse

of the Koran. Many *abl as-souq* (and others) also participate in religious 'orders' (*zawamia*). Sheikhs usually gather their followers on Thursday nights in sessions with recitals and sermons. Those of my informants who followed a sheikh were very keen to stress the non-worldly lifestyle and the pure heart of their master. Abu Muhammad, for example, said that he needed to counterbalance the corruption, troubles and evil of the present, with a window to heaven, to make him realize the 'true meaning of life'.

The daily and the weekly rhythm of the medina, and of Aleppo in general, is marked by the Islamic calendar. The calls to prayer, the weekly Friday off, the official holidays, all underline that Islam is the dominant faith in Aleppo. The Islamic rhythm ties traders with non-traders and underlines that, as believers, they belong to a moral community also outside the medina, and that they, as the better off, have obligations to the less fortunate. Such obligations are especially marked before the big feasts. But the Islamic rhythm also serves as a social boundary against followers of other faiths and the less religiously inclined.

The Christian minority put their religious paraphernalia on public display in the predominantly Christian residential quarters, the shopping areas of Aziziyye and Sleimaniyye, before and during Christmas and Easter celebrations.<sup>25</sup> In 1999 the Christmas season overlapped with Ramadan. Christmas is celebrated on the same dates by all Syrian Christians except the Armenians.<sup>26</sup> But Easter is only intermittently celebrated on the same dates by the Eastern Orthodox and the Catholic churches.<sup>27</sup> In 1999 *'aid al fitr* finished just before the Catholic Easter took place. This was celebrated by enormous processions through the old Christian quarters in Jdeide and Saliba, culminating with visits to various churches. A week later the Orthodox Easter took place. The Christians commonly stress that it is better when all celebrate at the same time, because they can then manifest a sense of Christian unity, and processions and feasting are much nicer when all their friends take a holiday at the same time.

All public employees – Muslim and as well as Christian – are allowed one day off for Christmas and two days off for Easter. During the year each church has its own rules for fasts and its own series of saintly holidays and celebrations, but many celebrate Saint Barbara's day in early December as a festival for children. Muslims and Christians in Aleppo exchange greetings on each other's religious feasts, and may visit each other. Many of my older informants said that when the medina had more Christian (and before the late 1940s, Jewish) traders, they always used to greet each other and pay their respects on the various holidays. It is obviously hard to know the scope and extent of such mutual civilities,

but such comments at least indicate a perception of good neighbourliness.

Muslim and Christian religious holidays are thus publicly and mutually acknowledged in Aleppo. The ruling Ba'th party embraces a Pan-Arabism in which all religious and ethnic differences are, and should be, under-communicated in public political life. Initially the party recruited heavily from the many various Syrian minorities and, in the eyes of many Sunni Muslims, the regime itself came to be regarded as anti-religious. However, according to the Syrian Constitution, the President must be a Muslim. In the late 1970s President Hafez al-Asad, an Alawite, started to cultivate a public air of Sunni religiosity. On all major Muslim religious holidays he, and other important men in the government and the Ba'th party, prayed in the large Ummayyad Mosque in Damascus. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Islamic aura of the regime increased.<sup>28</sup> The state supported the building of new mosques and encouraged Muslims to follow a non-political religious path. Many Syrians of all faiths have been, and are, highly critical of this change of policy, which is commonly considered as insincere and shaped by political expediency. Urban Sunni Muslims are still strongly prejudiced against Alawites whom they often consider as non-Muslims. But at the same time many enjoy the increased public religious opportunities with celebrations on feasts, with *zaawias*, with new mosques. On major feasts, not only does the President pray in public, but governors will visit the major mosque of the provincial capitals to pray publicly.

The increasingly 'Islamic' character of public space in a city like Aleppo, epitomized by female veiling and a stress on gender differences, heightens the fears of many Christians. Many have come to regard the 'minority' character of the regime as a safeguard against increased Islamic public dominance. On Christian feasts the President will visit, or be visited by, major Christian patriarchs and bishops, and church celebrations are broadcast to the public on radio and television, underlining the equal value of all Syrian citizens, regardless of their faith. There is one major celebration in Syria which is studiously ignored, however. The Kurdish New Year celebration (*newroz*) takes place at every spring equinox. In Aleppo, with its large Kurdish population, and in the Kurdish villages in the Aleppo hinterland, this is an important day which receives no official recognition, but which on the contrary is carefully supervised and at times repressed. Kurds, when celebrating the New Year, express their Kurdishness outside the fold of officially cultivated Arab unity.

*The National and State Calendar*

There is not only a seasonal and a religious rhythm affecting trade in Aleppo. Events regulated by the state are also important. On Thursdays debts are settled and at New Year stock-taking is common. Such practices are not a mandate from the state, nor perceived to be religiously motivated, but are considered part of good trade practices. But public sector pay-days are important for traders. At the end of the month, before pay-day, employees have no money to shop. After salaries have been paid trade picks up. When the schools start in the fall, school uniforms, notebooks, pencils and bags are important items in the souq. There are also national holidays when employees are off duty but the market stays open. Such days can be important to catch customers, and they also serve to remind traders and all other citizens of the powers that be.

All but one of the national holidays celebrate events after the Ba'th takeover in March 1963.<sup>29</sup> At the time, Syrians had no way of knowing that this military coup-d'état – one of many – would instigate an unprecedented period of stability and one-party rule. Politically the party was quite small and weak at the time of the takeover and to a large extent consisted of religious and ethnic minority officers and public servants. But the party, and its successive leaders, were extremely successful in shaping and forming new political and social institutions. As noted earlier, many analysts of Syria, and many Syrians at large, stress the sectarian and ethnic aspects of the ruling party (and the regime). However, it is important to stress the profound impact of the Ba'th as a builder of the nation-state.<sup>30</sup> The Ba'th expanded its membership, controlled the army, and reshaped much of 'civil' society through the creation of so-called popular organizations. The public sector expanded enormously through increased spending on education, health and infrastructure. Public sector employees became, after the peasants, the single largest occupational category in the country. The trade unions, the peasant union, the professional unions, the student and school-pupil organizations, as well as the women's union, all became vehicles for the party to change and transform society. These organizations, and the party itself, were used to reach out to shape citizens and to create political support. The public bureaucracy, as well, became an instrument to realize party goals, and a whole series of repressive agencies emerged to bolster the stability of the regime. Syria and Syrians became tied together through infrastructure and the party structure.

Hafez al-Asad came to power in 1970 and remained in power for almost three decades. During this period the parliament has been given an enhanced, but still limited, political role, and more parties have been



incorporated (or co-opted) into the sanctioned political system. Periodic economic liberalization has also given the private sector more room for manoeuvre. At the same time, however, this period has seen a staggering number of Syrians killed in civil strife, or imprisoned without trial, or dead at the hands of security agencies.<sup>31</sup> The rule of law is almost non-existent in Syria, and corruption is rife. Concomitantly, the cult around Hafez al-Asad took on enormous proportions. While the state is certainly 'strong' in many ways, especially in terms of the power the regime can wield over citizens, it is also 'weak' in that citizens at large view it as equivalent to the regime. Today there is very limited interest or enthusiasm, on the part of most Syrian citizens, in participating in official celebrations glorifying the Ba'th party. Public employees (and often schoolchildren) are forced to take part, and are afraid that absence will be interpreted as political discontent and reported by security-agents in the workplace. In these celebrations the Syrian nation, the Syrian state, and the ruling party become fused; as almost one and the same. The nation and the state (and obviously the party) have also become very closely connected to the regime of Hafez al-Asad.

In March there are enormous official festivities to celebrate the takeover of the Ba'th party in 1963. In every major Syrian city centre there is a public meeting with speeches and then a 'manifestation' (*masiira*), with flags waving, and banners and slogans, to which employees in the public sector, and sometimes schoolchildren, are called out. After the manifestation many linger in the centre and shop, browse or hang around. In April there is a holiday to celebrate Syria's independence in 1946. Again streets and official buildings are decorated, again public employees and schoolchildren are called out to wave flags and banners. In early October the so-called victorious October war against Israel in 1973 is celebrated all over Syria. Streets and official buildings are decorated with slogans extolling the heroic leadership of President Hafez al-Asad. In November there are similar celebration of the so-called Correction Movement of 1970, when Hafez al-Asad opened up the parliament for other than the Ba'th party to form the National Progressive Front.<sup>32</sup> Again the city is decorated, and again there are 'manifestations'.<sup>33</sup>

As has been described in this chapter, gender and ethnicity/religious affiliation are important principles for how Aleppians, and the rural visitors who are so important for the economy, organize the use of space. The historical city centre, the medina, acts like a magnet for trade. Traders and *abl as-souq*, as has been described, are not alone in inscribing Aleppo into their lives, or being inscribed by the city. They are

confronted, co-operate, and struggle with both other traders and non-traders, in their daily use of the city. They cannot impose their kind of city – their reading of Aleppo – on all the others. But in many ways their self-esteem makes them see themselves as the true urbanites. Traders are not insulated from the demands of political loyalty. During my fieldwork periods, a number of elections were staged, and traders, just like other citizens, complained that they were more or less forced to vote. These elections and how they were debated in the souq will be discussed in Chapter 5. But unlike employees in the public sector, traders can distance themselves from many public manifestations. The celebrations discussed above were hardly commented on or discussed in the souq, other than in connection with traffic-jams or the number of customers lost or gained. Traders are not forced out, en masse, to express their loyalty to the present regime on these holidays. None of my informants in the souq expressed any disdain for the employees who have to take part in these public displays of regime loyalty. But their non-participation reinforces, I would argue, the traders' ideas of independence, and serves to enforce the importance of striving to maintain 'a shop of one's own'. In the next chapter the traders' ideas of independence will be in focus.

## TRADING INDEPENDENCE

One day an employee from the tax authorities visited Abu Anwar in his shop. He wanted Abu Anwar to make a statement about the situation of a trader in the same souq. Abu Anwar swore that the neighbour was bankrupt, without assets and, according to Abu Anwar, lived on handouts from relatives while trying to find a job among other traders in the souq. When the employee had left Abu Anwar exclaimed: 'Poor man, he has lost his shop. A man without a shop is worth nothing. With a shop a man is established and settled and he is independent.'

The overriding concern and endeavour of traders inside and outside the medina is to keep and maintain their own shop or office.<sup>1</sup> To be somebody in the souq is to have a shop. The concern over, and endeavour to, maintain a shop is fundamental, taken for granted, and seldom needs to be expressed. A shop is both an expression of such stated values as 'independence' and 'settlement'<sup>2</sup> as well as a means of gaining them. When traders spoke about independence and settlement they defined it in terms of not taking orders from others, of being free and able to make their own decisions. Traders seek independence from agents of the state, but also from other traders, even when they are closely related. Yet trade – as was readily admitted by my informants – is an intensely social activity involving the creation and maintenance of a great many relationships. Traders thus depend on others both inside and outside the souq in order to be 'independent and settled'. They need credit, and need to extend credit to others. They often need partners, or to invest with others if they have excess capital. They need good contacts with public employees. They are tied to others in a myriad ways. These aspects are reflections of, and simultaneously contribute to, the 'informality' of the market, where involvement with the state is generally shunned. But traders do depend on, and have profited, from state policies. In this chapter everyday shop-life will be discussed as a backdrop to a discussion about the tension between independence and

dependence in the souq. How traders talk about 'trust' and 'security' will also be examined.

### **Everyday Shop-life**

A shop is a means to be free and not to have to take orders from others, but at the same time shops also tie traders into an everyday trading life in which links to, and dependences on others are necessary to survive. How these ties and dependences are expressed and evolve in everyday shop-life vary from one trader to another.

#### *Abu Jamil and His Sons*

Abu Jamil, a retail and wholesale trader in household utensils, often jokingly referred to the shop as his personal club. It was usually the sons, Jalal or Jamil, who opened the shop in the morning. They unlocked the big padlocks on the rolling iron-curtain, they selected the merchandise to spread on the pavement in front of the shop, and the items to be draped over the entrance door. They greeted their neighbours and Salaheddine, the shoeshine boy, whose turf was close to their shop. The young men had their close friends nearby and they visited each other in the morning, if the souq was not too busy. Perhaps Jalal organized the savings club<sup>3</sup> he had started with ten other friends. They all contributed one thousand lira every month and each, in turn, received the monthly sum. He wanted a twelfth member so that the club would run nicely throughout the year, but he had to settle for eleven. Perhaps Jamil, with a newly married friend, pored over the photos taken of the men's party.<sup>4</sup>

If they were lucky there was a steady stream of customers, and not only a stream of sundry sellers. Jalal, Jamil, and Abu Jamil, if he was around, simultaneously bought, from agents of wholesale traders or others, and sold to retail and wholesale customers. On any given day they were approached by many sellers with merchandise smuggled from Lebanon or Turkey, or men representing factories. Very quickly they inspected, assessed and made decisions as to buy or not, or whether to try new items or designs. They often promoted the merchandise of friends and relatives – many with stores of their own, others with offices – by displaying and selling their goods, and then handed over the proceeds to the owner. This kind of risk-sharing is common in the medina. If the merchandise found a market, they bought more at the wholesale price and sold 'for themselves'. The young men spent a lot of time on the telephone, just like their father did when he arrived. They often called home, talked to other traders for business purposes, or just to pass the time. If they were hungry they bought something from the

souq.

When Abu Jamil arrived the shop often became crammed, not only with customers (if and when they were around) but also with the friends and acquaintances of Abu Jamil. In the afternoons Abu Jamil would intermittently order coffee, and often offer it to some passing friend or relative. Often his cousin Abu Abdou passed on his way to his office, taking a sip, and inquiring about news. Almost every afternoon Abu Jamil's brother, Abu Yousef, visited for a while, and his cousin Abu Naser who ran the big family store which had been established by their grandfather. Beggars collecting their Thursday *zakaat* came when they knew that Abu Jamil was in the store. A number of beggars, mainly women, had been 'assigned' to Abu Jamil and to others in this part of the souq. Each would normally receive twenty-five lira. Public employees looking for perks, or who needed information, would usually come after Abu Jamil had arrived.

Abu Jamil's friend Abu Malek, a factory owner and investor, would often come in the afternoon, and first spend time with Abu Jamil in his shop, before both of them, and perhaps others as well, visited Abu Faris in his office close by. Abu Malek treated Abu Jamil's shop as his own. He could conduct some business in the store, use the telephone, or he would ask some youngster to buy a carton of cigarettes. He would demand coffee, and would ask Salaheddine, the shoeshine boy, to clean his shoes while he waited. One day he had his barber come to give him a haircut in the shop. Another of Abu Jamil's cronies would also come almost every day to joke and jest or to give small lectures with religious messages.

Although Abu Jamil spent a lot of his shop-time entertaining, and being entertained by, friends and relatives, he kept a constant eye on the more business aspects of the shop and also on the daily or weekly accounting. 'Yes, hajji, there are different prices on those thermoses because they are of different quality', he could comment while scribbling his accounts. 'This one is from Japan, that one from Turkey and that last one is national and of cheap quality'.<sup>5</sup> He traded by phone in the shop, but also at home, or wherever he was. Many of the friends Abu Jamil saw in his shop, he also saw in the evenings, sometimes going out, sometimes visiting each other, sometimes going to formal functions like weddings or funeral wakes, or religious meetings. Business and pleasure, family obligations and religious activities were all interconnected. Late in the afternoon, the shop once again became the territory of the young men, and their club, rather than that of their father and friends of his generation. Usually Jalal closed the shop in the early evening, around sunset.

*Abu Khaled*

Abu Khaled, a retail and wholesale trader in textiles, has two shops in the covered souq. His shops never contained the number of people Abu Jamil would muster on a daily basis. He usually opened rather early, putting his oldest son in one shop and himself in the other, and having his young shop-assistant running between the two. He had a telephone in the shop which was connected to his other shop and to his warehouse, so he would call, or be called, to discuss with his son or his shop-assistant. Although Abu Khaled had visitors for other than trading purposes, he did not have cronies who came every day, or whom he visited every day. One of his brothers had the shop next to him, and although they conferred with and consulted each other from time to time, they were never in each other's pockets. He talked and jested with neighbours and mobile sellers but he spent much more time arranging and rearranging his merchandise and on the look-out for customers. 'Welcome, welcome, what do you need,' he called to people showing signs of lingering close to his shop. 'One must be ready to turn a coin, and make money work', he explained. Abu Khaled always brought lunch from home; usually bread, olives, cheese and some vegetables and he made tea or coffee in his shop on a small gas heater.

But although Abu Khaled spent most of his time in his shop, he visited one of the souq mosques at least once, and usually twice, daily. He also visited his other shop and his warehouse. Sometimes he would hear that 'Russian' women (*rosiaat*) were around and he would rush off to find them and bring them to his shop or his warehouse. At other times he was busy with his long-standing *rosiaat* trading partners. He complained, however, that the trade with the republics in the former Soviet Union was not as it used to be in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He used to depend on that trade but had now switched more to trading with the rural areas close to Aleppo. Abu Khaled told me he preferred to stay at home in the evening, reading and helping his younger children with their homework. His wife always prepared dinner which they all ate together. But like everybody else in and of the souq, Abu Khaled was always *au courant* with Aleppo events and Aleppo gossip.

*Abu Sleiman*

Abu Sleiman, a retail trader in cloth, in his eighties, opened between eight and nine, despite his slack business. He got up at dawn for early morning prayers and then typically worked in his orchard on the outskirts of the city before opening his shop. He sat in the shop all day. Sometimes a grandchild came with a bit of lunch. He always closed the

shop properly when he went to a near-by mosque for the mid-day prayer, and then returned to his shop. Abu Sleiman always closed at dusk, the proper time, he claimed. He said he disliked television and instead went to bed early, after his dinner.

Abu Sleiman did not sell very much – his stock got dustier by the day – and most of the time he spent sitting quietly contemplating or surveying the street. But he was still a part of the daily life of his section of the souq. Neighbouring shopkeepers inquired after his health, and he of theirs. Some ran errands for him. Old friends passed by, exchanged a few words or stopped to chat. Some people dropped off packages which they later collected. Perhaps they discussed the weather, the prices of meat and vegetables, or the health and work of family and friends. Or, as often happened, they complained about the high cost of living and the corruption of officials. At his age, Abu Sleiman's shop was not essential as a source of income since he had sons and grandchildren to support him. But it was his designated place for meeting friends and acquaintances, and a fixed point from which he watched the world.

### **Being Owned by the Shop**

Traders consider themselves independent and settled when they have an office or a shop, but they are, at the same time, almost the prisoners of their shops. Traders want to have a shop of their own, but the shops also 'own' their traders. It is shameful (*'aib*), traders claim, not to open their shops.<sup>6</sup> 'We might open late', Jalal told me, 'but we always open. If we don't, people will think something has happened'. 'We only close for religious holidays and funerals', Abu Jamil said. One day one informant complained that he was quite bored with the everyday routine of his shop-life, but that it would be shameful to close the shop and just take a holiday. Neighbours in the souq will often keep an eye on each other's stores if the owner has to rush off on an errand. Shopkeepers frequently drape their shop with a cloth to indicate that they have gone to pray. But the coming and going of merchandise from warehouses and wholesale traders, and the need to meet with other traders, disrupt the flow of catching customers. It is bad business, and bad for business, to be away from a shop too often. Traders often depend on others to keep their shops open.

### *Hired and Family Labour*

For most of my informants their own and their sons' labour was not enough to keep their business going. Large retail traders often had handymen around their offices to carry out the more strenuous physical

work. Some had a special employee to clean and make coffee and tea for guests. Abu Ali, a wholesale trader, had many employees in his office. Two were in charge of making beverages for guests, cleaning and running menial errands. One was the office manager, devoted to computerized book-keeping and keeping track of contracts. Two others drove here and there and carried out other administrative duties. Most retail traders in the medina, however, bought coffee from an itinerant coffee-maker or made coffee themselves on a gas-burner. They also called for boys with wheel-barrows when they needed transport. In the medina one finds the many self-employed *abl as-souq*, described in Chapter 2. They are not traders but make a living by extending important services in the souq. In the medina there are also many employed by Aleppo traders and industrialists. Traders in the medina typically employ a shop-boy (*saana'*) with little or no education, who works for long hours for very little pay.<sup>7</sup> The rate of turnover is usually high but it is not hard to find a new helper in Aleppo. Traders are often approached by fathers asking for a placement for their young sons.

Abu Ahmad has two shops, across from each other, in the medina selling soap, canes and other items geared to rural trade. For many years when Abu Ahmad was employed as a teacher he supervised his shops only in the afternoon and relied on his employees. He has only one son, Ahmad, who has been to university but who now spends most of his time in the souq. The father is sickly and usually arrives late. Abu Ahmad and his son depend on their shop-boy, Zakariyya. He was illiterate when he came to work for them, although he had been to school for five years. Abu Ahmad taught him to read, and some basic arithmetic. Ahmad said that Zakariyya came from a village close to the city and was forced to work because his father was dead. Ahmad and Abu Ahmad said they liked Zakariyya but that they had previously had shop-boys who stole from them.

Abu Mustafa, selling textiles, has two shops that are separated by some distance, and he also relied on his shop-help. Mousa worked for him for a long time, but suddenly a new boy appeared and Abu Mustafa told me that Mousa had quit. 'In the last period he was no good. Not obeying orders, roaming about and he did not concentrate on his job. Then his father came to take him away to place him as an apprentice. He said he wanted his son to learn a craft. I saw him a few days ago. Dirty and bad smelling. He was working in a butcher's shop. Is that a craft! When he could have stayed with me and learned a respectable trade.'<sup>8</sup>

Older shop-assistants in the medina are more often treated like relatives. They have generally been 'vetted' for a number of years and have acquired specialized skills. They know the business, and their



interests have often merged with those of the owner. Their working conditions are much better and they have individual arrangements for their salaries, sometimes earning a percentage of the profits. But not all 'qualified' employees in shops shared the interests of their employers. Nouredine worked in a fancy shop on Baron Street selling men's clothes. He used to be a teacher and lives in a small town north of Aleppo, commuting every day. He was quite disgruntled about the long hours, often from ten in the morning to ten at night, but admitted that this job paid more than what he got as a teacher.

Many traders with small shops rely on the labour of their half-grown or grown-up sons. Fathers usually carry out informal 'in-the-shop-training' for their sons when they are quite young. During school holidays, especially the long summer break, young sons spend a lot of time in their fathers' shops, or offices, and in and around the souq. If sons leave school at an early age,<sup>9</sup> they usually take up work with their fathers straightaway. Traders may control the labour of their sons until the latter are grown-up, with sons of their own. Quite often men become economically independent only when their fathers are too feeble to run their businesses. There is no pension age in the souq. Most men continue to be economically active until they die, or at least continue to sit in or roam around the souq. Older men habitually try to control their sons for as long as possible, by keeping their business together. Fathers depend on sons to keep their shops open, and sons, on the other hand, commonly depend on their fathers to set them up in trade. Most of my 'independent' informants were, at the time I did my fieldwork, in their forties or early fifties, and had married children and even grandchildren. I had a number of younger and unmarried informants, but they were still part of their fathers' households, and of the shops and offices of their fathers. Only two of my close informants – both Christians – were more than thirty years old, economically independent and still unmarried. Although fathers and sons in many cases do have common interests, there are also muted conflicts over the control, succession and continuation of the businesses. These issues will be discussed in the next chapter when the meaning of family will be analysed in more detail.

### **Credits and Debts in the Medina**

In many shops in Aleppo there is a sign saying 'cash sale only'. In other shops a poster, which is sold among street vendors, is displayed. It consists of two different pictures. In the first there is a fat, cigar-smoking man sitting in front of his open, full safe. He has a blonde, smiling typist at his side and outside, in the street, a lorry is being loaded. The style of

the picture indicates its origin in the 1930s. On the wall this, obviously prosperous and successful trader, has put a framed picture with a caption in Italian: 'I sell for cash', which is translated on the poster, in quite small letters, into French and Arabic. The second picture on the poster shows a destitute man in torn clothes. His cupboard/safe is empty except for pieces of paper and rats! The style is perhaps early twentieth century. The bold caption reads in French: 'I sold on credit', with an equally bold translation into Arabic. But although the poster is very popular, few traders follow its admonition. 'Here trade depends on credits and loans. Business would be at a standstill if we stuck to a 'cash only' principle', Abu Ali said.

All neighbourhood shops depending on a specific and steady clientele have to extend credit to their customers. This is how such traders (and shopkeepers) expand their trade. The poorer the neighbourhood, the more important is the credit, here as elsewhere. But even in affluent neighbourhoods regular customers often buy groceries on credit. Such debts are often settled by paying the whole sum. Neighbourhood stores, selling clothes, gold, electrical appliances or other more expensive consumer goods, often allow customers to pay by instalments. Some customers may thus always be indebted to the trader, and the trader, in his turn, may extend a considerable amount of money as credit.

In the busy shopping streets of central Aleppo and in the medina credit is seldom extended to retail customers. Retail trade in the medina and in central Aleppo differs from neighbourhood trade in that long-term relations are much more unusual. Abu Jamil and his sons hardly ever gave credit to retail customers. Some retail traders in the souq act as wholesale traders to rural customers who buy to resell in their villages. In such instances a medina trader will extend credit to the villager. When the retail customers are other traders buying either for their own consumption or for a specific customer, credit is always extended, with no questions asked. In the souq for household textiles, for gold and for household utensils, customers commonly buy many different items, especially before weddings. It is very common for retail sellers who have 'caught' such clients to serve them by buying in items they lack themselves from other neighbouring traders. Such items are freely handed over without questions (or complaints) and the 'credit' is usually settled after the client has left, or later the same day.

### *'Private Banking'*

Unlike shops in the residential quarters, credit in the medina is very much at the core of relations between traders, rather than an issue

between traders and their retail customers. Syrian banks were nationalized in the 1960s and since then many traders (and others) regard banks with great suspicion.<sup>10</sup> Many of my informants had accounts with a Syrian bank, because this was necessary when applying for licences and permissions in connection with imports and exports. Many traders and industrialists in Aleppo instead used banks in Lebanon for their foreign dealings. Many industrialists and traders use the state banks to obtain credit, but none of my informants used the banks for that purpose, although they claimed that they could. Some traders said that they avoided banks for religious reasons, and there were no Islamic profit-sharing banks in Syria. But most traders avoid applying for loans because they are able to get credit elsewhere, and they claimed that they preferred this.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes my informants had assets like property or land which they sold. Quite often they pooled resources among their close relatives and friends and entered a venture as partners. At other times a single trader borrowed money from the same friends or relatives to invest for himself. In general, most of my informants did not want to be tied to the banks but instead preferred to depend on each other for credit in order to be independent of state institutions.

But traders also obtained credit through citizens outside the souq. Non-traders often willingly lent money to traders and claimed that this was more Islamic than ordinary banks. Others saved/invested with traders in order to get a better return on their money. Sometimes traders (and others) lent money in return for promissory notes (*sanad*). This was often done to mask interest, according to some of my informants. The promissory note relapses after three years, if the debt has not been paid, and the creditor then has to go to court to try to retrieve his money. According to lawyers, lapsed notes were becoming more and more common and constituted a good meal ticket for them. Some traders sent goods to a (trusted) trader on 'security', whereby the second trader sold what he could but was allowed to return the unsold goods. This procedure is clearly important when trade in the souq is slow and traders lack cash to buy large quantities from wholesale traders.

There was no stock market in Syria during my fieldwork, but in Aleppo the thread-market was often talked of as a substitute. The basis of Aleppo industry is textiles, and thus thread is the most important raw material. Most thread is imported from South and South-east Asia and the prices in Aleppo follow the world market. Many traders invested in thread short-term to speculate on price changes. In one of the khans of the medina, there was a small but lively '*boursa*' every afternoon, where thread was bought and sold without the actual exchange of items. Many of my close informants laughed at this 'stock market' and claimed it was

only for small fish and young people with a limited amount of money. Abu Abdou said that this trade was not really legal, but that the state did not bother to interfere. But he condemned it as un-Islamic. Abu Khaled, on the other hand, insisted that it was religiously permissible to make money this way. 'It is unlawful (*haram*) with interest, but it is permissible (*halaal*) to buy and sell and make money on price-hikes.'<sup>12</sup>

### *Retrieving Debts*

To get credit from some and extend credit to others is clearly part of the give-and-take of being a trader. Credits and loans tie traders together. Traders with cash are more or less obliged to lend money on a short-term or long-term basis to friends and relatives. But difficulties in retrieving debts are also the cause of many conflicts in the medina. Abu Khalil once calculated that he had 8 million lira as outstanding credit but he claimed that he had no debts. He was having great trouble making people repay. Abu Jamil explained that in the 1980s his business had a higher turnover. He travelled to other provinces as a wholesale trader and sold stock on credit. 'But it was very stressful to have so much money tied up with other people. Some traders still work like that, but I don't want to anymore. It is too much work and the risks are too high these days when the economy is bad and traders can't repay their debts.' Like most traders, Abu Jamil owes other traders money and has money owed to him. Finding money to settle debts and getting others to repay their debts are probably the most time-consuming aspects of trade. Abu Jamil often stressed that it was wrong not to honour a debt. 'Even if you have to liquidate assets at a loss, one should always repay'. This was not, however, what all traders did and conflicts over credits and debts were frequent.

Abu Khaled was having great difficulties in retrieving a debt. He had invested with the husband of a sister who was building a property in a fairly good location. The man had bought an old Arabic house for 6 million lira and thought that it would cost him 7 million to build a new property in its place. He had planned to cover his costs by selling the basement as workspace, the ground floor as four shops, and then living in the rest of the house. Abu Khaled was urged to invest more than 2 million to cover part of the project. But the construction had become much more expensive than was estimated, and his brother-in-law was not able to sell the shops at prices covering his costs. Abu Khaled was very angry because he wanted his money back. 'My brother-in-law was trying to be too clever. He was offered 13 million for the lot right after he had torn the old house down. He should have accepted that offer.

Now his half-finished building will not fetch that price. But he has promised me to repay my money. I will get half a million every six months. I should just have invested in my own shop and not with him. But he is married to my sister!

Thursday is 'collecting-day' in the medina, as mentioned in Chapter 2. It is the day for settling weekly debts. Larger enterprises and factories have special employees doing the collecting. Abu Faris and his partners have such employees. Small workshop-owners collect themselves or send their sons. Sons or shop-assistants rush between shops, paying and collecting debts. Many traders were in a bad mood on Thursdays, trying to avoid settling all their debts when they had little cash. Abu Mustafa usually haggled endlessly to postpone repaying his weekly debts. At one time he tried to tell a 'collector' that his prices had been unfair and that the quality was not as good as expected. But eventually he had to pay because the price had been agreed upon.

Old traders claim that 'today' traders borrow too much. In the summer of 2000, after the death of President Hafez al-Asad, old Abu Sleiman complained that for thirty years he had never seen the souq so frozen. 'People have no money and no one repays their debts. These days traders are different compared with before. If a trader has one million, he will borrow ten. Before, if a trader had one million he would put half of it aside and let the other half work. Then he was able to sleep soundly at night and not stay awake and worry about the money he owes other people.' But according to many of my younger informants the trouble is not that borrowers sleep badly, but that they do not honour their debts. Many kinds of credit transactions found in the souq are highly contested in Aleppo (and elsewhere in Syria) and bear witness to the tension between independence and settlement and dependence on others.

## Partnerships

Partnerships are very common in Aleppo, and some kind of partnership is often the only way a trader – or a would-be trader – can raise the credit for a venture. Partnerships, on the other hand, may make traders more vulnerable. One's control and independence is at stake. Partnerships are highly varied; in some cases very little except the business relations bind the partners together, and in others cases relations between partners are multi-stranded. Close relatives may cement closeness through intermarriage thus underlining their common interests. Abu Ali's wife – Umm Ali – for example, is Abu Ali's parallel cousin (his father's brother's daughter) and the sister of his closest associate Abu Hussein,

who is simultaneously his brother-in-law and his cousin. Friends and souq neighbours may intermarry as a sign of, or as a start towards, partnerships. Abu Hussein's son Hussein married the daughter of Abu Mahmoud, who is one of Abu Ali's oldest friends, and a close business associate of the family. Such marriage ties bind partners or pave the way for future partnerships, but they may also lead to conflict and fission. Single-stranded partnerships may cause less conflict and strain than strong ones, but multi-stranded partnerships may constitute a greater potential economic asset because partners are obliged to help each other. Traders, it seems to me, often like others to have strong multiple obligations to them, but, not surprisingly, they prefer to be independent of partners' multi-stranded claims on them.

One type of partnership, which is not very common in Aleppo, is called 'utilization'. A shop-owner 'leases' the shop, and the items in it, to a person who 'utilizes' the shop for an agreed monthly fee. The owner continues to buy and pay for the stock. Whatever extra 'the utilizer' earns, becomes his own profit. This enables shop-owners who are too old to run their shops to make a profit, or people with no money but experience in a specific branch to earn money, and perhaps buy a shop later on. This arrangement is very unusual in the medina, but is found mainly in 'new' markets in the suburbs.<sup>13</sup> Abu Khaled told me that he would leave his two shops to his two sons, but he also had a long-term plan to buy a shop for his two daughters. This he planned to lease as utilization, so that they could have an income independent of their husbands. His daughters, of course, could not run the shop and Abu Khaled would never trust a son-in-law to do it properly. By having 'utilizers' for his daughters' shop he would also make sure that the daughters, and not the sons-in-law, got the profits. And he could, moreover, keep economic control over the shop.

Abu Imad and his friends in the medina, entertained each other one day with the sad story of a trader who had lost a lot of money on a utilization arrangement in Tellal Street. They claimed that such partnerships are flawed, and the investor/owner has too little control. Since they had shops of their own they would never consider becoming a utilizer. Nor were they enthusiastic about other similar forms of partnership. It is not uncommon, for example, for owners of small stores to give a share of the profits, rather than pay a salary, to somebody minding the store. This is common practice when stores are investments for 'absentee' owners. Traders see this behaviour as typical of 'sellers'.

There are many stories of failed partnerships in the medina. But Abu Khalil insisted that not all partnerships fail. 'If you are open, honest, and straightforward, then you have no problems. But you have to have

papers and clear agreements on who does what, and who owns what. I have a very good relation with my partner. But many people are too ignorant or too simple.' Most partnerships in the medina are between relatives or close friends. Close friendships are highly valued, and many men in the medina claim that a close friend is better than most brothers. After all, you can choose friends who you like and respect. Many traders claim that friends are 'like family' – i.e. as close as family should be – and many have relatives who are also close friends.<sup>14</sup>

Abu Ali is the director of a 'company' of eight close male relatives. He and his three brothers, and his cousin Abu Hussein and his three brothers, are all partners. Some work in the company and others do not. They all share in the profit, but those working in the company get more. Each and every one can also have other economic interests, 'companies' and partnerships. Abu Ali, for example, has a number of close male trader friends with whom he does business on his own. The sons of the 'owners' of the family company are not paid a salary, and no part of the profit, even if they work for the company. Instead, they are given an allowance by their fathers. The owners meet frequently and discuss informally how to run their company. Some take a great interest in the running and work very hard, others do not. The drawback of a family company, according to Abu Ali, can be that conflicts spring from feelings of jealousy. 'But we, al hamdullilah, we are known in the medina to have few conflicts.'

It is very common in Aleppo for partners to split up and each set up a 'shop' of their own, or for a 'sleeping partner' to withdraw his finance and set up his own competing business, or for a former employee, after having learned the tricks of the trade (or more commonly the industry) to establish his own business. There are no formal limits to market entry.

Abu Malek owned, among other things, a dye factory, the running of which he had entrusted to a partner, who had also invested some money in the factory and shared some of the profit. Abu Malek spent part of the day supervising his various enterprises, and the rest of the time, usually in the afternoons, could be found in and out of Abu Faris' office. Suddenly he did not appear at all as he had done before, and I was told that he had become tied to his factory on a daily basis. His partner had managed to get hold of a million lira and opened his own dye factory. Abu Malek explained the next time I saw him: 'If you get the chance to increase your income from one pound to two pounds, wouldn't you take that chance? It is his right. And this happens not only here, but in Europe as well. There it's normal for people to leave a company and join a competitor if their salary is increased.'

Traders typically said that every man had the right to have a shop of

his own and the right to be independent of others, and there are no guilds or state institutions limiting the setting up of new enterprises. Conflict over the 'stealing' of trade ideas, trade concepts and production was seldom voiced among my informants in the medina. The basis of the souq, after all, is that many shops selling quite similar things crowd together to 'bring trade'. Informants outside the medina, or trying to establish a new line of business, at times, however, expressed frustration at what they saw as unfair competition. In such situations, they did not say that 'trade brings trade' but complained about what they said was the typical Aleppo trait: 'You think of a new business idea and establish yourself with great effort. And very soon somebody else opens a shop right next to you, imitating your idea. Here people have no ideas of their own, but only profit from what others have worked at.'

The flexibility and great variety of partnerships in the medina ensure that many traders can, in fact, maintain a shop of their own and stay independent and settled. At the same time, as I have discussed, partnerships may also threaten the independence of traders.

### **Souq Ideals and Souq Reality**

In the medina retail customers are economically important, but in many parts of the covered souq traders appear rather uninterested in retail customers. This can be understood in the light of two aspects of medina trade. First of all, *abl as-souq* mainly orient themselves to others of the souq, and neighbouring traders depend on each other in the daily life of the medina. A medina trader who is keen to develop or preserve good neighbourly relations, in order to stress his *taajer*-ness, will not treat retail customers with more interest than he devotes to his neighbours. Secondly, the coolness towards retail customers is related to the importance of wholesale trade and to complicated partnerships in the medina.

#### *'Our Souq is the Best Souq'*

My informants invariably claimed that their own part of the souq was like no other: 'We are like a family here. We help each other and we support each other. In other parts of the medina, this is not always so, but we are known for our good relations.' While many retail customers are no more than temporary guests in the souq, traders depend on continuous good relations with their souq neighbours. 'We see each other more than we see our children and our wives. We are here everyday. Of course we have to get along', Abu Imad once said, and continued: 'Our grandfathers knew each other. We marry into each



other's families. We know everything about each other. We ask about each other.'

Traders often commented on the special atmosphere, or the care and mutual support, of their particular part of the souq. Abu Jamil told me that it was the old people in his souq who had taught him that a man without a shop has no value. 'They know what is right and wrong. They help each other and support one another in ways not found elsewhere. As long as you stay here you will always manage. Some people have left this souq and gone elsewhere and managed. But look at my brother! He left to become a contractor. By 1987 he was extremely rich and had a big Cadillac. But he had bad friends and started to live a terrible life with drinking and drugs. Now he is destitute. If he had stayed here, if he had gotten himself a small shop he would have survived. He would not have become rich like he was, but he would have managed and survived.'

In many cases individual shop-owners may not be on intimate and daily visiting terms with their close neighbours, or have them as close friends, but they still have to get along.<sup>15</sup> Conflicts with other traders in the same souq are avoided because they give the souq a bad name, according to informants. As soon as conflicts are brewing mediators are brought in, or bring themselves in, to calm the parties, and try to solve the conflict. Such mediators are men who are respected in the souq. According to Abu Imad, they have to be patient and not lose their temper, a quality he frankly admitted he lacked. The medina in many ways thus fosters conformity. Abu Imad once sighed and said that people in the medina have limited aspirations, and Abu Khalil said that jealousy is a general problem in Aleppo, and very noticeable in the medina. Outspoken aspirations could be perceived as self-aggrandizement and many traders were circumspect about voicing their ambitions. The downfall of Abu Jamil's brother – his loss of independence and settlement – began because he started to '*kabbir baalu*', to make himself big. This is not primarily a question of economic risk-taking, but of self-aggrandizement. Such an endeavour is seldom communicated among traders in the medina. It may invite envy and conflict rather than trust and co-operation.

### *Trust and Lack of It*

Traders would frequently stress that 'trust', *thiqa*, was an important characteristic of the souq and of relations between traders, or between traders and special customers. In the social sciences analysis of 'trust' has become very lively since the late 1980s.<sup>16</sup> The concept became much used also outside academia, when linked to questions about 'civil society' and the overall functioning – or lack of functioning – of democratic and

modern societies. But as an analytical concept, 'trust' is remarkably elusive. Seligman, critically assessing other scholars, underlines that 'trust', 'faith' and 'confidence' should not be conflated.<sup>17</sup> As used in the Aleppo souq, *thiqa* contains elements of all three, but I will translate it as 'trust'. Traders used *thiqa* as a normative concept, and as a metaphor of goodness against which evil and bad things can be measured. *Thiqa* can thus be analysed as a term through which morality can be debated.<sup>18</sup> As an analytical concept, 'trust' can be understood as a symbolic glue which ties the souq into a functioning market.<sup>19</sup>

When discussing trust my informants would often relate it to overall values in the souq, or to values in the wider society. Trust would be linked to traders' sense of 'right and wrong' (*halaal wa haram*), which in turn would be linked to a 'fear of God' (*kehauf allah*). 'People know how to behave, to be trustworthy, because we have a fear of God,' Abu Ali explained. Many of my informants insisted that, in contrast to 'the West', trade in Aleppo (and Syria) was based on trust: 'Here we trust each other. The word of a trader is as binding as a piece of paper. Before in the old times, we had no papers as all. The name of a person was all that mattered.' But others, like Abu Hussein – although a firm advocate of fear of God – would counter and argue that trade everywhere depends on trust. 'You fax someone in Singapore and order thread. Of course you have to trust that trader to send it to you, and send the right quality and quantity. If he doesn't, you will never trade with him again. And he has to trust you to pay for what you order. The principle is the same all over the world.'<sup>20</sup>

The small enterprises in the souq, and the ideal of a shop of one's own, clearly make trading trust a central issue in Aleppo. The very organization of the souq makes each trader depend on the trustworthiness of the others as more 'complete' persons. Although *thiqa* was presented as central to trading practices, my informants frequently complained about the lack, or the absence, of trust. Seen differently, because of the centrality of trust, informants complained about its absence. Complaints generally centred around issues of credit. When debating trust, not surprisingly traders stressed that they could be trusted, but that others they dealt with did not always reciprocate this trust. Traders also linked *thiqa* to their reputations – their 'names' – which will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

On a number of occasions Abu Mustafa made angry comments after some – in his opinion – particularly thick-headed villager had disappeared. One day he sold a great many towels to a man who was going to resell them in his village. After rather rapid negotiations he got a wholesale price and paid. Abu Mustafa arranged for transportation and

said the merchandise would arrive the next day. The customer asked for a receipt, and Abu Mustafa became very upset: 'Is there no trust anymore?' 'Well, yes' the man replied, 'but I still want a receipt.' With loud sighs, Abu Mustafa wrote a receipt on a small piece of paper he tore from his notebook. The customer expressed dissatisfaction at the appearance of the receipt, but took it and left. Abu Mustafa complained: 'This is my customer. We are not strangers. He comes all the time! What is my capital? Not my merchandise or the things I possess, but my good name. As my customer, he should trust my good name.'

A perceived decrease in trust in the souq was explained in various ways. Some people related trading problems to a general moral decay in society. In such a perspective everything was better 'before'. Views on contemporary Aleppo as compared with views on 'before' will be looked at in later chapters. Sometimes traders stressed that the difficult times pushed them to their credit limits. Here the state was commonly blamed. Abu Sabri, for example, would argue that trust became scarce when trade was so slow. Others complained that too many inexperienced people dabbled in trade. Also here the state was usually blamed. Many former public employees tried to become traders in order to be economically independent, as will be discussed below. But such people could not always be trusted, according to some of my informants.

One woman, an employee with a limited salary, invested all her savings with a former colleague who had opened a workshop. 'We were very good friends at my workplace and I admired his guts in setting up a business. I trusted him and when he needed money I willingly lent him all my savings. But then he suddenly disappeared from the country and I kept visiting his family to try to get my money back. We did not sign any papers and his family says they have nothing to give me. Everybody calls me a fool. But I really trusted him. I have lost everything.' Abu Jamil tried to help this woman but failed because she had nothing to show that she had, in fact, lent money to her former colleague. Abu Jamil said that, like many other non-traders, she had simply been too trusting.

Traders often complained that owners of workshops or wholesale traders would try to cheat on quality and claimed that what was produced 'earlier' was better. An industrialist, on the other hand, told me that he was trying to produce goods of high quality, but the traders only asked for cheaper quality. Quite often traders and industrialists would complain that the decrease of trade with Russia and the new post-Soviet republics, was due to stinginess and lack of quality. 'At first we exported a lot, in the early 90s, and many traders and industrialists here became rich on that trade. But then traders got lazy and started to sell less good quality. Aleppo lost trade that way. People here only run after short-term profit.'

'They never think ahead', Abu Mamdou insisted. Abu Hassan countered that what had been exported initially was not of such great quality. Abu Mamdou clinched the matter by claiming that when the quality was lowered even further, the cheapness really showed. Some traders, like Abu Malek, took the issue of bad quality more in their stride: 'You have to be on top of everything, and check what others produce or sell to you. You can never relax and just expect that you get the best price and the best quality. This is the way of trade.'

### *Security and Lack of It*

'Security' meant that huge amounts of money could be transported by messengers in plastic bags, that traders could leave their shops, and that women could move about wearing lots of jewelry, without fear of theft, as pointed out in Chapter 2. Traders linked the security of the medina and of Aleppo (and Syria) to social values, to a 'fear of God', and to state policies, as I have discussed. But although thefts from shops or robberies were unusual, Aleppians complained that burglaries were increasing. This was talked about in various ways. Sometimes it was described as lack of trust. Abu Adel told me that his house, where he kept his safe and his stock, had been burgled. 'I lost money and stock to the value of half a million lira. There is no *thiqa* anymore.' The thief obviously knew the house contained valuables and Abu Adel suspected that 'others' in his medina surroundings, or in his neighbourhood, were involved. One day Abu Imad and his friends were upset. The house of a man they all knew had been broken into and gold worth a million lira was stolen, when his wife and daughter were out shopping. Many traders, and other Aleppians, would claim that poverty was a major motive behind the burglaries. Abu Malek, with experience of other countries, pointed out that, comparatively speaking, Aleppo and Syria had few burglaries, although gold could be found in almost every house.<sup>21</sup> Others, however, said that the city had grown too big and that social cohesion was lessening. They claimed that Syria was becoming 'like the West' with people who no longer knew and respected each other.

During my fieldwork there was also a story of a daring, but failed, coup in the gold souq. This souq is sealed and guarded after sunset, because most jewellers keep their gold in a safe in their shop overnight. But a band of thieves had tried get into the gold souq by the way of the roofs of the medina. They had managed to attack the guard but had not been able to open any safes. For a few days the medina was rife with rumours: Had the guard been co-operating with the thieves? How many were involved? While some insisted that none among the *abl as-souq*

would participate in such a crime, others thought it was an inside job since the burglars clearly knew how to get in and out of the souq.

'Trust' and 'lack of trust' were, as I have shown, used in various contexts in the souq by my informants. They were talked about in both very concrete and metaphorical ways to reflect the traders' views on the good and bad things in life. Trust was conceived of as an aspect of the behaviour and thinking of individuals, and also as a diffuse ethos in society at large. Through discussions about trust, and lack of it, traders could ruminate on dependence and independence in the souq. In these debates the Syrian state was frequently made into a scapegoat and blamed for the evils of the contemporary situation.

### **Traders and the State**

No market is a self-regulating mechanism. Everywhere the state and the public authorities intervene to try to regulate the relationships between traders and customers, among traders, and between the state and traders. In Syria policies of strict regulation, and efforts on behalf of traders and industrialists to circumvent these regulations, have been prevalent for decades. This 'tug-of-war' has in many ways established an atmosphere of distrust between traders and politicians, and traders and many public employees. At the same time, there are many connections, links and interdependences between the Syrian trading community and public employees.

At the end of the 1950s and in the early 1960s the state curtailed the size of private companies and nationalized industries.<sup>22</sup> Many well-off Aleppo traders chose to leave the country at that time.<sup>23</sup> After the Ba'th take-over in 1963 the relationship between the *ahl as-souq* and the ruling Ba'th party was ambivalent. On the one hand, private property of a 'non-exploitative' kind was safeguarded by the Syrian Constitution, and by the tenets of the Ba'th party. On the other hand, traders and *ahl-as souq* were regarded with suspicion, since party leaders assumed that traders were less than loyal to the creed of the Ba'th party.

When Hafez al-Asad came to power in 1970 economic restrictions were eased and the souq was given more room for manoeuvre. In the wake of the October war in 1973 Syria received aid from oil-rich Arab countries, which was used for investment in the public sector. By the end of that decade, however, the economic and political crisis in the country reached gigantic proportions. In 1976 the Syrian army entered Lebanon to 'regulate' the civil war, which caused massive criticism at home, both from parties and organizations of the left and from Muslim Brotherhood activists. Popular discontent grew as Syrians suffered both politically and

economically from the intervention in Lebanon. Consumer items were scarce and expensive. Smuggling, especially from Lebanon, increased. In 1980 Muslim Brotherhood militants intensified their attacks on Ba'th party leaders and on military installations. Traders in Aleppo closed down the entire market to vent their anger over the economic situation. These market closures spread to other cities. While traders at the time claimed their action was economic, the regime insisted that such activities were aimed at undermining the stability of the country. Special army units were called into Aleppo to open the market by force. This period (now euphemistically called *al-abdaath*, 'the events') marks the low ebb in relations between traders – particularly the *ahl as-souq* – and the regime.<sup>24</sup>

Once the leftists and the Muslim Brotherhood had been crushed, the regime began policies of rapprochement, as described in Chapter 2. The regime promoted its own brand of state-controlled religion, by, for example, building an enormous number of mosques in which state-controlled religious messages have been spread. Furthermore, spurred by the fiscal crisis of the state, the regime instigated new policies of economic liberalization, centring on promoting the private sector in order to provide more jobs and to increase exports to bring hard currency into the country. A quite spectacular growth in the private sector took place from the mid-1980s, and by the end of the decade it dominated the economy in terms of both gross domestic product and employment.<sup>25</sup> In 1991 a new investment law (Law No. 10) was passed encouraging the establishment of larger private industrial enterprises.<sup>26</sup> Projects covered by the law are exempted from taxation for five to seven years. In the last fifteen years the state has withdrawn more and more as an economic motor. Together with the public bureaucracy, however, it still pursues policies and laws regulating relations between the state and private trade, between traders and customers, and among traders.

The name of the trading game is to make a profit on what you sell. Most of my informants, not surprisingly, complained actively about the institutional setting, claiming that state policies or public employees were blocking them in their efforts to make the economy bloom. And, as pointed out above, they often linked a lack of trust or a perceived decrease in security to state policies and praxis. Traders complained about the taxes and fees they had to pay, about the control of prices, about their low profits and the difficulties in exporting and importing. They also complained about excessive bureaucracy and corruption.<sup>27</sup>

The state regulates the amount of profit a trader can make. Retail traders are allowed to make a profit of 12–16 per cent on the products they sell, according to my informants. There are what can be called

'price-police' from the Ministry of Supply, who check that traders do not overcharge. Traders have to have clear price-tags on their goods, and invoices verifying the price they paid for these products. If goods are not Syrian but foreign, traders must be able to show that they have passed through Syrian customs and that the customs tariffs have been paid. Special 'customs-police' check on this. There are also 'order-police' from the city council, checking that traders do not use public streets or alleys to display their goods. All traders break these laws, and all traders, one way or another, pay bribes to avoid being fined. Even the traffic-police are routinely given small sums of money or goods from the shops. Some laws are broken because it is almost impossible not to. Invoices of the kind the price-police demand are rare among traders, where much trade is done simply by word of mouth, on the telephone, or on small scraps of paper. In certain branches most traders sell smuggled goods, or goods that have not been declared to their full value. Dues for electricity and cleaning also have to be paid by traders. Abu Imad pays about a thousand Syrian pounds a month for electricity to his shop, which he complains about. Abu Khaled was constantly complaining about the cleaning fees: 'Look at this souq! With the amount we pay for cleaning it ought to shine. Thieves and crooks! We pay and get nothing in return.'

All registered businesses should pay tax in Syria, apart from the enterprises covered by Law No. 10, as mentioned above. The tax is calculated on the turnover of the business. Goldsmiths, and others dealing in what is termed the luxury trade, also have to pay a special tax, estimated on turnover, every three months. Traders complain that taxes have increased dramatically in the last few years. They complained they had to pay almost 50 per cent of their profit.<sup>28</sup> Taxes on turnover are collected once a year. There is also a tax on shops or businesses that are sold or inherited. Property-owners also pay a property tax. Traders, and others, stress that business taxes are high in Syria but that few actually pay what they should. Tax evasion is the rule rather than the exception. But one of my informants actually insisted that the Syrian bureaucracy was not so bad, and that fees and taxes were not a problem. 'The trader who is honest, has no problems. But people here are not honest, and make things too complicated.'

Economic policies since the early 1990s have made Syria into a much more trade-conducive country. My informants acknowledged that the economic climate has improved, and admitted that the state was less negative towards the private sector. Thus more and more men were able to both open and maintain a shop of their own. But not one of my informants admitted that traders in general have prospered because of state policies. They argued that very large and very rich traders are

prosperous as a consequence of their political connections, but the contemporary relative prosperity of traders in general, including themselves, was regarded as being due to their own skill, perseverance and hard work.

*Buying and Selling as a Way to Survive*

Aleppians often attribute the prevalence of trade in the city to the energy, industry and cleverness of its people. Many talk about Aleppo's trading tradition, but the increase in trading and manufacturing activities in Aleppo should be judged not only as a response to the more liberal views on private enterprise on the part of the political powers that be, but also as a response to the severe economic difficulties among Syrians at large. Many of those who trade or manufacture in Aleppo are, or have been, public employees. Many have enjoyed higher education. The commercial interest and energy of Syrians (and perhaps Aleppians in particular) should, therefore, be understood also in the light of severe livelihood difficulties.

Traders often stressed that they were much better-off than the vast majority of public employees. They acknowledged that the economic balance turned in their favour from the middle of the 1980s with cutbacks in the public sector and with the undermining of the value of the Syrian currency by inflation. It became increasingly difficult to raise a family on state salaries and by the early 1990s some cherished employment policies were abandoned in Syria. Up to then, in principle, all secondary school and university graduates were automatically employed in the public sector, according to type and length of education. Engineers and doctors (and others) initially welcomed this change of policy. These professionals had been placed where various bureaucracies deemed they were needed, and had to serve 'the public' for at least five years. Syrian educational institutions, despite the changed employment policies, still churn out massive numbers of secondary school and university graduates, who now have great difficulty in finding public or private employment.

*A Failed Seller.* Abu Saleh is a retired public employee who moved to a new Aleppo suburb about ten years ago. This western suburb, close to the main road to Damascus, was inhabited by many employees who had joined various building co-operatives. Abu Saleh wanted to augment his meagre pension, and as he had a ground-floor flat with a garden, he opened a small grocery store in one of the rooms. He was very successful for the first few years as he was the first to open a store, in the area. He



had a telephone in the shop in the days when telephones were not generally available in this suburb, and people came in to telephone and bought goods from him as well. But when I visited him the shelves were bare and he was not making any money at all. He had no money to buy stock, and was only selling – cheaply – what he already had in the shop. Abu Saleh said that competition had increased; there were now more than forty small grocery shops in the quarter, and many of them were facing difficulties. He also complained that one of his competitors, an employee in the customs office, was able to sell smuggled goods he had ‘confiscated’. Later Abu Saleh closed his shop and took a job in a shop in the ‘electric souq’ in the centre of the city, where he received no normal salary but instead got a share of the profits.

To open a grocery store, or a store for sweets and soft drinks, in your own neighbourhood is a typical venture for many retired public employees. This is also the case for active employees able to put family members in the shop while they are at work. Grocery stores, or stores selling vegetables, candy or ‘this and that’ are also often opened in neighbourhoods by rural migrants with a bit of money, or by people with some money to spare. Not much capital is needed for such a small store. Grocery – and similar – shops are clearly the most numerous in Aleppo, as in many large cities all over the world, both today and earlier.<sup>29</sup> The profit margin for such shops is often low and the majority of neighbourhood grocery stores in Aleppo have to extend credit to loyal customers. If they are unknown in the business, however, wholesale traders may decide not to extend credit to these shop-owners. Hence many such small shops do not survive, or change ownership quite often, a process obviously not unique to Aleppo.

*A Budding Trader.* To most of my informants in the medina people like Abu Saleh are ‘sellers’ rather than ‘traders’. People with a small neighbourhood store, and people selling from stalls or carts, are not considered traders, as has been pointed out. On the other hand, a seller might become a trader. Now and then I would be told that ‘Abu so and so’ started with two empty hands, perhaps as an itinerant seller in the souq, and slowly made a good profit, invested it in a shop and expanded in the market. Abu Muhammad’s case can illustrate this kind of career. Abu Muhammad is in his forties and used to be a teacher. He lives in a ‘popular’, densely populated southwestern quarter, where he has been a shopkeeper for a decade specializing in articles for women: fripperies, make-up, perfume and clothes, sheets and bedspreads. Abu Muhammad started with a partner, but they split up three years ago, due to differences of opinion on how to run the shop. Abu Muhammad was

born and raised in the quarter and claims that this has helped him a lot. It is a 'conservative' (*mubaafiz*) quarter, meaning that the vast majority of women are heavily veiled, and that people uphold the value of public gender separation. An old colleague of Abu Muhammad's who accompanied me to his shop, had told me enthusiastically about his friend's skill, claiming that he made a net profit of 5,000 Syrian lira every day. Since this was the average monthly salary of a Syrian teacher, I could easily understand his change of profession. Abu Muhammad, like so many other Aleppian traders said that the most important assets in business are 'good practice' and 'reputation'. He also added 'appearance' of the shop as a third asset, something few in the medina emphasized. Abu Muhammad's shop was actually very tidy and neat, and the goods were carefully arranged. His margin of profit was very small but by selling a great deal he made a lot of money. He said that he sold cheap things as well as expensive things, catering for a wide variety of customers.

In Aleppo *tajer*-ness can be acquired through skill and perseverance. Abu Muhammad bought and sold for a profit and he was making a more than tolerable living. But this alone did not make him a trader. More importantly, he had begun to embrace a trading spirit. He had a shop, talked about his relationship with clients, about his reputation and about his ability. He acted as if he were a trader, and others reacted to him as if he were. In short, his interests were tied to the market rather than elsewhere. Credit was extended to him and he had acquired networks of clients and of wholesale traders. He was becoming both settled and independent.

As has been pointed out, there have been numerous changes in the conditions for trade in the past few decades. But there has also been continuity of a kind, in that the organization of trade remains both fragmented and heterogeneous. It is fragmented in the sense that there are many actors in production, both wholesale and retail.<sup>30</sup> It is heterogeneous since the nature of these businesses is highly changeable. In reality only a few of my middle-aged informants sell or produce exactly what their fathers sold or produced. Instead, most have branched out, changed direction or diversified. While the *abl as-souq* constitute the core of traders who are tightly linked to the souq, the composition of this core changes over time. A great many families 'fall out' of trade and others join. There are a number of families in Aleppo who have been rooted in the market for more than two hundred years,<sup>31</sup> but the families of most of my trader informants are actually relative newcomers in the souq. There has been great social mobility in the past century,

particularly between the 1950s and the 1980s, with new occupational opportunities opening up and with fortunes being both lost and gained. In some families there has been a 'conversion' from trade to state employment and work in liberal professions like engineering, medicine or law, especially in the 1950s. At that time public employment was prestigious and well-paid, and education was still a concern for the better-off in Syria. Since the 1980s the 'conversion' has often taken the opposite direction because public employment has become more uncertain, less prestigious and less well paid.<sup>32</sup>

The ideal of a shop of one's own must therefore be understood in its contemporary guise. There are increased opportunities for 'a shop of one's own' in Aleppo, due to economic liberalization and the downsizing of the public sector. Hence more men can achieve both 'independence' and 'settlement' and live in accordance with souq ideals. But this process has, paradoxically, also led to less independence. When more and more men are tied to others in the souq they become more dependent on each other, because they try to be independent of the state. Most traders depend on others for labour and credit. They need partnerships to hedge against the ups and downs of the market. The heated debates about *thiqa* – or rather lack of it – express this paradox. Dependence on trusted others in the market was acknowledged as a means of gaining independence. Yet in their daily life in the souq traders were confronted not only with unknown others but also with 'trusted others' who broke this trust. The traders' concern with 'independence and settlement' is both a consequence of, and contributes to, the fragmentation and heterogeneity of the market. They have to trade their independence to stay independent.

In the next chapter trading names will be examined. Many traders frequently talked about the importance of reputation – names – in the souq so that others could trust you, and you could trust others. Not only a shop but also a good name is important to achieve and maintain independence, but in this process a trader depends on others, thus again underlining the intensely social character of the souq.

## TRADING NAMES

*‘Here all trade depends on trust and one’s name is everything. No one will trade with a man who has money but no name. But people will trade with a man who has no money if he has a name.’*

The vast majority of my informants were of the opinion that a (good) name (*ism*) is the most important asset for a trader.<sup>1</sup> On the market a trader gains a good name by his (good) practice, as mentioned in Chapter 3. A trader ought to be fair, honest, sincere and truthful. Many of my informants said that a trader must have a ‘sweet tongue’. And, as already discussed, a trader should furthermore not indulge in self-aggrandizement. *Ism* can be translated as ‘reputation’, but *ism* is ‘name’ also in a very concrete sense. Furthermore it is often talked about as a tangible aspect of a trader.<sup>2</sup> Like ‘independence’, ‘name’ can only be discerned by its opposite: dependence and lack of name. But in the souq, ‘name’, unlike ‘independence’, is perceived as a limited good. From the point of view of traders, all in the souq should, in principle, be able to be independent. As discussed in Chapter 3, traders recognize the right of others to be settled and independent – to have a shop of their own. As an ideal ‘independence’ valorizes the equality of traders and budding traders. Yet, I stressed, the increase of ‘independent shops’ makes traders more dependent on each other.

*Ism* is different. If all have names, then having a name becomes pointless. *Ism*, therefore, valorizes rank and hierarchy. While traders could say that the *ism* of a trader is his greatest asset, he could not say that his own name was great. In fact, the most reputable traders in the souq never spoke about their names, but instead let others speak for them and about them.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter trading names – reputations – will be scrutinized as a concern mainly among the traders themselves. Although *ism* is talked about as essential in the market, there is no consensus on how to

measure reputation, nor on who, in fact, has a name and who does not. Opinions about rank and hierarchy are not uniform, but religion, urban-rural differences and ethnic labels are commonly used as cross-cutting indicators. Some traders intermittently claim that ‘other traders’ lack a name, and non-traders frequently claim that most traders are unfair, dishonest and do not deserve an *ism*. ‘Trust’ and ‘name’ are often paired, as discussed in Chapter 3. Traders see themselves in terms of their own (good) reputation, while non-traders, not uncommonly, lump all traders together in terms of their not-so-good reputation. On the market, therefore, ‘name’ is a contested concept, and conflicts are often attributed to the lack of name of the other.

My informants stressed that each person should be judged by his achievements and actions. Yet they were keen classifiers of social rank and distinction linked to family name or background. Traders argued that each one must develop his own trade-ness and reputation. Yet they also admitted that in the souq the name of one’s family is usually of great importance for traders when trying to build a reputation for themselves.

The importance of ‘family’ – like the importance of a shop of one’s own – is taken for granted in the souq (as well as outside). To belong to a family, to build and maintain a family of one’s own, to have children – and especially sons – is commonly expressed as the ultimate purpose in life. Relations between fathers and sons are, as will be discussed, extremely important in the souq and also fraught with tension. Among *abl as-souq* relations between men and women and gender ideals both reflect and generate the importance of trading names. Their wives, daughters, sisters and mothers are essential in the production of the good – or bad – name of the traders.

### **Names on the Market**

A name in the souq has to be continuously achieved on the market, but the market in names differs from one trader to another. While many of my informants talked about the centrality of *ism*, or took its centrality for granted, its content is actually relative rather than absolute. There is, for example, an important difference between retail and wholesale trade. In the medina, among the *abl as-souq*, the reputation of a trader is created, maintained and assessed mainly amongst themselves as traders. For traders outside the medina and the city centre, on the other hand, it is extremely important to have a good reputation among retail customers. For a budding trader like Abu Muhammad, discussed in Chapter 3, selling clothes and fripperies to the women of the neighbourhood, reputation is of the utmost importance. Abu Muhammad is helped by

the neighbourhood itself, where women are discouraged from shopping elsewhere if items are available close by, but he still has to make clients come to him rather than shop elsewhere. He depends on customers who often know each other and who will bolster or deflate his reputation. If word of his honesty, sincerity, fairness and his 'sweet tongue' is firmly established, not only will his customers increase, but his contacts with wholesale traders in the medina will improve.

A trader selling the same items as Abu Muhammad on the busy central Tellal Street (geared towards women) depends much less on loyal customers. Here there are many shops next to each other selling more or less similar items, and shoppers tend to browse from one to another until they find what they want at a reasonable price. Shopkeepers and shop-assistants are very active in attracting customers. They may use loudspeakers to announce sales or discounts. There are 'catchers' outside the shop trying to entice customers inside. The shops have windows displaying a lot of merchandise. On Baron Street, geared more towards men's clothes, the sale style is much more subdued and discreet. But even in this location many customers are not loyal, and the name of the shop-owner is not mainly established vis-à-vis retail customers. This is the case also for many retail traders in the medina. The majority of retail customers in the medina are from the rural Aleppo hinterland. While many of these customers clearly develop specific relationships with specific traders, the majority of retail transactions are not of this kind. Customers are price-sensitive rather than 'name-sensitive'. Most customers want to be treated nicely; they ask for good practice on the part of traders, but their overriding concern is to get a good bargain.

### *To Bargain or Not to Bargain!*

In the Old Istanbul souq, where dress-material is sold, and where – as in the gold souq – powerful lamps are directed to show off the merchandise, traders, in the midst of the sheen and splendour of the cloth, often call out to customers. 'Welcome, welcome my lady, can I be of service?' Elsewhere in the medina the active 'hunt' for customers is most noticeable along the stretch where the tourist trade has emerged. Here shopkeepers rush out of their shops as soon as they identify a foreigner and, in English, Italian, French or German, call out the prices of their items, or draw attention to their selection.

Both Abu Adel and Haytham, who depended a lot on the tourist trade, expressed ambivalent feelings about this trading style. They never called out to prospective customers. Abu Adel diligently kept on working in his shop, and Haytham often entertained friends. Both claimed the

quality of their goods and their cooler trading style signalled good trading practice, but they were also frustrated by the reputation of the souq as a whole among tourists.<sup>4</sup> Haytham complained: 'We have to exaggerate our prices because even if I say that I have fixed prices, they never believe me. So I have to put on this show of lowering the prices, so that, eventually, the customers think they have made a good deal. They think they are Oriental by bargaining.' He ranked foreigners according to their shopping style, putting Germans on top for their efficiency in deciding what they wanted. Italians, he claimed, wanted to look at everything, bargained and bargained but seldom bought. 'They are too much like Arabs, and try to be too clever!'

Bargaining between shopkeeper and customers – perhaps contrary to outsiders' clichés about the souq – is not legion in the Aleppo medina.<sup>5</sup> Intense bargaining is, in fact, not very usual in retail trade. In general, there is less bargaining over 'male' merchandise, and there is more bargaining with female customers than with male. It is obvious in the souq that some women really enjoy window-shopping, browsing, and comparing prices. In some 'female' shopping streets or parts of the souq, there are, therefore, mutual expectations of bargaining and banter from female customers and the male shopkeepers. Women generally try to bargain more than men, and in some parts of the souq rural customers try to bargain more than urban customers.

As already noted, villagers, often both men and women together, come to Aleppo to shop, especially before weddings. On the one hand, these customers are very important for traders in rugs and mats, textiles, cloth, fripperies, and gold. They are therefore coveted and pampered, especially if they appear willing to spend a lot of money. On the other hand, many medina traders and shop-assistants also subtly, or not so subtly, communicate their urban sophistication and *savoir faire* to villagers. Comments like 'Yes brother, how old is the bride?' or 'No sister, this colour is really more beautiful for a bridal bed' can be simultaneously friendly and patronizing. Many villagers, and customers from smaller towns, claim that Aleppians overcharge them and regard them as rural and backward. If non-Aleppians suspect that they are being cheated, this creates an atmosphere where they feel obliged to bargain, in order not to appear gullible. But 'over-bargaining' instead marks them as hopelessly unsophisticated. It is, of course, very different when the customer, regardless of sex, knows the trader. Then mutual trust has been established.

Abu Sabri and his sons, like many other traders selling household utensils in the Sweiqat Ali, only exceptionally bargained with retail customers. If a customer asked them to 'give in' and lower the price, they

responded by saying that they only had 'one word', that their prices were the same for stranger and friend, and that they did not work in a bazaar.<sup>6</sup> When retail traders claim that they only have one price, and refuse to bargain, they will often stress the good quality of their merchandise. 'You don't want cheap quality (*tijaari*), do you?' or 'If you search the whole souq, you will not find the same quality at this price' is commonly used in the ladies' market. Sometimes traders sent a customer to another trader, but, contrary to what many claimed, this was not the practice in every part of the souq. If a customer was looking for a particular colour, size or shape and a trader did not have it, a shop-keeper would, as mentioned earlier, obtain it from a neighbour if this was convenient. But he could also try to entice the customers to buy something else. If customers complained about the price, a trader could insist that he was selling cheaply 'to cover our costs', because the market was so slow.

If customers and traders were arguing about the price, the trader would sometimes clinch the matter by saying: 'Oh daughter/son of sweetness! Take it without paying. I am selling at a loss. This price does not even cover my expenses', indicating that the customer was really off the 'correct' price. No customer would dream of accepting such an offer, just as no trader would give away his merchandise. Likewise, a cherished and known customer, or a friend of a trader, would often be told to 'leave it to us' i.e. do not pay, resulting in a polite interchange of 'no, my brother, that is not possible', 'But yes, my dear, it's possible. Leave it to us' until the matter was settled.

Abu Imad and I once had a discussion about the rights and wrongs of bargaining. I had bought material in his part of the souq and was on my way to his shop. Soon afterwards the shopkeeper came rushing looking for me. He had returned too little change and gave me 40 lira which he said he owed me. 'You always have to return the correct change', Abu Imad said. 'The price you agree on when you bargain, that price is your right as a trader. It is *balaal* (religiously correct). But if you agree on a price and then don't return the right amount to the customer, or if you give him too little cloth, for example, then it is *haraam* (religiously forbidden). What I earn that way is not *balaal*.' To earn a name as a trader with a *balaal* practice is important on the retail market.

### *'Good Practice' in the Souq*

In the medina, in sharp contrast to the 'modern' central shopping streets like Tellal and Baron and the suburbs, many traders seem quite uninterested in their retail customers. Medina expressions like 'customers bring customers' or 'trade brings trade', discussed earlier, do not



underline the role of the individual trader in getting customers. Unlike Abu Muhammad, discussed above, medina retail traders never talked about sales strategies, but only about the slowness, or occasionally the briskness, of the souq in general. The ‘sweet tongue’ so many claimed was needed to establish and maintain a reputation, was certainly not universally cultivated with retail customers. Flattering retail customers was uncommon. In most shops in Aleppo, also outside the medina and the city centre, there was no overall ethos of ‘the customer is always right’ or ‘always pay attention to the customer’. The customer had his or her rights, but so did the traders! If the trader was having an interesting conversation with a neighbour, or on the telephone, the customer might have to wait. I never heard older more experienced traders give lectures, or ‘tricks of the trade’, to their sons, their employees or their partners. When more than one person worked in the same shop, they never interfered with each other. Fathers always left their sons to do their own deals, to bargain or not to bargain, and to talk to customers the way they chose. Shop-assistants were treated no differently. Neighbours visiting a shop might also serve a customer or conclude a deal.

Usually, the behaviour of customers excited few comments among traders and seldom ruffled them, one way or the other. Experienced traders had seen them all. I was frequently told that ‘people come in all shapes and sizes’.<sup>7</sup> But Abu Issam once said laconically ‘God help her husband’ after a woman had left the shop. She had looked at many items, had compared, complained and passed comments like ‘this is ugly... that is too small... this is too thick... the quality is no good’ and in the end bought nothing.

In the medina it is in wholesale, rather than retail trade that the name of each party really comes into play. Much of the medina trade is, as I have discussed, wholesale, or between one wholesale trader and another, or between an owner of a workshop and a wholesale or retail trader. Such transactions are more complex than in retail trade, and usually more long-term than transactions between retail customers and traders in the medina. Because of this, reputation in the medina, and especially among the *ahl as-souq*, is mainly an intra-trader concern. In the medina the names of others are assessed according to multiple scales.

Many traders were dependent on, or helped by, the very concrete name of their family. Some family names in the souq can actually be assessed as the equivalent of brand-names, thus counteracting the idea that only the practice and actions of each individual should form the basis of one’s trade name. Traders are keen classifiers and establish scales of social worth in which ‘origin’ (*asl*) and ‘family’ (*‘aile/ahl*) are important criteria for how names are assessed.

## Family and Descent

To the many devout Muslims and Christians in Aleppo there is, in principle, no merit linked to family background. The social worth of a believer should be linked only to his or her good practice. There is no inherent difference between one human being and another. Rural or urban background, educated or uneducated, Arab, Kurd or Armenian are mere surface aspects. The Ba'th ideology, fostered in schools and in the mass media, also stresses that all inherited social divisions are irrelevant in a Syria where all citizens are equal and free. Although citizens in general clearly object to the monopoly of Ba'th ideology in official Syria, the egalitarianism of the ruling party strikes a chord inside and outside the Aleppo souq. Yet ideas of, and talk about, family and origin are at the same time essential aspects of daily life in Syria.

Among my trader informants 'family' is used contextually to describe both their set of living relatives, the patrilineal descent-group (including their ancestors) and their own nuclear family. Some of my informants have a very large family of living members and others a quite small one. In a rural context the concept *ashiire* (tribe, clan) is often used for the patrilineal descent-group and the set of living relatives. My informants talked about 'peasant' and 'tribal' in a rather derogatory way.<sup>8</sup> But there were also traders in Aleppo who claimed that many of the present *abl as-souq* are 'clannish', backward, uneducated and corrupt. In such discussions the various Aleppo scales of social rank became apparent.<sup>9</sup>

In Aleppo there are a number of family-names that are commonly thought of as 'old' and 'good'. Sometimes these families are talked of as 'aristocratic' or 'feudal' or 'land-owning'. Many of these families acquired a fortune and bought land and property in the early, middle or late nineteenth century when new economic opportunities arose. These family-names are associated with the 'old rich' of Aleppo, and commonly also with learning. Sometimes, but more rarely, the term 'notables' is used in Aleppo. This is a more indigenous and pre-independence terminology, used to describe old families of religious, and later also secular, learning, of property, and of political power, who were rooted in the city.<sup>10</sup> Many such 'notable' and 'feudal' families had, as briefly described in Chapter 3, their fortunes, their land and their property nationalized in the late 1950s or the early 1960s. Many family members today have ordinary jobs, are employed, or work as traders.

One day Abu Sabri, from a well-known *abl as-souq* family, and I were discussing a folkloristic show in an Aleppo hotel. One member of the acting troop was from an 'old and good' family. Abu Sabri said it was a shame to see a man from that family working in such a profession, while

others 'without family or origin' (*bidoun asl wa fasl*) had become rich. Abu Sabri expressed no particular admiration for this family-name. On another occasion he and his cousin had discussed this particular family's relation to their own. 'Before,' his cousin told me, 'this feudal family in Aleppo looked down on us because we are conservative and veil our women. They thought they were so cultivated and that we were uneducated. But actually many of them were quite peasant-like. But then some of their women got to know some of our women and they had to change their opinion of us.' Abu Sabri agreed. His comment about the 'shame' of the actor was not a comment in sympathy for that family nor, for that matter, a comment on an inappropriate choice of career. Rather, he was stating that others, without distinction, could rise to riches and fame these days.

*With and without 'asl wa fasl'*

In Aleppo there is a general feeling of disadvantage as compared with Damascus, the capital. Traders and industrialists claim that state-sponsored businessmen in Damascus block their success. But people in Aleppo are criticized as well. It often happens that traders claim that 'other' Aleppo traders are crooks. My informants would point to a villa or a large car, and insist that the owner became rich from smuggling hashish, or from cheating in trade. There is a prevalent opinion in Syria, shared by my informants, that almost all 'new rich' traders have acquired their fortune through crooked activities. Traders and industrialists who have benefited from investment Law No. 10 of 1991, discussed briefly in Chapter 3, fall into that category as well. Such people, it is believed, are invariably politically connected and reap the benefits of these political connections. In the medina, among *abl as-souq*, there is a tendency to describe the new rich as newcomers to trade or as rural, or 'tribal' people, with no reputation or honour to safeguard and defend.<sup>11</sup>

My informants often complained that 'nobodies' had risen to fortune and influence. 'Who is that man? Where does he come from? He is a nobody!' Such people are said to be 'without family or origin'. Abu Nizar, after having cursed such a man, explained to me pedagogically that everybody, of course, has a family, and that everybody has an origin, thus wanting me to understand the metaphorical quality of the expression. To call a person a nobody, a person 'without family or origin' is an insult when talking about (but seldom to) others, all over Syria. It is thus not only a souq expression. What characterizes 'nobodies' is that they represent essential values the speaker does not share, and that are socially unacceptable to the speaker. According to my informants in the

souq, such nobodies typically flaunt their wealth, or behave like misers. They buy political power and influence, or use political power to gain riches. In fact, persons talked about in the souq as 'nobodies' are usually particular individuals with considerable influence over trade and politics.

In sharp contrast to talk about nobodies is the talk about 'somebodies'. To be called a 'son of people' (*ibn naas*) or a 'family-son' (*ibn 'aile*) in the souq, is to be recognized as sharing essential values. It does not have to entail this 'somebody' belonging to a large family, or to a family with a well-known name. 'Family' thus becomes a metaphor for qualities a particular trader looks for in another person. In that way the concept can almost be interchangeable with *thiqa* – trust. You trust 'a son of a family' or a person 'with a family' and people you trust are people with a family, in a circular argument.

Abu Abdou and his relatives, for example, stressed that ideas of noble origin and descent (*hasab wa nasab*) are obsolete today. But when I had figured out that they were descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (*ashbraaf*), they had been pleased. They were members of a very large family, with a good name on the market. They were also known to be descendants of a line of well-known sheikhs, and a religious pedigree was not unimportant on and off the market.<sup>12</sup> But, as Abu Abdou modestly pointed out, their *asl* ought not to be boasted about.<sup>13</sup> To boast of one's origin, or to lecture others about your descent – here as elsewhere – defeats the very purpose of 'having an *asl*' and a name. Traders have to be careful. On the one hand they should talk warmly about their fathers, uncles, grandfathers and brothers, yet on the other hand they were living representatives of their descent-groups, and hence had to be careful not to be accused of self-aggrandizement. Origin, descent and family connections should be communicated subtly, or not at all. People should, in fact, already 'know' these things about significant others. Your family name, or the name of your father, the quarter where you live, or where your father grew up, should be enough to establish a frame of reference by which you can be socially classified. In the process of acquiring their trader-ness traders learn such things about each other on the market. It was easier for women than men to communicate pride in their descent. A woman could boast about her father or grandfather as a sign of daughterly devotion, and at the same time indicate her impeccable pedigree.

One day Abu Ali showed me the family genealogy which one of his relatives had compiled.<sup>14</sup> I saw several men – both relatives and non-relatives – browsing through it with interest, but soon enough they were more engrossed in the conversation in the office. Perhaps the men in Abu Ali's office had lost their interest in the genealogy as such, and

perhaps the relatives did not want to seem too preoccupied with their descent, but the presence of such a document is highly telling. Although family names can be thought of as fixed, inherited and ascribed, they are continuously achieved. A written genealogy is one way to establish a good family name, to create or stress *asl wa fasl*, the brand-name. A good family name is also achieved when traders from the same family cooperate and help each other (but not at the expense of others). Traders are thus helped by the efforts of other traders in the family to establish the family name. But the work of others in the family is also important for the establishment of an individual name, since the two aspects of an *ism* cannot be distinguished. Traders may also be blocked, however – or feel they are blocked – by the bad trading practice of their relatives. Traders with relatives in the souq may have an advantage in the market, but they are also vulnerable and depend on the good names and good practice of their relatives, so that others will not claim that they, in fact, lack *asl wa fasl*.

There was also a copy of the genealogy discussed above in the shop of Abu Sabri, Abu Ali's cousin. Hammoude, a young relative visiting the shop, did not think it was proper that the names of living women should be included in the genealogy. Sabri countered that women were members too. Hammoude agreed, but responded that it served no purpose to show their names. This exchange reveals crucial aspects of gender relations among the *abl as-souq*. In many ways women are essential to the medina, but, according to many men, knowledge about women should be guarded from 'strangers' and only distributed carefully.

Abu Sabri once told me that when he was a young boy he had been ashamed to acknowledge his sister in public. This was stupid, he said, but in the company of other boys, they were supposed to ignore their sisters. 'This was out of modesty, shame, and ignorance. This is changing, but some young men take modesty and shame very seriously.' Umm Sabri added that this behaviour was also a sign of protective jealousy. Acknowledging sisters or daughters by name in genealogies, greeting them and talking 'freely' about them in front of non-family men, might give 'strangers' the impression that family women are not revered, honoured, protected and spoiled. This, in turn, can diminish the reputation – the very name – of the family. Women, and the relationship between women and men in the family, are often central to the names of traders.

## Gendered Reputation

Many of my informants were very keen to present themselves as good men. They frequently discussed their views on gender relations with me and they usually claimed that they spoiled their mothers, wives and daughters. Among the *abl as-souq*, gender relations should ideally be regulated with decorum. Scandals which might blacken the name of the family should be avoided. Both men and women should behave with constraint and modesty. Many were keen to condemn the 'open society' of the West. In such discussion 'open' was always a metaphor for sexual relations outside marriage. Many stressed that women and men – although equal before God – have different capacities and capabilities; men should support the family and women should bring up the children.

Old Abu Sleiman usually claimed that 'before' relations between men and women were better. Marriages were arranged and the boy and girl did not have much say in the matter. He reminisced about his childhood and youth when all women, Muslim and Christian, were veiled and when they were screamed at for staring at even such women. But he also said that, 'before', all young men were ignorant and fantasized about women all the time. 'I remember when we heard that a doctor had opened a clinic with a nurse who was not veiled. We all rushed to the clinic, pretending all kinds of illnesses, in order to catch a glimpse of this woman and even hoping to be able to talk to her. I had never seen an unveiled woman other than my mother and my sisters. We were very stupid and ignorant. No, today people are more educated and not so easily excited.'

### *Traders' Wives*

Some men liked to joke with me about the strict rules they imposed on their womenfolk, using my discomfort as a start for playful banter. But most men did not like outsiders to regard them as uneducated or uncivilized imposers of rules; traits they regarded as rural and un-Islamic, rather than urban and religiously grounded. A lot of male banter in the souq, however, centred around the 'wish' for men to get another wife.<sup>15</sup> Only two of my informants actually had more than one wife, but quite a number had fathers who were married to more than one wife. Abu Jamil's father, for example, had had four wives. All middle-aged men and women stressed that in polygamous families, brothers and sisters from the different mothers are not close. Abu Jamil classified 'full' siblings as 'brothers and sisters' and 'half' siblings as 'brothers/sisters-from-the same father'. In serious discussions most of my Muslim informants expressed the opinion that polygamy is old-fashioned, but no men and

few women questioned the religious right of allowing men up to four wives. Most women and men argued that since a man is supposed to treat his wives equally, and since this is impossible for ordinary men, this in itself acts as a ban. But both men and women concurred that if the wife is sick, barren or mad 'it is a man's right to take a second wife'.

Not surprisingly husbands and wives talk about divorce, remarriage and polygamy in relation to their own marriage in different ways. Even in front of their wives men often joked about wanting more children, saying their wives did not. Thus, they saw no other recourse than getting a new wife, or divorcing the present one. Women, on the other hand, never joked about leaving their husbands. All women knew that a man could divorce his wife and leave her without support, or he could marry a second wife, however unusual the occurrence of this among traders. Once at a woman's party among the *abl as-souq* I was asked about the purpose of my research and tried to explain. Before long a woman exclaimed that she was an object worthy of study. 'Look at me! My husband has married a second wife and has abandoned me. He totally ignores me. Is this right?'<sup>16</sup> Another woman said that polygamy was the only problem connected with her religion. She thought the law should be changed 'like in Tunisia' to ban polygamy.<sup>17</sup>

During many conversations in the souq men recounted stories about poor ignorant men who either simply left their wives and children, or who took another wife. Such women were, as mentioned in Chapter 2, much pitied and no stigma was attached to the fact that they were supporting their children. 'Those men are a disgrace', was the common verdict. But at the same time such behaviour was generally attributed to peasants, 'tribal' people, or urbanites from 'popular' quarters, unversed in the 'true' meaning of Islam. When discussing themselves, second marriages could be excused.

Abu Mahmoud's new marriage, for example, was excused by his cronies in the souq for a number of reasons. He had been obliged to marry his cousin when he was very young and they never got along. She was quite uneducated and rather dimwitted, according to his friends. Then he got desperate, they said, and married a beautiful woman, but she was no good. Since she did not have any children he divorced her. That is why he had been so unhappy and spending all his time with his friends, they explained. Now, finally he had found a wonderful girl. Abu Sabri and Abu Malek told me that Abu Mahmoud's new wife was educated, from a nice family and that, at long last, he was happy. 'But he could not divorce his cousin. That would be bad, so he had to have a second wife. But he can easily afford that'. According to such reasoning only men who can afford the upkeep of two wives (and potentially many

children) should marry a second time. But money is not enough. A man should have a good reason and not act thoughtlessly, on the spur of the moment, to get another wife. And men my informants like or admire clearly have 'good reasons'.

Mature men should not fall violently in love. It was generally thought that men were easily manipulated by a pretty face or a coquettish smile.<sup>18</sup> Many were the stories of such men who, after getting a new younger wife, found themselves cuckolded. Divorce was frowned upon, but it is not unusual. Once a couple have been married for some time and when there are children, both men and women stress that a second marriage (for the man) is usually better than divorce. That way an adult woman can retain her household and the social prestige attached to being married. Young divorcees usually remarry quickly. Widows and widowers are also encouraged to remarry. Most *abl as-souq* stress that both men and women have sexual needs and that marriage provides a natural outlet for these. They also stress that human beings are 'social' and that men and women need each other to provide emotional closeness.

Although many men joked about wanting a second wife, and boasted about spoiling their womenfolk, and sometimes complained about the spending patterns of women, most men spoke with great warmth and admiration about their female relatives and their wives. Mothers were singled out and adored. 'Did she not bear me, did she not feed me and clothe me, and shower tenderness on me? The Prophet, peace be upon him, said that sitting at the feet of your mother is a foretaste of Paradise.' Many men stressed that men and women are 'the same' (*nafsa shi*) and that men should pay attention to keeping their wives happy.

Abu Khalil, who frequently travelled abroad, often took his wife along. He said that she was entitled to holidays just like a man, since she had her work in their home. During my fieldwork he took Umm Khalil to Mecca for *'umra* (the small pilgrimage). The trip had been a great success. He had also been offered possibilities of opening a shop in Saudi Arabia, which he declined despite the economic benefits, saying that he could never live in Saudi Arabia because of his wife and daughter: 'Women there have no life of their own. They can't move about at all. They are nothing'.

Abu Ali and Umm Ali, like others, spoke of their marriage as 'sharing' or as a 'company' (*sbaraake/shirke*); they helped and supported each other, they said. This sharing, however, Abu Ali said, did not make him involve Umm Ali in business matters. He would only tell his wife if his business was good or not so good. Abu Ali said he did not want to cause gossip, problems and jealousy between the women of the family. He lived close to his partners who were also close relatives. Umm Ali said



that she and Abu Ali had been married for a long time and had shared many happy and sad events. 'He is a friend, he is like a brother, and he is my husband.'

It was not uncommon for traders' wives to be criticized by women and men from both trading and non-trading families. It was said that they cared too little about their homes and their duties as wives and mothers. Some said that traders' wives only spent time visiting each other, gossiping, going to parties, and that they were too concerned about what to wear to weddings. Others stressed that traders' wives cared too little about their children and were too ignorant to help them with their schoolwork. Clearly complaints about traders' wives were based on envy and dislike of traders and their lifestyle. But rather than speak ill of the traders themselves, their wives were made into scapegoats.

Also in the souq traders' wives were at times complained about. Abu Khalil said that many traders' wives did not help their husbands when they were in financial difficulties. He knew of a trader whose wife possessed three kilograms of gold, but would not sell a single ounce to help her husband when he was in financial difficulties. Abu Mustafa once said that Aleppo women in general, and not only traders' wives, were too attached to their families of origin and cared more about their relatives than their husbands. I protested and he suddenly said: 'Well, yes, many wives are also too scared of divorce to take care of their children properly. They have to keep attractive to keep their husbands interested.' Some men told me they thought it strange that 'Western women' dressed up when going out, and 'looked sloppy' in their homes. They stressed that they wanted their wives to look attractive for them and not for others. But many emphasized that the most important aspect of marriage was the proper upbringing of children.

Many of the stories about other men and women are obviously hearsay, but by talking about, and discussing, the misfortunes (and the occasional good fortune) of others, the traders presented variations of condonable and condemnable gender relations. Talk about the laziness or stinginess of other men's wives may underline the virtues of one's own. Traders were circumspect in complaining about their own wives, since such comments might be taken as a sign of their lack of ability as traders and not only as husbands. Trusted others in the souq – like the friends of Abu Mahmoud discussed above who married a new wife – could do the complaining. But men – as husbands, fathers and brothers – depended also on the co-operation of women to gain a reputation and to be regarded as men of family honour. The reputations of women,

especially of mothers, are crucial when *abl as-souq* look for brides for their sons.

*Getting Married among the abl as-souq*

To marry and have children is considered the only natural course in life, among traders and non-traders alike. It would be shocking and unthinkable for most Aleppians to voice any other opinion. Most of my informants were, as already mentioned, middle-aged and married with children. Although wives and daughters were seldom in the souq themselves, they were very much present in everyday souq life. As mentioned earlier, many traders telephoned their wives, or were called by them, often many times a day. They discussed what food the men should buy, the plans for the day and the evening, the health of the children, or any other issue related to family life. Women are also 'present' in the souq as links between men. Men may either marry the sisters or daughters of other traders as an affirmation of such links, or these marriages may become the starting-point of such links. But conflicts may also be caused in the medina by such links. If a brother does not like the way his brother-in-law treats his sister, this may result in trade conflicts. Men frequently commented on their good-for-nothing brothers-in-law. Conflicts may also be brewing because of 'hidden' faults with the bride or the groom, discovered only after the consummation of the marriage. The groom might be impotent, and the girl might have a physical deformity. Differences over marriage settlements were not uncommon.

Many of my informants asked me over and over again if it was true that there were no pre-nuptial settlements in Sweden, and that young men could get married without buying a house and furnishing it. But once a sheikh, visiting the shop of Abu Imad protested and insisted that Christians and Jews had something similar – a *dotta* – without which a girl could not be married. 'This is how it used to be for Jews and Christians in Aleppo. The family of the girl had to collect money.'<sup>19</sup> When the sheikh understood the contemporary Swedish jurisdiction – where a wife and husband are equal co-owners of all property, and equally responsible for the support of children and each other – he was shocked. 'That is not good. No here it is better. The man gives a pre-nuptial settlement to the bride, he is economically responsible for her. She has the right to be supported. What she owns is her own property and not his.'

Many traders took pride in their ability to support their family, but they often complained about the high costs of marriage. As fathers, they were obliged to pay for the marriage-feasts of their sons. Although food was unusual at the various feasts in connection with engagements and

weddings, ballrooms were often hired and musicians engaged. New clothes were also needed for all the close female relatives of the groom. When their daughters married they were obliged to give them clothes, gold and perhaps some furniture, as well as spend money on new clothes for the women of the family. ‘This is killing us’, traders often said, but not without a certain smugness. Before Jamil was finally married Abu Jamil was struggling to pay for everything: the flat had already been paid for, but needed painting; the kitchen had to be equipped and furniture had to be bought. Umm Jamil claimed that her husband was overspending and that their son would be happy with less. She said that her husband was showing off to ‘the world’ that he was a good and caring family man. ‘His whole family is like that.’<sup>20</sup>

*Conflicts and Resolutions.* The son of one of Abu Imad’s souq neighbours was getting married, and for weeks we were entertained with the negotiations. What sort of furniture should the apartment be equipped with? How thick should the curtains be? Suddenly, after the signing of the contract, but before the consummation of the marriage, the wedding was called off. The parents of the bride had protested that the furniture had been used and was not brand new. They said they felt the value of the girl had been put in question. Abu Imad and his friends were busily discussing how the wedding could be saved. The girl wanted the boy, and the boy wanted the girl, but the parents were at odds. ‘Can’t they settle for this used furniture for the time being?’ I asked. ‘Oh no! Now her parents will never give in’ I was told. ‘The boy must raise more money and buy at least a few new and expensive things for the house’. A week later this had been done and the wedding took place. ‘The bride and groom are very happy’, Abu Imad later proclaimed.

But not all such conflicts end happily. Abu Abdou was asked to act as mediator in a case where the father of the bride had called off the wedding right before the consummation. Now the family of the groom wanted help from Abu Abdou to get the bride’s father to relent. Abu Abdou had asked to see the groom but his brother came in his place because the groom had left Aleppo. We were told that he had been so angry with his prospective father-in-law that, the very same evening the wedding was called off, he had concluded a wedding contract with a paternal cousin. Abu Abdou and the brother of the groom discussed the case at length. Finally the brother concurred with Abu Abdou: the groom should not marry at all; he was not to try to get his first fiancée back, and he should release his cousin from the engagement. Abu Abdou stressed that it is very wrong to marry somebody just to spite other people. ‘Think of your brother and your cousin. He will regret it later on,

and then it will be very bad for the poor girl. A broken engagement is not a problem, but a failed marriage is terrible. Let your brother mature a bit more before trying again to marry.' When the brother had left Abu Abdou sighed and said that some boys are very irresponsible and very immature. 'But God willing, this problem will be contained.'

Many of my informants had married when they were young, and their brides even younger. Most thought this was good. They claimed that they wanted to be strong and healthy when their children got married, and that they would live to enjoy their grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. They also expressed the opinion that early marriage is good for the individual man because it makes him settle down. Since sex before marriage is condemned, early marriage is also talked of as a 'safety-valve' for young people's sexuality, and so 'better for society'. Many were married in their early twenties and with their wives in their late teens. Abu Sabri, however, was almost thirty and his wife twenty when they married. He told me that he had avoided marriage, despite his mother's nagging, until he saw his future wife at a wedding and immediately fell in love. Abu Khaled, having studied for many years, only married when he was in his late twenties. Abu Imad was around twenty-four when he married, but his wife was only fourteen.<sup>21</sup> Brides, many in the medina argued, should not be 'too old' when they marry. Most of my informants said that a young bride will be 'brought up' by her husband; that way she will be more attached to him and they will become closer. Wives of traders, instead, said that such young brides would be brought up by their mothers-in-law. Some traders, however, stressed that girls should not marry too early, because they are not mature enough to handle married life. Many also argued that girls should have an opportunity to finish school.

Fathers and mothers were not always in agreement when their sons wanted to marry. Abu Ali's sixteen-year-old son suddenly decided he wanted to get married. He had his eye on a young relative, and he was greatly encouraged by his grandfather who thought that Ali was old enough. He also said that he wanted more great-grandchildren before he died. Since the family could afford a wedding the grandfather saw no point in delaying the marriage. Abu Ali and his friends, on the other hand, thought that Ali was not old or mature enough. Abu Ali said that his son was still a child with no sense of the seriousness of marriage. He was also against marriage to a close relative since Umm Ali was his cousin. But his wife had taken sides with her son and her father-in-law (who was also her paternal uncle). She told me that since the son and his bride would live with her and Abu Ali anyway, she was more than ready to take on the upbringing of the bride, to teach the girl cooking and

child-care. 'She will also keep me company. Ali is determined and I think marriage will make him grow up.'

Ali eventually did marry, but not the girl he had initially cast his eyes on. Instead, he married another young girl to whom he was only distantly related. Abu Ali rented an outdoor club and threw a huge men's party where his many relatives, friends and business connections came to pay their respects. 'It was a fantastic wedding', Abu Jamil told me afterwards. 'Everybody was there and we stayed up dancing and singing all night.' When I visited Umm Ali to congratulate her and to meet the young bride she was very happy. She said that 'before' it was difficult for young brides to arrive in the house of their mother-in-law, even when they were related. Young brides feared and respected the family of the groom to such a degree that it made life difficult. Now, she said, things were better. Umm Ali, the bride and I then spent the whole afternoon watching the DVD recordings of the men's party.<sup>22</sup>

Many traders marry women who are part of the same family. This is especially the case if the family is large, because there are many 'available' spouses. If a pattern of 'family endogamy' becomes established, it may be difficult for non-related suitors to succeed. Such families will emphasize their 'good name' and their *asl wa fasl* by subtly, or not so subtly, rejecting 'strangers'. Abu Faris, as already mentioned, is married to his paternal cousin, and Abu Abdou is also married to a cousin. Abu Jamal married a woman totally unrelated to him, but his daughter and Jamal have both married paternal cousins. Abu and Umm Jamal were against this. Like many others today, they expressed the opinion that marrying close relatives is not 'good for the blood' (i.e. a fear of inherited disease). But since the parents were not related, they finally agreed. Marriage links within a family can be crucial to establishing and presenting a good name. But there has to be a balance, like the good co-operation between related traders. If *abl as-souq* marry only within the family this will instead be taken as a sign of their lack of good name. It can then easily be said that nobody wants to marry their sons and daughters.

### *Good Daughters and Sons*

Among trading families (as among Aleppians in general) marriages are family arrangements, in that family members are engaged in, and feel responsible for, finding a good spouse for young relatives. Lots of close relatives feel they have a right, and are obliged, to concern themselves with the choice of partner for relatives about to be married. If a young man is considered 'ready' to be married and is without an attachment to a specific girl, relatives and friends will try to help. Girls, and their

mothers and fathers, are supposed to wait for offers. Parents of girls are not supposed to be over-eager to accept a suit, which might give the impression that they are happy to get rid of her and will reflect badly on the name of her family. Traders, and their wives, said that girls (and boys) should never be married against their own wishes. Quite often the boys (and the girls) have already formed an attachment. In such cases they have to persuade their parents of the suitability of the match. Since young men depend on the financial support of their fathers to be able to marry, parents of young girls need assurance that their daughters will be supported in, at least, the style they are accustomed to at home.

When traders (and their wives) talk about the criteria for good spouses they commonly stress that what is looked for is a 'family-son' or a 'family-daughter' (*ibn/bint 'aile*), i.e. a person who comes from a 'good' – but not necessarily large – family with a 'name'. A good family name, in this context, is, tautologically, a family which any given 'we' consider to be good. Women and men also stress that the groom and the bride should have good characters (*akhlāaq*). The more that is known about the family of the groom or the bride, the more one is able to vouch for the character of the individual, according to Aleppians. Traders never mention that marriages should link individuals – and families – of the same religion and preferably the same ethnic group. That is taken for granted.

Many of my informants stressed that life was too expensive today to encourage their sons to marry young. Yet they commonly wanted their young daughters to marry young, and not middle-aged, men. Daughters leave their father's house, but they are still part of their original family. Most women seemed to have very strong relations with their family of birth, and constantly visited their parents.<sup>23</sup> Also brothers, as fathers *inter locus*, were supposed to look after the interests of their sisters. As mentioned above, men commonly expressed negative opinions about their sons-in-law and brothers-in-law. When talking about their sons and daughters my informants often stated that they felt differently towards them. 'Sons are important' Abu Khaled said, 'but you feel tenderness towards your daughters and constantly worry about their well-being'. Sons provide the continuation of the family name and often of the family business. Fathers need, as already discussed, the co-operation and support of their sons to remain 'independent' and 'settled', just like sons need the support and co-operation of their fathers to eventually become 'independent' and 'settled'. In the souq fathers also depend on their sons to establish and maintain their reputation as good and providing men and as reputable heads of households. If sons marry early, fathers can continue to exercise considerable control over them for many years. The

interdependence of fathers and sons is fraught with both ambiguity and conflict.

### **Like Father Like Son?**

A great deal of prestige is accorded a man who exercises family authority subtly and without overt coercion. Among traders in the souq, the business character of a trader is influenced by what other traders know of him as a family man. Relations between a father and his sons, unlike relations between a father and his daughters, are very public and give more reason for comment. Abu Sleiman and an old friend of his were talking about a third friend, a destitute old man. They were discussing how the son of this man had taken money from his father in order to trade in Russia, and had lost everything in what appeared to be less than honourable circumstances. 'Poor man', Abu Sleiman exclaimed, 'the son is a failure and he has no one to support him. A good dog is better than a failed son'.

Fathers did not reason about or explicate the value of wanting to keep their sons as close as possible, for as long as possible. It is a goal all men should aspire to and a goal traders, more than many others, can achieve.<sup>24</sup> It is honourable and morally good to have a large family in which your sons co-operate and support each other, and later their old parents. Abu Ibrahim has ten children and he was building a house where every son would have his own apartment. 'It is good to have your children close to you. As a father I am obliged to help my children. This is what our religion demands. Not like in Europe where parents throw their children out when they are eighteen. I have all my sons working for me, not here in the shop but in my small factory. That way the family grows close.'<sup>25</sup>

Sons are not supposed to voice any kind of public criticism of their fathers. Such a critique would diminish the name of a trader. Filial duty is perceived to be outstandingly binding. 'Good' sons of 'bad' fathers will do better to distance themselves quietly from the (bad) practices of their fathers without any public announcement or condemnation. Sons are supposed to be loyal and devoted to the interests of their fathers. Fathers are also supposed to have the interests of their sons at heart, but they are not only allowed, but also expected, to criticize their sons (except about their trading style, as noted above). This can be done subtly or more directly, in public or in private. Sons are supposed to learn from their fathers, and fathers have an obligation to bring up their sons. Strong ties to sons may also be talked about as a sound business strategy: 'When my sons work for me they work for themselves, don't they?' Abu Mustafa

said.

Not only fathers should be listened to and respected, but also others of an older generation. Abdel Razzaq, a young relative in the office of Abu Faris, returned from a number of years in Russia full of new business ideas. Unfortunately the others in the office argued that his ideas were not very feasible and he was advised not to waste his time or his money. 'He will not listen to anyone and it is driving everyone crazy', Abu Sabri said one day when we had examined and discussed yet another of Abdel Razzaq's propositions. "Listen to the person older by a day. He is wiser by a year". This is a proverb which I believe in. One should become independent, but by listening to the advice of people who know better. Look at Sabri! He is now wise and can make decisions on his own. But the next in line is still immature and needs to learn a lot from his elders.'

Close ties between fathers and sons, and the 'binding' of the sons on the part of the fathers, are common among most families in Syria, and certainly not specific to traders in Aleppo. But children's, and especially sons', dependence on their families is increasing, I would contend. The contraction of the public sector has made the family economically crucial when children are preparing to set themselves up as adults. A majority of my middle-aged informants had also been helped and supported by their fathers, but the costs of setting up a business or getting a house are much higher today. Most fathers have more than one son, and each son has an equal right to be helped. Fathers therefore have an interest in keeping their business together as long as possible to support themselves, their growing sons, and eventually the families of their sons. Sons, on the other hand, have a long-term interest in establishing their financial and overall independence – a shop of their own – apart from their father and brothers. But sons are not supposed to express their efforts towards independence in such a way that their filial duty can be questioned by others, and diminish the name of the family and the individual trader. Traders' sons are thus walking a tightrope.

### *Fissions in Family Enterprises*

There are no obvious patterns in how the fission between father and sons, or between brothers, actually take place. If the father is well-off he can easily absorb all his sons in the family business even if initially they have very little skill. But he might, like Abu Malek, encourage his sons to try and set up independent businesses. Abu Malek's sons all worked on commission in trade and industry although Abu Malek was very well-off. But most fathers do not have enough capital and property to set their



sons up with new shops or economic ventures. They might encourage their sons to try, little by little, to find and utilize other business opportunities. Abu Sabri, like many others, told me that the best situation is when brothers can keep the business and the property together after the death of their father, at least until their own children are grown-up. But at that point, property can no longer be kept together, he said, because the grandchildren will all pull in different directions. But the split may take place earlier if the brothers are not united and good (*abna halaal*). The most important thing, however, he said, was ‘not to lose the shop.’

Many traders recognized the dilemma between wanting to help their sons and wanting their sons to – eventually – grow up, become adult, successful, independent and thus supplant them. They expressed this in terms of ‘spoiling’ their sons to such a degree that sons became too dependent on their fathers.

*Fathers’ Complaints.* ‘We want our children to have a better life than we had’, Abu Mustafa told me, ‘so we spoil them and give them things and opportunities we never had.’ He complained that he worked and toiled, scrimped and saved, in order to create a secure future for his children. Since he had two shops he planned to give his two sons one each. His two daughters would be given property. Abu Mustafa said that he planned to divide up everything while he was still alive. ‘This is better. Let each one know what is due to them’. But Abu Mustafa was worried about Mustafa, his elder son who ‘does not understand what responsibility means, he only thinks of sports and playing’. Mustafa worked for his father but received no real salary. Instead his father gave him large amounts of pocket-money. ‘He wants a lot! He spends 3,000 lira a week! This is more than most people earn in a month. How can I teach Mustafa the value of money? The best thing is to get him married – well, he is practically engaged right now – that is the only way for him to become responsible.’ Another time Abu Mustafa complained about the difficulty of bringing up sons: ‘Each person has to take a moral position. But if you tell your children to follow this, they become like sheep and they will be eaten by everybody. If you tell them to become like wolves, then they become persons you do not like. Whatever you do, it is wrong.’

Many fathers tried to instil the value of hard work in their sons. Abu Khalil said that he had started with two empty hands, but that his sons had been given everything. Their life was totally different because they had their father’s shop and factory as a stepping-stone for their adult life. Abu Ali tried not to spoil his eldest son, although he could easily have placed him in his large office. When Ali left school Abu Ali arranged for

him to work in a foundry to learn the value of hard work. Abu Ali also admonished the son of his cousin and partner, Abu Hussein, for being lazy after he got married. The young man insisted that the market was slow and he saw no point in coming to the souq early. But his uncle countered: 'With a frozen market you just have to work twice as hard. You will never become a trader by loafing around.'

Only on rare occasions did I hear young men voice anything resembling a criticism of their fathers. Abu Adel expressed a wish to take a holiday and managed to go on a business trip to Amman for a few days when the souq was closed anyway. This trip had been fantastic, and Abu Adel said he then realized he really needed a break from his shop and his hard work. He said he wanted to go to Lebanon and take his wife along, but his father had told him it would be shameful (*'aib*) to close the shop. Abu Adel had several brothers close by in the souq who could look after the shop, so a few days off would not be impossible. But he did not go. Ahmad once had plans, he told me, to continue with his university education. He wanted more out of life than sitting in the shop from morning to night. But as an only son he was very important to his father, and he did not want to disappoint his father who was sickly and needed him in the souq. Abu Ahmad later died and Ahmad was devastated with grief. With streaming tears he told me that his father had not lived to see him married and with children of his own. Ahmad had postponed marriage because the family had had large debts which they had only recently settled.

The name of the trading game in the souq is to buy cheap and sell dear. Here sons may be economic assets and economic burdens and the cause of conflicts in the family. But the souq game also gets its meaning from having sons. Through sons your name can be honoured, and honourable, after you are dead.

### **Reputation, Education and Culture**

In Aleppo there is a prevalent opinion that traders, especially in the medina, do not value formal education. Many traders agreed that this has been the case. The contraction of employment opportunities in the public sector in the past decade, as discussed earlier, has changed the economic value of education for many ordinary Syrians. Today no one is guaranteed a job after their secondary-school diploma or after graduation from university. Traders today, therefore, do not educate their sons for employment opportunities. On the other hand, many people, traders included, stressed that formal education is important anyway, and a way to 'cultivate' oneself. It is prestigious, and to be considered cultivated

(*muthaqqaf*) contributes to one's name. Many traders (and their wives) stressed that life is complicated today and that children need more education than before. On the other hand, they also insisted that skills in management, in English and in computers could only be gained outside the formal school system. Others complained that the Syrian educational system was totally defunct and that access to university depended on paying bribes.

All but one of my informants had been to school. This older man learned to read and write on his own. Most of the traders are of the generation which benefited from the great expansion in the Syrian educational system. After the takeover by the Ba'th party, formal education very quickly became mass education. The vast majority of my informants started in secondary school, but most of them quit before taking the final examination.<sup>26</sup> Many, however, not only passed secondary school but also continued to university. Abu Hussein studied in Syria as well as abroad, and Abu Khaled has a post-graduate degree. While Abu Hussein studied economics and business administration, most of my informants with university degrees work in fields totally unrelated to their studies. Abu Khaled frequently expressed anger that his degree was not put to good use by the state. He had been employed but had quit in frustration, and had started to work in the medina. Abu Taufiq studied computer engineering in the United States, but then quickly returned home to work in the family perfume business. He said that his sickly old father wanted him to come back quickly to get married and work with him and his brothers. It was interesting, Abu Taufiq said, to study in the USA but he did not like the lifestyle. He said, however, that he missed the days of such limited responsibility. Shamseddine has a degree in law, but worked in the family textile business. His job was totally unrelated to law, but he said that he never regretted getting a university education.

Despite the fact that Syrians commonly complain about the contemporary quality of university education with its rote-learning and overcrowded lecture halls, many university graduates still concur that a degree is something nobody can take away from you. Butrus had not really thought about working in trade at all. He has a higher degree in chemistry and taught for a few years until the low pay and the stress became too much. He thought of starting a tutoring business but realized that his reputation as a teacher was not established enough.<sup>27</sup> His uncle offered to set him up in trade and he accepted. Butrus said that he earned much more in trade with half the effort. But he also complained that he was beginning to feel stupid because all his education was disappearing. 'When you are surrounded by people with no cultivation,

your own slips away, as well.'

Many souq traders have a longer formal education than what is commonly assumed in Aleppo, and many also want their sons to continue in school as long as possible. However, many sons quit somewhere in secondary school. Abu Munir wanted his son to get a secondary-school diploma and supported him with private tutors. But one day the son simply stopped going to school. According to Umm Jamil, Jamil just 'barely' managed to make it through secondary school and Jalal quit in the tenth grade. Umm Jamil said that this was bad, because he was a young man with his life ahead of him and yet he knew nothing outside the souq, the family and his circle of friends, according to his mother. Jalal was clever, Umm Jamil said, but he lacked a general education. He never read or discussed topics of general interest. Both she and her husband feared that the younger generation had no interest in education, and yet they saw there was a reason for this: 'Schools are boring for the young men', Abu Jamil said. 'Now, with Jahiz, he is taking after his older brothers. He does not want to go to school. He is only in the eighth grade. He sees himself as grown-up already and has no patience with school. And we are less able to discipline him than the others'. But both parents firmly stated that Jahiz would not start in the family shop. 'If he quits school he will have to work somewhere else in order to learn some sense.'

While many sons of traders quit school, it seems that the daughters continued. A number of my informants are married to women with a longer formal education than themselves and many of their daughters continued past secondary school while their sons did not.<sup>28</sup> Some mothers admitted that this is because girls in trading families have only two options: to study or to marry. Many parents stressed that they wanted their daughters to continue their education as long as possible because this would make them better wives and mothers. The education of a girl could be an asset when looking for a suitable husband. Other parents told me that if a girl decided she preferred to marry rather than to study, there was not much they could do. Few fathers planned to have their own daughters married very early, but many had without doubt enjoyed marrying very young girls themselves!

When non-traders complained about the lack of education among traders they were actually criticizing the perceived parochialism of traders. Traders were said to be narrow-minded, conservative, bigoted, and not promoting the welfare and interest of society at large. People outside the medina sometimes also expressed the view that the *abl as-souq* had no modern business acumen. Once, when I was trying to explain the purpose of my research to a man connected to foreign companies, he

said: ‘Study the souq! Analyse how traders think and plan! Do they think? Do they plan?’ Many in Aleppo who conceive of themselves as harbingers of modernity and progress view traders, especially the *abl as-souq*, as backward and lacking civilization.<sup>29</sup> To such people it is, in fact, traders, and especially the *abl as-souq*, who lack names.

### Reputation and Religion

In the souq Muslim informants commonly talked about gender relations, family relations and family cohesion, by way of reference to Islam. Arguments were put forward via religious interpretations. A myriad of verbal expressions underpinned the daily relevance of faith. A man arguing that to marry early or to have many children is (religiously) good, stressed that ‘God provides’. Another man claiming the contrary stressed that ‘God looks after the person who looks after himself’. While in one situation ‘God only knows’ was a suitable expression, in another ‘God gave humans reason for them to use it’ could be preferred. The medina has become more religiously and ethnically homogeneous since independence, as was noted earlier. The vast majority of the traders in the medina are Sunni Muslim Arabs. But Aleppo is still a city with a sizeable Christian minority and where languages other than Arabic are commonly heard. Although my Christian informants were as preoccupied as my Muslim informants about their *ism*, they did not underpin their reputation with such a religious vocabulary.

With a few exceptions my Muslim informants in the souq expressed their deep religious devotion. They commonly claimed that their practice was based on Islam. They frequently tried to engage me in debates in which the great advantages of their interpretations of Islam could be stressed, and many were curious about my knowledge, or lack of knowledge, of comparative religion. They stressed their reverence of ‘Virgin Miriam’ (Mary), of the ‘Prophet ‘Isa’ (Jesus) and ‘Prophet Haneina’ (John the Baptist) and lectured me on the correct – Islamic – interpretation of their deeds and importance. Often the traders engaged in lengthy discussions on the interpretation of a verse from the Koran, or a saying of the Prophet Muhammad. But just as public criticism of fathers was unthinkable, religious debates were never conducted in order to question the tenets of the faith itself. As mentioned above, a society where religion loses its role was generally felt to be a society in grave danger. The perceived loss of religion was the problem of the West, according to many.

Abu Khaled claimed that there is a close link between religion and social life. In Central Asia Islam had been spread by traders. They were

successful, he argued, because people could see that Muslim traders were fair. By their practice they were able to convince others of the righteousness of Islam. Most of my informants expressed the opinion that Islamic rules and regulations governing social relationships like marriage, divorce and inheritance were superior to all others. Many of my informants tried to bolster their arguments by bringing in modern science. I was told, for example, that it had been scientifically proved that circumcised men were cleaner than non-circumcised, thus proving that Islam is correct for all times. Abu Sabri explained that foreign experts had studied all the legal inheritance systems in the world and had found that the Islamic rules were the best and most fair by being clear and unambiguous. Problems and conflicts were always due to the fallibility and the weakness of the believers. The map was right, but the map-readers were often misguided. 'Only God is perfect, humans are flawed.'

On a more overarching scale these informants always stressed the commonality between Muslims, Jews and Christians. 'We are all people of the book. We all believe in God. We are all God's creations'. The deplored wrong-doings of Europe or the United States, which will be discussed in Chapter 6, were never attributed to religion but rather to colonialism, greed, and hunger for power. But the commonality with Christians did not make Muslim traders talk of the two religions as equal. While they stated that each believer must hold on to their particular religion, they also stressed that Islam was the most complete religion.

Muslim traders constitute a majority in Aleppo. Their practices dominate the medina, and my Muslim informants were secure in their benign dominance. Aleppo Christians were tolerated and even appreciated; they were talked about as 'our Christian brothers'. It is not uncommon for Muslims and Christians to form partnerships and some Muslim traders claimed that Christians were more honest than Muslims. But Christians are no longer part of the *abl as-souq*. They no longer share the moral universe uniting Muslim traders, with their perception of themselves as socially conservative, traditional and god-fearing.

### *Christian Self-presentations*

To Christian traders (and non-traders) Muslims were their brothers in one sense, but most also expressed strong feelings of threat, and fears of constituting a decreasing religious minority. Christians commonly lamented that they married too late, had too few children and migrated to a higher degree than Muslims. Abu Toni, who had been a public employee but now worked in trade, often discussed what he felt to be the underdevelopment of Syria where his countrymen blamed others for

their own faults. He claimed that the Muslim majority lacked a scientific attitude to life, and instead based all their arguments on religion and tradition. Many Christian traders associated themselves with modernity and development and saw their lifestyle as much more cultivated than that of the majority. Many were also extremely worried about a regime change. They expressed fears that this would usher in the Muslim Brotherhood or groups wanting to impose Islamic law in Syria.

My Christian informants in the souq also voiced the opinion that their religious devotion differed from that of Muslims. Butrus explained: 'When I studied at university many of my old Muslim friends were politically and socially radical. But now they have all become devout Muslims. They pray, they fast and they lock their women in. For us it is different. Even if we are no longer politically radical, we cannot become religious that way. For us faith is more on the inside.' He concluded: '...Actually Christians believe less, I think.' Christian traders commonly expressed the view that the basic difference between themselves and their Arab Muslim colleagues was concerned with relations between men and women. Muslim men are permitted by their religion to marry Christian women, but a Christian man has to convert to Islam to marry a Muslim woman. The names of both families suffer through intermarriages between Aleppo Muslims and Christians, and such marriages are extremely uncommon in Aleppo.<sup>30</sup> Haytham, however, claimed that Christian traders were disadvantaged since they did not practise the same kind of gender separation as their Muslim colleagues in the souq. 'When we have Muslim friends we take them home to meet our mothers and sisters, but we never get to meet their female relatives. They see our women uncovered in the streets but we never see their female relatives.'

### *Kurdish Self-presentations*

But there are also Muslim traders who do not share the moral universe of the majority of my informants. Comments like those from Christian traders are also echoed by Kurdish traders and businessmen. Kurdish women, as mentioned in Chapter 2, are usually not veiled like the urban Arab Muslim women of Aleppo. Even well-off Kurds have retained rural and 'tribal' gender relations where, for example, women and men associate more.<sup>31</sup> At Kurdish weddings both women and men feast and dance together. Shamseddine, a Kurdish trader, told me that he hated going to Arab weddings in Aleppo. He found them boring because he had to sit for hours in an all male gathering, listening to religious music, and only coffee, if that, would be served. Shamseddine said he tried to

avoid invitations, but sometimes he had to appear for the sake of good relations in the souq. Shamseddine was a conscientious Muslim; he prayed five times a day, fasted and attended the Friday sermon. Like other Kurdish traders and industrialists, he often claimed that many of his Arab Muslim colleagues paid attention only to the superficial aspects of religion.

### **Mirroring Opinions of Selves and Others**

When discussing religion, gender and ethnic relations in Aleppo, and the interrelationship between gender, ethnic and religious categorizations, many of my informants – Arabs, Kurds, Muslims and Christians – despite their various assessments of names and reputations, stressed that Aleppo differed from Damascus. The capital, they said, is a city of bureaucrats and employees where everybody has moved in from somewhere else. Thus there are few original Damascenes in Damascus. In such a city, Abu Amin once said, nobody knows the family of others and nobody cares about the origin, behaviour, religion, or name of others. Aleppo was different, they concurred, contributing to the conservative atmosphere in the city. Some informants stressed that the Sunni Arab majority of Aleppo were hard hit during the political convulsions of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the aftermath they had become much more socially conservative. An enhanced social and religious conservatism, outwardly expressed in gender segregation and veiling, was readily admitted by many traders, and it was discussed also as a phenomenon to be found in the Middle East as a whole. Abu Yousif, who had two wives, told me that both had been unveiled when he married them. But they quickly started to veil in public, because everybody else did in his family.<sup>32</sup>

As discussed in this chapter there are various (but in many ways also over-lapping) categorizations of others based on religion, on ethnicity, on language, on perceptions of family and origin among Aleppo traders. In all of them gender relations constitutes an organizing principle for exclusion and inclusion. What stands out is that for 'minority' traders – Arab and non-Arab Christians, Kurds, and those Sunni Arabs who do not talk of themselves as conservative, traditional and deeply religious – the 'moral majority' is extremely significant. In every discussion of names and reputations, the 'moral majority' is invoked. This 'majority' constitutes a mirror for reflection ('We don't look our women up...as they do.' 'We are not hypocrites...the way they are'). For the 'majority' the 'minorities' are also significant but in a totally different way. In discussions of names and reputations the minorities are not invoked nor



mirrored. The continued presence of trading ‘minorities’ in the souq was a source of self-gratification for the ‘majority’. ‘Minorities’ in the souq reaffirm the Islamic openness and acceptance of others, different from oneself. The names of the ‘majority’, however, are not significantly patterned in opposition to minorities in the souq. Instead power-holders outside the medina provide an opposition on which reputations are patterned. By articulating that political power-holders are corrupt nobodies and lack names, the ‘majority’ traders, thus, bolster their own practices, inside and outside the souq. They can regard themselves as honourable men with names.

Debates over names are means to establish, maintain and reproduce traders – especially the *abl as-souq* – as a community and each trader as a reputable man. Although comments about reputations in the souq are often trade-oriented, they are also linked to concerns apart from immediate trade-concerns. Talk about marriage, children and *asl wa fasl*, for example, tie traders to each others in the souq and affirm that such ties stretch also outside the market. But traders are also linked, and also see themselves as linked, to non-traders outside the souq. In the next chapter Aleppo public events and spectacles will be described and delineated in order to analyse how traders are linked to non-traders, and to issues with ramifications outside the souq.

## ALEPPO EVENTS

The analysis of concepts like 'independence', 'settlement', 'trust' and 'name' in the two preceding chapters fixed the focus mainly on the self-perceptions of the traders in the context of the souq. As already discussed, traders in general, and *abl as-souq* in particular, saw themselves as generous and reputable men. But, as has been shown, my informants also complained about each other and about life in the market. 'Before', the traders were more honest, more caring, and helped each other more. Abu Ahmad said that customers were right to haggle over the price, because no one knew right from wrong. 'There is no trust anymore.' Abu Mustafa complained that, whereas he had respected his father, obeyed him and been afraid of him, this was no longer the case. 'Today the children are too spoiled. Everything was better before. Simpler but better.' Abu Riyad claimed that 'before' each trader got what was due to him and every trader in the souq saw to it that all the others survived. 'Now there is too much jealousy and egoism. Today you can't trust anyone. No one will help anyone else.' He said that, 'before', there were informal leaders in every quarter, every village and every souq. People would bring their problems and conflicts to them and they would be given a fair solution. 'Now', he claimed 'there is no friendship and no justice.'

But although complaints about relations among traders were common, my informants complained even more loudly about relations with the powers-that-be. Claims like 'Our situation is awful' or 'We are being strangled' were not uncommon in the souq when traders met me initially and heard about my interest in their work. Some of my informants never uttered a critical word against the power-holders outside the souq, but many traders were both open and ferocious in condemning bribery and corruption, and blaming those holding power for their prevalence.

In this chapter the focus will be moved from relations mainly amongst the traders themselves to broader political issues on the urban scene. The traders' ethos of 'independence' and 'settlement' and their concern about their names have to be understood also in the context of politics in Aleppo and Syria generally. Public events and urban spectacles in Aleppo will be depicted and discussed from the point of view of the traders. These events connect traders and non-traders in complex ways both in space and in imagined communities. They establish both commonalities and differences between traders and non-traders and thus have repercussions on how public space, civility and civil society in Aleppo can be interpreted. They also demonstrate how traders live their everyday political lives in the city.

My informants all saw themselves as urbanites and often as the true inhabitants of Aleppo. Yet, as was mentioned earlier, they were not particularly attached to the specific history of Aleppo, its souq or its medina. They had very little interest in the development of a large project of urban rehabilitation aimed at safeguarding the old city. Nostalgic expressions, however, were common among middle-aged and older informants.<sup>1</sup> 'Before', the water was sweeter and the food tasted better. 'Before', people were simple and were easily satisfied. 'Before', people were healthier in both mind and spirit. The exact time-frame of 'before' was usually not clearly specified in such complaints. At times they seemed to refer to the period of their childhood, or the childhood of their fathers. At other times 'before' clearly referred to the pre-Ba'th and pre-nationalization period. Essentially 'before' was anything except the present. Such complaints were utilized to comment on the present, just as 'now' was utilized to comment on, and idealize, the past.<sup>2</sup> Complaints about 'now' were related to perceptions of uncertainty, where 'before' represented the good things in life. Not only trade was uncertain 'now', but also urban life in general.

Like others in the city, traders were not insulated from demands for political loyalty. During my fieldwork periods a number of elections were staged, and the traders, just like other citizens, were – or said that they were – more or less forced to vote, causing debates in the market.

### **Parliamentary Elections**

In the early 1990s the Syrian parliament enhanced its political role as part of the political and economic liberalization. The number of members was increased as well, and more candidates from other than the National Front – the coalition of accepted parties – were not only allowed, but encouraged, to take part. But Front candidates still constituted the

majority, thus ensuring regime stability and regime loyalty. In 1990 tribal and religious leaders, and a scattering of urban professionals, entered the parliament. But traders also won independent seats. In the 1994 elections traders were very successful as independent candidates, which to many in Syria signalled a rapprochement between the regime and trading interests.<sup>3</sup> Elections to the Syrian parliament also took place in the late fall of 1998. Aleppo was given ten seats from the National Front lists and ten seats were reserved for independent candidates. The number of independent contestants was, however, much higher, and most of them had trade and industrial interests. As the campaign drew closer to the elections pictures were plastered all over the city and banners were put up. Independent candidates with large economic resources put up tents in various residential quarters and set up shop every evening. They sponsored musical and folklore performances, and served coffee, tea or food to visitors.

#### *Talk about Candidates*

All over Syria people in the early 1990s people became much less circumspect about airing their complaints outside the confines of their homes. Some of my informants were loath to discuss the upcoming elections and cultivated an air of lack of interest, but others angrily insisted that the whole electoral process was a sham. None of my informants were running in the elections. The candidates, instead, were said to be uncultivated 'nobodies' and people without names and without *asl wa fasl*. Openly critical informants said that anybody who was elected was, by definition, a crook and would only serve his own interests.<sup>4</sup> Many of my trade informants, and others in Aleppo, expressed the view that independent members of parliament had no real power, but only gave the country a democratic veneer. Although a member of parliament had a high salary compared with other public employees, it was not really enough to have a decent living, according to many traders. And yet it was obvious to many that members of parliament lived extravagantly. Umm Loay insisted that all members of parliament were crooks and continued: 'If you are not a crook you cannot stage a campaign, and then you will not be elected.'

One of my informants insisted that one of the independent Aleppo candidates was a murderer. 'His family was nothing! But he started to cooperate with one of the big shots in the Ba'th party's security service, smuggling raw material from Lebanon. He set up a factory and the family became very rich. But they had a fight with some of their partners and this candidate had them killed.' The banners and pictures of

candidates habitually demonstrated that voters were sponsoring the campaign. But most of my informants insisted that this was not the case. 'The independent candidates pay millions for their campaigns, but they are not willing to give 50,000 lira to a charitable organization to help the poor', one trader told me. One day visitors in Abu Abdou's office asked why he, as a respected and well-known trader, did not run. 'Why waste money when the election is already settled?' Abu Abdou said. 'It is better to be truly independent', he told me as an aside, thus underlining that the so-called independent candidates were in reality dependent on the powers-that-be.

The chairman and the secretary of the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce<sup>5</sup> were two of the leading competing independent candidates, whose pictures and banners were plastered all over the city centre. Many traders had the picture of one or the other in their shops. At the same time, they were debating which one of them was the more crooked. But just before the election Abu Sabri told me that he felt sorry for the chairman of the Chamber of Commerce because his tent was not visited as much as that of the secretary. For the chairman of the Chamber, winning a seat was of the utmost importance. According to the traders, he was facing a pending sentence of fifteen years imprisonment for economic crimes. If he was elected to the parliament he would enjoy immunity.

But in between talk of corruption and of the crimes of candidates, traders intermittently stressed that the political climate had, in fact, changed since the early 1990s. Before then nobody in power listened to the problems of traders. Now they had to listen, Mohsen said, when issues related to the demands of traders were brought up in parliament. But he added as an afterthought that the members of the regime did not care about the concerns of traders until they developed trading interests of their own. In other words, when more and more people in the army, the security services and the ruling party started to invest their gains in trade, they became more sympathetic to the demands of real traders. Some optimists insisted that democracy had to come about by degrees, but pessimists stressed that Syria had had freer elections in the 1950s than today.

As the election days drew closer I was told that there would only be a few voting stations 'so that it will look really crowded on television.' My informants also picked up their election identity cards. Many rumours surrounded these. Samir, a young trader, explained: 'Last election they clipped a hole in our ordinary ID-cards.<sup>6</sup> It scared people into voting. An ID-card without a hole could indicate that you refused to participate. Now they will issue special ID-cards for the elections, because they can't

keep on cutting holes in the ordinary card. Look at these small empty squares. This is where we write the names of our candidates and then we put the whole card in the ballot box. Once the election is over, we get the card back.' I expressed strong doubts about such cumbersome and blatantly non-secretive proceedings, but he just laughed. This young trader was wrong, but more in form than in content, because more and more people felt obliged not only to get an election ID-card, but also to vote, since participation, rather than the voting itself, they thought, was registered on the card. One trader, discussing with another, said that he got an election card 'because you never know if not having one might affect my relations with the state.' In the Syrian mass media, however, the campaign was followed closely and the 'democratic and popular participation' was constantly emphasized.

### *Election Rumours*

The campaign period was rife with rumours. One day I was told by Abu Mamdu and Abu Imad that each candidate was allowed to borrow a large sum of money from the state, free of interest, to help in the running of the campaign. Most candidates, they said, had no hopes of winning, but they chose instead to use the money to invest in trade. Candidates were given ten years to repay the loan by instalments, according to Abu Mamdu. Later that day Abu Khaled confirmed the rumour and added: 'What kind of country is this? There is no democracy!' The next day Basel told me that the sum borrowed was too small to invest in trade, but that candidates could use it for other things. Abu Khalil told me about someone who knew a candidate who used the money in his law firm which was doing badly at the time. But when discussing these rumours with Abu Abdou and Abu Naser, the former said: 'If this was true many more than 1500 candidates from Aleppo would sign up. Every Syrian would become a candidate!' The latter continued: 'We are a poor country. Where would all this money come from?'

The story of the economic benefits for candidates obviously underlines that people in the souq had no faith in the electoral process. But at the same time the story underlines that traders also lacked faith in the candidates. The only 'real' reason for becoming a candidate was to reap economic benefit, it was thought. In the souq people ruled out that candidates might want to act politically for the benefit of a larger constituency.

Rumours about the amount of money each vote was worth also circulated all over Aleppo. Sometimes I was told that specific candidates had already collected enormous numbers of election ID-cards, at other

times I was told that each voter would receive a gallon of oil, or five hundred – or a thousand – lira when voting for a certain candidate. But nobody, obviously, could explain the logistics of such scams. There was also a rumour that the BBC had reported that the Syrian authorities had arrested many people in Aleppo who had been trying to buy election ID-cards. The night before the first election-day I was close by the tent of one of the major independent candidates, and saw men gathered round a parked car arguing about some sort of deal. Another car passed and a passenger, in a rare burst of civil disobedience, called out: ‘Are you selling election-IDs?’

Jokes were also spread in the souq fuelling the rumours that the elections were a sham: ‘A Russian, an American and a Syrian official compared how quickly the results of the election are made public. The Russian said: “We need two days”. The American said: “We need only one day” and the Syrian said: “We know the result before election day!”’<sup>77</sup> Many of my informants claimed that they knew who was going to win and saw him as their preferred candidate. They argued that it was safer to vote for a candidate who was sure to gain a seat. By voting for someone who might not win, one risked drawing attention to oneself.

The election took place over two days. The souq was open as usual and the city centre was crowded but not much more so than usual. Trade was slow, however. One of my informants had a television in his shop and a group of traders watched election programmes in which reporters underlined the joy of the citizens when the Syrian President gave them this opportunity to vote and express their wishes. Everyone in the shop sighed at this. Later that day there were reports and interviews from various election buildings, where election administrators talked about the successful first election-day. The Minister of the Interior was interviewed and said that the parliament had many important decisions to make. That night rumours were still rife in Aleppo. Some people said that some independent candidates ‘who respect themselves’ had, at the last moment, threatened to withdraw. This, it turned out the next day, was not true. An industrialist told me that when he had taken his village employees to a rural election building they had been given a National Front list only and told to vote according to that list or not at all. It was common during this election to vote by proxy. One person would collect the election ID-cards of friends and relatives and vote for all of them. None of the wives of my trade informants voted on their own, but sent their cards with their husbands.

The results of the election did not particularly interest my informants. They were ‘as expected’. Lists of the successful candidates were being circulated on the day after the two-day elections. The mass media also

published the names. The top candidates on the National Front lists had all been elected, of course. Among the independents the chairman and the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce were both elected, along with Sabah Fakhri, an Aleppo singer of international fame. A brother of the Mufti of Aleppo<sup>8</sup> was also elected, along with two men from a large 'tribal' Aleppo family and an Armenian man. The next day, a Friday, all the successful candidates, including the National Front people, celebrated wildly with their supporters in their tents. The laconic asides, also from those who congratulated the winners, were to the effect that 'the crooks and criminals have won, as expected.' The low expectations my informants had of the electoral process had been amply fulfilled.

### **Presidential Referendums**

Posters and banners remained in place for weeks as the results of the election sank into oblivion. But soon enough another public event was to be staged; the re-election of – or rather the referendum to re-elect – President Hafez al-Asad. The first important job of the new parliament was to support and unanimously nominate the president for a fifth eight-year term. In late January 1999 the motions to re-elect the president began. Huge banners, posters and enormous pictures of the president covered official buildings in Aleppo and all other Syrian cities with slogans like 'To eternity, oh Hafez', or 'Love for you is in our hearts', or 'Yes to the hero of the liberation war of 1973!'<sup>9</sup> Manifestations were organized and, as usual, public employees were called out to show their everlasting love and loyalty to the president.<sup>10</sup> Traders, though not participating in these manifestations,<sup>11</sup> had pictures of the president handed to them for display in shops and offices. Most put them up while muttering that they were obliged to do so. Abu Khaled's workshop had large assignments to frame huge pictures of the president and he was quite pleased by this opportunity to make money. The Syrian presidential referendum differed from the parliamentary election, of course, since there was no competing candidate. The election itself was simply a matter of voting 'yes'. But even more than in the elections a few months earlier, citizens felt compelled to vote.

Hafez al-Asad was re-elected by 99.9 per cent of the voters in February 1999,<sup>12</sup> with 267 officially reported to have voted no, 'showing the world we have free elections,' as many Syrians commented ironically afterwards. Umm Yousef complained about the 'manifestations' before the elections, and the 'manifestations' after the elections: 'Who are we fooling by these displays of love and loyalty? The whole world is laughing at us.' Parents were upset because schools had not functioned



for over a month while teachers, and at times also schoolchildren, were called out for public displays of enthusiasm. Citizens at large complained that the public sector, not known for its efficiency even in normal periods, ground to a halt due to these pre- and post-re-election manifestations.

In early March, after the annual celebration of the Ba'th party takeover in 1963, the President was sworn in for a new period. This was not a holiday, but the ceremony in parliament was televised during the day. I watched it with Abu Marwan in his office. The members of parliament were all shouting and screaming slogans in support of Hafez al-Asad. Abu Marwan watched the show off and on. He said that the country lacked democracy, but he also claimed that people in Syria 'want and deserve a dictator. We are not ready for democracy, yet.'

In April, yet other elections took place, this time for local councils. There have been elections to local councils since 1972, but the campaigns are usually low-key, reflecting the lack of 'stakes' involved in local affairs and the quite low profile of many council members. Syria is an extremely centralized state where provincial and local councils have very little room for manoeuvre and no economic resources independent of hand-outs and decisions taken in Damascus. The local campaign in Aleppo was barely noticeable. Public employees had their election ID-cards collected in their workplaces, to make sure the right people got votes. My souq informants were totally uninterested in this election. Instead, they, and others, were talking about the line of succession.

For more than a decade Syrians had speculated about the ill-health of Hafez al-Asad. One of the major worries among the citizens at large was that his death would cause a regime conflict, resulting in a blood-bath. Before the elder son, Basil al-Asad, was killed in a car accident in 1994, it was generally believed that he would succeed his father. Basil was an army officer, and reputedly had both the ruthlessness and the charm necessary to win the support of the party elite, the military leadership, and – not least important in Syria – the leaders of the security organizations. On his death, Basil al-Asad was proclaimed a martyr and his pictures were displayed as prolifically as his father's. Who was the next in line? Bashar, the younger brother, was slowly trained and groomed, but many Syrians thought it highly improbable that he would ever succeed his father. He was too young and lacked political experience and acumen. He also seemed to be shy, and he did not have the support of the army and the security services. My informants analysed the situation, speculated and made guesses. Most of them stressed their wish for continued stability and security (*istqraar wa amaan*). These were the key concepts used, not only to discuss a 'shop of one's own', or to

discuss the souq atmosphere, but also to describe the positive aspects of the Hafez al-Asad regime. The 'settlement and security' of today was used to contrast with the 'events' of twenty years before, or with the pre-Ba'th period of many coups and counter-coups.

In the spring of 2000 the Ba'th party announced that its ninth party congress, the first in fifteen years, would be held in June. There was a party election, and many new young members were elected as delegates to the congress, indicating a rejuvenated and changed party. In the spring there were also renewed signals concerning economic liberalization, as well as yet another campaign against corruption. A new government was formed, headed by Mustafa Miro, a nationally somewhat unknown governor of the province of Aleppo. All this was interpreted as the signs of preparations for Bashar to take over, and he was increasingly being promoted as the young, modern saviour of Syria.

The scenario for a peaceful handover of power seemed to be secured. One trader told me, 'Everything is settled. At the party congress in June Bashar will be elected as Secretary General of the party. Then manifestations will be staged to demand that he should stand for the presidency now, and not wait until his father's term has ended. The parliament will listen to "the voice of the people", it will change the constitution so that Bashar can be elected, and soon we will have Bashar as president.'<sup>13</sup> President al-Asad died 'ahead of schedule', but otherwise events followed this scenario very closely.

### *Line of Succession*

When the announcement of Hafez al-Asad's death was made I had been in Abu Ali's office for about half an hour. The atmosphere in the office was quite tense when I arrived. Abu Ali was on the telephone and his close friends and relatives were quietly talking and exchanging rumours. Abu Ali told us to put the television on to listen to the 6 o'clock news. The news was a few minutes late, and then we all knew that something stupendous had happened. A television announcer came on, with tears streaming from his eyes, and we all understood that the president had died. Hafez al-Asad had been in power for thirty years and the majority of Syrians have no memory of the days when he was not the president. The men in the office were very subdued. One trader said that this was a dangerous period for Syria. Perhaps the Israelis would use this opportunity of Syrian weakness to attack? Perhaps the Americans would act against Syria? Another showed me the goose-pimples on his arms. Then the television broadcast a session from the parliament. The Speaker of the house made a solemn announcement of the death of the

president and said that parliament was preparing a bill to change the Constitution. The men in the office were relieved: 'Bashar's supporters are in control and there will be no regime blood-bath. The stability and unity of Syria will be maintained', Abu Malek said. Abu Hussein turned to me and reassuringly told me not to be frightened since the situation was under control. Abu Ali said that one of his partners in Damascus had called earlier to tell him something important had happened and that he had to watch the 6 o'clock news. From this message he suspected that the president had died but did not dare to spread the rumour. The president had actually been dead for a few hours, we later learned, but the parliament had to be quickly assembled to prepare for the line of succession, so the news had been suppressed.

We started to break up from the office. Each one had to close his shop or office and notify his family. The souq was very calm and shops were quietly closing. Traders and customers disappeared. There was no sense of panic and no particular sense of hurry, in contrast to the atmosphere during the 'events' of twenty years earlier. As I walked through the souq, the medina and the city centre I saw black cloth being displayed in shop-windows, and along the walls of buildings. Coffee-houses and restaurants were closing but there was no sense of rush or urgency. Clearly, the general public felt no panic. In the evening the mosques held mourning recitals and Syrian television showed manifestations from different parts of the country with people shouting slogans like 'With our spirits, with our blood, we redeem you', honouring both Hafez and Basil al-Asad.

The day after the death of Hafez al-Asad the souq remained closed but then the authorities encouraged the traders to open and employees to go back to work. The souq closed again on the third day, when the funeral took place. That day Syria was more or less at a complete standstill as all those not taking part in the funeral in Damascus, and later in the hometown of Hafez al-Asad, were watching television. Later I heard of many Syrians who, although critical of the public display of grief, were impressed that so many foreign guests and dignitaries had come to pay their respects. During the funeral Bashar not only represented his family, but also acted, and was reacted to, as the new Syrian leader.

Although all the people I met during the next few weeks were extremely relieved about the peaceful transition, complaints about the scale and intensity of the mourning were voiced among Syrians at large. Forty days of public mourning were proclaimed, with nothing but Koranic recitals and news covering the death of the president on Syrian radio and television. Final examinations in the secondary schools were

postponed for a week.<sup>14</sup> Many devout Muslims in the souq were upset because this public mourning transformed, they argued, a mortal human into a demi-god, and made the cult of the president dangerously close to idolatry. Many also commented that it was wrong to use religion to bolster the image of the regime as committed to the tenets of Islam.<sup>15</sup> Christians were upset that they were forced to listen to the Koran recitals day in and day out. And many people, of whatever faith or inclination, said that they were being deprived of their right to entertain and be entertained. 'Thank God we have satellite-television these days', Umm Feisal told me. 'When Basel al-Asad died six years ago, they weren't as common as today. We were going crazy. Koran recitals and programmes about the "martyr Basel" every day. What war was he martyred in? What did he do for the nation? He died in a car accident! The father, at least, we can respect because he maintained the stability of the country' she said, while switching over to the Abu Dhabi channel, where a Syrian soap-opera was being showed.

In Aleppo the tents used during the parliamentary election campaign were quickly set up again as elected members staged public mourning. 'We are so tired of this', many informants complained. 'Now they have Koran recitals and serve black coffee to mourn Hafez al-Asad. Soon they will arrange to have *dabke* (a 'folkloric' dance) to celebrate the new president.' Some traders told me that certain Aleppo members of parliament had every reason to be content with the timing of the death of Hafez al-Asad. That very day, they said, the parliament was due to discuss the law of parliamentary immunity, and there was a risk that the immunity would be abolished, so that pending sentences might be put into effect.

*Media Debates.* Satellite television was greatly appreciated in Syria during those summer weeks. For two days Arabic satellite channels celebrated the dead president and lauded his careful political style. But then more analytical and even critical voices began to be broadcast. Al-Jeziira, with a home-base in Qatar, which had quickly become the most authoritative television channel in the Arab world, started to send out penetrating programmes with outspoken analyses of the situation in Syria. Many well-known Arab social and political scientists and writers, most of them living in exile in Europe, were interviewed. MBC, a Saudi-sponsored channel based in London, put out a fitting call-in programme under the title: 'Is it good or bad that sons of presidents become presidents?' All Syrians who called the programme stressed that they supported Bashar al-Asad and claimed that he would be a good president. Some argued that 'others' had no right to tell the Syrians what to do. All non-Syrians

who called in argued against a hereditary republic. Many stressed that all Arab republics were facing grave democratic problems. The MBC journalist conducting the programme tried to underline that what was being discussed was a principle, which concerned more countries than Syria, since the presidents of Libya, Iraq, Egypt and Yemen were also preparing their sons to succeed them.

These channels and such media events were much discussed in Aleppo. Some of my informants said that they were ashamed that Syrians did not have the courage to say what they felt on television, while their Arab brothers and sisters from other countries were more outspoken. Many appreciated the quality of the information available through satellites. These alternatives made the officially controlled and sanctioned news and debates in the Syrian mass media stand out as incredibly dull, uninteresting and patently false.

At times the media became actors in real-life political dramas or rather soap-operas, since the ingredients were family, loyalty and betrayal. The day before Hafez al-Asad's funeral, his brother Refat al-Asad, a former commander of the Special Forces who had been exiled to Europe about fifteen years earlier in an intra-regime schism, staged an anticipated media show. A few years earlier he had launched his own satellite television channel, ANN, and now used it to have a letter read, addressed to the Syrian people, announcing that he had been forbidden to attend the funeral, and that he was devastated by this. He also announced that he had a programme for the democratization and renewal of Syrian politics. Although this move had been anticipated, many of my informants were extremely worried. If Refat al-Asad were to stage a comeback, they said, regime fighting would break out, threatening stability and security. But other people claimed that this move had been staged and manipulated by Bashar's supporters in order to increase support for Bashar.<sup>16</sup> Most of my informants, however, while willingly contributing to rumours about the conflicts within the Asad family, just shrugged their shoulders and claimed that 'everything has been decided and settled already. Bashar will take over'.

About two weeks after the death of Hafez al-Asad parliament was in session to vote on the young Bashar standing as presidential candidate. Syrian television broadcast the session live. One of the MPs tried to raise the issue of the legality of the change in the Constitution, which had passed very quickly during a single session. He was loudly booed, especially by two 'tribal' Aleppo independent candidates, and removed from the chamber. Later broadcasts deleted this episode, but many Syrians saw these rare expressions of public disobedience, and those who did not were told of them by others, or were able to watch the incident

on satellite channels. For days rumours about the fate of this MP circulated in Syria. Some insisted that he had been asked, or at least given permission, to raise this constitutional issue, 'in order to show that we are having a free debate'. Others were more doubtful. But the general consensus among my informants was that only a fool would speak up in earnest.<sup>17</sup>

Four weeks after the death of his father, Bashar al-Asad was elected president by 99 per cent of the electorate.<sup>18</sup> Just as on other occasions described above, manifestations had been staged, banners had been spread and pictures hung from every official building. Public employees and members of the popular organizations were called out every day, in the heat of summer, before the election, to shout slogans about 'the hope of Syria, Syria's future, Bashar al-Asad.'

Once it became apparent, soon after the death of Hafez al-Asad, that the succession would be peaceful, many of my souq informants were more than willing to give him a chance. 'Nothing can be worse than what we have had', many stressed. But there were also traders who insisted that with the new president real changes would come about. In the mass media Bashar al-Asad was talked about as *doktoor* to underline that he had a medical degree and was a man of science and learning.<sup>19</sup> Before the death of his father he had become responsible for quickly ushering Syria into the age of computers and telecommunications. At his succession many of my younger informants in Aleppo told me that it was right and proper that a young man should come to power. 'Syria has a young population. He is young, he is not from that old generation seasoned by wars and conspiracies. He is our man and will open up Syria to the world', Jalal said.<sup>20</sup>

### *Spectators and Participants*

In the period after the death of Hafez al-Asad the stability of Syria was of paramount importance for most of my informants, and the threat of chaos loomed large. There was no official wording of this threat. It was noticeable and eminently present, however, by its total absence from official discourse. But traders in Aleppo discussed the instability of their region, and debated the many foreign enemies of the Syrian nation. Not least, they had views on the precarious balance of power in Syria which has been cultivated and shaped by regime policies. Many traders had internalized a 'threat of chaos' scenario which made regime stability the best possible alternative. 'If there is instability we shall fall back thirty years', a trader in Abu Ali's office insisted. 'We are already behind in our development. This is the best on offer.' Someone countered: 'We say yes

to Bashar, but do we have to have repeat it, endlessly?’ Another trader asked me: ‘If the same thing happened in Sweden, what would you do? Don’t go back and tell your people that Syrians are idiots.’ A fourth trader said: ‘The accolades are a show for you foreigners, not for us.’ But on other occasions, the traders were more weary and desperate. ‘What kind of country is this? We have sunk so low!’ Often enough I was told that Syria is not like Sweden. ‘We are not ready for democracy. It takes a long time to build a democratic society. How long did it take you? Look at people here in Aleppo! Each one wants to be a boss and decide just for their own gains.’ But at other times they discussed the pre-Ba’th era – an era now viewed as one of endless coups and counter-coups – and they would stress the relatively democratic elections and the much more heterogeneous political climate of that period. ‘Thirty years of dictatorship and misrule. Of course people are no longer used to different viewpoints and democracy.’<sup>21</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s people would only joke about the powers-that-be and critically discuss the goings-on of the public sector, the army and the regime, in the privacy of their homes. Syrians lived in a republic of fear where one half the population was said to spy on the other half. Stories of old women being dragged away by some security agent after having complained about the lack of bread (or sugar, or tea) were rife in all the major cities, underlining that no one was above suspicion, and that any public complaint was significant enough to cause regime alarm and action. Public self-censorship and silence became second nature for Syrians in Syria, and also for those of us who frequently visited the country. During the 1990s the public attitude changed. In Aleppo, from the late 1990s, I was told political jokes by people I hardly knew. Stories, rumours and complaints were told and spread with amazing openness in the semi-public souq.<sup>22</sup>

The change from self-censorship and silence to the intense and semi-public ‘performance’ of complaints, jokes, and political rumours was discussed in the souq. Some said that the regime was ‘clever’ and ‘was allowing’ people to joke and complain to take their minds off more important issues. To many joking and complaining were allowed because they constituted absolutely no threat to the regime. ‘Nobody cares about politics in this country anymore. People are just trying to get by, to survive’, Abu Ismail said.

These political events in Aleppo and Syria can be viewed as public spectacles in which traders and others were mere spectators. But, as readily admitted by many traders, by accepting the role of passive or applauding spectators, they also contributed to, and became actors in, these public events. The events described above – elections and

referendums – both united and divided Aleppians. Through such public events the Syrian nation and the Syrian state were unfolded. The very staging of such rituals – however ‘un-free’ or ‘undemocratic’ – provided a vehicle for the materialization of modern Syria in which citizens were tied, linked and united to one another. But these public events also – however indirectly and sometimes subtly – highlighted that the political and economic interests and resources of citizens differ. Traders had the resources not to join manifestations, for example. Despite complaints, they furthermore supported independent candidates who represented trading interests.

But Aleppians also gathered, met and confronted each other in public spaces for public issues other than extremely orchestrated events such as elections. Traders and others had, so to speak, a more local and everyday public scene on which they were, or chose to be, publicly active.

### Urban Plans, Urbanity, and Sense of Space and Place

Traders in Aleppo are urban, they live in a big city which, as discussed earlier, clearly influences their perception of, and attitude towards, their fellow human beings. They like being urban and, generally speaking, shun and despise rural life.<sup>23</sup> They presented themselves as quick-witted, clever and sharp. Popular ‘historical’ soap-operas more commonly depict life in ‘traditional’ city quarters rather than village, or nomadic, life. Syrian folklore – the idealized creation of dress, dance and songs – is mainly urban. Many traders argued, however, that ‘today’ most Aleppians are not urbane. Some of my informants expressed the view that the influx of rural migrants had destroyed the fabric of urban life. Aleppo streets and the ‘popular’ (*sha’abi*) quarters are dominated by people who lack sophistication and ‘culture’ (*thaqaafê*). ‘They are like ants. They are everywhere and they have too many children and no plans for their future’, Abu Zaher told me one day, when complaining to me about the changes in Aleppo. My informants also, as discussed in Chapter 4, characterized people they despise as ‘rural’ or ‘tribal’ to rob them of their urbanity and urban belonging. Complaints about the rural influx into Aleppo are also a way of complaining about the regime. ‘Rural’ or ‘tribal’ is a common metaphor in many larger Syrian cities for either Alawites in general, or for Ba’th party members, as well as for the armed forces, or for people working in the security agencies.<sup>24</sup> To depict political power-holders and people with political power as rural, symbolically redresses the speaker’s lack of power and control.<sup>25</sup>

All of my medina informants share a commitment to the blessings of urban life, and regard themselves as true Aleppians. There are, however,



other Aleppians who imply that the *abl as-souq* are upstarts and do not represent the true spirit of Aleppo. Such claims, discussed in Chapter 4, state that the *abl as-souq* are uneducated, and only think about their short-term profit. There were also allegations, mainly from educated professionals outside the souq, that they contributed to the degradation of the urban environment of the medina. My informants in the medina refuted such views. But their turf – the souq and the medina – is not just ‘any’ place for trade and production. It is also a part of the Syrian patrimony; a place of world renown and interest, and the focus of debates on urban heritage and renewal.

### *Urban Demolition*

In the late nineteenth century, during Ottoman rule, a German architect drew up a plan for the urban expansion of Aleppo. During the French Mandate a survey of the medina was made under which maps and the ownership of plots and lots were established.<sup>26</sup> But the medina itself was not subject to massive structural change. It was only after independence that ‘development’ and ‘modernity’ really touched and affected the medina. In the 1950s an urban master plan was (partly) put into effect, whereby new roads were created and old ones widened, to make easy access into the medina and the souq possible for large motor vehicles, as mentioned in Chapter 2. Parts of the medina were torn down to make way for higher modern buildings.

The urban thinking of the Ba’th party continued in the same vein. While major mosques and more ancient sites were considered an important patrimony linking the present rulers to a glorious past, the urban medina and souq 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 far-reaching social, political and economic change. The *abl as-souq* were considered both socially backward and politically reactionary, and viewed as allies of the Syrian bourgeoisie. During the early decades of independence there was also, as mentioned earlier, a flight of capital (and ‘capitalists’) from Syria. Many of the old urban inhabitants, the families of *asl wa fasl*, left their large Arabic houses and moved elsewhere. Some moved within the city, but many left Syria when their factories, trading companies and banks were nationalized. Generally speaking, there was little public investment in the medina of Aleppo.

In the 1970s the old urban master plan was revived and amended, and by the middle of that decade the demolition of buildings covering nine hectares in the northwest section of the old city, bordering Bab al Farraj

and Khandaq Street, was planned and set in motion.<sup>27</sup> The plan was to construct high-rise buildings for offices, shops and restaurants. Large chunks of Bab an-Neyrab,<sup>28</sup> a large densely populated quarter on the southeast fringe of the medina, were to be torn down as well, and new traffic arteries constructed through the old city. Although most Aleppians greeted this news with a shrug, some well-known public figures started to campaign actively against this project.<sup>29</sup> In 1977 they mobilized the Syrian Board of Antiquities to classify the whole of the medina as a historical monument. The following year this classification was extended to the old Christian quarters north of Khandaq Street. A committee for the protection of the old quarters was formed, but the governor of Aleppo and leading Ba'ath party members insisted that the plan for 'modernization' should be realized. This urban conflict coincided with the so-called events (*abdaath*) in Aleppo,<sup>30</sup> severely limiting basic freedom of movement for most Aleppians for a very long time.<sup>31</sup>

The demolition in the city centre took place in the spring and summer of 1979, and in 1982 a large part of Bab an-Nayrab was torn down. By then a UNESCO mission had already – 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 of reconciliation after the 'events', the grandiose plans for Bab al-Farraj were demoted and instead new smaller-scale plans were discussed. In 1984 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.<sup>32</sup> Today many Aleppians express pride in the antiquity and continuous use and habitation of their medina.

### *Urban Rehabilitation*

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 medina and the many people working and living there.

During my fieldwork I came to see this project from two perspectives. First of all, it touched many of my trade informants by way of a new sewerage system which was laid down in the medina. But it also touched a few of my informants and other Aleppians by way of some project activities. 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. One trader had been interviewed for a large socio-economic survey conducted as a base-line for assessing the economic contribution of the private sector.<sup>33</sup> But, 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’) 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 medina should contribute economically to infrastructure which benefited them. But others were of the opinion that a system of payment would only increase the corruption. In the end, some traders told me, they did pay to have the trenches filled in quickly because customers could not be expected, for months on end, to jump across the trenches to reach their shops.

Project activities open to the public, and aimed to involve the Aleppian public in the project, were known, on the other hand, to more of my trade informants. Most of these, however, were seen not as part of an urban rehabilitation scheme but rather as more general urban cultural activities. They did not separate such events from others, like theatre performances or open-air concerts. One project activity was to clear and partly restore Shibaani, a huge building complex close to the south-western Bab-Qannesriin. It used to be an old Jesuit church, was later turned into a monastery, and then converted into a school before being nationalized in the 1930s and used by the Régie de Tabac, the Syrian tobacco company. Now it was leased to the city to be used as a cultural centre in the medina, and was inaugurated in September 1998 with a photography exhibition, dancing and concerts. None of my middle-aged or older informants attended any of these quite crowded events. But they were very pleased at my enthusiasm and could inform me in detail about the singing style of one of the performers.<sup>34</sup> In the spring there was a large international women’s arts festival in the Shibaani which was attended by many Aleppians, and also a small festival of poetry recitals.<sup>35</sup> Only one of my younger informants attended. The building was

subsequently rented out to soap-opera productions. The imposing and versatile building and the large enclosed courtyard were suitable for imaginary historical series. One day some actors, dressed in archaic Arab dress passed Abu Imad's shop as I was sitting there. I told him about the film-work in Shibaani and this awoke his interest. 'Perhaps I should go there some day. I have not set foot in that building since I was a young child.'

### *Involvement and Non-involvement*

Many of my informants in the souq viewed the aim of the urban rehabilitation project as a way of enhancing the potential for Aleppo tourism. They all expressed the opinion that tourism in Syria in general, and 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. Abu Malek 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?' Jibrán, 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 meant 'foreigners', i.e. Westerners. Traders and others who lived off the tourist trade habitually claimed that they were disadvantaged as compared with Damascus. Butrus explained: 'The new enlarged airport has been ages in coming. Only smaller planes can land here. Charter tourists are taken to Damascus and only come here for a quick visit. All agencies in Aleppo are forced to have a Damascus partner who profits from our efforts and our work.'

The enhancement of Aleppo for tourism was noticeable in the old Christian quarters of Jdeide and Saliba close to the demolition site of Bab al-Farraj. The rehabilitation project had identified these as particularly suitable for tourism. Some 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.<sup>36</sup> The

waiters are dressed 'folklore-wise' and they serve elaborate Middle Eastern cuisine. In the hot season there is often live ('traditional') music. The local guests are Christians and Muslims who tolerate the serving of alcohol. None of my self-styled conservative informants frequented these restaurants, or placed their out-of-town partners in these hotels. They were not openly against the upgrading of this area, but dismissed these quarters as not quite part of their *medina*.

The question of alcohol had actually become an increasingly sensitive public issue in Aleppo. Although many of my 'conservative' traders do drink, they do so privately among their close male friends. When tourist projects were discussed, or when offers came to invest in hotels, cafés or restaurants, these traders said that they were not interested. Abu Abdou told me that as a member of the Chamber of Commerce he had been offered the opportunity to invest and become a partner in a new hotel on the empty site of the Bab al-Farraǰ lot. But he had declined the offer: '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.' Other, more malicious voices, however, claimed that what stopped many traders from investing in tourism and leisure was the need for economic patience. Abu Hassan told me that returns on such investments were too slow and too insecure for most Aleppo traders. But yet other informants insisted that such investments were low-risk and very profitable, with tax exemptions and other benefits.

The lack of interest in taking an active part in such ventures can, I would contend, be interpreted as part of the *abl as-souq*'s ethos of 'independence' and 'settlement' and their concern about their 'names'. Through leases of land, or building codes, or health regulations tourist and leisure projects are in many ways sponsored by the public sector. Thus a trader who engages in such ventures must almost daily rub shoulders with, and depend on, public employees. To many this is an abhorrent thought. Furthermore, most of my trade informants were not advocates of urban projects 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.<sup>37</sup>

### Everyday Politics

Traders (and others), as already discussed, viewed elections and orchestrated public spectacles, and even the urban rehabilitation project, as political events over which they had little influence. But in their everyday life in the city traders and other Aleppians did act politically. People's way of using, utilizing and organizing common space – their way of turning space into place – and their way of dealing with common and communal issues indicate, form and sometimes reflect essentially political positions. The public-ness of urban space in Aleppo is, as mentioned in Chapter 2, relative to who uses it and for what purpose. There is no general public using a general public space. How, and for what purpose, Aleppians move in the city, how they meet and interact depends, as already discussed, on age, gender, occupation and wealth, as well as religious and ethnic affiliation.

But, despite these differences, city people appeared to be united in their complaints about publicly managed space and infrastructure. Power cuts, water shortages, polluted air and traffic congestion are legion. The city also mismanages, according to my informants, streets, parks and squares. Informants expressed the view that the mismanagement of public space and public utilities was both an indication and a symbol of a larger national mismanagement, in which resources are squandered and siphoned off for the benefit of some at the expense of others. Public utilities are the responsibility of no one, I was told, and citizens have to find private solutions. My informants habitually insisted they were innocent by-standers in this publicly induced urban degradation, and lamented the lack of civility which has come in its aftermath. 'It is everyone for himself, these days. Nobody cares about the other, or the rights of others.'

The 'all for himself' attitude, according to many Aleppians, permeated much of urban common space. Anyone constructing a building blocked and obstructed the right of way for others. A club arranging a wedding party disturbed the neighbours by playing extremely loud music until early in the morning. People parked their cars wherever they found a space, regardless of the problems it caused others. Families cleaning their balconies drenched their neighbours with dirty water. This lack of civility was a matter of degree. In neighbourhoods where people knew each other and where they were linked and connected for mutual benefit, there were checks and balances in how they behaved to each other in shared spaces. In neighbourhoods where more enduring and multi-stranded relations had not developed, where people knew nothing of or cared little for the *asl wa fasl* of each other, conflicts were common, according to many Aleppians. There were, however, people who in

public flaunted the lack of civility with impunity. ‘Nobodies’, as discussed in Chapter 4 – i.e. people who were very rich or very powerful, and those who were thought to have close connections with such people – stood above the ordinary exchange of complaints in Aleppo. Ordinary people were afraid to confront them with insults or curses.

This ‘all for himself’ attitude can also be related to how traders viewed the medina space. Medina traders were, in general, keenly interested in ‘history’ in the abstract. They were aware of, usually in a vague way, and proud of the long history of Aleppo. Living in a city, being urbanites in a city reputed to have the longest continuous human habitation in the world, utilizing space which had been utilized for trade for centuries, clearly created a framework of pride and continuity. But most of my medina informants had no particular interest in knowing the specific and detailed history or historical processes which had faced the city, specific quarters or specific buildings. To traders and others living off commerce or production, space and buildings in the souq and the medina were resources to be used and exploited here and now. The souq and medina were not ‘rarified’, nor did they reify that environment by viewing it as possessing a spirit, a character, or will of its own. My informants never expressed awe, inspiration or intimidation at the long recorded history of the medina. That history was not viewed as unfolding through the physical environment, to be looked at and admired as a symbol of their achievements.

The overall aim of the rehabilitation project is to ensure that the old city of Aleppo will survive. The continued economic importance of the medina and the way it is integrated into the larger city centre are assets for Aleppo. But the economic importance of the medina also poses a threat to its environment. Residential houses, as already mentioned, have been turned into workshops, shops and storage space, as the souq expands into what, not so long ago, used to be residential quarters. Furthermore, the ownership structure of buildings is very complex. Many commercial buildings in the medina (and the city centre) are owned by the Ministry of Religious Affairs which acts like an absentee landlord. On the one hand, rents are very low but, on the other hand, hardly any maintenance or investment is being made in these buildings. Private owners act in the same way. The cost of a shop, i.e. the cost of the right of possession – the *pas-de-porte* (*frugh*) – is seldom assessed in terms of the ‘value’ of the building in which it is situated, but in terms of its location and its size.<sup>38</sup> A new shop-‘owner’ may put a considerable amount of money into repairing or decorating his shop. A great number of shop-keepers actually own their commercial property in the souq. It is not, however, the property as such which they value, but, again, the

location and the size of their property. Such shop-keepers act no differently from their colleagues who 'only' have a lease.

For my informants the medina space is turned into a significant place, not through the antiquity of its bricks and stones, but through the social relations they are engaged in. These social relations are intensely here-and-now, and oriented mainly to the living. But they are also oriented to the past through the relations of deceased fathers, uncles and grandfathers who before them had used, and made a living, in that significant space. The web of significance in space is in, and through, other human beings, and not through projects of urban rehabilitation. Abu Jamil, as discussed in Chapter 3, said that his part of the souq was 'everything' to him, and that he had learned everything important from its older traders. Umm Jamil, as already described, sometimes sighed over the eagerness with which her sons rushed off to the souq. It was significant others which attracted the traders and their sons.

The use and perception of the medina by the traders contained no sentimentality about 'old things', even their own property. They were living and breathing the medina, their medina. Abu Hussein now and then talked about his childhood when he ran around in the alleys close to his present office – alleys that had disappeared to make way for a broad street. But he claimed that his move – along with many members of his large extended family – had been a good decision. This lack of sentimentality on the part of the *abl as-souq* contributed also to their lack of enthusiasm for the urban rehabilitation project, which was categorized as yet another infringement on their independence. There were also traders or workshop owners who complained that they were not being helped by the project when they needed money to rebuild. Instead, they voiced suspicions that 'their' money was lining the pockets of the project personnel. Such suspicions clearly legitimated non-involvement in the project. But the lack of interest in the project is also linked to the limits of free associational life in contemporary Syria.

### *'Civil Society'*

The souq has no co-operative associations today. There are no formal organizations to deal with common day-to-day problems. When problems arise traders try to solve them by means of trusted and respected trader neighbours, as described in Chapter 3. The state has been loath to let any group or category of citizens organize themselves for mutual benefit in their daily lives.<sup>39</sup> Traders, and others, are not at liberty to associate freely or to found formal interest groups. Instead, citizens are firmly linked – top-down – to the state, which has a near-



monopoly on defining their interests. In general, trade unions and so-called popular organizations are the loudspeakers of the ruling party and the regime.

The Aleppo Chamber of Commerce could be viewed as a union-like association ideally serving the interests of the trading community. It was founded already in 1858 during the Ottoman period, even before the Chamber in Damascus. In the late 1990s about 23,000 Aleppo companies were registered with the Chamber of Commerce, but only between 8,000 and 10,000 traders paid their dues each year. Membership is needed for all traders who export or import. But some years a trader may not need the services of the chamber, and may then decide not to pay the dues. Every four years members elect a general assembly which meets once a year. From this assembly twelve members are selected to be part of the administrative council, and six others members are selected by the Ministry of Supply to represent trading companies in the public sector. The members of the administrative council elect seven members of the chamber who are in charge of the daily running of the Chamber of Commerce. The Aleppo Chamber is large and had approximately thirty employees in the late 1990s.

The administrative director explained to me that the various Chambers in Syria act as a two-way bridge between traders and the state. They vouch that a trader is, in fact, a trader and stamp the papers needed for exporting and importing. The Chamber of Commerce can also link Aleppo companies to companies outside Syria, and help their members to find new markets. The presidents of the Aleppo and Damascus Chambers are members of an economic council which decides on which projects will fall under Investment Law No. 10 of 1991. Thus, according to the administrative director, the chamber has access to, and an important role in, the economic policies of the country.<sup>40</sup>

Although many of my informants were members of the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce, they viewed it with little enthusiasm. It is not an association they joined to air and discuss their common issues, or their differences. They did not regard it as an independent association, but claimed it was tied to the state. Abu Abdou said that it did not represent the interests of most traders in Aleppo, and Abu Malek claimed that the service it provided in getting to know new markets was no better than what private companies provided. But much more serious were the allegations that the elected leadership of the chamber, as discussed above, were among the biggest crooks in Aleppo and behind many export and import scams. Nevertheless, despite this criticism and such allegations, my informants voted for Chamber of Commerce officials in the parliamentary elections.

The lack of enthusiasm for the Chamber of Commerce on the part of most *ahl as-souq* has to be understood also in relation to differences among the traders. The chamber was generally perceived to be in the hands of 'nobodies', that is, people representing the interests of the new rich and traders profiting from their political connections. This difference, and the issue of political control, were also reflected in discussions about *'Afi'e* (Strength), a charitable organization formed by Bashar al-Asad before his succession to the presidency. According to the Aleppo traders, the inspiration came from Egypt, where the son of President Mubarak had set up a similar organization. *'Afi'e* was supposed to be a 'super-organization' to support and help all other Syrian charitable organizations and rich traders in Damascus and Aleppo were invited to join. One of my informants, a man with a good name both inside and outside the souq, was invited to become one of the ten founding members in Aleppo. Immediately after Bashar al-Asad had been elected President, my informant was called to the second meeting. He told me and others in his office that he wanted to withdraw from the organization. However, this was more or less impossible since it would be taken as a sign of political opposition. A visiting trader added: 'Most of the traders in this organization have billions, but they never gave a lira to anything charitable before *'Afi'e* was formed. But at the very first meeting they gave away more than a hundred million lira!' A third trader, in a more optimistic vein, said that through *'Afi'e* it would be possible to gather together a group of people who had not been co-opted by the regime, to whom the President could turn for sound and honest advice about 'how the responsible in the state work and who is good and who is bad.' But none of the three traders seemed very convinced that this would actually take place. They all concurred, however, that the selected trader had to attend the meeting.<sup>41</sup>

But there are other associations in Aleppo. Here, as elsewhere, cultural or historical associations and societies are less supervised and controlled than trade unions or organizations like the Chamber of Commerce. Such societies are allowed to exist when they do not make overt political or economic claims on behalf of their members, and are even appreciated when, and if, their purpose is to glorify and stress the rich cultural heritage of Syria. Many in Aleppo with heritage interests were members of the Archeological Society of Aleppo. This society, established in 1924 by Kamel al-Ghazi, a well-known Aleppo historian, is one of Syria's oldest non-governmental organizations. At its headquarters lectures and seminars on historical, archeological and cultural topics are given almost every week. The society also arranges popular guided field trips to various parts of old Aleppo, as well as to other parts of Syria and to

neighbouring countries. The society is one of the few formal organizations in Aleppo which attracts both Muslim and Christian members. During Ramadan, for example, it always sponsors a breakfast for members where both a sheikh and a priest will talk about peaceful co-existence and good neighbourliness between Christians and Muslims. All my informants knew of the society and held it in (uncharacteristic) high regard. Some of them were paid-up members, but only one attended meetings now and then, and he worked in the tourist trade where historical knowledge is an asset.

Other associations are also permitted in Syria. In all the major cities charitable organizations can be found.<sup>42</sup> Their activities have increased and become more public since the 1990s following the rapprochement between the regime and the urban educated and better-off strata. Since then, the need for charity has also increased as public spending has decreased, and as the job market fails to meet the demands of job-seekers. There has, of course, always been poverty and misery in Syria, but the presence of urban poor, or poverty in the urban areas, was by the turn of the century much more noticeable than twenty years earlier. The gap between rich and poor is said to have increased since the mid-1980s, and many urbanites have become members of, or support, charitable organizations trying to alleviate some of the needs of the poor. Such organizations are also an important public arena for urban, and often well-educated, women. Here they can become engaged in highly qualified and professional tasks within an accepted idiom of 'non-work'.<sup>43</sup>

There are charitable organizations supporting the old, the handicapped, orphans, or simply the urban poor. There are organizations working only with Muslims or only with Christians, or with both. They are all supervised and controlled by the Ministry of Social Work, but are otherwise (today) left to their own economic and organizational devices. Many of my informants contribute to such formal organizations, as has been mentioned. Most of them also contribute to informal charity work by giving food, money and clothes through their mosques or through informal religious groups.

### *Mediated Nostalgia*

Aleppo archeological and cultural societies and cultural activities within the project for old Aleppo are, as already mentioned, appreciated by my medina informants. Some, as has been discussed, even take part. Events and spectacles within such associations tie participating Aleppians together, across the many social, economic, political and religious urban divisions, in the pursuit of a common urban civility through the use, and

creation, of an Aleppo past. The ability of these events and spectacles on the urban scene to create a common urbanity is, however, somewhat limited. These events are not the common topic of debates and discussions, neither hotly contested nor heatedly defended.

In this age of mass media it is rather the nationally produced urban historical soap-operas and television series which are topics of discussion. According to many traders, television series had for a long time been dominated by Damascus topics. Then a series about Aleppo between 1920 and 1950 – *Khan al-Hariir* (The Silk Khan), written by the Aleppo author Nihad Siriis – was broadcast in the mid-1990s, and became enormously popular, not only in Aleppo, but all over Syria. Aleppians told me that, first of all, it put their city on the national mass media map, and secondly, it showed the historical changes and developments in the city. Sometimes when I was walking in places where it had been filmed, strangers to Aleppo would exclaim. 'Look, this alley is from *Khan al-Hariir*.'

In the spring of 1999 Syrian television broadcast a series called *Urs Halabi* (Aleppo wedding). City inhabitants were pleased that Aleppo was in the limelight, but some complained that, although the story was set in the late Ottoman period, the stage-set and the props depicted an Aleppo of the 1950s. Yet others complained that the story lacked a proper script. Instead, it was too episodic, with songs, proverbs, poetry and *folkloor* stacked like beads on a string and 'events' added in here and there. A month later another Aleppo series, *Bab al-Hadiid*, was aired, depicting a 'traditional' quarter of Aleppo in the 1950s. Some of my informants were upset by the portrayal of some of the Aleppians as crude and brutish. But, despite the critique against both these series very many Aleppians watched, discussed and commented on them. These series, to my mind, created a nostalgia for 'real' houses, old quarters, neighbourliness and good old conflicts that real-life spectacles and events concerning 'before' in contemporary Aleppo, did not. Nostalgia, of course, is close to reification. Nostalgia is a vehicle for actors to turn their 'culture' or 'history' into an object which can be looked at, longed for and admired.

In contemporary Aleppo, as described in this chapter, urban dwellers face many common problems related to urban life. But there are also great differences in the ability to solve such problems through networks of relatives and friends. My informants regarded themselves as being better-off, as having more assets and resources, compared with most non-traders in Syria today. This clearly strengthened their perception of the value of having a shop of one's own, and the need to stay both independent and settled. But in their capacity as citizens, traders were

just as dependent on the state as were public employees. 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 the ethos of 'independence', and the ethos of 'a shop of one's own' fostered a lack of interest in co-operating with generalized others, if they did not see any economic or social gains in that co-operation.

In the late twentieth century and early twenty-first centuries Syrians simultaneously face economic change instigated, and political continuity controlled, by the regime. Through the kinds of events and urban spectacles described in this chapter my informants remained suspended between hope of a better future and fear of a worse. In the next chapter the political economy of the Syrian state will be looked at more closely. How traders view the economic changes and their own economic capacities on the global scene will also be in focus.

## TRADING ON THE MARGINS

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. Those days are gone, and only names like Khan al Hariir and Khan al Gumruk remind visitors of the great importance of Aleppo as an entrepôt in the trade in luxurious and costly merchandise. Today Aleppo no longer straddles strategic trade routes, nor is it a centre of production of exquisite textiles. But although Aleppo 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.

In this chapter these links and how they were talked about in the souq, will be looked at more closely. The importance of the private sector has, as discussed earlier, increased tremendously since the early 1990s. Syria is comparatively closed to international capital, but policies of economic liberalization have been instrumental in linking my informants more firmly into transnational activities. The importance of the private sector has, I shall argue, augmented the necessity for mediation and the opportunities for bribes. How such practices, and regional and international politics, were discussed in the souq will also be brought out in this chapter. Traders emphasized both their own vulnerability and their cleverness by constantly comparing themselves, Aleppo and Syria with other people and other places.

### **The Anomaly of Syria**

Today most countries are linked to other countries in the world, to international agencies, to transnational corporations, and to supranational associations, in ways that profoundly affect their domestic and non-domestic policies. 'Globalization' can be measured by the increased interconnections between states, between states and other political bodies, and between states and economic enterprises. From this

point of view, the economic sovereignty of many contemporary states is severely limited and hedged in. In this day and age Syria is an anomaly because the state is, in many ways, independent of the pressures of global capitalist demands.<sup>1</sup> Unlike most other Third World countries Syria's economic policies have never been dictated by other states, by the World Bank, or by the International Monetary Fund. Syria did not join, and could not be forced to join, the structural adjustment bandwagon of the 1980s and early 1990s, whereby public spending had to be severely curtailed.<sup>2</sup> Syria was not, however, de-linked from international capital. The country has borrowed heavily from the West and the World Bank, and it also has large debts to Russia.<sup>3</sup> But creditors have not been able to force it to open its economic decision-making to outside influence. First of all, it always paid just enough on its debts, and secondly, the regime was always able, as a last resort, to get economic support from its richer neighbours.

Syria is an oil-producing country, and although its exports are moderate compared with many neighbouring countries, these earnings are very important economically. Income from oil-exports and aid from neighbouring countries constitute a rent which underpins the economy of the state. Until recently this rent has, in many ways, liberated the regime from common internal political constraints.<sup>4</sup> Direct taxes have been low and the political economy of the state has been one of distributing rent income, rather than redistributing income generated by production. Externally, the regime has been able to counteract the demands of various donors. It has thus been able to utilize Syria's geopolitical position and its natural resources, to manoeuvre between its creditors.

Another international anomaly is that Syria never joined the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and only in 2002 started to discuss joining the World Trade Organization.<sup>5</sup> Syrian industrialists and traders have in many ways been advantaged by this. Syrian producers have been shielded from external competition. Today customs duties are progressively being lowered between Syria and neighbouring Arab countries, which has pleased some, but not all, of my informants. By not being a member of the GATT, copyrights have been ignored or circumvented in printing, in music-copying and in the use of well-known trade-brand symbols. Until Syria joins the WTO these practices can and will continue.

However, this somewhat unique economic sovereignty was not once acknowledged by my informants; this kind of national independence was never brought out. In the souq, I never heard any comment on the relative freedom of the Syrian state to form its own economic policies.

Only a few of my informants had ever heard of the GATT, and during my fieldwork only one trader expressed any interest in the WTO, and discussed how membership would affect them. While my informants talked incessantly about the economic constraints imposed by 'the state', they only rarely talked about their comparative advantages. This is a crucial aspect of my informants' perceptions of their own role and the role of the state. The increase in foreign trade, for example, was generally thought to be due to their own energy, hard work and cleverness.

### *Economic Policies*

Economic liberalization, which has taken place in Syria at intervals ever since Hafez al-Asad came to power, has thus not been dictated from the outside. Such policies, often referred to as 'openings' (*infitaḥ*), have increased the scope and scale of the private sector's contribution to the Gross National Product, and can be seen as responses to the fiscal problems of the Syrian state. In this perspective the state no longer controls sufficient rent to neglect the economic contribution of the private sector. Yet policies of *infitaḥ* can also be seen as responses to political demands from the trading and industrial community or, perhaps more correctly, as a way of tying this community to the regime, by giving it more room for manoeuvre. Today the private sector economically overshadows the public sector. Private trade, industry and agriculture employ more people, and their contribution to the Gross Domestic Product exceeds that of the public sector.<sup>6</sup>

By means of *infitaḥ* policies the private sector has thus expanded, especially in the production of consumer goods and in the service sector, including trade. These policies have also opened the country to more imports. Since the early 1990s the importation of consumer goods has increased dramatically. At the turn of the century almost every conceivable item was available in Syria, but at a price. This means that consumption patterns are becoming much more divergent. Furthermore, imports of new machinery have diversified domestic production. Privately owned Syrian factories produce up-market cotton clothes not only for the national market, but also for export. Synthetic yarn, imported from South-East Asia, feeds the many factories around Aleppo producing clothes, which are exported, for example, to Russia and Central Asia, and cloth which is exported to the Arab Gulf countries.

The Syrian currency is not convertible and for decades the state has tried to impose a monopoly on trade in foreign currencies. In the 1980s a producer, or trader had, in principle, to export in order to be able to import. The black market in currency became very important in most



export-import transactions, despite heavy fines or the threat of imprisonment. In fact, the currency racket became very much tied to people with close relations with the political powers-that-be. Such people, who became very rich, were among those talked of as 'nobodies' by my informants, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. Since the late 1980s and through policies in the 1990s the problems of the Syrian currency have been tackled in various ways.<sup>7</sup> By 2000 the Syrian (state) banks no longer controlled foreign trade, but rather tried to control the inflow and outflow of foreign currency.<sup>8</sup>

In the late 1990s public sector enterprises in Aleppo were still important in terms of the number of people employed. But the general opinion in the city was that such enterprises were badly run, lacked investment, and had long since stopped being motors of the economy. Instead, the prestige of private industrial enterprises, and the confidence of their owners, rose. Industries and workshops can be found in many parts of Aleppo. There are new industrial zones outside the city, where the authorities have tried to encourage industrialists to set up shop. Others have established large factories outside Aleppo on privately owned land. Many of the new factories rely on computers for design and sometimes also for the production itself. Larger textile factories outside, or on the outskirts of the city, often used, for example, Italian computerized weaving machines or French jacquard machines. The larger factories employ between 50 and 100 workers, and a few very large factories employ up to 300 workers. Such factories often operated 24 hours a day. Many used synthetic thread which the owners imported on their own. The owners sold most of their products on the export market under their own names. These large factories are not public shareholding companies but family firms, or are run as partnerships between unrelated owners. There is still no stock market in Syria, despite years of rumours.

The vast majority of the industrial establishments in Aleppo are not large, and employ only ten or fewer workers, and they are commonly situated within the city itself. In some the work is highly labour-intensive and not very automated or even mechanized. Other factories and workshops rely to a considerable degree on machinery and computers. Only the very large factories cover the whole production chain. Many companies, especially in textiles, produce commodities by farming out work in a number of small workshops. Abu Hassan, for example, who has a workshop north of the medina, specializes in computerized designs on sweatshirts. He had fourteen employees working on the electrical sewing machines connected to a computer which designed and made the patterns. He worked for many larger textile industries in Aleppo, and

also on commission for a huge transnational company. Abu Ismail acted as an industrialist trader with no workshop of his own. He farms out all his production to others and exports via the licence of a very large Aleppo company.

Industrialists, just like the traders, commonly complained about the bureaucratic difficulties of running a business, but also admitted that they were regarded with much less suspicion and distrust than before. The *infitaḥ* policies have benefited many of my informants, but they have also paved the way for discontent. The traders want even more 'openings' and even less control. They claimed that liberalization had been too limited since Investment Law No. 10 of 1991 only covered the larger economic enterprises.

### Global Connections

Syrian commodity producers and traders are economically marginal on the scale of international trade. But contemporary 'globalization' takes many forms.<sup>9</sup> Advocates of increased international economic connections and free trade typically paint a very rosy picture in which all benefit and no one loses. But increased international trade, in itself, obviously does not eradicate the global hierarchy of the international political system, or lead to a more equal world order. Globalization as both a processes of increased economic, political and cultural interconnections, and a process of awareness of, and struggles over, such interconnections, distributes gains and losses in a highly complex way. This complexity can be discerned in the Aleppo souq.

Syria is comparatively closed to international trade, yet, as in earlier centuries, Syrian products and raw materials are found outside the country. As earlier, the country is also open to imported raw materials and commodities produced elsewhere. In Syria '*kleeniks*' has become a generic term often used for any kind of thin paper napkin; '*nido*' has become the generic name for powered milk; '*bambersʒ*' is used all over the country to connote any kind of disposable diapers, and '*moliniks*' is commonly understood to be any electrical grinder. People here, like everywhere else, wear 'fake' clothes announcing well-known international brand-names such as Cardin, Nike, Lacoste, Adidas, Puma and Versace, and clothes with slogans or names that are generically 'Western' and always in the Latin alphabet. Many such items are imported from countries with even cheaper production and are often smuggled into Syria. But the majority are made inside the country, in small workshops or larger factories.

All Aleppo producers exporting clothes to the European market use

Latin alphabet labels only, indicating both a hierarchy of quality (the best things are exported to Europe) and a hierarchy of nations (the non-Western origin of the clothes is under-stated). Producers in Aleppo, like many Syrians in general, express ambivalence with regard to national commodities. The term 'national' was often used by traders in the souq to connote poor quality when they sold products from different countries.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, producers underlined the cleverness and inventiveness of Syrians – and Aleppians in particular – in being able to produce at all in adverse circumstances. Yet, on the other hand, they and the traders also commented, as was discussed earlier, that Syrian producers – with the exception of themselves – were stingy, cheap, and looked for short-term profits only. I heard customers in the souq say that the quality of many Syrian products had improved due to the enhanced role of the private sector. In the souq everyone insisted that it is important for Syria to produce consumer commodities, but many traders admitted that they, themselves, often preferred to buy non-Syrian products.

### *Markets, Marketing and Packaging*

Labels, packaging and the presentation of commodities are becoming increasingly important in Syria. Political 'advertisements', signs and symbols are more noticeable in public spaces, than advertisements for commodities. But billboards and the TV provide arenas and spaces for commodity commercials. The Aleppo market was not uniform and consumer behaviour was very varied. In the medina, with its emphasis on bulk sales or on well-known and similar commodities, retail customers seldom asked for brand-names. Customers buying wholesale were, or claimed to be, well aware of differences between different producers. But generally speaking the medina is not a market where the name of the product, or its wrapping and packaging, is of much importance. The wrapping-and-packaging value of the product is infused in the medina itself. But for certain textile products, like bedspreads, towels and bathrobes, which are commonly given as wedding gifts, the packaging and the label of the product are becoming increasingly important, even in the medina. Such products may also appear as advertisements on billboards in the city. The spread of well-known generic brand-names, and the use of 'global' consumer goods like diapers, shampoo, tissue-paper, radios and grinders, indicate that Syrian consumers are part of the global capitalist economy and that their tastes, although both varied and particular, are under scrutiny by producers and market-people.<sup>11</sup>

Abu Ali and Abu Hussein work as agents of a large brand-name detergent. Once they complained about the rudimentary marketing skill of Syrian traders. Their particular detergent was produced in Syria on licence from a large German company. It was doing well, despite an above-average price, but they tried to enlarge their market share through a campaign in grocery stores, as well as directly among customers. They offered grocery-store owners special prizes if they sold more of their product. Abu Ali and Abu Hussein also hired (unveiled) young women to distribute samples of the detergent in various better-off residential quarters of Aleppo. At the same time, they questioned the housewives about their washing habits and their preferences in detergents. According to Abu Hussein, marketing as a serious and scientific part of business was very underdeveloped in Syria. He said that shop-keepers were not loyal to distributors of specific brand-names and that they knew very little about the behaviour of their customers. 'They know from experience that this or that label will sell, but they don't try to attract customers to buy a certain brand.' Abu Ali said that in their experience television ads were important to increase sales, but such campaigns were very expensive. He also stressed that marketing in Syria was in its infancy because the market is still very fragmented.

During this particular discussion Abu Hussein and Abu Ali were struggling to enhance and protect the position of the brand-names for which they were agents. They portrayed themselves as harbingers of new and developed marketing techniques. At other times, however, they freely admitted that infringements on other people's brand-names or labels were part of their marketing strategy. Once, discussing the wrapping or the name of a candy-bar to be launched by one of their Syrian producers, they decided to try a design which was very similar to an already successful, but competing, label. Abu Hussein admitted that they were copying and conceded that this was a 'disease of the souq', which would continue, he claimed, until there are laws in Syria on the infringement of brand-names and copyrights. Most of my informants were not even aware that intellectual property can be, and often is, regulated through national and international law.

*The Phenomenal Success of Cassandra.* The ability to seize opportunities for making money is, as has been frequently stated, part of the self-image of Aleppo traders. In the mid-1990s Syrian television for the first time broadcast a melodramatic and romantic Mexican soap-opera, dubbed into Arabic. *Cassandra* became an instant success and Syria was at a standstill for an hour every afternoon while the serial was running. People with access to satellite television watched instalments ahead of

the Syrian broadcast and their knowledge of the plot was much sought after. When I saw middle-aged traders glued to small television sets watching *Cassandra* in the Aleppo medina, I realized the vastness of the media hype. *Cassandra*, a tragic but ultimately victorious heroine, had become a household word. *Cassandra* products appeared everywhere! Clothes, make-up, foodstuffs, furniture and other kinds of consumer goods were labelled 'Cassandra'. Later, when satellite television spread all over the country, and became affordable not only for the rich, other such Latin American soap-operas followed. But none had the same impact. 'This was the very first glamorous series aired in Syria. The clothes, the decor, and the plot appealed to us as Easterners (*sbarqin*), yet it was clearly foreign', one friend explained. 'We all watched the same programs then, but now people see different shows because we have satellites, and nothing can match the popularity of *Cassandra*.'

Abu Hussein was one of the traders who had cashed in on the phenomenal success associated with the name of the soap-opera. He bought chewing-gum produced in Aleppo, labelled it *Cassandra*, and sold it on the national market. 'When the fever was at a peak we filled three lorries a day and sold every gum we bought', he said. In 1997, when this label was out of fashion in Syria, he was visited by two Syrian traders who were based in Bulgaria. The serial was to be broadcast in the Balkans and they wanted to order *Cassandra* chewing-gum for these markets. They were convinced that the serial would affect consumer-behaviour, and Abu Hussein agreed to manufacture and sell 10,000 thousand gums as a trial run.

The commercial success of *Cassandra*, the money made in Syria from association with that name, and the type of international trade my informants are involved in, illustrate, to my mind, crucial aspects of globalization. The global market is incredibly heterogeneous and divided, with global brand-name products – or their imitations – moved across the globe. At the same time, there are highly specialized markets in 'insignificant' brand-names or products associated with such names. The products in the first category can be produced anywhere in the world, but the profits reaped from their trade mainly fall into the hands of large transnational companies, which, moreover, spend fortunes on marketing all over the world. The products in the second category are commonly produced by smaller companies and sold without much marketing. Furthermore, despite the hype (and often fear) of brand-names, commodity homogenization, and the global reach of transnational companies, the bulk of everyday transnational consumer production, trade and consumption is in prosaic and non-homogenous commodities, which are often moved 'informally' from one 'periphery' of the globe to

another.<sup>12</sup> Many Aleppo producers, and the traders buying their products, have thus found a transnational niche on the margins of the global economy.

Abu Talal, for example, produced patterned woven headscarves for men, through a home worker system. These were sold to an Afghani trader in Saudi Arabia who sold them mainly to Afghanis coming on hajj. Abu Talal also spun Syrian wool and sold it to England where it was used in the rug industry. Earlier he just exported the wool because the Syrian spinning was not good enough, but now with new machines he was able to do the spinning here. Abu Talal also imported fine British wool made into the small hard black bags which Syrians commonly use to scrub themselves in the bath. The Syrian wool is too coarse to be used for fine cloth, but is good for rug-making.

Imported raw materials, foodstuffs and consumer goods are certainly not new to Aleppo. The historical trade links through the city bear witness to this. In near-contemporary times the import of industrial consumer goods was the starting-point for many enterprises in the Aleppo souq. In the 1920s Abu Faris's grandfather, for example, was the agent of the well-known simple Swedish kerosene-operated Primus stove (*babour*). Today, with the lapsed patent and the restructuring of the Swedish company, such stoves are made in China. They are still an essential household item and are found in every rural house and tent all over the Middle East. In the 1950s Abu Faris' grandfather imported the Swedish Husqvarna grinder, which is still cherished by older women as much better for *kibbe*-making than the contemporary electric *moliniks*. Today technological modernity is represented by such imported consumer goods as videos, CD players, home computers and, more recently, by DVDs and cellular telephones. 'Old' industrial exporting countries like Sweden have been replaced by Italy, Singapore and Hong Kong. But there is still a small specialized niche for the sale of expensive Swedish ball-bearings, for example.

In the 1970s when imports were more restricted and costly, traders often resorted to importing second-hand heavy machinery which was then refurbished in Aleppo's mechanical souqs and resold on the national market. This line of business still existed in the late 1990s but it was no longer as flourishing as before, since the quality of engines and heavy machinery, according to Aleppo traders, had fallen. In the 1970s the import of second-hand clothes (*baale*) from Europe was also a profitable trade for some. *Baale* was differentiated, with both up-market clothes of high quality as well as very cheap low-quality clothes. Since the early 1990s the import of second-hand clothes has been forbidden in Syria. Some traders told me that this was to protect the Syrian textile

industry but, typical of Syria, others insisted that the state did not want Syrians to be dressed in clothes that had been discarded by others. ‘It makes us seem like a poor nation’ as someone said. The *baale* trade is not new. I was told that in the 1930s, when used clothes came from the United States, the governor of Aleppo opened the annual sale. In the 1960s and 1970s Aleppo was a large centre for the redistribution of imported second-hand clothes which were even resold to Turkey.<sup>13</sup>

With the decreased importance of second-hand clothes (also due, as traders said, to the falling quality of Western clothes), very cheap imported – and nationally produced – new clothes filled the market. They are often classified as *stook* (stock). Much of this is smuggled into the country. Syrian exported products have also become part of this worldwide trade in cheap clothes. *Stook* is actually used to denote any kind of cheap and often second-rate product, which is sold without a specification of the country of origin, or without the name of the producer. On their journey across the world duct-tape, tools, needles, wrapping paper, and a myriad of other seemingly insignificant products have changed hands many times, providing small profits to many and eventually finding a market in Aleppo.

The global market – a market linking people, commodities and information across the world – is not a contemporary invention. But contemporary understanding of globalization rests on the awareness of the extreme interconnections of markets. We now call international trade ‘global’ by virtue of the speed and intensity of information and commodity exchange, and of the enormous scale of both commodity production and consumption. Most of my souq informants fully endorsed this inter-connectedness, perhaps because they had not been fully subjected to the caprices of global ‘free’ trade. They often blamed the Syrian state, and claimed that Aleppo would be more in the centre of the world, and not on the margins, if only opportunities were more open.

### *Travel for Work, Trade and Business*

Not only goods, but also people, are part of the movement across Syrian borders. In one way or another, most of my informants were, or had been, involved in international trade. The self-image of Aleppo traders (and Syrians in general) is that they can survive and prosper anywhere. Only a handful of my informants had never been outside Syria, and some travelled frequently abroad for trade and business. Many Aleppo traders and industrialists, with no labour constraints in their offices or shops, visited trade fairs in Western Europe, or in other parts of the world, at least once a year. In Aleppo there were private offices helping traders to

arrange such trips, including securing the necessary visas. Once, when many of my informants were getting ready to visit a huge textile fair in Paris, Abu Malek joked: 'There are 2,000 Aleppians going to Paris, and if any of those airplanes carrying us has an accident, trade and industry in Syria will come to a standstill.'

Jibran, with his profitable trade in machinery and clothes, frequently travelled abroad. He visited Lebanon almost weekly and often took expensive holidays all over the world. Jibran said that he liked to go outside Syria to relax and enjoy himself, but he also used his vacations to scout for new products and think up new business schemes. Abu Ibrahim often talked about his love of travel and how he once spent three months in Algeria on a combined holiday and trading trip. Nowadays, with responsibility for a shop and a small workshop producing women's clothes, his trips were planned for family pleasure only.

Many souq traders and small-scale industrialists, like Abu Hassoun, have export markets they depend on and travel to. He has a small factory, set up by his grandfather, producing headscarves for men. Abu Hassoun also has a wholesale shop in the medina where he packages his products and meets customers and friends. Every year during the hajj season he travelled to Mecca where he rented space in the shop of a local trader. There he sold his scarves to pilgrims from Indonesia, Iran, Afghanistan, Yemen and the Central Asian republics. Abu Hassoun also exported directly from Syria.

Some travel only so long as they need to establish good contacts. Abu Yassir decided that he wanted to have direct control over his imports of china and other household utensils. He travelled to China and attended various fairs and tried to establish his own contacts. Initially it was very difficult and he was cheated a great deal. 'One needs a lot of capital to import directly, because all traders lose initially,' he told me. But gradually he developed contacts that he could trust, and no longer needed to travel so much.

During my fieldwork Aleppo traders began to travel to Iraq. In 1997 the Syrian government opened its border with Iraq in violation of the international sanctions against the Iraqi regime. Many Syrian traders were keen to go, not least because they were deeply sympathetic to the plight of the Iraqi people.<sup>14</sup> Abu Ali went in the summer of 1997 and later told me that he had been shocked by the poverty and misery in Baghdad. From a trading point of view, the trip was not successful and he had no immediate plans to set up trade with Iraq. Instead, he, and some of his partners arranged to collect and send over some basic consumer items and clothes as gifts. In 1998 Iraqi taxis were allowed into Syria. In



Aleppo the drivers parked in the city centre, and displayed their limited goods for sale. Aleppians always crowded around these taxis. Trade with Iraq continued, but on a small scale. I never heard that anyone made a profit from such trips. On the contrary. Abu Salman lost a huge amount of money when trying to sell refrigerated food which was spoiled. In 2002 traders told me that the Iraqi trade was dead, except for those traders with connections with the state, because the state had acquired a monopoly on all trade with Iraq, and 'ordinary' traders had been squeezed out.

Traders with relatives or friends abroad commonly tried to use their expertise to set up trading links. Such residents often acted as go-betweens and mediators. Aleppo trading families continue to establish 'branches' in other countries where members are sent to take care of trade and business. There are, for example, large well-known Aleppo families who are established in West Africa. Abu Malek's family established a factory in Egypt in the mid-1970s, where he lived for a while to supervise the factory. Abu Mahmoud owns a factory in Morocco. Many of the rich trading and industrial families who established themselves in Lebanon during the period of nationalization in the early 1960s are now, with the economic liberalization, re-establishing themselves in Aleppo.

### *Russian' Trade*

In the early 1990s when Syrian exports to the countries of the former socialist countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia increased dramatically, many producers and traders in Aleppo became involved in this. Many traders had developed trading relations in locations where they, or relatives or friends, had studied, due to government links between Syria and various (then) socialist regimes. A considerable number of male Aleppians used to finance their holiday trips to Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s by taking along Syrian products. Abu Muhammad, trading in men's clothes, visited the Soviet Union in 1986, spending one week in Jerevan in Armenia and then continuing on to Leningrad and Moscow. He said he had brought along 20,000 lira for his trip and lived it up. About a decade later he spent forty days in Poland – a trip which was more seriously trade-oriented as he had been invited (by some Syrian friends) to participate in a trade fair. He took along samples and was very successful and for a few years he sold men's clothes to Poland on a regular basis. Abu Muhammad claimed that he was among the first traders in Aleppo to export to Poland, but he said that he had stopped this trade because too many others followed suit.

Abu Imad, like so many other Aleppians, went on a trip to Russia in 1992 and took along commodities; he managed to sell them all, but it was not as easy as he had imagined, he admitted, and he never made another trading trip. Abu Munir travelled extensively to Romania where he had lived for a while twenty years before. He imported walnuts and sold his own and other Aleppo products, and supervised their transport to Rumania. Abu Ali invested in a factory in Romania through a partnership with an old Aleppo friend who lived in Romania. Abu Ali said that the business infrastructure in Romania was worse than in Syria, but he regarded this investment as being on a long-term basis. His Aleppo partner, Abu Hussein, had lived in Romania with his family for almost a year after the fall of the Ceausescu regime, and started an import-export business, but he returned home when his wife became ill. The family then turned to Russia and opened an import business in Moscow which was later left in the hands of the eldest son.

Trade with the former socialist countries was fraught with ambivalence. Many traders and would-be traders were initially lured by the possibilities of making money in these new markets, either by travelling or by exporting via others. Most, of course, were not very successful. Many Aleppians stressed the lack of security in the former socialist countries as a reason for their failure. Abu Muhammad compared Syria and Russia: 'It is not like here, where people can walk around with a lot of money. And there is no business security either, with the mafia, and the authorities behaving like the mafia.' Abu Hassan, on the other hand, claimed that many Aleppians were successful in the former socialist countries because they had learned every dirty trick at home.

Not only trade attracted Aleppians. Many went simply in order to have, as some put it, 'a good time', by which they meant drinking and having sex. One of Abu Nader's brothers went to Russia in 1992 and stayed for six months, and came back boasting, according to Abu Nader, about his sexual exploits. He went on telling me that his brother had earned a lot of money in Russia, but then he lost everything, and finally came home with nothing. The son of a friend of Abu Sleiman, discussed in Chapter 4, who had disgraced his father by losing all his money in Russia, is another case in point. According to Abu Sleiman, the son had met a Russian woman in Aleppo and gone with her to Russia, after borrowing money for trading from his father. He was, allegedly, attacked by men in her apartment and everything he owned was stolen. Abu Sleiman, however, expressed his doubts about this story, and said that the son was good for nothing.

My informants who had visited, or who still had trade links with the

former socialist countries seldom told me directly about their own exploits. But all over the souq stories were spread of the sexual availability of women in the former socialist countries in general, and in Russia in particular, and this affected local perceptions of Russian women (*rosiaat*). Abdel Rafiq, the son of Abu Hussein, told me, however, that Aleppians had a totally wrong perception of *rosiaat*. He claimed that men spread these rumours after returning from Russia or Romania because others in the souq expect them to. 'I think women in Russia are much more honourable than women here in Aleppo. The older men of my father's generation don't know what goes on under their noses right here. I lived in Moscow for three years and I loved it. There even the police respected the citizens. Not like here.'

From the end of the 1980s until the mid-1990s, *rosiaat* were very common in the Aleppo souq. Signs in Russian in many parts of the souq bore witness to their importance. These female traders came to buy large quantities of textiles and cheap clothes, much of which was produced locally solely for the 'Russian' market. The products were then transported by air to various parts of the former Soviet Union, where the female traders and their home-based partners resold them on the local market. As discussed earlier, this brisk trade greatly benefited Aleppo traders and industrialists. Abu Khaled, for example, started trading as a student in the Soviet Union, and later developed strong links with Russia and some Central Asian republics. In the late 1980s and early 1990s he geared much of his medina trade to the *rosiaat*. But the presence of these women also became contentious. In the wake of the 'real' traders, 'artists' (*aratiist* i.e. prostitutes) arrived in Aleppo, filling the local cabarets and the cheap hotels in the city centre. Some of my informants told me that it was Aleppian middlemen who seized the opportunities for this profitable trade when poverty hit the new republics. Others implied that the '*rosiaat*' were a corrupting influence on Aleppo men. In the souq, the image of the *rosiaat* represented the very antithesis of their cherished image of their own virtuous womenfolk. Hence, Aleppo men married to women born in Russia constantly stressed their wives' non-involvement in trade. Today all female traders from Russia and the Central Asian republics need a Syrian sponsor and protector (*kafiiil*) who is responsible for their conduct.<sup>15</sup>

Many in the souq today complain that the *rosiaat* traders have all but disappeared. What used to be a very important trade stream has now been reduced to a trickle. Abu Ammar said that the traders had turned to Istanbul and Abu Dhabi instead, because they had been so badly treated in Aleppo.<sup>16</sup> Abu Ziad countered that it was the poor quality rather than the bad treatment which had driven away most female traders. Abu

Samer claimed it was the fault of the state: 'Traders have an interest to keep trade going and to be nice and set a fair price. But the government employees are corrupt and make it too difficult for the *rosiaat*.' Traders like Abu Khaled no longer depended on the 'Russian trade' and many developed alternative markets. Some produced and exported cheap clothes to the oil-producing countries on the Arabian Peninsula, where migrant workers or itinerant traders bought their products. Others were busily looking for new markets or new opportunities. Abdel Rafiq, who had closed down the family business in Moscow and returned to Aleppo, dreamt of the United States: 'I have a friend in North Carolina and he wants me as a partner in a bakery for Arabic bread. But it is very difficult to get a visa for the USA.'

### *Migration*

Syria may be judged to have a marginal position in the world economy, but Syrians are found all over the world. The relative lack of free movement has not prevented Syrians from leaving the country. Today there is no single Syrian family which is not directly or indirectly touched by the experience of cross-border short-term or long-term migration. My souq informants, like all other Syrians, were almost globally connected through travel, residence and labour. Abu Malek has relatives who have lived in Casablanca for twenty years, and he has invested in their factory. Abu Mahmoud grew up in Baghdad where his father had established a business in Aleppian sweets; he only returned to Syria as a young man and he still has family in Iraq. Abu Ali has relatives all over Europe and in Latin America. Abu Khaled has one brother in Germany and another in England; both were educated abroad and have never returned. Abu Munir has close relatives in Germany and the USA. Abu Adel's father was born in Turkey and they have many relatives on the other side of the border. Abu Subhi has a brother in Germany, to whom he exports textiles from the family firm in Aleppo. Among the important Armenian community many were born in present-day Turkey, and many have migrated to Lebanon, to the USA and to Australia, while maintaining contact with their relatives in Aleppo.

In a city as old as Aleppo, and among people who cultivate ancestral memories and kinship links, it is not surprising that my informants are aware of, and acknowledge, their transnational links. Migration in the Middle East is as old as humankind. It has, of course, taken on new meanings and significance since the advent of modern national borders and travel documents. Most of my souq-informants experienced no difficulties in travelling for business.<sup>17</sup> They could leave Syria legally and

the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce vouched for them when applying for visas. With the Schengen agreement in the European Union, one visa is sufficient to visit a number of countries. When they travel, traders are typically welcomed by friends and relatives in other countries. In cases of longer stays abroad the migration set-up has usually been within a context of family business. My informants were often sent off, or chose to go off, with money from their fathers, uncles, or other relatives, to sprout new branches, or to cultivate new lines of business. In such cases they always had the security of the family business back home. Some of my informants who had studied abroad with few or no specific plans in mind, were able to return and immediately work with their fathers. Others, who had studied abroad, were asked to come home by their family. It was difficult to refuse such a request, as was discussed in Chapter 4.

With rare exceptions, I never met my souq informants outside Syria, and in Aleppo I only met those migrating traders who were returnees, or who travelled back and forth. The stories and motivations of traders who have settled permanently abroad are very probably different. My 'travelling' souq informants, from what I could see, had chosen Aleppo, or a kind of Aleppo away from Aleppo, as the arena of greatest significance for them. On the other hand, they all had relatives who had settled, seemingly permanently, somewhere abroad. These more permanent migrants may, as noted above, be important links with traders in Aleppo. Much of the import of second-hand machinery from Sweden, for example, is by way of Aleppians residing in Sweden.

About fifteen years ago, when HIV and AIDS became household words, even in Syria, a joke was commonly heard: 'AIDS is not a problem in Syria. Nobody wants to come here from abroad, Syrians can't leave, and those who manage to, never come back.' The point of the joke was not that this dangerous illness was spread from foreign lands, but that Syrians felt stifled, isolated, and unable to leave the country. But even in the mid-1980s there was migration from Syria. It was said that over a hundred thousand Syrians had left the country illegally in the years of the 'events', but many more were legal migrants and did, and still do, come back. Many sent, and continue to send, money to their families, contributing to the national economy. Syrians have moved, and continue to move, wherever there are opportunities for work.<sup>18</sup>

Discussion about trips abroad for business and pleasure on the part of trading informants invariably led to putting Syria and Aleppo in a comparative light, where the pros and cons of living abroad were weighed and measured. 'I could settle anywhere in the world' Basel told me. 'I have enough money to be independent. But I come back to

Aleppo because human and social relations are better here.' 'You can make money anywhere in the world' Abu Faris told me, 'but this is where we belong. I like travelling and I go as much as I need for my business, but this is where I have my family. If I am gone too long I miss everything in Aleppo, even the traffic.'

Often the comparisons between Aleppo and abroad centred on law and order. Traders perceived and admired the rule of law and the order of Western Europe and South-East Asia. But Abu Ismail complained that many companies in Western Europe were insensitive to the complexities of Syria, where the company exporting a product was perhaps not the owner of the merchandise since many traders lacked export licences of their own.<sup>19</sup> The former socialist countries, on the other hand, and especially Russia, as noted above, were often singled out as countries lacking in both law and order. Traders commonly admit they participate in less than legal activities, but they mainly blame their own laws and lack of order for this state of affairs. The complaints about fees and taxes were linked to the perceived inefficiency of the public sector, but also to its widespread corruption.

### **Local Connections**

Aleppo traders, as I have mentioned frequently, complain excessively about the malfunctioning of the public sector. Such complaints are legion all over Syria, and were, as noted in Chapter 5, much more open and public in the 1990s than in previous decades. No topic – apart from marriage, family life and religion – was brought up as much by my informants in the souq as that of the perceived malfunction of the public sector. They viewed it as inefficient and ill-suited to their requirements. Complaints were commonly heard about the mismanagement of public enterprises. There were frequent comments in the souq, and outside, that when Syrian private companies were nationalized in the early 1960s, the state brought in managers with no experience, leading to various kinds of malpractices. Frequent visits by street-level bureaucrats commonly sparked off complaints. The cleaning tax was one of the most irksome for traders; whenever the subject came up, traders expressed great frustration. My informants complained about the cost of electricity and telephone. Taxes and death duties were routinely said to be 'too high', and were evaded as long as possible.

Traders were faced with a great deal of uncertainty in their dealings with representatives of the public sector. Rules and regulations were, they claimed, deliberately unclear, applied in a haphazard way, or subject to change. Most citizens were faced daily with great inconveniences

when confronted with the public sector. One way to hedge the risks in such encounters is to use mediation (*wasta*).

### *Mediation*

*Wasta* is a complex phenomenon involving actors in both hierarchical and horizontal relationships.<sup>20</sup> *Wasta* is based on trust, friendship or patronage. It may involve exchange of money, but it is never understood, or talked about, as an economic relationship between giver and taker. Any person may become a *wasiit* – a mediator or a middleman – if he or she has resources deemed necessary by others. People often act as mediators in one context and need mediation in another. A customer may, for example, bring *wasta* in order to ensure a fair price, a prospective groom may use a mediator (*wasiit*) to approach the family of his intended bride, or a worker seeking a job may bring *wasta* to secure employment with a trader. *Wasta* may have long- or short-term implications. It may bind the mediator to the supplicant, or it may be the expression of a prior link. To be regarded as a good mediator is a way of building up your *ism* – your name and reputation in the souq. Abu Faris, for example, acted daily as a *wasiit* for many of his visitors, many of whom also provided *wasta* for him. Most of my informants had a group of friends who passed mediation to each other. *Wasta* in the souq, and outside, is part of the ‘collection of others’ deemed necessary not only for trade but also for everyday life in Syria.

But mediation in the Aleppo souq is not enacted between traders only. On the contrary. Most instances in the souq (and outside) where *wasta* is deemed necessary involve the public sector. In this perspective *wasta* can be understood as a resource which expands as the need – or perceived need – for mediation expands. In Syria, the expansion of the public sector, and the increased needs on the part of citizens to deal with that sector, have increased both the need for *wasta* and the opportunities for *wasiit*-acting.<sup>21</sup> In Syria a great many of the contacts between the bureaucracy and citizens at large involve *wasta*. Partly this is because such contacts are still based on face-to-face interaction between public employees and citizens in general. Some people feel intimidated by bureaucrats and ask a friend, an acquaintance, or a patron to intercede on their behalf. Many argue that the name or presence of such a *wasiit*, who will be known to the bureaucrat, will smooth the way and hasten the often slow workings of the Syrian bureaucracy. For others *wasta* means that they themselves do not have to attend to an errand, but their *wasiit* will do it for them. Such a *wasiit* could be considered as a friend of the supplicant, or indebted to the supplicant for some earlier service. Most

*wasta* in the public sector is of a petty kind, mainly to enable citizens to 'get things done', but also, at times, to circumvent rules or regulations.

My informants were publicly exposed in the souq and, as has been pointed out, were in daily contact with representatives of the public sector. There were rules and regulations pertaining to their daily activities which gave rise to visits by public employees, and they needed papers for various kinds of transactions. The kind of *wasta* they needed certainly depended on the issue at hand. While traders strove towards and cherished their independence, they often expressed the opinion that they were at the mercy of public employees who were satisfied by nothing less than a tangible gift. Visits by public employees also often resulted in a gift from the trader to the employee. Since traders routinely broke any number of laws, there were ample opportunities for employees to be appeased by gifts. Abu Sabri once gave a set of glasses to an employee he appeared to be very friendly with, but later told me that this was a cheap form of insurance. 'Those glasses cost me fifty pound, but will hopefully be worth much more if it keeps the employee off my back.' Furthermore, Abu Sabri's action illustrates a shift from petty *wasta* to petty bribes (*rashwa*), a shift which has been very noticeable in Syria in the last two decades. Concomitantly many citizens no longer seek the *wasta* of ordinary low-paid public employees, but have instead been obliged to, or condescended to, pay bribes.

### *Bribes*

Traders and non-traders alike constantly complained about the corruption in the country and the prevalence of bribes.<sup>22</sup> I heard an endless number of stories, and witnessed many incidents, where money changed hands between a citizen and a public employee. Abu Marwan told me that 'everything' in Syria is infused with bribes because 'everybody' wants their cut.<sup>23</sup> He stated that every month he paid money to the driver of the school-bus and the janitor in the school so that his children would be looked after. But when he was away and was unable to pay, they were bullied and harassed. Abu Samer, a public employee who was present, retorted that it was the fault of well-off traders that bribes were spreading everywhere in Syria: 'You have spoiled the employees, and you are constantly out-paying each other.' Abu Marwan replied that he would prefer to pay precise fees and taxes if he could be sure that the law was being applied equally. He then told us that he, and all the shop-owners close to him, each paid 500 lira a day in bribes to city employees, in order to keep their bread-stalls situated on the pavement. Earlier he had paid 5,000 for three months' legal permission, but this permission was withdrawn because, according to Abu Marwan, some public



employees had found a way to make money for themselves. He now paid 45,000 lira in bribes instead of 5,000 for a fee. The city lost taxes and the only winners, according to Abu Marwan, were the corrupt employees. Abu Samer retorted that big traders should fight such practices rather than submitting to them.

The ubiquity of graft and bribes never stopped people from complaining, or from expressing anger or shame. Daily petty-corruption was generally attributed to the low salaries of Syrian public employees. According to the traders, it had become virtually impossible, even for comparatively well-paid employees, to live on their salaries. After Bashar al-Asad's succession, traders and non-traders alike hoped, in vain, for a substantial increase in the salaries of public employees. 'This country will remain corrupt as long as salaries are so low', many informants reiterated again and again.<sup>24</sup>

The danger of low salaries was often discussed through stories and parables involving judges. Someone also told me that Syrian judges are not supposed to eat out at night, except in the company of their families, in order not to be tempted by the offer of bribes, but that judges broke this law. No matter the patent absurdity of such a decree for judges, I find the ideas conveyed very interesting. First of all, they communicate an expectation of corruption and willingness to be corrupted, and secondly they convey the fact that this is a common occurrence.

### *Corruption*

During my fieldwork many city dwellers told me that corruption (*fasaad*) was more widespread in Aleppo than in any other Syrian city.<sup>25</sup> It is, of course, impossible to corroborate or refute such an allegation, but the statement can be seen as an indication of the openness and lack of finesse in how bribes were taken and given. Non-traders attributed widespread corruption to the prevalence of trade and industry, with a large number of people who could afford to pay bribes to get things done. Some complained that even clean employees who moved to Aleppo became used to taking bribes. And many traders discussed quite openly the 'price' of various employees. One judge, for example, was pointed out as being notoriously corrupt, and as having built a private palace from the proceeds of his bribes.

Many traders were involved in various law-suits or in legal procedures, and they often expressed fear of not receiving fair treatment. In the souq everybody claimed to know which lawyers and which judges conspired together, and at what price a favourable outcome could be bought. 'But', as Abu Yousif told me, after a visit to his lawyer, 'there are judges and

judges. They all take money from you, but some don't let this interfere with their sense of justice, while others take money and pass a wrong sentence.' At the time I was at a loss to understand this statement, but later it became clear.

During a discussion about bribes and corruption, I asked Abu Abdou if it was religiously permissible to pay a bribe. He told me that it was permissible to pay *rashwa* if you were able thereby to obtain what is rightfully yours. Hence, if your right to get a passport, for example, was obstructed, it was permissible to pay a bribe. Abu Abdou also claimed that if someone wronged him in his trading practice and he had to go to court to seek his rights, then it would be religiously permissible to pay the judge in order to get his money back. Abu Sabri asserted that it was always better not to pay *rashwa*, but that it was permissible when seeking one's just rights. Abu Abdou continued: 'It is furthermore permissible to give gifts to poor employees. But these should be gifts and not a bribe in expectation for a service. They should be freely given.'<sup>26</sup>

All my trading and non-trading informants expressed the view that the prevalence of *rashwa* led to widespread corruption (*fasaad*) in Syria.<sup>27</sup> In principle, bribes were abhorred by people working in both the private and the public sector, but were excused when given, or taken, by themselves or others close to them. From the point of view of the traders, they had certain rights and could use means – considered illegal by Syrian law – to achieve those rights, since the employees of the state did not, free of charge, give them their rights. *Rashwa* in Aleppo is always a matter of hard cash, while *fasaad* is perceived as a structural disease prevailing in the public sector, with repercussions in the private sector. My informants defended their own practices of *rashwa* as a necessary evil to get their job done or their rights attended to, and did not implicate themselves in the *fasaad* of the country. The process whereby bribery has become more and more common in Aleppo, or at least perceived as more and more common, is obviously very complex. It is partly related to the relationship between the private and the public sectors; between traders and public employees, and between citizens at large and the public sector. Citizens are today tied to the public bureaucracy in many different ways. The need for voting cards, identity cards, passports and a myriad of permissions to travel, to build, to marry, and to be employed increase the intensity of contacts between citizens and the bureaucracy. The 'opportunity structure' for petty bribes has grown because the Syrian bureaucracy is still approached through face-to-face interaction. Citizens cannot call by telephone or write in for papers or permits or to pay their taxes or fees; they have to appear in person, or enlist the help of a *wasii*, as discussed above. The increasing poverty of public employees, and

their often poor working conditions, clearly increased the sense of discontent among them, and many, from what I heard, legitimated their bribe-taking in this way. The relative prosperity of many citizens in the private sector who are willing to ‘get things done’ has furthermore increased the opportunities for bribes.

Although most of my informants expressed a great deal of antagonism towards the public sector as well as towards many public employees, they were also, as noted above, worried about the fate of public employees. Many traders employed part-time workers who were public employees and many of my informants had relatives and friends in the public sector, or had been public employees themselves.<sup>28</sup> But my informants also stressed that not all public employees took bribes. ‘Clean’ employees were pointed out, but by doing this the very *rashma*-ization of Syria simultaneously appeared.

#### *Linking Mediation and Bribes to Corruption*

When Syrians speak about *rashma* (or *wasta*) they do not differentiate between the various kinds. But I find it useful to differentiate analytically between petty *rashma*, intermediate *rashma*, and grand *rashma*. The first I see as involving, on a daily basis, the payments citizens give to public servants for the latter to do routine jobs, like stamping a passport or signing a birth certificate. The second involves larger payments, or material goods, in exchange for non-routine bureaucratic procedures, like getting building permission or an export licence. The third is a non-routine occurrence involving very large sums of money, or material goods, exchanged between well-placed public servants, or between such servants and traders or industrialists in the private sector, or between actors in the private sector.

Grand *rashma* of some kind probably exists everywhere. It can occur, and frequently does, without systematic petty (or intermediate) bribery. But it is hard to imagine the non-existence of grand bribery in a country with systematic and routine petty bribery. There may be the rule of law despite grand bribery, and the rights of citizens are not necessarily obstructed by the existence of high-stake bribery, cartel formations, or insider dealings.<sup>29</sup> But in any state with a developed bureaucracy – such as that in Syria – it is impossible to uphold the rule of law, and not to violate the rights of citizens with systematic petty bribery.

Petty bribery ‘does’ a number of things. First of all it involves two parties (or more), tying them simultaneously in complicity and antagonism. The parties are brought together by a gain for both, but are also divided by a sense of loss of dignity and respect for the other, and

for oneself. Despite the prevalence of petty bribery in Aleppo, people giving bribes constantly harped on the indignity of them and said they were 'bad' or 'wrong'.

Secondly, systematic petty *rashwa* erodes bureaucratic and legal procedures. Syrian law, including rules and regulations in most sectors of life, is prolific, dense and subject to quick changes. The public bureaucracy uses *rashwa* as a way to 'inform' citizens of these rules and regulations. Furthermore, it is not the case that *rashwa* is given by citizens who are only trying to obtain their rights, or taken to secure those rights. Petty *rashwa* in Aleppo far exceeds the 'religiously permissible' discussed by Abu Abdou above. Petty bribery is used to bend the (admittedly often unclear) bureaucratic rules and Syrian law. Givers and takers are thus accomplices in undermining both the execution of and faith in bureaucratic and legal procedures. The very prevalence of routine giving and taking of money, where the line between 'permissible' and 'impermissible' is unclear and perhaps intentionally blurred, paves the way for, and contributes to, a '*rashwa*-ization' of society and a sense of *fasaad*.

In Aleppo (and Syria generally) there is a dynamism between petty, intermediate and grand bribery, with the occurrence of one kind feeding into the others. What I characterize as intermediate *rashwa*, where money or material goods are exchanged for non-routine services in the public sector, has increased dramatically. Until the late 1980s such services were mainly executed within the framework of *wasta*. They bound giver and taker, the sought after and the seeker – or cliques on both sides – into relationships of seeming mutuality. They were also the outcome of such relationships. Very often the *wasit* was a member of the ruling party or employed in one of the security agencies. Since the early 1990s prospective mediation has turned much more into an economic market where services have a price. Abu Samer, quoted above, insisted that traders have been, and are, instrumental in both spreading and intensifying bribery. Many informants agreed, but had perfectly good excuses for paying bribes and needing mediation. 'Free gifts' or petty bribes, and even intermediate *rashwa*, may easily be calculated as costs of their trade.

Some traders paid a considerable amount of money to officers in the army, so that their sons could serve the more than two-year mandatory military service in their father's shop or office. An informant justified this practice on economic grounds, insisting that if his son was away for such a long time his business would be severely hampered. 'Paying is better than losing trade, and by being away my son loses his trading ability.'<sup>30</sup> When his elder son had been drafted this trader told me that he

hoped his son would learn some sense and become responsible. But when he came home on his first leave, thin and sickly, his father changed his mind. He supplied his son with money for food and later on for lodgings, and later still he paid to have his son undertake light duties, only, in an officers' club. The trader calculated that before his eldest son had finished his military service he would have paid more than 300,000 lira for his upkeep and as bribes to his officers. 'I could just as well have paid to have him stay in the shop to begin with. Now I have lost money both ways.'

Twenty years ago petty, intermediate, and grand corruption certainly existed in Syria, but they were more rare. Then, I would argue, mediation – petty, intermediate and grand – through cliques and patrons was much more common than *rashwa*. Today petty mediation has all but disappeared from the public sector and been supplanted by bribes. Both *wasta* and *rashwa* are two-way processes. *Wasta* can hence be seen as a historical conduit for bribes.<sup>31</sup> It is a discourse in which 'help' has today taken on a monetary value. Networking *wasta* is still used for, and by, people with political connections, but 'ordinary' citizens often have to pay dearly for non-routine services, like building permission or an export licence.<sup>32</sup> Very often seekers of such services even need the help of mediators to make such payments.

In the *rashwa*-ization there is both an increasing supply side and an increasing demand side, and much is still often conducted within an idiom of *wasta*. Twenty years ago grand *rashwa*, involving very large sums of money or material goods, was quite prevalent in Syria, and based on a conduit between a clique of public employees with political power and actors in the private sector. Today, however, according to my informants, many more people are involved. Persons from the public and the private sectors involved in grand *rashwa* are always well-known public figures, and as the *rashwa*-ization of Syria increases, they are sought after as important mediators by people from all walks of life. Many of the public 'nobodies' discussed in earlier chapters are involved in grand *rashwa*. The supply side of grand bribery has, I contend, increased with the greater involvement of traders in elections and public offices, and the demand for grand *rashwa* has also increased with the apparently good supply.

The increased economic importance of traders and industrialists, it can be argued, has thus contributed to the *rashwa*-ization of Aleppo, because they have the means to pay bribes.<sup>33</sup> The aspirations of traders and industrialists – for independence and settlement – are furthermore the aspirations also of many in the public sector. Taking bribes is the starting point for many employees to set themselves up in business.

Umm Yousif, the wife of one of my informants, expressed great frustration, like everybody else. 'It is shameful. Today a common policeman earns more than a trader. The market is so slow that traders are forced to eat their capital and if the traders eat their capital, they cannot work. And if they cannot work they can provide no wealth for the country. This will affect everybody in a negative way. Traders are the basis of the economy.'

Although my informants did not implicate themselves in the spread of corruption, they commonly expressed shame and anguish over the general *fasaad* of Syria. Sometimes this led to pinpointing others, further away, as responsible. Some informants often claimed, as already mentioned, that Damascene traders had intimate and close contacts with politicians and those in power. They insisted that Aleppo traders had to pay bribes because they were disadvantaged compared with Damascene traders. In such reasoning the clever and hard-working Aleppians were deliberately kept on short rein by private and public actors in the capital. Others stated that nowadays the name of a trader did not matter any more, but only money.

### **Ups and Downs of the Market**

In 1998 I visited a government office with Abu Hussein and was intrigued by a middle-aged male visitor whose appearance broke all Aleppo codes of good taste. He wore a great many gold rings and a thick gold necklace; he had long greasy hair and his tight-fitting shirt was opened to reveal a great deal of soft flesh. Abu Hussein greeted him and, once we were out of the office, told me that this was the baker everybody in the souq was talking about. A decade or so earlier this baker had migrated to Greece to work as a labourer. He had not been particularly successful and had decided to return to Syria, but just before leaving he had won a fortune in a Greek lottery and was able to return in triumph. Abu Hussein and his friends had intermittently discussed, not so much the enormous luck of this baker, but his problems in putting his fortune to good use. In these discussions the baker was portrayed as a kind-hearted but essentially stupid man, who let himself be exploited and conned by almost everybody in the city. He helped many relatives by setting them up in various businesses, but they all failed and came asking for more. 'Nobodies' in Aleppo solicited him and invested his money in schemes that never made him any profit. When discussing this case, Abu Hussein and his friends had various solutions to the baker's problems. Not a few insisted that if only they had been allowed to invest such a fortune it would not have dwindled. Abu Hussein instead insisted that in

the long run the only way for the baker to keep his money would be to invest it in a modern bakery. ‘The bakery business is something he knows. Now he dabbles in everything and learns nothing.’

Before I actually saw the baker myself I thought of him as a mythical figure, a sort of legend in the souq used to illustrate the difference between ‘real’ traders and people with a lot of money. But once I saw that he did exist, the story of the baker also came to illustrate the difference between a rich and generous man who was fooled by ‘everybody’, and the few infamous Aleppo investors who, a few years earlier, had fooled everybody in the city.

The export boom of the early 1990s affected the city as a whole, with increased investments in real estate, in shops, in trade and in industry. In this period private investors started to act as ‘banks’. They took savings from non-traders but also invested on behalf of other traders. Their rate of return was spectacular, and more and more Aleppians (and people from other parts of Syria) became involved in such schemes, lured by the initial large profits. These activities were illegal, but few bothered because they were earning so much money. In 1995 the bubble burst, and the state moved in to confiscate whatever assets were still in Syria. But rumour had it that billions of lira disappeared out of the country. The big investors fled and only the small fish were sentenced for economic crimes and imprisoned. The most infamous of these investors were called Kallase and Amino, and their names are now household words in Aleppo.

Few traders, and in particular few among the *abl as-souq*, admitted that they had invested with Kallase or with similar ‘bankers’. Not one of my informants admitted to losing money.<sup>34</sup> Abu Khaled said that he was suspicious, because he knew from Russia that such bubbles would burst. But Abu Adnan actually admitted that he had given money to Kallase. He said that he knew it was *haraam* to invest and make money from such speculation, but he could not resist the temptation and he invested half a million lira and got 15,000 back for two months. ‘It was wonderful! To get so much money without working and without getting tired.’ But then he got nervous and he claimed he had withdrawn his capital just before the crash.

All my informants agreed that, when these speculative bubbles burst, the real losers were people who could not afford to lose any money at all. Many mortgaged their houses, liquidated other assets and even borrowed money to invest with Kallase and others. ‘Real’ traders and rich people also lost money, but these losses – although on a huge scale – did not, in most cases, lead to total poverty. Traders still had their shops and their stock. Some of my informants also hinted that rotten eggs were taken

out of circulation when the bubble burst, and that the souq was happy to see some people disappear.

Bankruptcies take place in the souq even without financial bubbles. Abu Anwar's neighbour who lost his shop and Abu Jamil's brother who began to 'make himself big' were discussed in Chapter 3, like Abu Saleh, who never made the transition from shopkeeper to trader, but instead lost everything. During my various periods of fieldwork a few of the traders I got to know went bankrupt. In the souq these cases were explained in various ways. In one case the trader was 'really an employee'. He had borrowed money from ordinary people and not repaid it; this was proof that he was not 'a true trader'. In another case the trader's more rural family background was invoked as a cause. But it was also said that the trader failed because he overextended himself while no longer relying on his family. The business had been jointly owned by a group of brothers who had much joint property, but this trader had wanted to be the sole owner of this particular enterprise. In the end, after his bankruptcy, his brothers bought the enterprise back and let him work off his debt to them. In the third case the lack of interest in a joint family enterprise was interpreted as the cause of failure, together with the faltering market for their product. Brothers and cousins with shares in the business were too involved in other, individually run, enterprises to operate the joint one properly.

The speculation bubble was something out of the ordinary, where many in the market were made to look like fools and where the name of the market as a whole was blackened. The case of the fabulously rich baker was also out of the ordinary. The speculators and the baker, by being extremely atypical, thus illuminate the essence of 'real' traders. Real traders, first of all, survive in the market; those who do not can simply be re-classified as 'not real traders'. Real traders may take risks but they are also cautious, and – perhaps most important – real traders do more than simply make money. At the same time, the case of the baker, the speculation bubble, and the cases of the failed businesses, underline the fragility of trade.

During my fieldwork most of my informants, as I have already stressed, complained about the 'frozen' economy. Such complaints, as I have discussed, can be seen as a way of voicing criticism of their present situation. But when traders talked about the souq in a more long-term perspective their analyses of the 'frozen economy' became much more complex.

The boom years of the early 1990s caused prices in shops and property to rise to spectacular levels. When the financial bubble of Kallase and Amino burst, prices fell and continued falling, but not down



to pre-boom levels. Abu Marwan, who had a large grocery store expressed anxiety over the prices of property because new traders could hardly establish themselves with such prices. Prices were not falling, he said, because nobody sold at a loss unless they absolutely had to. He continued: 'Here people are the richest and the poorest, at the same time. They own a lot, which they value highly, and put a high price on. But when the market is frozen, they are poor because they cannot make their assets work for them.'

I got so used to the many complaints from most of my informants that I was very surprised when George said that his business was doing well. 'We have become a people who complain', he said. 'During the exceptionally good years people started to think that this is normal. But the situation now is really more normal.' And during a discussion about the frozen economy, Abu Malek reminded his friends that trade always goes up and down. 'This is natural. The economy has cycles and trade is affected by this.'

In 2000 Abu Sleiman said that in all his long life he had never seen such an economic slump. A little later in the conversation he recounted the trading history of his family. His father, who was born around 1880, had had a workshop for dyeing fabric in the medina. Neither he nor his brothers took over the workshop, because the craft was not lucrative enough and it was very tiring work. The father also had a shop selling hand-woven fabrics. During the Second World War many of those trading in fabrics became speculators; prices rose enormously and huge profits could be made. After the battle of Stalingrad, when German losses began, prices fell in Aleppo, according to Abu Sleiman, and many traders in textiles lost a lot of money. 'Some died, others became dirt poor. It was not easy for people who had lived as kings to be reduced to begging.' Abu Sleiman's father and his sons survived but had to sell the shop in the medina. When the father died soon after the war, the brothers split up and each established a house and a trade on his own. Abu Sleiman established himself as a trader in fabrics in the busy Bab an-Nasser souq. This shop was later expropriated when the new streets were planned in Aleppo in the early 1960s. He did not receive much compensation, he claimed, but he was able to open his present shop.

Any given trader in Aleppo in any given part of the city had specific views on the history of economic booms and busts. Some very old men retold stories they grew up with, of how the French Mandate after the First World War affected trade in the city. Others talked of the loss of Iskanderoun – now part of Turkey – and how this dramatically changed the economic position of Aleppo. Others talked about the early days of independence and the briskness of trade and industry in the 1950s. For

others still, the 1970s was a period of expansion and prosperity. Most of my informants talked about the 'frozen' situation in the late 1990s in comparison with how Aleppo prospered in the early years of the decade through exports, mainly of garments, to the former Soviet Union. This trade diminished for various reasons, as discussed in earlier chapters. Although opinion in the souq typically blamed the 'frozen' economy on the Syrian state, it was equally common for the very same traders to underline how the slow Aleppo market was exacerbated by a drought<sup>35</sup> or how the slump was a worldwide phenomenon. At other times the slump was claimed to be part of an international conspiracy to keep Syria – and Aleppo – weak. Such capacity to plan and order was often brought out when discussing international and regional politics.

### **Talking about Regional and International Politics**

To my informants the perceived lack of stability of the region they inhabited formed a backdrop to their everyday lives.<sup>36</sup> Although regional political crises and instability were constants to be counted on, they were not all perceived as similar in intensity or danger. In the fall of 1998, for example, Turkish–Syrian relations became very strained as Turkey accused Syria of harbouring and supporting Abdallah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdish PKK party. Turkey also demanded that Syria recognize the 1939 border. Syria countered by claiming that Öcalan was not in Syria and that no recognition of this border would be made. Troops were massed close to the border and the propaganda war was quite intense in the Syrian media. Despite Aleppo's proximity to the Turkish border, my informants in Aleppo did not, however, seem excessively perturbed. The international highway between Syria and Turkey was still open and merchandise could get through. Flights operated between the two countries, and the Turkish consulate in Aleppo was open and unmolested. And, at the end of October, a security agreement was signed, after the mediation of the Egyptian and Iranian presidents.<sup>37</sup> Many of my informants had argued that Turkey was not acting as an aggressor on its own, but that Israel and the United States had an interest in keeping Syria under threat of an armed conflict, and busy along its northern border.

In December 1998, just before the start of Ramadan, Britain and the United States, in the name of the UN alliance, resumed air bombardment over Iraq, causing fury in the media and among most of my informants.<sup>38</sup> Next day, to my great surprise, there were demonstrations in the centre of Aleppo. The participants, carrying the Syrian flag, the flag of the Ba'th party, pictures of Hafez al Asad and his dead son Basel, shouted 'with

our spirits, with our blood, we redeem you, oh Iraq'. Somebody called 'eat shit Clinton', and somebody else '*allahu akbar*'. This was an unusual event; a demonstration rather than a manifestation for the Syrian regime or the President. It was obvious that people had been allowed to show their anger and frustration. In Damascus the US and British embassies were attacked by demonstrators. In Aleppo the British consulate was attacked, and a café with '*American*' in its name was forced to close (and quickly changed its name before reopening). I was also told that small boys, imitating the 'popular' demonstrations, had staged one of their own in the medina. But instead of hailing Iraq, they had hailed Saddam Hussein, an old enemy of the regime, causing fear of reprisals among the by-standers.

Many in the souq thought that these demonstrations and attacks were childish and silly, and only orchestrated to appease public opinion. But traders and customers in the souq were also venting their anger over the USA and Britain. Later that day the Syrian regime officially declared its opposition to the bombings, and said that it supported the Iraqi (sister) people. The bombings continued throughout Ramadan and were a common starting point for political analyses of the international and regional systems. Many of my informants in the souq, and outside, insisted that the current situation in Iraq had been orchestrated by the USA. Saddam Hussein, many claimed, was a victim of American (and/or Israeli) planning. He was, according to many, lured to invade Kuwait in 1991 in order for the Americans to wage war against the only economically strong and well-armed Arab state and the only country which, in the long run, could pose a threat to Israel. When discussing such a scenario, or variations on this theme, it was futile for opponents to highlight Saddam Hussein's atrocities. These could always be explained away by his relations with some foreign power, and the outcome of any given event could always be accounted for. Saddam Hussein was still in power in Iraq, not because the Americans (with their allies, including Arabs) had failed, but because he was meant to stay in power, as an excuse for continued warfare against the country and its people. The continuation of the bombings served not only to crush Iraq, but was also a warning and a deterrent to all other Arabs. 'We are supposed to be like clay to be shaped and formed as they like.' Despite such bleak visions, all my informants, apart from Abu Abdou, fervently hoped for the end of the bombings. He, instead, hoped for more, so that eventually all Arabs and Muslims would rise up in anger.

In March 1999 NATO waged war on Serbia, which continued until June. Syrians had followed the events in the former Yugoslavia for a decade. Many had initially been surprised by the large number of native

Muslims in the Balkans, and the Greek Orthodox community was also made much more aware of co-religionists in that region. Middle Eastern Muslims organized medical and humanitarian support for Bosnia in the early 1990s. During my fieldwork souq traders told me that they had been urged to marry Kosovo-Albanian women. There had been announcements in the mosques that 4,000 women were coming to Syria as refugees from Kosovo, and that good Muslims should marry them to give them safe homes and the dignity of matrimony.<sup>39</sup> The ethnic and religious affiliations of people in Central and Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Republics, became more apparent and were discussed more vehemently in Syria after the fall of the socialist and communist regimes. While some of my informants voiced the opinion that these affiliations actually caused conflict, others saw them more as being manipulated in conflicts in which other issues were also involved. Whereas many argued that only strong, or authoritarian, regimes can hold together a country where different religious and ethnic groups reside, pointing to Syria as an example, others argued differently.

The 1999 NATO bombings in Serbia were typically seen as the instrument of American policy and interests. They were strongly condemned by most of my informants. Some claimed that Milosovic, like Saddam Hussein, was an agent of the West; his task had been to break up Yugoslavia and open up this militarily strong country to foreign influence. Analogous to the situation in Iraq, the USA wanted war in Europe so that the Europeans would stay weak, divided and needing American help. 'World peace is threatened', Abu Khaled agonized. 'Russia, with its Orthodox people, cannot silently watch this war. They will have to react and there might be a clash with America.' Christian traders not only voiced their anger against the USA, but also supported Milosovic as a co-religionist, and claimed that the Albanians in Kosovo were 'recent settlers, much like the Jews in Palestine.' Abu Jamil – a devout Muslim – was against Milosovic, against the bombing, but also against the aspirations of the Kosovo-Albanians. He said they were religiously at fault to want a country for themselves at any cost: 'According to Islam, life is more dear than anything else. You are even allowed to hide your religion if that can save your life.'<sup>40</sup>

In Aleppo, as elsewhere in Syria, the Palestinian–Israeli conflict was uniformly seen as the basis of regional instability and as a core issue that had to be resolved. Syrians had various analyses as to its development or solution, but all agreed about its repercussions on the lives of every person in the Middle East. I had just arrived in Aleppo at the end of March 2002 when the Israeli army 'reoccupied' most of the limited territory under the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Despite

media censorship by the Israelis, there was ample coverage of the West Bank by the large Arab satellite television stations. People were glued to their TV sets and hardly spoke of anything else. Many of my informants argued that hopes of a peaceful and just settlement, both for themselves and for the Palestinians, were being crushed. Many were in a state of shock at seeing close-ups of demolished cities and swollen corpses. The siege of the Church of the Nativity and the humiliation of the Palestinian leadership, surrounded by Israeli tanks in Ramallah, underlined their sense of powerlessness. Although many condemned Palestinian suicide bombings, and many more disliked the politics of Yassir Arafat, the plight of the Palestinian people overshadowed everything else. 'They call Arabs terrorists, but now we see the face of real terrorism. The Israelis have no mercy, they will not be satisfied until every Palestinian is dead. That is their final solution.' The lack of support and help from the Arab world, and the silence from their own political leadership underlined, for all to debate, Arab and Syrian impotence. The Israeli attack on the Palestinians in the spring of 2002 marked a peak in modern Syrian history in terms of political stress and anguish. For the first time Syrians were daily and closely exposed to media violence. They felt well-informed by Arab media, and listened to a myriad of arguments from Arab intellectuals and political commentators.<sup>41</sup> But there was no just, or even clear, solution in sight. People talked, debated or wept, but all to no purpose. Resentment centred not only on Israel and the United States; all Arab regimes were implicated as well. Everybody spoke of the link between the current events in Palestine and the attacks in New York and against the Pentagon on 11 September 2001. And many in the Aleppo souq drew the conclusion that 'it was all part of the plan.' If Osama bin Laden and al-Qa'ida were behind the attacks, then they were American/Israeli agents. Such a conviction was used to explain why bin Laden had not yet been found, and how he was being used to smear the image of Islam. 'This is not the work of real Muslims.' One young trader earnestly told me that no Arab could ever plan such a detailed and complicated terrorist attack: 'They would have bungled the whole thing.' According to the souq consensus the 11 September attack had been carried out to provide the Israelis with the excuse to find a 'final solution' to their problems of territory and security. Arab regimes, including the Palestinian Authority, were implicated because the regional instability provided them with an excuse not to grant their citizens more freedom.

*Making Sense of the Senseless*

In Iraq and in Kosovo most of my informants could see the obvious presence of Americans, and assess this in terms of policy and interests. In Palestine the Bush administration was just as heavily implicated. But no incident of political importance was too small not to warrant the involvement, or behind-the-scenes presence, of the USA or Israel.<sup>42</sup> 'Why do the Americans defend Kosovo-Albanians but not Kurds or Palestinians?', Abu Toni exclaimed. 'Because it has all been planned and calculated.' He told me that the CIA killed President Kennedy as well as the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme because they were too peaceful. Yeltsin was paid by the Americans in order to finally dissolve the only other superpower able to confront the USA. Mu'ammarr Qaddafi is an American agent, and the Lockerbie explosion was planned as an excuse for American aggression against Libya in order to control Libyan gas and petroleum resources.

The calculations and planning of wilful others extended beyond simple political subjugation. A deplorable, social evil coming from abroad could be explained by the planning of distant or near enemies. European TV channels showed pornography on satellite channels in order to corrupt Arab men and prevent them from doing honest work, one trader told me. It thus contributed to the underdevelopment of the region. Arabs were unable to fight against this evil, he claimed, because the sexual repression of society made men unable to resist watching. 'And the governments do not mind. They want docile people more interested in pornography than politics.' Most of my informants were not very consistent as to the details or the internal order of their analyses. The 'it-has-all-been-planned' could in any given conversation range from rage over corruption in Syria, to insisting that electricity cuts were made in order to annoy citizens, to an exegesis of why Jews 'throughout history have been distrusted because they have tried to dominate the world.' Most of my informants, however, disagreed with the 'facts' of others. There was consensus only on the far-reaching capacity and capability of Israel and the USA.<sup>43</sup>

Only one trader brought out a detailed far-reaching analysis on a number of occasions. Abu Abdou told me that since the 1950s the Americans had planned to bring Syria down economically. 'Syria was on its way to really developing economically. Our industry did not lag much behind that of Belgium. Then they forced the union with Egypt on us – you do know that Gamal Abdel Nasser was an American agent? Don't you remember that the Americans helped him in 1956 against Israel, France and Britain! – and that was the beginning of the nationalization of industry. Then they brought in the Ba'th party and socialism of the worst

kind. They wanted to crush religion in the country, because when people lose their religion they lose their sense of right and wrong.’ Another time, when discussing the World Trade Organization, he told me that the plan for Syria, Lebanon and Jordan was to create a region of recreation for Western tourists, so that these countries would never compete industrially with the West.<sup>44</sup>

It is exceedingly difficult to argue against a reasoning in which everything has been planned, and anything can be accounted for. I often had heated arguments inside, and outside, the souq, not against the importance of foreign or domestic interests in trying to influence, divide or rule, but against linking this to a single-minded ability to plan, control and execute a complicated chain of events on the part of named actors, regimes or whole countries. As a social scientist, I found their collective victimization of themselves, and the blaming of distant others, deeply disturbing, because their model of agency and structure clashed with my own. But I was equally disturbed by the blame my informants put on themselves, and the many instances of verbal self-flagellation.<sup>45</sup> Just as many of my informants stressed that almost everything of political importance was planned by cunning agents, they also, again and again, argued that they did not really deserve anything better. ‘We have the rulers we deserve’, or ‘We are so divided and so unorganized, we will never be better.’ When I visited Abu Adel, after the massive Israeli incursion into the West Bank, he complained about the behaviour of his souq neighbours, saying that they put garbage outside his shop and claiming that this was due to jealousy and lack of affection. He continued: ‘The problem of the souq is the problem of the Arab world. There is too much jealousy and no affection between us. That is why we are divided and why Israel and the USA has power over everything.’

Blaming ‘us’ is the flip side of blaming ‘them’. Through comparisons a political order of inclusion and exclusion is both manifested and created and the boundaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are contextually fixed. Conspiracy theories, like any strong belief, are tautological and self-referential where the proof is in the pudding. Clearly this reasoning can be seen as a desperate expression of the weak. Such predictable, yet flexible, analyses as those in the souq provide a comforting predictability, as well as meaning and order, to events perceived to be beyond their influence. Conspiratorial reasoning may also seem like a contemporary version of fatalism, commonly associated in the West with Islam. But it is, I would argue, far from the case. The ‘it-is-written’ fatalism of the souq is a reminder of the need to accept and embrace the power of God to both initiate and terminate the life of every single human being. Such fatalism is hence an equalizer focused on the individual. We come into this world

with nothing and we leave with nothing, regardless of riches or misfortunes. Such fatalism did not preclude traders from very earthly pursuits. 'Fatalism' can and does co-exist with the reasoning of 'it-has-all-been-planned'. The persuasive power of conspiratorial reasoning in Syria is totally different from an acceptance of humanity's equal fate. It rests on contrasts and differences, and it is grounded in the comparative experience of people propagating them. People can clearly sense that what 'we' lack – justice, the rule of law, economic and political development (or more concretely; riches and power over other nations) – is precisely what the important 'they' guard, protect and monopolize. Inequalities and differences in political power, wealth and resources cry out for an explanation in the modern world, because, through global connections and national state-building, Aleppo traders, like other people, have been taught to expect a better life and a better world.

Through the global links and connections described in this chapter, Aleppo traders were daily made aware of the world order in which there are first- and second-class nations. In first-class nations citizens enjoy democratic rights, freedom of expression, and free and fair elections. There are governments, rather than regimes, which have the interests of their citizens at heart, because they need those citizens. There is the rule of law and the accountability of public servants. Second-class nations lack all this. First-class nations are economically strong, and commonly use that strength as an instrument to dominate second-class nations, both politically and economically, according to my informants. Aleppo traders constantly underlined the second-class status of Syria, thereby often idealizing the first-class status of other nations. But they refused to regard themselves as second-class traders, even as they implicated themselves in second-class practices. Perhaps they were producing second-class products 'now', but, given the right circumstances, their cleverness, ingenuity and hard work would, I was told, prevail. 'Now' Aleppo was perhaps situated on the periphery of the world economy, because the Syrian state (and other nations) put it there, but this could change. Until then, they make do, trading on the margins.



## TRADERS OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In the previous chapters traders in Aleppo have been scrutinized in three different contexts; first the local souq and the city itself, secondly the state, and thirdly international trade links. Traders have been in focus throughout, and the opinions and viewpoints of non-traders have mainly been brought in to throw additional light on Aleppo traders. Hence, this has not been an analysis of life in Aleppo, nor of the Syrian state or the machinations of state employees, nor of how the developments of the global economy affect the Aleppo souq. Rather, these issues have been looked at through the activities – including the talk – of my informants. Traders have not been assessed in terms of the contributions they make – or could make – to Syrian economic and political life. It is, of course, possible to do so, but that would force my informants into an all too familiar story of development and utility. They would be cast in roles of ‘either/or’ (progressive/reactionary, good/bad, heroes/victims). Instead of this familiar story, I want my account of traders in Aleppo to be more ambiguous and open-ended. In these final pages – after summarizing my earlier arguments – I shall instead argue that they are good to think with when a *shop of one’s own* has become an important global aspiration.

### Three Overlapping Contexts

Aleppo’s old city and its souq have survived as the uncontested economic centre of the city in which traders constitute an important local category. Most of my informants are part of the *abl as-souq*, the people of the market. They mainly consist of families who are old-timers on the market and who talk of themselves as ‘traditional’ and ‘conservative’. Yet many traders – including the *abl as-souq* – displayed no conservatism or traditionalism in the way they trade. Many were constantly, as has been described, on the look-out for new opportunities

and for new ways to make money. Most of my middle-aged and older informants were not working in exactly the same line of business as their fathers, and many had actually changed the location of their shops. It was rather as husbands, fathers and sons that my informants displayed their conservatism. As sons, they should respect their parents and obey their fathers. As fathers they should keep their sons close to them for as long as possible; they should also find good husbands for their daughters. And as husbands, they should support their wives and make sure they did not have to work outside their homes. This 'traditionalism', according to my informants, was anchored in religion. A 'fear of God' underpinned good behaviour both inside and outside the souq.

But ideas about their own traditionalism and conservatism must also, as I have stressed, be understood in the light of changes in the souq. While Aleppo is still an ethnically and religiously heterogeneous city, the *abl as-souq* now present themselves predominantly as Sunni Muslim Arabs. This religious and ethnic homogenization has contributed, as I have stressed, to an increased sense of a shared destiny.

My informants, especially those with shops and offices in the covered market in the medina, all expressed a strong attachment to their particular souq. It was not the bricks and mortar of the shops, nor the antiquity of the souq, which was extolled. Instead, the traders were attached to significant others of, and in, the souq. These significant others were people whose opinions mattered; that is, those influencing a trader to gain, keep or lose his *name* and *reputation*. They were those whose co-operation was needed to create *independence* and *settlement*; that is, those on whom a trader depended to gain, keep and maintain *a shop of his own*. Significant others were thus those with whom a trader shared a moral universe, informed by daily interaction in the souq.

Throughout this account I have claimed that the aspirations and values of the traders – their stress on settlement and independence – are found also outside the souq. But unlike many others, traders have the resources, or can muster the resources, to be able to be *settled* and *independent*. This ability, I have stressed, is very much linked to state policies. Relations between the state and traders are complex, as I have described. In the 1960s the ruling Ba'th party was highly critical of capitalists and nationalized the larger private enterprises. But the smaller traders in the souq survived. At the same time Ba'th rule has buttressed 'newcomers' in trade aligned to, or part of, the political establishment, the army, and the security services. Since the early 1990s economic liberalization has given more opportunities for the private sector. This has benefited both these newcomers and 'old-timers' in the souq. The number of actors in the private sector has increased due not only to

more liberal policies but also to fewer opportunities for employment. The contraction of the public sector is linked to the expansion of the private sector. This development, in turn, has fed into the ideals of *a shop of one's own*, and demonstrated to Syrians also outside the souq, that *trade is the essence of everything* and traders are essential to the welfare of the country.

For minority traders like Kurds, Christians and less religiously devoted Sunni Muslim Arabs, the 'moral majority' was, as I have described, extremely important in how they presented themselves. But the reverse was not the case. For the majority of traders – and especially the *abl as-souq* as embodying the values of the souq – perceptions of selves were patterned against perceptions of political power-holders and newcomers in trade. These were described as '*nobodies*' without family, reputation or honour. Intimate social relations were avoided with such nobodies, yet many traders actually had trading connections with them. In the souq discussions about malfeasance and the constant harping on the malfunctioning of the state institutions and the public bureaucracy were very common. They underlined the shame traders felt about wrongdoings in the souq and in the country. Yet they also underlined that '*nobodies*' rather than traders were to blame. While my informants acknowledged that new economic policies contributed to new opportunities in general, they never admitted that they had personally benefited from this. Success was attributed to their own hard work and cleverness, and failure was attributed to the policies of the state and the machinations of public employees or '*nobodies*' outside, or inside, the souq.

Public security is clearly crucial for trade to function smoothly, and my informants lauded this aspect of urban life. Theft, burglary and assault were rare, thus minimizing certain kinds of risks in the market. Political instability in the region, furthermore, made Syria and Aleppo stand out as safe for traders and citizens at large. But my informants never admitted that the state actually provided this stability or that Syria's relative independence contributed to this. The Syrian anomaly – the relative independence of the state – was not recognized at all in the souq, and instead my informants complained about the closed economy and talked about the need to open up the country for more trade.

Although Syria has been relatively closed economically since the Ba'th takeover in 1963, traders and *abl as-souq* have maintained a great many international links. These links have also increased since the late 1980s, as I have explained. Aleppo traders and industrialists benefited greatly, as described, from intensive exporting to the former Soviet republics. Most of my informants traded across borders. They all had relatives – both

dead and alive – in and from locations outside Syria, and they often used these connections as stepping-stones in trading ventures. They all had direct or indirect knowledge of places outside Syria. Many have resided in countries outside the region.

### Three Overlapping Homelands

My informants were, as has been described, globally connected in many ways. Yet they were also locally rooted and parochial. It is important, of course, not to equate geographical mobility with openness of thought. One can be parochial anywhere in the world, and remain or become parochial despite transnational mobility. And one can be non-parochial anywhere in the world. I see the parochialism of my informants in the way they took for granted world interest in their region. This privileged them when explaining their – as they analysed it – underdevelopment. The parochialism of Aleppo traders also emerged when they, in a sense, took Aleppo to wherever they were trading. Their food was better than any other food, their ‘customs and traditions’ were more congenial, their women were more honourable, and their streets were safer or livelier. My informants had no wish to be challenged in these values and aspirations. Yet at the same time, they also wanted to be more globally connected, to engage in increased international trade, and to travel with greater ease.

Thus experiences from international trade fed into the overarching endeavour to have a shop of one's own. And this endeavour fed into their perceptions of the state, which linked into their views on trade across borders, which fed into the local setting. By having *a shop of their own* traders indicated their cleverness and hard work. In their shops they were able to demonstrate their good *names* and their *independence*. The Aleppo market, and especially the old covered souq, where traders work in very close proximity to each other, can be seen as a hothouse where the dominant values and aspirations were cultivated. To my informants these values and aspirations were, of course, essential, but they should not be analysed in an essentialistic way. Values and aspirations were communicated in flexible ways. There is no real paradox between the global connections and endeavours, and the parochial ambitions and sentiments of the traders. On the contrary; by stressing both facets they were able to create contextually, what I would call an overlapping homeland (*watan*), and this overlapping homeland was used to comment on their present economic and political situation. There is a limited homeland consisting of their own particular souq, or particular quarter, as well as the *watan* of Aleppo. Then there is the political *watan* of the Syrian nation-state which they feel ambivalent about, and constrained by,

but a homeland they can only with difficulty escape from, even as traders abroad. Finally, there is a more extended homeland, consisting of the many links they have with other locations in the world. This is more of an imagined *watan*, of sometimes vast proportions, which can act as an impetus or inspiration for trade. Such an overlapping homeland is a trading asset. It provides flexible solutions to questions of loss, gain and survival. It is a model of and a model for the trading market, providing a multidimensional alternative to the neoclassical model.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Proof is in the Pudding**

Traders in Aleppo wanted to make money, of course, and saw money as a means to trade. But even with money, not all made it. Not all had the skill to make it. Some men had resources but learned nothing, others had nothing but made it eventually, as has been discussed. In this account I have noted that traders occasionally expressed self-doubts and occasionally blamed themselves for shortcomings in the market. But in general they articulated a fairly high opinion of themselves as ‘real traders’ and ‘somebodies’. The almost constant talk about the economic slump served not only to cast blame. Difficulties in the souq, the very debates about the ups and downs, or the frozen economy, underlined that *trade is the essence of everything*. They also illustrated that the survivors were *real traders*. The deeper the slump, the more heroic the survivors! Real traders survive in, and on, the market, despite its ups and downs. And in a circular argument, those who survive are the real traders. Such circular arguments- where the proof is in the pudding – helped underpin, to my mind, the flexibility of their market model with its overlapping homeland where they could contextually find support for their viewpoints.

In this account I have stressed that trading in Aleppo is not basically about making money. Money is the means to achieve *independence* and *settlement* rather than an end in itself. Although trading is what they do, being a real trader is more than just trading. At the same time, the means and the end are, of course, inseparable. Trade is a means to achieve and maintain a *shop of one's own*, and a shop of one's own is a means to stay in trade. Such a circular argument renders the logic of my informants impregnable and flexible. Traders may come and traders may go, but the souq and the trade remain. Traders are, in a sense, servants of the market; as economic actors, they provide continuity to the trading scene. Yet, at the same time, the souq also serves the traders. The souq provides an area in which traders can set up, maintain and keep *a shop of their own*, and the arena on which they perform their *tajer*-ness. And it is

here that they are able to show others that they are honourable, reputable, independent and settled men, despite the ups and downs of the market.

The essential aspiration in the souq is, as I have stressed, an aspiration also outside the souq. Such an aspiration must be linked, I have repeatedly argued, to the contraction of the public sector in which employment has become more scarce and where salaries are devalued. But this aspiration can also be regarded as the triumph of petty bourgeois values even outside the souq. All in Aleppo have become aspiring market men. But *a shop of one's own* has also become a global aspiration.

### **Aleppo Traders in Other Perspectives**

Since the early 1990s we have witnessed a 'fundamental transition in political economic life'.<sup>2</sup> This has contributed to the process of a post-modern petty bourgeois mode of production worldwide. The contemporary petty bourgeoisie is to a high degree shaped by the state which polices policies of economic liberalization. Governments spend less and less on public welfare. Job opportunities in the public sector are few, but increasingly well-educated job seekers with high expectations are many. Governments and international and national financial institutions tell people to start their own businesses; to open shops of their own and to become entrepreneurs. On a global scale, therefore, the production and distribution of merchandise and services are increasingly in the hands of owners of small workshops and shops.

In the contemporary petty bourgeois mode of production not only merchandise and services are produced and distributed. More significantly, the production and distribution of selves are becoming increasingly important. With this new state- and bourgeois-sponsored ideological stress on self-employment, people set up a shop or start a 'project' in which their 'unique selves' are the main assets. In this new affective economy, personality, emotions, sensibilities and hunches are talked about as capital. In this contemporary petty bourgeois mode of production the creative entrepreneur is a cultural hero.

In light of this, Aleppo traders are eminently good to think with as traders of the twenty-first century. My informants in the Aleppo souq can easily be compared with the new petty bourgeoisie anywhere. Aleppo traders are similar to post-modern self-employed workers where each is his/her own entrepreneur, creating and using person-centred networks, and for whom work and leisure flow into each other. In such markets reputations and presentation of selves are everything. In such a

perspective the Aleppo traders are successful forerunners of the new affective economy.

But Aleppo traders are also good to think with when pondering on the contemporary sentimental individualism of the entrepreneurial hero. Such a hero typically negates the thesis that ‘people live only by the cooperation of those around them’.<sup>3</sup> The views and opinions of my informants, as I have stressed, were often inconsistent. On the one hand, they often articulated the opinion that trust and care were typical traits of their souq. On the other hand, they also claimed that nobody cared about the other in the market and that nobody could be trusted any more. Many traders and industrialists expressed the view that ‘others’ were stingy imitators blocking the success of innovators with ideas. But they also expressed the opinion that, given the opportunity, ‘anyone’ in the souq could contribute to the economic success of the country. Such inconsistent views are deeply human. In the Aleppo market these inconsistencies also became vehicles for debating their sense of selves. The inconsistencies expressed a tension between their struggle for independence and their acknowledgment of dependence on others in the market.

The world market of selves and reputations is not based on equality. It is hierarchical and highly competitive. Following one’s own tastes and hunches does not automatically lead to market success when one has to compete with many other ‘unique’ selves. As can be seen from the bankruptcies and failures, not all make it. Most small-scale ‘independent’ shop- and workshop-owners are far from independent. Many are really, like the Aleppo traders, owned by the shop and in reality prisoners of their enterprises. *Independence* and *reputation* have a cost. And, as seen from the traders in Aleppo, the labour of others – often family members – has to be harnessed or exploited for enterprises to survive.

Communications, global networks and exchanges have chiselled out a macro order of similarity and a micro order of dissimilarity and difference. Tastes and fads are being similarly promoted all over the globe, but the way they are actually received, appreciated and used by customers cannot be totally controlled. In the production of both similar and different products and services, certain places and certain people become marginal, or come to regard themselves as marginal on the world market. Aleppo traders are good to think with when scrutinizing how place – despite deterritorialization of capitalism (or perhaps because of it) – is still deeply meaningful and important for the survival and success of traders. In such a perspective Aleppo traders can be studied to understand how overlapping homelands, firmly anchored in a locality peopled by significant others, help traders to survive.

Aleppo traders thus have their own locality – their souq – on their side. They do not feel threatened by extinction from competition or by unfriendly takeover by hungry transnational capitalists. They can perform their *tajeer*-ness securely, knowing that their souq has always been there. When they claim that ‘an Aleppo trader can survive anywhere’, and when they talk of themselves as real market men, they have predecessors they can utilize as proof. And most importantly, they recognize and accept – even if grudgingly at times – that in order to achieve and maintain independence they have to depend on others. To be engaged with others is seen as good and natural and as an essential part of one’s humanity. One trader exemplified this with a proverb: ‘Paradise without people is like hell.’



# NOTES

## Chapter 1

### WHAT IS A TRADER?

<sup>1</sup> I use the term ‘trader’ rather than merchant or businessman to indicate its rough equivalence to the Arabic concept *taajer* which – as an important emic classification in Aleppo – was the starting-point for my queries.

<sup>2</sup> I use ‘context’ – a much debated and contested concept in anthropology – to indicate different spatialities in the world economy (cf. William Roseberry, ‘Understanding capitalism – historically, structurally, spatially’ in David Nugent (ed.), *Locating Capitalism in Time and Space. Global Restructuring, Politics and Identity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 61–79. For valuable discussions about context in anthropology see Roy Dillely (ed.), *The Problem of Context* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> I call Syrian rule ‘authoritarian’ to indicate a political system where power is exercised arbitrarily with limited possibilities for political opposition (cf. ‘Authoritarianism’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 2004. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. Steven Heydemann in *Authoritarianism in Syria. Institutions and Social Conflicts 1946–1970* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999, p. 5) describes Syrian rule as populist authoritarian to capture its mobilizing aspects.

<sup>4</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922).

<sup>5</sup> This is, of course, not true for anthropologists such as Maurice Godelier, Emmanuel Terray and others in the Marxist tradition, who were very active in the late 1960s and the 1970s.

<sup>6</sup> I am intentionally ignoring the historically important (American) debate in the 1960s between the so called substantivists and formalists. The latter claimed that neoclassical economic theory – the study of choices – can be universally applied, while the former claimed this theory can only be applied to modern market economies. In E.E. LeClair Jr and H.K. Schneider (eds), *Economic Anthropology. Readings in Theory and Analysis* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968) the main protagonists on both sides appear. According to Keith Hart, ‘The idea of economy. Six modern dissenters’, in Roger Friedland and

A.F. Robertson (eds), *Beyond the Marketplace. Rethinking Economy and Society* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1990, pp. 137–160) this debate obstructed the development of economic anthropology and ‘modern anthropologists have been too ignorant of the history of economic ideas to make a serious contribution to the revision of economic orthodoxy’ (p. 155). For an important and influential sociological contribution to embeddedness, see Mark Granovetter, ‘Economic action and social structure: The problem of embeddedness’, *American Journal of Sociology* 91 (1985), pp. 481–501, also reprinted in Mark Granovetter and Richard Swedberg (eds), *The Sociology of Economic Life* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 63–81. For a discussion on ‘entanglement’ and economy, as opposed to embeddedness, see Anna Hasselström, *On and Off the Trading Floor. An Inquiry into the Everyday Fashioning of Financial Market Knowledge* (Stockholm: Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University, 2003.)

<sup>7</sup> See for example, James G. Carrier (ed.), *Meanings of the Market. The Free Market in Western Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), Roy Dilley (ed.), *Contesting Markets. Analyses of Ideology, Discourse and Practice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), Roger Friedland and A.F. Robertson (eds), *Beyond the Marketplace. Rethinking Economy and Society* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1990), Stephen Gudeman, *The Anthropology of Economy. Community, Market, and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), Christina Garsten and Monica Lindh de Montoya (eds.), *Market Matters* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, writings by Manning Nash, Sidney Mintz, Sol Tax.

<sup>9</sup> *Bazaar* is a Persian word for marketplace, also used in Turkish, and spread to many modern European languages. Like the Arabic term *souq*, bazaar is both the concrete trading place and the more abstract notion of buying and selling.

<sup>10</sup> Clifford Geertz, ‘Suq: the bazaar economy in Sefrou’, in C. Geertz, H. Geertz, L. Rosen, *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 123–313.

<sup>11</sup> C.-J. Charpentier in 1973 published *Bazaar-e Tashqurghan. Ethnographical Studies in an Afghani Traditional Bazaar* (Uppsala: Ethnographica Upsaliensia). In this bazaar craftsmen and sellers were organized in guilds. Such guilds disappeared more than a hundred years ago in the Aleppo souq. Philip H. Gulliver and Marilyn Silverman in their wonderful *Merchants and Shopkeepers. A Historical Anthropology of an Irish Market Town 1200–1991* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), note (p. 354) that very little has also been done on West European retail shopkeepers or merchants.

<sup>12</sup> Geertz, ‘Suq: the bazaar economy in Sefrou’, p. 140.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 124. The enormous influence of Geertz’ bazaar analysis outside anthropology over the decades can perhaps be attributed mainly to his short article ‘The bazaar economy: Information and search in peasant marketing’, *Supplement to the American Economic Review* 68 (1978), pp. 28–32, also reprinted in Granovetter and Swedberg *The Sociology of Economic Life*. Geertz’ influence can be seen in the way his bazaar-concept has been used by Eric S. Raymond, founder of the open-source movement, in *The Cathedral and the Bazaar* (1999), and by others writing on the information economy. Demil and Lecocq write about an emerging ‘bazaar governance’ as a tribute to both Geertz and Raymond. There

is also Robin Bloor, *The Electronic Bazaar. From the Silk Road to the Eroad* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishers, 2000). For all these writers the *bazaar* is a positive and anarchistic concept connoting the empowerment of users of the electronic media against 'big business'. See also John McMillan, *Reinventing the Bazaar. A Natural History of Markets* (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 2002). He reiterates the Geertzian lack-of-information thesis of the Middle Eastern bazaar but also stresses the similarities between the bazaar and modern Internet commerce, since both are shaped by 'information and the costs of getting it' (p. 47). The difference is that in the bazaar the transactions costs are higher. However, for Conrad Schetter, 'The 'bazaar economy' of Afghanistan. A comprehensive approach', in C. Noelle-Karimi et al. (eds), *Afghanistan. A Country without a State?* (Frankfurt-am Main: IKO Verlag, 2003), pp. 109–28, the concept is negative and an indication of how the transnational drug and arms trades dominate the economy of Afghanistan. For a more critical approach to Geertz, see Arang Keshavarzian, *A Bazaar and Two Regimes. Governance and Mobilization in the Tebran Marketplace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, Department of Politics, 2003). He notes that the Sefrou bazaar was small, rural and institutionally not very complex. See also Frank Fanselow, 'The bazaar economy. Or how bizarre is the bazaar?', *Man* 25 (1990), pp. 250–65, who claims that Geertz has not really grasped the underlying economic mechanism of the bazaar.

<sup>14</sup> Keshavarzian, *A Bazaar and Two Regimes*.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, Chapter 2. For recent examples of, in my opinion, such lack of critical reflection see Keith McLachlan, 'The survival of the bazaar economy in Iran and the contemporary Middle East', in Richard Tapper and Keith McLachlan (eds), *Technology, Tradition and Survival. Aspects of Material Culture in the Middle East and Central Asia* (London: Frank Cass, London, 2003), pp. 217–33, and also in the same volume Mahmoud Abdollahzadeh 'The political significance of the bazaar in Iran', pp. 234–41.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Weiss, *The Bazaar. Markets and Merchants of the Islamic World*, with photographs by Kurt-Michael Westerman (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Maysa H. Diab, *Guide to Aleppo* (no date), p. 20.

<sup>18</sup> *Syria* (Damascus: Ministry of Tourism, 1989), p. 147.

<sup>19</sup> R. Burns, *Monuments of Syria. An Historical Guide* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1994), p. 28. This is probably the best English-language guidebook to Syria's many historical monuments.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Heinz Gaube and Eugen Wirth, *Aleppo. Historische und geografische Beiträge zur baulichen Gestaltung, zur sozialen Organisation und zur wirtschaftlichen Dynamik einer vorderasiatischen Fernhandelsmetropole* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1984), Bruce Masters, *The Origins of Western Economic Dominance in the Middle East. Mercantilism and the Islamic Economy in Aleppo, 1600–1750* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), Mahmoud Hreitani and Jean-Claude David, 'Souks traditionnels et centre moderne. Espaces et pratiques à Alep (1930–1980)', *Bulletin d'Études Orientales*, Institut Français de Damas, Tome XXXVI (1985), pp. 1–70. Mention should also be made of Alexander Russell's 2-vol *The*

*Natural History of Aleppo* (London, 1794), 2nd revised edition. Russell was a medical doctor to the British community in Aleppo for over a decade in the middle of the eighteenth century. This is a wonderful eyewitness account of the city and its customs written by a curious, enlightened and scientific-minded observer.

<sup>21</sup> Abraham Marcus, *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity. Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, New York 1989); Margaret L. Meriwether, *The Kin Who Count. Family and Society in Ottoman Aleppo* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999). Many of the notable families listed by Meriwether are still important in Aleppo and in the market. Some of my informants were delighted to see their familynames listed in her book.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Nelly Hanna, *Making Big Money in 1600. The Life and Times of Isma'il Abu Taqiyya, Egyptian Merchant* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998); Thabit A.J. Abdullah, *Merchants, Mamluks and Murder. The Political Economy of Trade in Eighteenth-Century Basra* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Until the late 1960s urban historians and urban geographers saw Aleppo as a typical example of the so-called Islamic city. It was believed that Islam was an essentially urban culture creating not only a distinctive urban planning but also special urban social institutions. The central mosque, the bath-houses and the *souq* were the node around which other urban functions grew, and urban life was centred around closed neighbourhoods and inward-looking houses. This view, in which the Islamic city is contrasted with an – often imaginary – Western city, has been hotly debated and greatly modified in the last few decades. Scholars have underlined that the Islamic empires took over cities that had a long history, and not only founded new ones. The historical studies referred to above implicitly or explicitly question the validity of the Islamic city and the concept is used today with great caution. See Janet Abu Lughod, 'The Islamic city. Historic myth, Islamic essence, and contemporary relevance', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 19 (1987) pp. 155–76, who initiated the critical debate.

<sup>24</sup> I am not, of course, arguing that the historical material explains the – to my mind flexible – actions of present-day traders. I only want to underline that recent historical research throws new light on historical periods earlier deemed 'frozen' or on actors earlier deemed 'traditional'.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Geoffrey Crossick and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, 'Introduction', in G. Crossick and H-G Haupt (eds), *Shopkeepers and Master Artisans in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 9; Geoffrey Crossick and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, *The Petite Bourgeoisie in Europe 1780–1914* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Alan Richards and John Waterbury, *A Political Economy of the Middle East. State, Class and Economic Development* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990); Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (London: I.B Tauris, 1995). For a summary of this position see Perthes, *Political Economy of Syria*, pp. 10–13.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>29</sup> See articles in Eberhard Kienle (ed.), *Contemporary Syria. Liberalization between Cold War and Cold Peace* (London: British Academic Press and I.B.Tauris, 1994).

<sup>30</sup> For discussion of Joseph Schumpeter's different conceptualizations of 'entrepreneur' and the usefulness of applying the concept to non-Western settings, see Per Trulsson, *Strategies of Entrepreneurship. Understanding Industrial Entrepreneurship and Structural Change in Northwest Tanzania* (Linköping: Linköping Studies in Arts and Science, 1997). Fredrik Barth has made important contributions to anthropological studies of entrepreneurs; for example *The Role of the Entrepreneur in Social Change in Northern Norway* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1967), and to economic anthropology in general, through so-called transactional analysis.

<sup>31</sup> For very interesting discussions see Ghassan Salamé (ed.), *Democracy without Democrats. The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1994). See also Kienle, *Contemporary Syria*. For interesting and meticulous empirical analysis of entrepreneurs in Aleppo, see Jocelyne Cornand, *L'Entrepreneur et l'État en Syrie. Le Secteur Privé du Textile à Alep* (Lyon: Maison de L'Orient Méditerranéen, Lyon; Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1994). Cornand considers the 'entrepreneurs' as quite traditional and as caught in a paradox between an omnipresent and an absent state (cf. p. 239).

<sup>32</sup> Gunnar Dahl, *Trade, Trust, and Networks. Commercial Culture in Late Medieval Italy*, (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> Carrier, 'Preface' to *Meanings of the Market*, p. xii. See also Paul Alexander, 'What's in a price? Trading practices in peasant (and others) markets', in Dilley, *Contesting Markets*, pp. 79–96, for clear analysis of the cultural basis of all markets.

<sup>34</sup> 'Mr Smith, Meet Mr Hawken', in *Meanings of the Market*, pp. 151–54.

<sup>35</sup> See Crossick and Haupt, *Shopkeepers and Master Artisans in Nineteenth-Century Europe*.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Alain Faure, 'The grocery trade in nineteenth-century Paris: a fragmented corporation', in Crossick and Haupt, *Shopkeepers and Master Artisans in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, pp. 155–74.

<sup>37</sup> Dorothy Davis, *A History of Shopping* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 255–56. See also Gary Davies and Kim Harris, *Small Business. The Independent Retailer* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 28.

<sup>38</sup> Davis, *A History of Shopping*, p. 277.

<sup>39</sup> This concept was first used by Keith Hart in 'Informal income opportunities and urban employment in Ghana', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 11 (1973), 3, pp. 61–89.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, M. Estellie Smith (ed.) *Perspectives on the Informal Economy* (Lanham, MD: Society for Economic Anthropology, University Press of America, 1990), especially the introduction and contributions by Rhoda Halperin and Sara Sturdevant, Antony Oliver-Smit and Josephine Smart. See also Faruk Tabak and Michaeline Crichlow (eds), *Informalization. Process and Structure* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Crossick and Haupt, 'Introduction', p. 20.

<sup>43</sup> Philip H. Gulliver and Marilyn Silverman, *Merchants and Shopkeepers. A Historical Anthropology of an Irish Market Town 1200–1991* (Toronto:University of Toronto Press, 1995), pp. 224–25.

<sup>44</sup> See Crossick and Haupt, *The Petite Bourgeoisie in Europe 1780–1914*, with an excellent comparative synthesis of research. For discussion of the survival and resilience of the petty bourgeoisie, see Frank Bechhofer and Brian Elliot (eds), *The Petite Bourgeoisie. Comparative Studies of the Uneasy Stratum* (London:Macmillan Press Ltd., 1981).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. discussion in Andrew Leyshon and Nigel Thrift, *Money/Space. Geographies of Monetary Transformation* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 263, where they discuss the ‘systemic similarities’ of neo-classical and marxist economic analysis, and where metaphorical redescription plays an important role in fixing a specific economic discourse.

<sup>46</sup> Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development. The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 223.

<sup>47</sup> Once a man has a son, he often ‘loses’ his first name and is instead called the father of – *abu* – so and so, and a woman will by the same logic be called the mother of – *umm* – so and so. Abu- and umm-names may be used also ‘in expectancy’ of a son, or as endearing nicknames. I have given most of my informants an ‘abu -name’, since this is how most traders address each other.

<sup>48</sup> This method obviously has many disadvantages. But it makes a fieldworker less conspicuous in the kind of publicly accessible environment a souq provides. From a number of earlier fieldwork experiences in Syria, I know that the security agencies’ suspicion of foreigners in general, and of researchers working with qualitative fieldwork methods in particular, is quite strong – in sharp contrast to the enormous curiosity, kindness and hospitality of Syrians at large. This contrast constituted a backdrop and influenced much of my approach to the fieldwork. In order to protect my informants as much as possible I have changed their names and sometimes their line of trade. A few informants have been given two names. People who appear with their full names in any part of the text are well-known public Syrian figures.

<sup>49</sup> In Aleppo *tajer/tujaar* is a male concept, although there are women who do trade. The most noticeable women traders are the visiting *rosiaat*, women from the former Soviet Union. Aleppo industry and trade benefited greatly from their presence in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Many Aleppo women work to earn a living, and there is no stigma attached to this. Many women, furthermore, earn small sums of money by working on commission for traders. They sell goods, mainly women’s clothes and fripperies, that retailers have advanced to them in their own homes, or in the homes of other women. Many also earn small sums of money by reselling clothes, accessories, perfume and make-up that they, or others, have bought in Lebanon or the oil-rich countries. In general, women are very active in cross-border trade, and in Aleppo clothes smuggled from Turkey are, on the selling side, handled almost exclusively by women. Such a woman may be called *tajra* – the female form of *tajer*. *Tajra*, however, has a totally different connotation than *tajer*. A *tajra* is not seen to be in and of the market and does not represent *tajer*-ness, despite the fact that some

women are, or have been, very successful traders. But although women are not recognized as traders by Aleppians in general, they can be considered as part of the *abl as-souq*. As daughters, sisters, mothers and wives to *medina* traders they are of the souq, although seldom seen in the souq. Their values, aspirations and destinies are usually as closely, if not more closely, tied to the souq as those of their men-folk. There are some writings on women sellers/petty traders in the Middle East. Cf. Deborah Kapchan, *Gender on the Market. Moroccan Women and the Revoicing of Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996) and Evelyn Aleene Early, 'Getting It Together. *Baladi* Egyptian Businesswomen', in Judith Tucker (ed.), *Arab Women. Old Boundaries, New Frontiers* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 84–101. Such literature shows how poorer women take up petty trade to support their families.

## Chapter 2

### SPACE, TIME AND PEOPLE IN ALEPPO

<sup>1</sup> Margaret C Rodman argues that the relationship between meaning and place 'has yet to attract much theoretical interest in anthropology' in 'Empowering place: Multilocality and multivocality, in Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zúniga (eds), *The Anthropology of Space and Place* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 204–23. In the introductory article 'Locating culture' (p. 13) the editors of that volume discuss the role also of anthropologists in inscribing spaces. See also the interesting John A. Agnew and James S. Duncan (eds), *The Power of Place. Bringing Together Geographical and Sociological Imaginations* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Farha Ghannam, *Remaking the Modern in Cairo. Space, Relocation, and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> For a situation where shoppers complain about the lack of security in the market see *ibid.*, pp. 111–14.

<sup>4</sup> Aleppo and, notably, Hama were not open cities in the early 1980s when they were beleaguered by special army units trying to root out the Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition groups. For an account of this period, commonly called *al-abdaath* 'the incidents', see Chapter 3, p. 66 and Chapter 5, footnote 31. The scars inflicted on most Syrians and most Aleppians by the repressive policies of the state will be discussed in later chapters. Police and security agents are present all over Aleppo, but they are not as visible today as they were in the 1980s.

<sup>5</sup> I am not, of course, arguing that gendered space is unique to Aleppo. Space everywhere is clearly gendered. In analyses of the Middle East the conceptual dichotomy between *public* and *private* has long been plagued by the association of gender segregation. See Annika Rabo 'Gender, state and civil society in Jordan and Syria', in Chris Hann and Elizabeth Dunn (eds), *Civil Society. Challenging Western Models* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 155–77. It has also been common to link Middle Eastern women with enclosed space and men with open space.

Many scholars stress the need to cast aside preconceived ideas of gender segregation and instead start by looking at how men and women utilize and interpret space in various social contexts. For succinct discussion see Seteney Shami, 'Domesticity reconfigured', in Dawn Chatty and Annika Rabo (eds), *Organizing Women. Formal and Informal Women's Groups in the Middle East* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), pp. 81–99. See also Ghannam, *Remaking the Modern in Cairo*, pp. 90–92. For interesting analysis of the relationship between gender and official secularism and 'islamism' in Turkey see Yael Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State. Secularism and Public Life in Turkey* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002) especially chaps. 1 and 3.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to stress that this ideal has been subjected to historical fluctuations. J.A Reilly, writing about 'Women in the economic life of late Ottoman Damascus', *Les cahiers du CERMOC* no 8 (1994), pp. 79–106, stresses that poorer women in particular were very active economically and physically 'present' in public urban life. But women's control over female public crafts and skills decreased in the late nineteenth century due to Islamic reform movements and Western influence.

<sup>7</sup> The ethnic and religious composition of Syria is in many ways guesswork because official statistics on such issues are not allowed. However, an educated guess is that Christians constitute about 12 per cent, divided into at least fourteen sects with the Greek Orthodox as the largest. Most Christians see themselves as 'Arab', but there are also Armenians and Syrian Orthodox, who regard themselves as both an ethnic and a linguistic group. Most Muslims are Sunni, perhaps 60–65 per cent. A large share of the Sunni are Kurds, but Kurds are also Jezidi and some are Shi'a Muslim. The Druze consider themselves as 'Arab', as do the Alawites, both of whom are Muslim splinter sects, regarded by many Syrians as special 'ethnic' groups. There are also various kinds of Shi'a Muslims. Finally there are small ethnic/linguistic minorities like Turkmen and Circassians.

<sup>8</sup> The 'ethnic-religious mix', however, differs from one region to another, and from one city to another. There are no rural Kurdish or Alawite clusters in the south of Syria, and no rural Druze clusters in the north. The variety of Christian sects is greater in the north than in the south. The Druze are concentrated in the southwest mountain region of Syria. Many became refugees following the Israeli occupation of the Golan heights in 1967. The Alawites' 'original' area is the northwest mountain region.

<sup>9</sup> Most Syrians make little distinction between the ruling party and the regime. However, the importance of the Ba'th party has, according to most observers and Syrians at large, decreased since the late 1980s.

<sup>10</sup> The scope and meaning of Alawi dominance in Syria is contested among researchers. Some in a rather 'primordialist' position see Syrian politics as – more or less – the outcome of ethnic and sectarian struggles (e.g. Nikolaus van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, London: Croom Helm, 1981). But most see sectarian issues in a more 'instrumentalist' vein, as the effect of political struggles. Derek Hopwood, *Syria 1945–1986. Politics and Society* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), notes that 'Sunnis tend to exaggerate the Alawi nature of the



regime' but stresses that this perception in itself 'can foment discontent' (p. 98).

<sup>11</sup> According to Ross Burns, *Monuments of Syria* (London, I.B.Tauris, 1994, p. 32), the citadel itself dates back to the first or second century BC. It was very important during the twelfth century and was never conquered by the Crusaders. Timurlane, however, razed the citadel in 1400, but it was rebuilt.

<sup>12</sup> All charitable institutions (*awqaf*) are nationalized and the property is administered by the Ministry of Awqaf. The Aleppo branch of the ministry is the largest property-owner in Aleppo (Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj, 'Die religiösen Stiftungen – Waqf – heute' in *Damaskus–Aleppo. 5000 Jahre Stadtentwicklung in Syrien* (Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philip von Zabern, 2000), pp. 492–95) and its director has considerable influence on the commercial life of the city, through investment and control especially of new property. Traders who rent from the Ministry of Awqaf, or from a private landlord, usually pay a minimal rent.

<sup>13</sup> In Syria the tenant receives the 'emptying fee' – the pas-de-porte (*frugh*) – when vacating the shop for someone else. In the medina the *frugh* is comparable to the price of the property. See also Chapter 5, p. 123.

<sup>14</sup> Dr Mahmoud Hreitani, who has written on the change of space in the medina (see above Chapter 1, note 20) told me that Sweiqat Ali used to be called 'the gateway to Europe' (*bawabet erooba*) and older people in this souq agreed.

<sup>15</sup> In many parts of Aleppo unlicensed vendors were chased away by the police, or scattered when they thought the police were approaching. But I never saw a shop-keeper help the police, and they were never happy when someone was caught.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. PLANCO Consulting, 'Rapid assessment of Public sector contributions. Rapid assessment of private sector activities', *Project for the rehabilitation of the old city of Aleppo* (Essen, Germany: unpublished report, 1998), pp. 42–50.

<sup>17</sup> My understanding thus differs greatly from that of Geertz who, as discussed above in Chapter 1, saw a lack of good information as characteristic of the bazaar.

<sup>18</sup> See Chapter 1, note 47.

<sup>19</sup> To complicate things further, *haji-hajja* can also be used in a slightly derogatory way towards people of an obviously inferior status.

<sup>20</sup> During my fieldwork I also took a modest part in this vast network of spreading and receiving information. Initially, I was constantly asked by my informants about my comings and goings in the souq, about news of others, the prices of this and that, the latest rumours, and my assessment of these rumours. But I could seldom contribute information that they did not already possess. Furthermore, I also tried not to reveal too much about informants who did not, already, know each other. But now and then I could, at one end of the medina, report on raids of price-police, or electricity cuts, accidents, or celebrations at the other end.

<sup>21</sup> Women in Aleppo do not visit mosques for sermons. Some historic mosques in the medina are open for female visitors but often not during prayer-hours. Many women take part in the activities of religious 'orders' but then, as during Ramadan, women follow these sessions secluded from the men.

<sup>22</sup> Often special series, soap-operas and comedies are shown on Syrian television during Ramadan. This is one of the few periods of the year when people with access to satellite channels actually prefer national television.

<sup>23</sup> In 1999 4,000 visas were given to the Aleppo province, and only people 55 years of age, or older, who had not done hajj for the last twenty-five years were allowed to apply. Many apply but few are successful.

<sup>24</sup> The Great Mosque is also called the Mosque of Zakaria. Muslims recognize him as the father of John the Baptist and a prophet in his own right.

<sup>25</sup> The 'religious' Christmas decorations of the Christians in Syria have acquired a distinctly 'Western' touch and now include Christmas trees and Santa Claus.

<sup>26</sup> The Armenians hang on to the Julian calendar and celebrate Christmas on January 6. This date is also the 'real' church feast for the Greek Orthodox but they have joined the Catholic churches in order to have a common 'popular' celebration of Christmas.

<sup>27</sup> Since Easter is the most important religious holiday, the Orthodox stick to their own calculation of when it can be celebrated, i.e. only after the Jews have celebrated Pesach. However, about every four years the Catholic and Orthodox Easter celebrations coincide.

<sup>28</sup> This was after the brutal eradication of the Muslim Brotherhood.

<sup>29</sup> In Aleppo there is a yearly local Cotton Festival to celebrate the importance of cotton for the economy of the region. Public companies, party people, the governor, people from the Chamber of Industry, and trade union officials make a manifestation, and schoolchildren are called out as well.

<sup>30</sup> Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria. Institutions and Social Conflict 1946–1970* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999) is critical of how Syrian politics and politicians are commonly analysed mainly as motivated by and grounded in sectarian and ethnic interests. Instead, he underlines the development of institutional and state-building capacities on the part of the ruling party.

<sup>31</sup> See Middle East Watch, *Syria Unmasked. The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).

<sup>32</sup> The National Progressive Front consists of the Ba'th party and other smaller supporting parties, like the Syrian Communist party, the Arab Socialist party and others.

<sup>33</sup> All these events are much displayed in the national mass media. The 'popular manifestations' are commonly staged on different days in different cities so that television can cover the celebrations of each province. There are often historical programmes and films depicting the struggles and victories of Syria, and in particular of Hafez al-Asad. Some cities also have local feasts or festivals.

### Chapter 3

#### TRADING INDEPENDENCE

<sup>1</sup> A trader who is well established or engaged in many different activities may actually be without one particular shop or office. Some of my informants, as pointed out in Chapter 2, moved from shop to factory, to workshop, to shops of friends. But people always knew where to find them. The recent spread of cellular telephones will probably make a ‘real’ office less important for some traders. But shops and offices will, I predict, remain important symbols of independence.

<sup>2</sup> Independence/to be independent (*istiqlaal/mustaqil*) and settlement/‘stability’ (*istigraar*) are highly emotional words and commonly used in political contexts all over Syria to denote the lack of political independence and stability in the region as a whole. The concern in the souq about settlement and independence has to be judged also in such a context. Cf. Chapter 5, pp. 109–110.

<sup>3</sup> Savings-clubs are quite common in Aleppo especially among employees, but also among women of the *abl as-souq*.

<sup>4</sup> There is a formal party in conjunction with the signing of the wedding contract which only men attend. The guardian of the bride signs the contract for her. On the eve of the wedding-night there is a large women’s party with the bride, and a large men’s party with the groom, who is later accompanied to the party of the bride.

<sup>5</sup> The word used for cheap quality in this context is ‘trading’ (*tujari*). Although traders have a high opinion about what they do for a living, they all – just like customers – nevertheless use this word.

<sup>6</sup> The ‘shame’ of closing a shop may also be related to the so-called events of the late 1970s and early 1980s when there were market strikes and the army forcibly opened the Aleppo souq. To close one’s shop may thus be interpreted as an open complaint against the regime.

<sup>7</sup> At the time of my fieldwork such boys were commonly paid between 1,500 and 2,000 Syrian lira a month, about USD 30–40. The vast majority of those employed by traders for medina work, or for work in workshops and factories, are not registered with the Ministry of Social Work and thus have no pensions, nor provision for sick leave or insurance.

<sup>8</sup> I had few opportunities to hear shop-boys tell their own stories, but Mousa had not exactly been clean, sweet-smelling or ‘learning the trade’ while he was working for Abu Mustafa, who was a very exacting employer. Industrial workshops can be alternative jobs for young shop-helpers. Such jobs may suit some boys better, since there are more boys in the same workplace. Some young men also learn a craft in workshops, but the working conditions are usually terrible. Employment in workshops, however, may pay better than work in medina shops.

<sup>9</sup> During my fieldwork the mandatory schooling in Syria was six years, but it was going to be raised to nine years. See Chapter 4 for how education is talked

about in the souq.

<sup>10</sup> Private banks have now been established in Syria, but until the summer of 2003 there were no real branches opened which could be visited. All my informants were in favour of these private banks, but few thought that they would threaten the Lebanese banking system on which most Aleppo traders with foreign business depended. 'It will take a very long time for trust in the new system to develop' Abu Malek said. 'Look at Egypt where some private banks folded. We need to go very slowly here.'

<sup>11</sup> Although many of my informants said that they did not use ordinary banks for religious reasons, they never seriously debated or demanded an 'Islamic' economy. Some informants said that 'others' were hypocrites and masked taking or giving interest by pretending to follow 'Islamic' rules.

<sup>12</sup> These debates about 'proper' Islamic economic behaviour indicate that there was no consensus on this issue.

<sup>13</sup> The system of 'utilization' (*istithmaar*) is obviously quite close to a franchising.

<sup>14</sup> Women among the *ahl as-souq* (and even in Aleppo in general) are seldom able to cultivate friendship in the way men do. This is not surprising since they have fewer arenas on which they can act. Even educated women who have had a professional career are seldom able to cultivate their friendships after marriage. Most women have, and find, their friends in the group of women they, and their husbands, are related to through blood and marriage.

<sup>15</sup> Abu Samer and his shop neighbours once, in a humorous vein, when trying to teach me some Aleppo proverbs, told me that 'one has to be patient with one's bastard neighbour because he won't leave and he won't die' (*sboor jaarak al akrouf, ma byirub wa ma byimout!*)

<sup>16</sup> See, for example Anthony Giddens, 'Living in a post-traditional society', in Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization. Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994); Barbara A. Misztal, *Trust in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996); Adam B. Seligman, *The Problem of Trust* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Karen S. Cook (ed.), *Trust in Society* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001). All these texts grapple with interesting analytical – and sometimes highly practical – issues, but with a few exceptions they do not deal with 'trust' from the informants' points of view.

<sup>17</sup> Seligman, *The Problem of Trust*, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> Inger Lundgren, *Lost Visions and New Uncertainties. Sandinista Profesionales in Northern Nicaragua* (Stockholm: Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology, 2000), analyses how her informants talked about political developments in Nicaragua in terms of 'lack of trust', a key expression 'describing the fragility of social relations' (p. 144).

<sup>19</sup> The link between trust and reputation in the market is noted by John McMillan, *Reinventing the Bazaar. A Natural History of Markets* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 64. According to him, this 'informal device' is dependent on the free flow of information on the market.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Gunnar Dahl, *Trade, Trust, and Networks. Commercial Culture in late Medieval Italy*, (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 1998). Dahl argues that Italians were successful in establishing the risky long-distance trade – where profits are delayed – because trust developed to balance prudence.

<sup>21</sup> Poor women do not, of course, have a lot of gold in their houses but tend to wear the gold they own. Many people in Aleppo are of the opinion that the theft of gold, valuables and cash is committed by family members and not by thieves at large.

<sup>22</sup> Nationalization took place first during the union between Egypt and Syria (1958–61) and secondly during the first years after the Ba'ath takeover. In some cases, as with the banks, enterprises were nationalized during the union, then privatized again, and then re-nationalized after the Ba'ath coup. See Tabitha Petran, *Syria. Nation of the Modern World* (London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1972), especially chapters 7–9.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Elizabeth Picard, 'Managing identities among expatriate businessmen across the Syrian–Lebanese boundary', in Inga Brandell (ed.), *State Frontiers. Borders and Boundaries in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> Later, the army entered Hama, a stronghold of the Muslim Brotherhood, bombarded the city centre and killed perhaps 10,000 people. All over Syria people are still suffering from the effects of that period. Thousands of men and women were imprisoned, many were summarily killed, or simply disappeared. See Middle East Watch, *Syria Unmasked. The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1991), pp. 8–21. In Aleppo most families were affected in some way by these events. A brother of one of my informants was seized and killed by the special forces of the army. The son of another informant is still in prison, awaiting trial.

<sup>25</sup> Volker Perthes, 'Stages of economic and political liberalization' in Eberhard Kienle (ed.), *Contemporary Syria. Liberalization between Cold War and Cold Peace*, (London: British Academic Press, and I.B. Tauris, 1994), p. 61.

<sup>26</sup> According to Eberhard Kienle, 'Introduction' in *Contemporary Syria. Liberalization between Cold War and Cold Peace* (London: British Academic Press and I.B. Tauris), p. 1 this law can be seen as an 'abdication' of the socialist principles of the Ba'ath party. Although the private sector had been given more freedom after Hafez al-Asad came to power, and especially through legislative reforms in 1986, Law No. 10 of 1991 was much more far-reaching than the earlier economic liberalization. Companies and projects covered by the law are supposed to create new jobs and stimulate export earnings. Chapter 6 will discuss more fully how traders in the Aleppo souq talked about this law.

<sup>27</sup> The issues of corruption and bribes are hotly debated all over Syria. While many traders – and non-traders – see themselves as constrained (and humiliated) by a public sector very much permeated by bribes and organized corruption, many Syrians at the same time debate and analyse their own role in the perpetuation of these practices. This theme will be discussed more fully in Chapters 5 and especially 6.

<sup>28</sup> Some traders told me that they had to pay 63 per cent of their profits in tax, but most informants never calculated an exact percentage or an exact sum.

According to Perthes 'Stages of economic and political liberalization', in *Contemporary Syria. Liberalization between Cold War and Cold Peace*, p. 60, the tax-level for businesses was actually reduced in 1991.

<sup>29</sup> In nineteenth century Paris, the majority of small shops were grocery shops. Alain Faure 'The grocery trade in nineteenth century Paris. A fragmented corporation' in G. Crossick and H-G. Haupt (eds), *Shopkeepers and Master Artisans in Nineteenth Century Europe* (London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 155–74. On a global scale selling food and groceries probably constitutes the most important commercial activity.

<sup>30</sup> Historically most Aleppo traders sold what they also produced (see, for example, Abraham Marcus, *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity. Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). Here as elsewhere retail was linked to production, and only with the advance of capitalism were retail traders cut off from a more guild-like organization. See Dorothy Davis, *A History of Shopping* (London: Routledge, 1966), p. 277ff.

<sup>31</sup> A list of such families can be found in Margaret L. Meriwether, *The Kin Who Count. Family and Society in Ottoman Aleppo* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999), pp. 213–16. It is interesting to note that many such families were previously linked exclusively to production.

<sup>32</sup> The low pay in the public sector has contributed to the feminization of the sector in Syria; a phenomenon we can see in many other countries all over the world. But a large part of the public sector in Syria is also seen as more 'sheltered' and 'safe' and thus 'suitable' for women. This is paradoxical, given the generally low opinion and the accusations of bribery and corruption in the public sector.

## Chapter 4

### TRADING NAMES

<sup>1</sup> The importance for a trader of a good name, or reputation, is of course not unique to Aleppo. For a contemporary case where 'the importance' of 'who you are' rather than 'what you do' in business is discussed, see James G. Carrier, 'Mr Smith, meet Mr Hawken', in James G. Carrier (ed.), *Meanings of the Market. The Free Market in Western Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), pp. 129–57. The editors of the anthology *Revealing the Corporation. Perspectives on Identity, Image, Reputation, Corporate Branding and Corporate-level Marketing* (London: Routledge, 2003), John M. T. Balmer and Stephen A. Greyser, note that the interest in 'reputation' is probably linked to the importance of corporate reputation ratings, and 'reputation' has to a large extent replaced 'identity'. For the late medieval traders studied by Gunnar Dahl, *Trade, Trust and Networks*, (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 1998) the reputation 'was imperative for the business. In fact, a good name was, according to most of our sources, of greater value to a person than a large fortune' (p. 272). For a discussion of the importance of reputation in electronic societies, see Rosaria Conte and Mario Paolucci, *Reputation in Artificial*

*Societies. Social Beliefs for Social Order* (Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> A man's reputation according to F.G. Bailey, *Gifts and Poison. The Politics of Reputation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971) 'is not a quality that he possesses, but rather the opinions which other people have about him'. Although my informants would probably agree that 'name' has a give-and-take aspect, they would nevertheless stress the 'work' they themselves have undertaken to create their names. The way traders spoke about their *ism* – name – is close to how Syrians in a more 'tribal' context spoke of their honour (*sharaf*), cf. Annika Rabo, *Change on the Euphrates. Villagers, Townsmen and Employees in Northeast Syria* (Stockholm: Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology, 1986), pp. 81ff. For discussion about the links between 'shame', reputation and honour see Julian Pitt-Rivers, 'Honour and social status', in J.G. Peristiany (ed.), *Honour and Shame. The Values of Mediterranean Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1965), pp. 21–77, (especially pp. 41–2). Name, reputation and honour are clearly closely linked conceptually. Honour, as explained by J.G. Peristiany and Julian Pitt-Rivers, 'Introduction', in J.G. Peristiany and Julian Pitt-Rivers (eds) *Honor and Grace in Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) is paradoxical because 'it is at the same time a matter of moral conscience and sentiment...and a fact of repute and precedence' (p. 5).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. J.G. Peristiany and Julian Pitt-Rivers (*ibid*) who note that those 'whose honor is greatest feel least obliged to defend it'.

<sup>4</sup> In *Reinventing the Bazaar. A Natural History of Markets* (New York: W .W Norton & Company, 2002) John McMillan argues that a tourist will always overpay because 'a tourist is no match for a bazaar merchant' (p. 42).

<sup>5</sup> According to Frank Fanselow, 'The bazaar economy. Or how bizarre is the bazaar?', *Man*, 25 (1990), pp. 250–65, 'bazaar-bargaining' is related to the lack of standardized products. In the Aleppo medina there are both highly standardized and non-standardized products and I could see little difference in consumer behaviour because of these aspects of products.

<sup>6</sup> He literally said: 'We don't have a bazaar' (*ma 'indna bazaar*).

<sup>7</sup> This was exemplified through the proverb: 'Humans are like pomegranates, there are sweet ones, sour ones and in-between ones' (*al insaan mill al rumaan, byiji halou, hamoud wa lifaan*).

<sup>8</sup> In the souq traders commonly classify people living in villages as 'rural people'. The term 'tribal' is usually reserved for people of rural origin who live in specific parts of Aleppo and who are considered as 'nobodies' and without names. While 'peasant-like' among my informants was commonly linked to unsophisticated simpletons, 'tribal' was commonly linked to uncivilized nepotism. Cf. Chapter 5, p. 116.

<sup>9</sup> For illuminating discussion of *asl* and qualities attributed to 'us'/'them', see Lila Abu Lughod's discussion about the Awlad'Ali Bedouin of the Egyptian desert in *Veiled Sentiments. Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> For discussion about Aleppo's historical notables, see Margaret L. Meriwether, *The Kin who Count, Family and Society in Ottoman Aleppo 1770–1840*

(Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> The lack of honour attributed to such new rich was also linked to their perceived close connection with Alawites. Cf. note 8 above and Chapter 5 p. 123.

<sup>12</sup> All over the Middle East *asbraaf* is a prestigious category signalling descent from the Prophet Muhammad. In the Ottoman Empire the *asbraaf* had privileges and important ceremonial functions. In Aleppo the *asbraaf* constituted a large section of the urban population and were an important political 'party'. Cf. Meriwether, pp. 46–8 and Abraham Marcus, *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity. Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 6. My *asbraaf* informants, however, were not from these old Aleppo families because their great-grandfather had arrived from Baghdad about a hundred years ago.

<sup>13</sup> Not only one's origins and family should not be boasted about. A trader should not boast about his reputation; preferably others should do the boasting for him, as noted earlier.

<sup>14</sup> The writing down of family genealogies is common in many parts of the Middle East.

<sup>15</sup> Contemporary Syrian law is notoriously ambiguous concerning male polygamy. It is lawful but a judge may refuse to give a man permission to marry a second time. The man should have the permission of the first wife or have 'lawful cause' (e.g. the first wife does not conceive or she has a severe illness). The husband must also show that he is able to support two wives. The law thus gives the judge power over such cases, but according to many Syrian women I have talked to – apart from the wives of Muslim traders – the judges mainly take the side of the husband. And if one judge refuses, the man may try another.

<sup>16</sup> She was not questioning his right to take another wife – although she clearly did not like it – but she questioned his right to ignore her.

<sup>17</sup> President Habib Bourguiba changed the Tunisian law in 1956. The ban on polygamy was legitimized as being against the essence of Islam, which is the state religion in Tunisia.

<sup>18</sup> Much has been written on the topic of male weakness in the Middle East/the Arab world. See for example Eva Evers Rosander, *Women in a Borderland. Managing Muslim Identity where Morocco meets Spain* (Stockholm: Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology, 1991), p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> It is not surprising that the sheikh used the Italian word 'dotta'. The historical links between Italy and Aleppo have been strong, and Italian was for long a *lingua franca* in the souq. Jews and Christians continued to have strong links with Italy.

<sup>20</sup> Gunnar Dahl, *Trade, Trust and Networks*, p. 294, claims that among the Italian medieval traders he studied such conspicuous consumption was important to show, among other things, the solvency of the trader's credit rating.

<sup>21</sup> This is below the Syrian legal age which is 18 for girls and 17 for boys. But again, the law is ambiguous because the bride and groom may be married at an earlier age if a judge gives his permission. None of my informants reported that



they had difficulties in getting such permissions for themselves or their sons. The legal age of the bride was a non-issue in the souq. For comparison with more 'tribal' Syrian areas, see Rabo, *Change on the Euphrates*, p. 88.

<sup>22</sup> Umm Ali and the bride had, of course, not been present at the men's party, but the DVD recording made it possible for them to participate *post festum*, so to speak. Video recordings are now legion at male wedding parties in Aleppo.

<sup>23</sup> While many in Syria are keen to marry their children to migrants residing elsewhere, my informants were not keen to let their daughters live abroad. They wanted them to stay close to them after marriage. In some cases prolonged sojourns abroad by my informants had been cut short by their wives. I never met a trader's wife who had enjoyed her stay in Western or Eastern Europe. Women, according to the traders, miss their families more than men, who, after all, are kept busy with their trade. Even sons of well-connected traders residing abroad could have difficulties in finding a wife in Aleppo. The eldest son of one of my informants worked in New York as a driver of an airport limousine. He came back on holiday to find a wife among trading families known to his father, but he was not successful and had to return unmarried. Some men told me that, although they knew his father and respected him, they would never marry a daughter to the son, who was a worker 'with no trading interests'. One trader stated that if the young man had had clear plans about returning to Aleppo he might have been able to find a bride. 'We are not that desperate to marry our daughters. There are plenty of suitable men here in Aleppo.' They saw no reason, thus, to marry their daughters to other than 'independent' men.

<sup>24</sup> In the Syrian countryside men with sufficient landholdings are also able to keep their sons close to them for a considerable time. In the Euphrates region sons are married and get support from a common estate even if they cultivate a specific lot.

<sup>25</sup> In such discussions it was often quite useless to argue that 'Western' families could also be close.

<sup>26</sup> Syrians consider their secondary school degree – the baccalauréat – to be very difficult. Many parents pay large sums of money for private tutors or send their children to expensive tutoring institutes.

<sup>27</sup> Such private tutoring institutes are not uncommon in Aleppo. Like so many things in Syria, they operate outside the law, but are all the same recognized and extremely profitable.

<sup>28</sup> This pattern seems quite usual in many Syrian cities.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Arang Keshavarzian, *A Bazaar and Two Regimes. Governance and Mobilization in the Tebran Marketplace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, Department of Politics, 2003), whose discussion about the popular views of the bazaar shows a clear similarity to how some people in Aleppo speak of the *ahl as-souq*.

<sup>30</sup> Muslim traders could, and did, marry foreign non-Muslim women. A number of the traders I know are married to women they met when studying abroad. While such a marriage across the religious divide does not detract from the name of the trader, it does not add to it either.

<sup>31</sup> In Syria 'tribal' people, including the Kurds, are, on the one hand, as already pointed out, considered as less civilized than urban people, but on the other hand, they are also admired by urbanites as being more 'free'.

<sup>32</sup> In the medina and elsewhere in Aleppo women who are unveiled or who do not cover their hair are said to be 'in sports' (*s-poor*).

## Chapter 5

### ALEPPO EVENTS

<sup>1</sup> 'The nostalgic creature' writes Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001, p. 11), 'has internalized this division/ between the 'local' and the 'universal'/ but instead of aspiring for the universal and the progressive he looks backwards and yearns for the particular'.

<sup>2</sup> Old Abu Sleiman, however, who habitually complained about most things in contemporary Aleppo, surprised me one day by suddenly saying that life was not really better before: 'Before there were good people and bad people, and now it is the same. What is good is good and what is bad is bad.'

<sup>3</sup> For analysis of the role of the Syrian parliament and the role of traders in parliament see Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), pp. 166–70, or Volker Perthes, 'The private sector, economic liberalization, and the prospects of democratization the case of Syria and some other Arab countries', in Ghassan Salamé (ed.), *Democracy without Democrats. The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1994), pp. 251–54.

<sup>4</sup> Although some independent candidates were women, the vast majority were men. All those connected with trade were men. In Aleppo there were one or two independent 'professional' Christian women. On the National Front lists there were more women. Many Syrians argue that if the regime did not sponsor women on their lists, not a single woman would be elected.

<sup>5</sup> For discussion of the Chamber of Commerce see p. 125.

<sup>6</sup> ID-cards are extremely important in Syria and every citizen must carry one when conducting any official business or when travelling in the country.

<sup>7</sup> See also Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination. Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999) who has analysed in detail various political jokes in Syria.

<sup>8</sup> A mufti is the highest official Sunni religious authority. Syrian muftis are government employees and are carefully screened for political loyalty. The older brother in this particular family had been murdered by supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood during the events of the late 1970s. The family had a rather shady reputation in the souq. A second mufti, said to be extremely well educated, was appointed during my fieldwork.

<sup>9</sup> The October war of 1973 – in which Egypt and Syria attacked Israel – is officially always described as 'victorious'.

<sup>10</sup> Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, calls this 'a politics of spectacle', pp. 18ff.

<sup>11</sup> Syrians make a sharp difference between ‘manifestation’ (*masiira*) – public gatherings in support of something (usually the powers-that-be) – and ‘demonstrations’ (*masrahbiyye*) – gatherings to voice complaints or political demands. Both manifestation and demonstrations are politically controlled from the top.

<sup>12</sup> The Syrian presidential election was postponed for three days in February 1999, due to the death of King Hussein of Jordan. Syrian dignitaries, including the president, left for Jordan, and nation-wide mourning was proclaimed also in Syria.

<sup>13</sup> The Syrian Constitution stated that the president has to be at least 40 years of age, and Bashar was not yet 35 years old.

<sup>14</sup> Not only school and university examinations were postponed. Planned wedding celebrations all over the country had to be called off, as people did not dare to stage joyous celebrations, in case these were interpreted as joy at the death of the president.

<sup>15</sup> Since many of the regime’s inner circle are Alawites, this aura of religious devotion was not met with approval by many Sunni Muslims, as noted earlier.

<sup>16</sup> Syrian conspiracy theories will be discussed in Chapter 6, pp. 158ff.

<sup>17</sup> Informants later told me that this MP had not been penalized for his action, and most claimed that he had acted in earnest.

<sup>18</sup> This was not really an election but a referendum in Syrian terminology.

<sup>19</sup> In the Western, not least British, media Bashar al-Asad was ethnocentrically depicted as ‘our’ man since he had studied in England and was thus thought to have been exposed to, and breathed in Western notions of openness, democracy and development. This presumes that without such an exposure Arabs cannot become democrats.

<sup>20</sup> When Bashar al-Asad became president after his father in the summer of 2000 most of my informants were relieved by the peaceful transition of power. Like many others, they also hoped that economic reforms in the pipeline would finally be set in motion. There had been talk of private banks, of a stock market, of currency reforms and increased economic links with the outside world. Bashar al-Asad would, informants said, usher Syria into the twenty-first century through his interest in, and concern about, information technology. They also hoped that investigations into cases of corruption and the mismanagement of public enterprises would be speeded up. Many were initially very hopeful that new political winds would lead to real reforms. There were rumours that the regime planned to allow the formation of new parties. Regardless of hostility towards the regime, most Syrians I met that summer were more than willing to give the new president a chance. At first there were many hopeful signs. Bashar al-Asad indicated that he wanted to put an end to the visual cult of his father and his family. Photos, posters, and banners became more modest and not so ubiquitous. Professional unions were given new freedoms, journals connected to the Communist Party could be sold more openly. A private newspaper was allowed. Political salons were permitted in the houses of prominent Syrians, and even state-controlled newspapers published critical articles. There were far-reaching plans to reform the public sector, including privatizing public

companies. But about six months after Bashar al-Asad came to power a counter-movement became discernible. The honeymoon was over and no significant changes were to be seen in the economic or political running of the country.

<sup>21</sup> A trader told me the following 'archaic' story to illustrate why Syrians were no longer united in a struggle for justice, and hence were easily divided by a clever regime: 'Once there was a *wali* who wanted to increase taxes, but his minister told him that it would be difficult because people would protest. The *wali* tried, but people protested and the taxes were not increased. But the minister thought about the problem and then announced that he had a solution. He told the *wali* to ask each subject for an egg, to be placed in the official treasury. People came and delivered their eggs. They were of all different kinds and sizes. Some had a pigeon's eggs, others had ducks', ostrich's, turkeys' or hens' eggs. After a week the minister told the people that they could come back and pick up their own, but only their own, egg. The minister watched. Some did not bother to come because their eggs had been so small. Some who came simply took the largest egg they could find. Most were, of course, not able to find their own egg. All were discontented. The minister went to the *wali* and told him he could raise the taxes now. "There will be no demonstrations. People are no longer united, instead there is conflict between them, because the eggs have been mixed up".'

<sup>22</sup> During those summer weeks when Aleppians waited for Bashar to become president the following joke was one of the many that were spread around and laughed over: 'Prime Minister Miro and Bashar went to Saudi Arabia to solicit economic aid in order to raise the salaries of the employees in the public sector. The Saudis were willing to help the Syrians but only on three conditions. They would have to apply three Islamic laws. First of all Syrian women had to be veiled in public. "No problem" said Miro and Bashar. "We can accept that." Secondly the Syrians would have to close all shops selling, and all restaurants serving, alcohol. "No, problem, we can manage that", Miro and Bashar said. But thirdly the Syrians would have to cut off the hand of all thieves. "Can we live without our hands?" Miro and Bashar said and went back to Syria without any economic aid.' This joke highlights at least three issues which were much debated at that time; the rumours that salaries would be increased once Bashar came to power, the weakness of the Syrian economy, and the political influence of the conservative oil-rich states. The fourth issue, that of the application of Islamic rules, was interpreted as the willingness of Syrian power-holders to accept anything as long as they did not suffer themselves. It had a different edge for Muslims and Christians. Very few of my informants in the souq articulated a wish for Islamic laws to be applied in all spheres of life. It was rather the wives of some traders who expressed a stronger commitment to impose Islamic law on all Syrians. Many Christians feared the development of increased public Islamic rules, while many Muslims underlined the hypocritical Islamic veneer of those in power.

<sup>23</sup> Such an urban disdain for the rural influx is found all over Syria; yet, rural life is simultaneously frequently idealized. My Aleppo informants often enjoyed being invited to villages to eat 'clean food' and breathe 'clean air' The bedouin

(Arab) ethos is also admired and idealized all over Syria as a symbol of independence and free spiritedness. Cf. Rabo *Change on the Euphrates*, pp. 119ff.

<sup>24</sup> For Damascene views on the influx of rural people, especially Alawites, into the city, see Christa Salamandra, 'Consuming Damascus. Public culture and the construction of social identity', in Walter Armbrust (ed.), *Mass Mediations. New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 188–89.

<sup>25</sup> Some complaints about others' lack of urbanity are obviously related to a sense of loss among the Aleppians who have become declassé in the aftermath of the Ba'th revolution.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Mahmoud Hreitani and Jean-Claude David, 'Souks traditionnels et centre moderne. Espaces et pratiques à Alep (1930–1980)', *Bulletin d'Études Orientales*, Institut Français de Damas, Tome XXXVI (1984), pp. 13ff.

<sup>27</sup> For details on the Bab al-Farraj project, the opposition to, and development of, this project, see Jean-Claude David, 'Projets d'urbanisme et changements dans les quartier anciens d'Alep', in *Politiques Urbaines dans le Monde Arabe*, (Lyon: Maison de l'Orient, 1984), pp. 351–65.

<sup>28</sup> In Aleppo Bab an-Nayrab, outside the old city walls, represents a 'popular' and rather low-class area today, and a symbol of uneducated Aleppo.

<sup>29</sup> The activities were mainly directed at saving Bab al Farraj, and not Bab an-Nayrab.

<sup>30</sup> There was a similar, and perhaps even more dramatic, project in Damascus at the same time under which large chunks of the old souq surrounding the Ummayyad Mosque were torn down. According to what many Damascenes said, the plans for this project had been laid down by French specialists during the Mandate in order to remove the Arab trading character of the medina, and instead stress the ancient Greek and Roman remains. This project made direct access to the mosque, where dignitaries prayed on religious holidays, possible by car. At the time the shops and houses were torn down the Damascenes were very upset and regarded it as a typical gesture of the powerful, but hated, rural invaders. Now, after more than twenty years, people are reconciled to the new look of the medina, or have simply forgotten what it used to look like.

<sup>31</sup> The 'events' of Aleppo started in June 1979 when 83 Alawite student officers were killed by one of their teachers, at the Aleppo Military Artillery Academy. This incident marks the start of the open and ruthless infringement of civil rights in Syria during these particular years. From the spring of 1980 to the winter of 1981 the army's Special Forces were in Aleppo, forcibly opening the souq when it was closed and hounding suspected Muslim Brotherhood supporters and those leftists who were allied with the Muslim Brotherhood. These forces were led by Refat al-Asad. Cf. Chapter 2, note 4 and Chapter 3, p. 66.

<sup>32</sup> For an eye-witness description of this period, see Adli Qudsi, 'Kulturelle Erbe und Aleppo – der Start des Rehabilitierungsprozesses', in *Damaskus–Aleppo. 5000 Jahre Stadtentwicklung in Syrien*, (Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philip von Zabern, 2000).

<sup>33</sup> PLANCO Consulting, 'Rapid assessment of the public sector contributions. Rapid assessment of private sector activities', *Project for the Rehabilitation of the Old City of Aleppo*, (Essen, Germany: unpublished report, 1998).

<sup>34</sup> This performer was Sabri Mudallal who was over 80 at the time. He started his career as a prayer-caller – and a singer of religious songs. It was only at the age of 70 or so that he began to appear in more 'secular' contexts. He was much admired in the souq. A number of my informants were keen participants in religious musical events.

<sup>35</sup> The poem by Sandy Feinstein at the beginning of this book was actually first read at such a festival in 1999.

<sup>36</sup> For a discussion on similar and yet also different processes in Damascus, see Christa Salamandra, 'Consuming Damascus'. For a discussion about heritage debates in Istanbul, see Ayfer Bartu, 'Who owns the old quarters? Rewriting histories in a global era', in Caglar Keyder (ed.), *Istanbul between the Global and the Local*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc. 1999), pp. 31–45.

<sup>37</sup> In 2002, however, there was a great deal of activity in the central Bab al Farraj lot. A huge Intercontinental hotel was under construction, filling a great deal of the 'empty' space. My informants were divided in their views about this turn of events. One trader, who was himself building a hotel nearby, was very pleased and claimed that these quarters would be restored to their earlier importance. He welcomed what he saw as a gentrification. Others thought that such a hotel would ruin the atmosphere of these central quarters. But most of my informants were simply completely indifferent.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Chapter 2, note 13.

<sup>39</sup> According to Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad*, 'the number of social, cultural, scientific, educational, religious and charity organizations' has decreased since 1980 (p. 261). The number of charitable organizations has risen in the last few years, but 'civil society' was still in the early twentyfirst century deeply hedged in by the presence of emergency laws.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Raymond Hinnebusch. 'Liberalization in Syria: the struggle of economic and political rationality', in Eberhard Kienle (ed.), *Contemporary Syria. Liberalization between Cold War and Cold Peace* (London: British Academic Press and I.B. Tauris, 1994), pp. 97–113.

<sup>41</sup> In the spring of 2002, however, when I asked the chosen trader about his work in 'Afie he was very enthusiastic. 'We are doing very good work, and we work independently.' One of his, initially, sceptical friends concurred: 'Afie luckily never became a super-organization, but instead specializes in helping poor people in need of heart surgery, and it does very good work.'

<sup>42</sup> Some of Syria's charitable organizations are very old. Today most acts of charity are probably 'organized' informally.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Annika Rabo, 'Beyond the veil. Gender, state and development in Jordan and Syria', in Sara Goodman and Diana Mulinari (eds), *Feminist Interventions in Discourses on Gender and Development* (Lund: Department of Sociology, Lund university, Lund, 1999), pp. 189–201, and Dawn Chatty and Annika Rabo, 'Formal and informal women's groups in the Middle East', in D.

Chatty and A. Rabo (eds), *Organizing Women. Formal and Informal Women's Groups in the Middle East*, (Oxford: Berg, 1997), pp. 1–22.

## Chapter 6

### TRADING ON THE MARGINS

<sup>1</sup> For concise and clear analysis of the relative independence of the Syrian state, see Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), pp. 203–7.

<sup>2</sup> For insightful analysis of World Bank and IMF policies – ‘pure capitalism’ – and their effects in Trinidad, see Daniel Miller, *Capitalism. An Ethnographic Approach*, (Oxford: Berg, 1997), especially chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> The former Soviet Union and now Russia is Syria's largest creditor. In 1991, when Russia agreed to waive most of the debt, it actually amounted to about USD18 billion, approximately equal to the Syrian GNP. Part of this debt was being serviced through the export of Syrian products, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, which greatly benefited Aleppo industrialists and traders. For full discussion see Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad*, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> For interesting analyses of rent, rentier-states and the rent economy, see Hazem Bablawi and Giacomo Luciani (eds.), *The Rentier State* (London: Croom Helm, Istituto Affari Internazionali, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Syria is also negotiating with the EU to join the Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area but, compared with other neighbouring states, the negotiations are slow. Syria is, however, a participant in various EU-sponsored so-called MEDA programmes. In October 1998, for example, this programme sponsored contact days in Damascus and Aleppo for representatives of textile industries seeking European partners. There is a Syrian-European Business Centre in Aleppo. In the Euro-Med partnership discussions the EU is a firm advocate of privatization and deregulation.

<sup>6</sup> See Volker Perthes, ‘Stages of economic and political liberalization’, in Eberhard Kienle (ed.), *Contemporary Syria. Liberalization between Cold War and Cold Peace* (London: British Academic Press and I.B. Tauris, 1994), pp. 60–4.

<sup>7</sup> In June 2002 the government unified the three official exchange rates with the US dollar to a single one in an effort to co-ordinate its currency policy to those of neighbouring countries. For discussion on exchange rates in earlier decades see Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad*, pp. 53–9.

<sup>8</sup> Traders involved in export and import said they were faced with an enormous amount of paper-work and intimate dealings with many bureaucracies. Many informants claimed that few traders imported or exported in their own names, because possible economic losses incurred a loss of their licences. One informant who produced garments for export only did this through a big trader with a large export licence. This exporter has companies covered by Law No. 10 of 1991, granting tax exemptions, and it goes without saying that my informant had to pay a price for this service. Another informant

told me that he used to import items for one of his factories but now he bought on the Syrian market instead. He insisted that it was not much more expensive than importing himself.

<sup>9</sup> For a pertinent discussion of the varied forms of 'globalization' see Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections. Culture, People, Places* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 17–19. For a very useful overview of anthropological approaches to globalization and transnationalism, see Michael Kerney, 'The local and the global. The anthropology of globalization and transnationalism', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24, (1995), pp. 547–65.

<sup>10</sup> Traders, as mentioned in Chapter 3, also used the term *tujaari*, 'commercial' to denote 'cheap' and bad quality in general. Such products can come from any country, but since non-costly products are always Syrian or from East Asia, Western products were seldom considered 'cheap'. Interestingly, the term *baladi* (from the country/ domestic/national) has a totally different connotation in the souq in connection with foodstuffs. *Baladi* nuts, raisins and oil are always considered superior to foreign goods like Iranian, Chinese, Romanian or American. They are also more expensive. *Watani* and *baladi* belong to different semantic fields, the former linked to the state and the Ba'th party and political rhetoric, and the latter, it seems to me, to home and homeland, and the good things in life. *Baladi* items like nuts sold in the medina may actually come from Turkey. One informant told me that 'they are of the same kind as the Syrian (i.e. the 'home-kind') but, frankly, no Armenian would buy Turkish nuts if they knew.'

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Miller, *Capitalism. An Ethnographic Approach* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), p. 80, comments that most brands have no global image.

<sup>12</sup> By periphery I do not mean a geographical periphery but rather an economic one which may be located anywhere in the world. For analysis of 'local-global' companies, see Miller, *Capitalism*, pp. 58ff.

<sup>13</sup> See Karen Tranberg, 'Dealing with used clothing. Salaula and the construction of identity in Zambia's 'Third Republic'', *Public Culture* 6 (1994), pp. 503–23 and 'Transnational biographies and local meanings. Used clothing practices in Lusaka', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21,1 (1995), pp. 131–45, for interesting analysis of the cultural practices in second-hand clothes.

<sup>14</sup> Official Syrian–Iraqi relations have been tense and fraught with conflict for decades, due, in part, to different interpretations of the Ba'th ideology. The border has been more or less closed since the late 1970s when Syria supported Iran against Iraq in the long Iraq–Iran war. Syrians who were accused of having political contacts with Iraq were severely penalized. The opening of the border in 1997 was officially said to enable Syrians to help their 'sister people'.

<sup>15</sup> The *kafīl* system in Syria is similar to that in the oil-rich countries on the Arabian Peninsula, whereby all work-permits have to be sponsored by a native citizen. It can clearly be argued that 'foreign' prostitution has not disappeared in Aleppo with the need for sponsors. Quite possibly 'artists' now pay more to Syrian middlemen.

<sup>16</sup> For Istanbul perspectives on the 'Russian trade' see Caglar Keyder, 'A tale of two neighbourhoods' in Caglar Keyder (ed.), *Istanbul between the Global and the*



*Local*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), pp. 173–85, and Mine Eder, *From 'suitcase' merchants to organized informal trade? The case of Laleli district in Istanbul*. Paper presented at the Fourth Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting, Florence & Montecatini Terme, 19–23 March 2003, organized by the Mediterranean Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute.

<sup>17</sup> Syrian public employees need a special permit to leave the country. In some departments the minister has to sign such a permit. All Syrians need any number of permits for the various security agencies to even apply for a passport. Young men who have not done their military service have special difficulties in obtaining a passport. Married unemployed women commonly need the permission of their husbands to leave the country. If the woman is publicly employed, the permission of her employer is needed, rather than that of her husband.

<sup>18</sup> Traders obviously have many advantages compared with other citizens when moving across borders. The vast majority of Syrian migrants work as labourers on a seasonal basis in Lebanon. In the 1980s many worked in Jordan. The oil-rich countries on the Arabian Peninsula attract both highly educated specialists and labourers, and many Syrians are attracted by the high wages. It has become increasingly difficult, however, to get work-permits for these countries. During my fieldwork not a day passed in Aleppo without some non-trader telling me his story of working in Europe, or asking me for information about work opportunities in Sweden. A surprising number of Aleppo inhabitants had relatives or friends in Sweden. Many asked me if the fantastic stories of fame and fortune told by migrants returning on holiday were true. My hedged answers always seemed unsatisfactory. Whereas I talked about discrimination or the general difficulties facing any migrant, they wanted to know how much money people earned. If I talked about Swedish taxes, they asked about the standard of living. Work-related questions about Europe, the West, or Sweden would often initiate complaints about their own dismal opportunities in Syria with low incomes and high expenditure. 'Tell me the truth. Don't you have a better life than we do?' When hearing my feeble explanations about migration laws and Fortress Europe many complained: 'But we are willing to work very hard. Why cannot we be made welcome?'

<sup>19</sup> Cf. note 8 above.

<sup>20</sup> For fuller analysis of this complex phenomenon in the Middle East and in particular in Syria see Annika Rabo, *Change on the Euphrates. Villagers, Townsmen and Employees in Northeast Syria* (Stockholm: Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology, 1986), pp. 152–71.

<sup>21</sup> In a country like Syria therefore, mediation did not disappear with the advent of modern bureaucracy. On the contrary. For other examples and analysis of contemporary and 'modern' mediation, see Jean-Louis Briquet and Frédéric Sawicki, *Le Clientelisme Politique dans les Sociétés Contemporaines* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> Since the 1990s there has been an enormous increase in the world-wide academic and non-academic interest in, and concern over, corruption. See, for

example, the four-volume Robert Williams (ed.), *The Politics of Corruption*, (Cheltenham: Elgar Reference Collection). Volume 1, *Explaining Corruption* (2000) contains diverse approaches to the analysis of corruption. Corruption is no longer regarded as a phenomenon which will wither away with increased 'modernization'. Rather it is seen as endemic to all contemporary societies, but its strength or weakness differs from place to place. While a great many scholars stress that the new interest in corruption emerged after the end of the Cold War, they differ as to why. To some the concern over corruption is a sign of health, where people no longer accept this phenomenon (see Moisés Naím, 'The corruption eruption', *Brown Journal of World Affairs* II, 2 Summer, (1995), pp. 245–61 and *Explaining Corruption*, pp. 263–79), while to others the concern on the part of international agencies like the UN, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund could be seen as a way to 'explain the increasingly apparent shortcomings of the international capitalist system' (Robin Theobald, 'So what really is the problem about corruption?', *Third World Quarterly* 20,39, June (1999), pp. 491–502 and *Explaining Corruption*, pp. 470–81). For useful worldwide case studies see Gerald E. Caiden et al. (eds.), *Where Corruption Lives*, (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, Inc., 2001), and for interesting methodological approach see William L. Miller et al., *A Culture of Corruption? Coping with Government in Post-communist Europe* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001). For more focus and analysis on the state itself see Josiah McC. Heyman (ed.), *States and Illegal Practices* (Oxford: Berg, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Akhil Gupta, 'Blurred boundaries. The discourse of corruption, the culture of politics, and the imagined state', *American Ethnologist* 22, 2 (1995), pp. 375–402, who notes that through talk of corruption citizens implicate the state in their everyday lives.

<sup>24</sup> 'Who loves his *watan* (homeland) on three thousand lira a month?' (USD 60) a woman in Aleppo asked me rhetorically when we were debating whether bribe-taking was unpatriotic.

<sup>25</sup> Twenty years ago when doing fieldwork in the Euphrates region, I was often told it had the most corrupt practices in Syria. Corruption was said to be fed by the ignorance of the native rural population and the influx of outsiders who did not care about the future of the region. The Arabic word '*fasaad*' carries the same connotations as the English term corruption, namely, spoiled, evil and decayed.

<sup>26</sup> This incident, it should be mentioned, was the only time bribes were talked about in religious terms.

<sup>27</sup> Bribes are, of course, only one indicator of corruption. The analysis of my informants (and many others in Syria) concurred with that of many scholars, where other indicators of corruption include absence of the rule of law, lack of an independent judiciary and lack of independent mass media.

<sup>28</sup> In turn, it seemed to me that ordinary employees in the public sector expressed no antagonism towards the private sector as such, since many of them depended on it for their survival, or were connected to it through friends and relatives. Public employees did not identify with the public sector. Their hopes and aspirations for their own future were not bound to public employment.

Public employment was not a source of pride or good reputation, and it inspired no loyalty. Instead, bribes had, for many, become an institutionalized perk. One informant told me that some public employees pay a large sum of money to be transferred to the tax offices in Aleppo and to the police, because of the possibilities to take bribes. Interestingly, I heard exactly the same thing about public employees in a Euphrates province in the late 1970s. So either ‘clean’ employees became corrupted by the trading spirit of Aleppo, or corrupt employees came to Aleppo to earn a fortune! This informant concluded that no matter how corrupt or dishonest one became through trade, traders were still cleaner than public employees.

<sup>29</sup> The sense of right, the sensibilities or the faith in politicians or business leaders may, of course, be offended by grand bribery.

<sup>30</sup> This father did not need to talk about the hardship and humiliation imposed on all new soldiers, and the often boring inactivity after the first six months. The reputation of military service was so bad that well-off non-traders and traders alike tried to pay to have their sons serve in an ‘easy’ place.

<sup>31</sup> John Waterbury, ‘Endemic and planned corruption in a monarchical regime’, *World Politics* XXV, 4, July (1973), pp. 533–55 and in Williams, *Explaining Corruption*, pp. 83–105, discusses Morocco and sees corruption as part of patronage. Patronage is seen by many scholars as ‘parochial’ or ‘traditional’ corruption and differentiated from ‘market’ or ‘modern’ corruption. However, Donatella Della Porta, ‘The vicious circles of corruption in Italy’, in Donatella Della Porta and Yves Mény (eds.), *Democracy and Corruption in Europe* (London: Pinter, 1997), pp. 35–49, underline that corrupt politicians in Italy have developed both ‘traditional’ patron-client relations and ‘modern market’ networks.

<sup>32</sup> Theobald, ‘So what really is the problem about corruption?’, in Williams, *Explaining Corruption*, (p. 496) stresses that ‘traditional’ patronage is ‘no longer on offer’ which explains the increase in petty corruption.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Paul Heywood, ‘Political corruption: Problems and perspectives’, *Political Studies* XLV, 3, Special Issue, (1997), pp. 417–35 and *Explaining Corruption*, pp. 337–55.

<sup>34</sup> Talking about failure to retrieve a debt is rather shameful (unless the culprit is a relative) and lessens the reputation of a trader, and this is probably why women were more willing to admit losing money to traders, or that men close to them had lost money. It is also probable that women invest more with traders, while non-trading men go into some kind of partnership arrangement. The case of Kallase and Amino is, however, exceptional because they set up what can only be described as private banks with the promise of fantastic returns.

<sup>35</sup> The years between 1997 and 2000 were extremely dry and Aleppo depends much more on agricultural production than Damascus. The ties to al-Jaziira, the agricultural ‘island’ of the northeast, are still very strong. Villages and small towns close to Aleppo are exceedingly important for the medina traders, as has been discussed. Many traders survive because villagers still get married, and still buy gold and a trousseau of textiles and cloth for the bride, as Abu Imad said. In the summer of 2000 many villagers around Aleppo were extremely poverty-

stricken. Poor people came to Aleppo looking for jobs of any kind, competing in a job market that was already saturated. Heart-breaking stories were told of people rummaging through garbage and begging for scraps. Many of my middle-aged and younger informants said they had never experienced such grim poverty. Old people compared the situation either to the starvation years of the First World War, or to the drought years of the 1950s. When traders complained about the frozen economy, they often shamefacedly added: 'But *al-hamdullilah*, we are surviving and we have food. We thank God.'

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Chapter 3 note 2 for analysis of the concepts of *stability, settlement and independence*.

<sup>37</sup> For analysis see Emma Jørum, 'The October 1998 Turkish–Syrian crises in the Arab press', in Inga Brandell (ed.), *State Frontiers. Borders and Boundaries in the Middle East*, (London, I.B. Tauris, 2005)

<sup>38</sup> Those supporting the bombing were Kurds.

<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, nobody thought it strange that only women were to be 'saved' as married refugees. The whole issue of these marriages passed and I never heard that anybody had actually married any refugees from Kosovo.

<sup>40</sup> This informant was a Sunni Muslim, although such a notion is more developed in Shi'a theology.

<sup>41</sup> It became clear, after some time, that the sense of being well-informed was not totally well-founded.

<sup>42</sup> The topic of 'a paranoid turn in politics' or conspiracy theories is enormous. Importantly, as stressed by Geoffrey Cubitt, *The Jesuit Myth. Conspiracy Theory and Politics in Nineteenth Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), there is a difference between conspiracy theory and an analysis in which conspiracies are regarded 'as a normal and widespread activity' (p. 1). Although my informants saw conspiracies beneath the surface in world politics they did not think this was normal behaviour. Conspirators were successful because they did not all behave in the same way. Propagators of conspiracy theories, according to Cubitt, attribute events in the past and present to human volition, they sharply differentiate between good and evil, and they see a difference between a superficial and a hidden reality. These three aspects may be more or less pronounced. They were all present in conspiracy talks in the souq. In Harry G. West and Todd Sanders (eds), *Transparency and Conspiracy. Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), there are a number of highly interesting anthropological case studies from various parts of the world. In the introduction to the book, 'Power revealed and power concealed in the New World Order', Sanders and West link buzz-words like 'transparency', 'anti-corruption' and 'good governance' to a widespread feeling that 'something is not as it is said to be' (p. 2). This 'something' easily feeds into conspiracy theories or elaborations on hidden meanings in the world.

<sup>43</sup> While many contemporary conspiracies discussed in the literature deal with Western and notably American fears about aliens, and plots and conspiracies related to new technologies (cf. Jane Parish and Martin Parker (eds), *The Age of Anxiety. Conspiracy Theory and the Human Sciences* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers/

The Sociological Review, 2001), conspiracy theories in Syria dealt with much more concrete and tangible threats.

<sup>44</sup> Although most of my informants did not see Syria's lack of industrial development as planned from the outside, many linked current difficulties to their historical heritage. 'Turkish colonialism' or 'five hundred years of Turkish rule' was commonly brought forward as an explanation for perceived underdevelopment (*takballouf*) in Syria and the Middle East. This argument is part of the ideological underpinnings of Arab nationalism and is propagated by parties of the left and the ruling Ba'th party. 'Turks' exploited 'Arabs' and 'Arabs' had a historical mission to liberate themselves. Cf. Inga Brandell and Annika Rabo, 'Arab nations and nationalism. Dangers and virtues of transgressing disciplines', *Orientalia Suecana* LI–LII (2002–3), pp. 35–46, and Annika Rabo, 'Trade across borders. Views from Aleppo', in Inga Brandell, (ed.), *State Frontiers. Borders and Boundaries in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005). See also Michael Herzfeld, *The Social Production of Indifference. Exploring the Symbolic Roots of Western Bureaucracy* (Oxford, Berg and Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1992) for an analysis of the importance of 'Turkish occupation' for the development of Greek nationalism.

<sup>45</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 134ff. for an account of blame and self-accusation in Greece.

## Chapter 7

### TRADERS OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

<sup>1</sup> 'Economic man' is a well-known essential abstraction in neoclassical economic theory. He is the actor who always calculates rationally and acts instrumentally. The economic man is lifeless and not very interesting, even as an abstraction. He has also become obsolete! Market man – *homo mercans* – is actually more interesting, according to Christina Garsten and Anna Hasselström, 'Homo mercans and the fashioning of markets', in Christina Garsten and Monica Lindh de Montoya (eds.), *Market Matters* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 209–32) because his actions are not predetermined, and the 'road from A to B is, in the world of *homo mercans*, a road of uncertainty and insecurity.' Market man has to deal with 'negotiations and interpretations with others, as well as, with himself' (p. 213). Garsten and Hasselström's market man reveals the dimension of an actor on the contemporary global market where self-interest is being questioned and new forms of governance and self-discipline are being discussed. And to understand *homo mercans* we need more tools than those provided by neoclassical economic theory.

<sup>2</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 124. We should not, Harvey cautions us, confuse 'the transitory and the ephemeral' with more fundamental transformations. To Harvey it was not yet clear if there was a new regime of accumulation and a new mode of regulation. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the shifts, to my mind, have been more than ephemeral.

<sup>3</sup> James G. Carrier, 'Mr Smith, meet Mr Hawken', in James G. Carrier (ed.), *Meanings of the Market. The Free Market in Western Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), p. 150.

## GLOSSARY

<i>abl as-souq</i> <i>al abdaath</i>	‘the people of the market’ ‘the events’ – euphemism for troubles in late 1970s and early 1980s
<i>abl</i> <i>akblaaq</i>	family, kin good manners, proper behaviour and morals
<i>ashiiire</i> <i>ashraaf</i> <i>asl</i> <i>asl wa fasl</i> <i>bidoun asl wa fasl</i>	tribe, clan descendants of Prophet Muhammad origin ‘origin and style’ ‘without origin and style’
<i>artiist, aratiist</i> (pl.) <i>‘afie</i> <i>‘aib</i> <i>‘aid al adba</i>	‘artist’ i.e. prostitute strength shame, shameful feast of the pilgrimage month, ‘the small holiday’
<i>‘aid al fitr</i> <i>‘aile</i>	feast of at the end of Ramadan, ‘the big holiday’ family (nuclear)
<i>baale</i> <i>baladi</i>	used clothes national
<i>dabke</i> <i>dbu al hijja</i>	‘stomping’; popular dance Month of the pilgrimage
<i>fasaad</i>	corruption

<i>frugh</i>	pas-de-port, what you pay to get a lease on property
<i>galabiyaat</i>	floor-long shirts
<i>hajj, hajja</i> (f.)	pilgrimage and a person who has done the pilgrimage to Mecca, polite address
<i>balaal</i>	religious permitted and good
<i>haraam</i>	religiously forbidden
<i>hasab wa nasab</i>	'good descent'
<i>ibn 'aile/ bint 'aile</i>	son/daughter of a 'good' family
<i>ibn/ abna</i> (pl.) <i>balaal</i>	'sweet', well brought up son(s)/offspring
<i>ibn naas</i>	son of 'good' people
<i>infatab</i>	opening (economic)
<i>ism</i>	name, reputation
<i>istiqlaal/ mustaqiil</i>	independence/independent
<i>istiqraar</i>	settled
<i>istithmaar</i>	utilization
<i>jilbaab</i>	long coat
<i>kafiil</i>	sponsor (for visa or work permit)
<i>kebaab</i>	minced meat
<i>kibbe</i>	meat with bulghur; in Aleppo made in many different ways
<i>khauf allah</i>	fear of God
<i>masiira</i>	parade
<i>masrahiyye</i>	demonstration
<i>medina</i>	city centre, old city
<i>mu'allim</i>	teacher, master
<i>moune</i>	provisions
<i>mulk</i>	private ownership
<i>mubaafiz</i>	conservative



<i>nafsa shi</i> <i>nauroz</i>	the same thing Kurdish new year
<i>rashwa</i> <i>rosiaat</i>	bribe Russian women
<i>sanad</i> <i>saana'</i> <i>sh'abi</i> <i>shaleb</i> <i>sharaf</i> <i>sharaake/ shirke</i> <i>sharqi, sharqiin</i> (pl.) <i>souq</i> <i>stook</i>	voucher for a loan, promissory note shop-helper 'popular' (Fr.) Chalet honour companionship/company Eastern, Easterners market 'stock' i.e. cheap manufactured goods
<i>taajer, tijaar</i> (pl.) <i>tijaari</i>	trader 'cheap quality'
<i>zakaat</i> <i>zaamia</i> <i>ziyaara</i>	alms (tax) religious gathering; Sufi order visits to religious places
<i>thaqaafe</i> <i>muthaqqaf</i> (adj.) <i>thiqa</i>	up-bringing, cultivation cultivated, educated trust
<i>'umra</i>	(small) pilgrimage to Mecca on occasions other than during the <i>hajj</i> -period
<i>waqf, awqaf</i> (pl.) <i>wasta</i> <i>wasiit</i> <i>watan</i> <i>watani</i>	religious endowment mediation mediator, middleman nation, fatherland national



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