Who Are the Samaritans?

The Samaritans are an old-fashioned community. The group displays hardly any of the features of modern communities that have given social scientists ample reason to redefine the notion of community and, ultimately, the task of anthropology itself. They are not an “imagined community,” such as a nation, a scattered collective of professionals, or a transnational group of migrants.1 Rather, the Samaritans resemble the small-scale communities of the earliest ethnographies with their locally bounded places of residence; their seemingly self-contained religious, philosophical, and kinship systems; and the face-to-face relationships prevalent among their members. Their commonality is not merely symbolically imagined, but a structural fact; their community is not a passing association, but a durable social entity. While it is not my aim to discuss the reality or constructedness of such traditional ethnographic settings, I mention these assumptions to account for the epistemic difference between the Samaritan case and many of the explicitly modern forms of human association that anthropologists today have a penchant for.

If I had to adumbrate the outstanding features of the Samaritan community in a few sentences, I would focus on its religion and size. On a simplified comparative level, the Samaritans are one of the small, highly localized religious sects and minorities that appear throughout the Middle East, such as the Sabeans, Yazidi, or Zoroastrians. Like these groups, the Samaritans are a “pre-Islamic” community in the temporal sense, a group that has resisted Islamization to an extent just sufficient for survival. Unlike the other minorities, however, the Samaritans share with Judaism the set of formative ideas and common rituals by which they explain their identity. The Samaritan religion and Judaism are two strands of Israelite religion that have undergone separate historical developments. While the latter has evolved into a world religion embodied in a globally dispersed and culturally heterogeneous peoplehood, the former has withered away, barely surviving into our times. In due course, it will be shown how this happened (Chapter 2).

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Owing to too many historical moments of attrition, the Samaritans are today a very small community. They currently number approximately seven hundred individuals who can ill afford dispersal. Thus they dwell almost exclusively in two demarcated residential centers: on their sanctuary Mount Gerizim—Hargrizîm in Hebrew—which rises above the West Bank town of Nablus (Nāblus), and in Holon (Holôn), a former “development town” on the southern edge of the congested Tel Aviv area in Israel (Figure 1). The size and spatial boundedness of the community notwithstanding, it constitutes today no single sociocultural field. The historical and political developments of the past century have created considerable cultural, political, economic, and linguistic differences between the two places, and thus the Samaritans inhabit in many respects a bipolar world. They do not share the religions of the majorities in Nablus or Holon, but they do share their languages, ways of life, and symbols. This split has its own intriguing implications for social, political, and individual identities. It impinges on almost all aspects of the internal social order and is discussed throughout this study in different contexts.

Research Conditions

I have known the Samaritan community since September 1991, when I set out for my first spell of fieldwork, which lasted until February 1992. The aim of this sojourn was to gather material for my M.A. thesis on Samaritan ethnicity and marriage, which I finished in 1993. This campaign was a fruitful one and had a long-term effect on my research. The genealogical charts I drew up then with the help of informants, as continuations of census lists from the beginning of the twentieth century—chiefly that of Paul Kahle—have also served the present study: updated to reflect subsequent marriages and births, they are the basis of my descriptions of Samaritan family relations as well as my analysis of marriage patterns (the topics of Chapters 5, 6, and 9). During that half-year, I think I gathered an essential understanding of “life as lived” in this community: the wholeheartedness with which people relate to their religion and their sincere emotional attachment to its symbols, Mount Gerizim and

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2 The internal census at the time of writing identifies 756 Samaritans as of January 1, 2013, of whom 357 live in Nablus (Mount Gerizim) and 399 in Holon (A.B., nos. 1126–1127, January 15, 2013, p. 4).
3 Humer 1993.
4 Kahle 1930; see Chapter 5.
5 In the phrase of Abu-Lughod 1993, p. 34.