

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

COFFEE READING AND NARRATIVE HEALING
IN BINT JBEIL

by
GHADA FOUAD DAGHER

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
to the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies
of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences
at the American University of Beirut


Beirut, Lebanon
December 2023

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

COFFEE READING AND NARRATIVE HEALING
IN BINT JBEIL

by
GHADA FOUAD DAGHER

Approved by:



Signature

Dr. Livia Wick, Associate Professor
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies

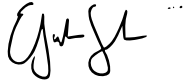
Advisor



Signature

Dr. Sylvain Jean Daniel Perdigon, Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies

Member of Committee



Signature

Dr. Elizabeth Matta Saleh, Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies

Member of Committee

Date of thesis defense: December 5, 2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Livia Wick, Dr. Sylvain Perdigon, Dr. Kirsten Scheid, and Dr. Elizabeth Saleh for their unwavering support and invaluable guidance throughout this journey. Their encouragement has been instrumental in the completion of this thesis project and their belief in me has been a constant source of inspiration. I am also thankful to my family and friends for their continuous emotional support and faith in me.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Ghada Fouad Dagher

for

Master of Arts

Major: Anthropology

Title: Coffee Reading and Narrative Healing in Bint Jbeil

Coffee reading or *tobsir* is a common practice among the women of Bint Jbeil in South Lebanon. However, in the official histories of the town, historians and anthropologists were silent on this topic. The main reason of this silence is that coffee reading is looked upon by some conservative groups in the town. It is still allowed though, and most women practice it for fun. Other than being a superstitious, useless, and religiously forbidden act, I show in this ethnography the other lenses where this practice could be studied. In chapter 2, I unravel the reasons why the women of Bint Jbeil need *tobsir* in their daily lives and look at this practice as a choreographed conversation that brings out the anxieties of these women to the surface at a time where the country is in a multidimensional crisis. In chapter 3, I present the healing side of *tobsir*, where I give the *bassara*, the coffee reader, the role of a healer who after building a connection with the women being read that enables the exchange of emotions, she transforms through her cup reading the narratives of these women into ones about the universe away from every day worries. Lastly, in chapter 4, I study the two modes of interpretations the *bassarat* use while practicing *tobsir*: the form-based interpretation and the intuition-based interpretation. I go deeper into the formed signs in the coffee cups and their meanings and show how these *bassarat* activate their intuition in this kind of divination.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	1
ABSTRACT	2
TABLES.....	4
INTRODUCTION	5
TOBSIR AND THE WAYS IT BRINGS OUT ANXIETIES TO A CHOREOGRAPHED CONVERSATION	22
TOBSIR AND THE WORK OF HEALING	40
TOBSIR, INTERPRETING SIGNS AND ACTIVATING INTUITION	66
CONCLUSION	80
BIBILIOGRAPHY	82

TABLES

Table

1. Coffee Signs from my Cup and their Meanings	12
2. A Dictionary for the Coffee Signs.	67

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Back in 1971, when my grandmother was pregnant with her 9th child, a Bedouin *bassara*, a fortune teller, used to pay her a visit every Thursday morning. My grandparents' house is in the middle of the Bint Jbeil Market, and on Thursdays, traders from various towns in South Lebanon and religious backgrounds and nationalities used to come to this market to build their tents and sell their different products like clothes, shoes, kids' toys, fish and vegetables. This made my grandparents' house a place where visitors coming to the market could rest and drink coffee. Upon the entrance of this Bedouin *bassara* to the house, the atmosphere was cheerful as she sang to my grandmother by clapping the Arabic coffee cups against one another in her hands. Based on the description my mother gave me, she was a stunning brunette lady dressed entirely in black, with wide eyes, a nose piercing, and a tattoo on her chin. My grandmother used to tell her "I want a baby boy who is brunet, "sabi asmar", with wide eyes just like you," and this *bassara* would reply "Inchallah ykoun metleh!" (I hope he looks like me).

In the Arab culture the *bassara* was mainly embodied by Bedouin women with the physical appearance I just described. The word "bassara", or fortune teller, refers to the woman who can practice divination. When I was in school, my Arabic teacher gave us the poem "Qari'at al-Finjan", meaning "cup reader", by the late Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani. This poem was performed as well by the late Egypt singer Abdel Halim Hafez in April 1976. Behind it, there is a symbolic meaning that this cup reader is trying to convey to Qabbani; She raises the issue of Arab nations and its peoples, specifically the Palestinian cause, through using several symbols (like using the word "woman" to refer

to “nation”) and semantic overtones. The Lebanese singer Samira Tawfeeq also has a song called “Bassara wa Barraja”, meaning “fortune teller and astrologist” that my mother admires. She always recommended this song to me, so that I can get a better idea of the Bedouin *bassarat*. In the song’s video clip, Tawfeeq is dressed like a Bedouin *bassara* and predicting the future of a man, a woman and an old man while singing the lyrics. She tells them stories related to love, marriage, and others. This embodiment of the *bassara* role has shifted, however, in Arab culture in the 1960s and 1970s to a local woman- a housewife, an old lady or any woman with astute divinatory skills. This is the case of a great number of women in my hometown, Bint Jbeil, South Lebanon. The town’s name is composed of two nouns; “Bint” which translates to “daughter” and “Jbeil” which translates to “mountains”. This results in the compound name “the daughter of the mountains”. It has been said that a princess once migrated from Jbeil (Byblos), after her family forced her to marry a man she didn’t love, so she ran away to my hometown to start a new life. There, she built an emirate with a prince to protect her and this is how the town was named “Bint Jbeil”, meaning the daughter who came from Jbeil (Bazzi 1998, 20).

Stories about *tobsir bil ahweh*, which literally means “divination through coffee”, have a history in Bint Jbeil. It is a form of divination that falls under the category of tasseomancy or tasseography¹, where a *bassara*², or a coffee-reader, reads and examines the cooled coffee sediments left at the bottom of the cup after drinking the coffee. Through this divination practice, the *bassara* predicts future events related to the life of the person being read, and gives a description of the past and present events

¹ A form of divination or fortune-telling that involves interpreting patterns in tea leaves, coffee grounds, or other sediments left in a cup after drinking. “Tasse” is a French word that means “cup”, and it originally comes from the Arabic word “tassa”. So tasseomancy or tasseography is the form of divination that is done through a cup.

² “Bassarat” as plural form.

in the life of this person. Coffee reading is related to much older methods of divination and rituals like libations or liquid offerings that were used for praying purposes in ancient Greece (Shannon 2017). Sometimes, after the drink was poured, the remaining sediments in the cup were examined as signs of oracle. In the Old Testament, it was mentioned that Saint Joseph had some skills in divination using a cup. The two goddesses of destiny of Hattian origin, Istustaya and Papaya, also used bowls of liquid that were poured for scrying in several cultures. We can thus conclude that the coffee cup goes back or belongs to an old tradition of ceremonial vessels included in divination (Shannon 2017).

The most important element in *tobsir* that I discovered in my fieldwork is the concept of “al hassa”, meaning “intuition”. This concept has weight among the community of *bassarat* in the Bint Jbeil, since through activating it, they reveal and unravel the unknown of the women of the town. Throughout my fieldwork, they frequently told me that they “just feel stuff”. They have this strong psyche in them that makes them feel powerful and confident enough to predict the unknown, and in some cases, diagnose anxieties and uncertainties. However, for some, having this power is malevolent and scary, and for others, it is helpful and does not cause any harm. In my work, I show how the concept of intuition is manifested through one form of divination, which is *tobsir bil ahweh*. I will be referring to the practice simply as “tobsir”, as it is the commonly used term in the town by the local women, or as “coffee reading”, if I want to use an English term.

My grandmother’s story is one of the many stories I heard from my mother and the townies about *tobsir*. Historians like Mustafa and Hikmat Bazzi and anthropologists like Ali Bazzi wrote lengthy books about their town Bint Jbeil. These books, however, cover numerous aspects of the town, such as the social, economic, geographical,

historical, traditional, and so on, but never mention anything about coffee reading among the Bint Jbeily women, despite the fact that it is a common practice in the town. The main reason for this silence is that *tobsir* is looked down upon by some in the village, especially a certain kind of religious and conservative group of people. Afifa, the wife of my mother's cousin, affirmed to me this negative view of *tobsir* by sharing with me an incident that happened with her once. There was a woman that visited her one time after knowing that she can coffee-read. While reading her cup, Afifa said to this woman "God knows, but there is a woman from your family that will get pregnant with a boy. If this comes true, what will you bring me?". "Two kilos of *Baklawah*", the woman answered. Few days later, this woman comes back to Afifa with 2 kilos of *Baklawah* and informs her that she was right. In the meantime, her conservative brother-in law witnesses this incident and gets furious at Afifa. "You are lying to people! Don't let me know that you are carrying a cup in your hand ever again!" he shouted at her. Nevertheless, even though *tobsir* is looked down upon, it is still allowed. No earthly punishment is implemented if practiced since the majority of the women in the town consider it for fun or leisure. It is practiced in women's gatherings, during their *sobhieh* (morning gathering) or *asrounieh* (afternoon gathering), and therefore it is considered non-threatening and non-political, and this is why there is a certain freedom to engage in it. At the same time though, I want to note that there is a certain ambiguity in the way people talk about *tobsir* in the town: On the one hand, if there is an exchange for money, they consider it sinful, since it is "mal haram" (unlawful money). This is where they start to say that "It is only God who knows the unknown and the destiny of a person". On the other hand, as I just said, they say "It is ok " to do it since it's "for fun", and it gives them hope and eases anxieties related to the unknown.

Historically, there were well-known *bassarat* from Bint Jbeil who were not only famous in the town, but also in the nearby towns. Some of them practiced *tobsir* for money, like Em Jamil, and others, like Em Ali and Em Hassan, practiced it to serve people only and not in exchange for money. Based on what my neighbors explained to me, Em Ali had her own superstitious thoughts. She lost a handsome young son, whom she used to call "chaqqur," (blonde). She believed that he died because he was struck by the evil eye of the villagers. She refused to take a shower for years after his death, saying that she did not want the "chhar" (soot) to get washed away from her chest. As part of the old tradition in South Lebanon, relatives of the person who dies put soot on their chests as a way to show their sadness and lamentation.

My mother, Zahra Baydoun, is my best friend. Being her only daughter has created a strong bond between her and I. But even though this is the case, I'm still discovering new things about her every now and then. She is always full of surprises. In 2018, while we were drinking Arabic coffee together, she revealed to me a secret. She confessed that she can practice *tobsir*! My jaw dropped for a while after this shock. As a matter of fact, I always knew about her strong intuition and her vivid dreams, which is something that she transferred to me, but never about her acquisition of the skill of *tobsir*. I was curious to know why she kept this a secret from me and the townies. She said that she didn't want this reputation. Some of the *bassarat* in the town like being known for their astute skills in *tobsir*. They do want this reputation. But it is not the case with my mother because she didn't want people to come over just for the sake of reading their cups and exploiting her. This discovery has changed so many things though. First, our mother-daughter bonding became stronger as we started to have our weekly, and sometimes daily, *tobsir* sessions, and second, my mother started to practice *tobsir* publically, but only for my friends and people close to the family. Since then, I

started to watch her reading coffee cups for me and my friends, and this is where my mother started to share with me her stories about *tosbir*. At the age of 16, she used to gather in the morning or afternoon with her friends and cousins at my grandparents' house or in the field, or "hakli", to have fun and spend some quality time together. This gathering or "Jamaa " used to end with them coffee-reading for each other. They first learnt the practice from Em Hassan since she used to come and sit with them every day, and then it became a daily routine among them.

On March 19, 2021, at 9:00 AM, I sat with my mother in our village house in Bint Jbeil. The aim of this sitting was to make her read my coffee cup. Knowing that she is a busy housewife, I had to tell her about this sitting two days prior. While she was holding the *raqweh*, (coffee pot) with her right hand to pour coffee in the cup, and a cigarette in her left hand, she started to open up about her past, family, and childhood. Even though I had not asked her anything yet, she started the conversation this way all of a sudden. I did not want her to stop since she seemed emotional, and felt that it was an open space to share her personal stories with me. She narrated how she raised my uncles and took great care of my grandparents since she was a 9-year-old girl. She wanted to continue her education so badly, but life was harsh on her, which hindered her from following and pursuing her dreams. Being the only daughter among 8 boys came with a price. My grandfather is an old fashioned and protective father who did not allow her to continue her education. She was a genius at school and wanted to be a psychologist or a gynecologist when she grows up. She was not making much eye contact while narrating as she was looking towards our garden with her hands clasped together. In the middle of the conversation, I noticed that the coffee in my cup was a bit runny. This meant that no dregs would remain to form the residues, which would leave no room to do the reading. For this reason, I gave her my cup to add more coffee from

the *raqweh*. After adding more coffee to my cup, my mother told me to put the cup aside so that the coffee could get thicker. Then, she continued to talk about her personal emotional stories, and her tears welled up. After a few minutes my cup was ready to be read.

My Cup Interpretation

“*Wow! You have a lot of interesting things in your cup*”, was the first sentence uttered by her when she had a first glance at it. Then, for about 18 minutes, she did the interpretation of my cup.

*You have a **snake** that is trying to bite you, and there is a person under it who is trying to calm you down and tell you not to worry about it. Even though it is far away from you, it keeps on approaching you to bite you. You have two **eyes**, one that is evil and one that is good. But the evil one is under that snake.*

*You have a **white pigeon** that is holding a letter for you that will make you feel happy.*

You are overwhelmed and thinking about a lot of things. You are trying to get rid of this thought and to forget something that happened to you in the past. When you're stepping forward, a wall is pushing you back to the past. In this case, you're using crying as a way to release it.

*You also have a high mountain, like a **ladder**, that will lead you to what you are wishing for. The end of this ladder will be a good one. You are standing at a high point and raising your **hands** and praying for a dream to come true.*

*You have two **scorpions** that are not too far and not too close to you. They show you that they love you, but they don't.*

*You have three **butterflies** rotating around you that will tell you good news related to you or to other people.*

You are also standing in the middle of a group, and you are fighting or arguing with one person in this group, but eventually you will win this fight.

*You will receive a **present** that will not attract your attention and a **phone call** that will disturb you.*

You are hugging someone that you really care about.

My mother stopped the interpretation and asked me to make a wish silently in my heart while stamping in the cup with my thumb. I inquired as to whether there was a specific side of the cup to stamp. “No, wherever you want. You can stamp on the bottom, side, or middle,” she replied. Following her instructions, I stamped with my thumb in the middle, made a wish, and turned back the cup to her. She checked the stamp and interpreted the following:

You wished for something big. You made multiple wishes. They need time to be achieved. You have a high and white mountain with layers.

During my mom’s interpretation of the cup, I was asking her about the meaning of the signs she was seeing. Below is a table listing the signs along with their meaning.

Table 1. Coffee Signs from my Cup and their Meanings

Sign	Meaning
Snake	Enemy
Evil Eye	Envy

White Pigeon	Good News
A Set of Entangled Lines	Overthinking
Open hands	Praying or Wishing for the Best
Teary Eye	Crying
Mountain	Standing High
Box	Present
Hug	Love
Scorpion	Enemy or Jealousy
Butterfly	Good News
Wall	Obstacle

This detailed interpretation of my coffee cup, has taught me a lot about *the pre-tobsir and tosbir* stages. As I mentioned, there is a certain way of performing *tobsir* and preparing the coffee. This *tobsir* session with my mom also triggered in me some questions. I thought of the ways *tobsir* brings out stories from the past, refreshes memories, and how it builds social bonds. It made me think as well of *tobsir* as a site that enables emotional exchange between people.

When it comes to Em Khodor, my neighbor, I have a different story to tell. "Em Khodor ma betshuf mnih bas betbasser bel ahweh," which translates to "Em Khodor can't see well but still can coffee-read", is a sentence that I grew up hearing from the villagers in Bint Jbeil. This reputation about Em Khodor made me curious to know her when I was still a teenager, and also made me ask myself questions about her even before meeting her. "How can she coffee-read if she can't see well? What is her mode of interpretation? What is her way of knowing the signs? Does she rely on her intuition only?" I thought to myself.

Em Khodor's house is less than a minute walk from our house, but I never met or saw her when I was a child. After she partly lost her vision due to a hereditary eye problem that runs her family, her daughter, Hanadi, kept her company whenever she went outside her house. Her husband passed away in 2012 from cancer. And even though he was born mute, he was full of life and down to earth. He was loved and respected by the villagers. He left Em Khodor and his kids a small plot of land with fig and olive trees. They sometimes sell the allocated crops from this land. Her eldest son, Khodor, owns a small café, where the men of the town gather every night. He left the country 5 years ago, and moved to Australia with his wife and son. His younger brother, Ayman, is currently filling his place in the café.

Em Khodor was and still is known for her astute *tobsir* skills. Back in the 2000s, she made Arabic coffee every afternoon and sat on the top of the stairs leading to her house (see figure 2). As soon as the women outside and inside the neighborhood saw her sitting, they immediately gathered themselves and joined her so that she could read their cups. The first time I got to know Em Khodor better was in 2016 when she visited us. I was back then a 19-year-old in my first university year. She came and coffee-read for me for the first time and this is where I had the chance to experience coffee-reading for the first time in my life. I was astonished by Em Khodor's astute skills despite her eye condition. When I started my fieldwork journey for this project back in March 2021, I started visiting her frequently in her old vintage house. It is a house that hides a very long history and holds dozens of memories. It starts with a downward concrete staircase that leads to the outside lounge and the garden of the house. The walls are not painted and the floor is not tiled, yet Em Khodor's and her 8 children's warmth and cheerful vibes make the place bloom with hope and positivity. One of the things that caught my eye when looking at Em Khodor's garden was the presence of an old grave.

It is the grave of her husband's cousin who passed away on Feb 25, 1928. He was a 7-year-old fat and handsome boy, who was believed by the townies that he passed away after being inflicted by a woman's evil eye. Em Khodor said that this woman came for a visit when the mother of this little boy was showering him. Instead of saying "smallah", she told the mother that her son is "ad al kharouf", meaning he is the size of a sheep- implying that the boy was fat. The next day, the mother wakes up and finds the lifeless body of her son lying on the bed. After checking his body, she saw that there was a form of an eye imprint on his stomach. Seeing this mark, the mother directly linked the death of her son to the malevolent eye of that woman. Because there was heavy snow on that day and the roads were blocked, the boy's family couldn't take his body to the cemetery to bury him, so they ended up burying him in the garden.

Em Khodor always welcomed me by singing the famous song "Ahla Bhatallah", by the late Lebanese singer Sabah. I sat for hours listening and collecting her adventurous life and *tobsir* related stories. Her journey in *tobsir* started for fun when she was 17 years old. They were five friends who gathered every day to have fun and socialize in a field called *Rayhan* in Kafra, a nearby town of Bint Jbeil. Among these friends, there was Hayat, the eldest in the group who taught them how to coffee-read. She frequently gave them guidance and life advice through reading their coffee cups. Once, she predicted that one of the girls in the group was two-faced and didn't have good intentions. After a while, the girls realized that Hayat's foreseeing was accurate as this girl turned out to be saying whatever she sees and hears in their gatherings to the parents of Em Khodor and the other girls. After knowing this girl's true color, the girls cut her out of the group and stopped seeing her. Hayat has predicted Em Khodor's destiny since that time as well. While reading her cup, she saw that her future husband will be mute and that she will have 8 children. Her first born will pass away, and then

she will be giving birth to 3 girls in a row at the beginning, making her in-laws unhappy about it, and then 5 boys in a row. Indeed, Em Khodor got married to a man from Bint Jbeil who turned out to be mute, as I previously mentioned, and had 8 kids with him.

From my visits to Em Khodor and the stories she told me, I thought of *tosbir* in another way as well. I thought of it as a way women use not only to know their destiny, but also to get some advice from the *bassara* if something fishy is going around. The *bassara* seems to bring out solutions and to protect and warn her readers when there is danger or something bad is happening or about to happen.

Divination practices had been studied by several anthropologists, namely Greek such as Nadia Seremetakis, and Turkish such as Zeynep Korkmaz and Zeynep Devrim Gürsel. Nadia Seremetakis explored the interconnectedness of divination, media, and the modern body. She argued that divination practices (like coffee reading and evil eye exorcism), have evolved in tandem with the development of modern media technologies and the transformation of the human body in the modern era. She contends that divination is not an archaic or obsolete practice but has adapted to the modern world through the mediation of various technologies, such as photography, film, and digital media. These technologies have allowed for the creation of new forms of divination and have reshaped the way people perceive and experience their bodies. For her, the act of divination, whether through traditional means like tarot cards or through contemporary practices like reading horoscopes online, involves the modern body's engagement with these media, resulting in a complex interplay between technology, the supernatural, and the human experience (Seremetakis 2009). As for Zeynep Korkmaz, she examined commercial divination as a way to explore the gendered aspects of labor and intimacy in the context of neoliberalism. She focused on coffee divination as a traditionally feminized practice for socializing and caregiving in Turkey, which has evolved into a

commodified service that involves women, youth, and LGBTQ individuals as both workers and consumers. In this work, she also introduced the concept of "feeling labor," wherein divination serves as a means to produce an affective intersubjective space for the expression and experience of emotions. By studying coffee divination from this lens, she discovered that it creates commodified forms of intimacy, enabling women, youth, and LGBTQ individuals to explore their emotions (Korkmaz 2015). As for Zeynep Devrim Gürsel, she took coffee reading to another level. She studied personal and political stories within the narratives of coffee reading through "Coffee Futures", a short film she directed in 2009 (Gürsel 2012). In 2009, Turkey was trying to be part of the EU, so the anthropologist showed how people were using coffee reading not only to know things about their personal lives, but also to know the political destiny of Turkey (Gürsel 2012).

Other than being seen as only a useless, superstitious, and a religiously forbidden act, I wanted to shift some perspectives and showcase, like these anthropologists, that divination practices (specifically coffee reading) can be also perceived from other lenses, and that it can create a relationship with human beings and affect their emotions. In this ethnography, I show these other lenses. In chapter 2, I unravel the reasons why the women of Bint Jbeil need *tobsir* in their daily lives and look at this practice as a choreographed conversation that brings out the anxieties of these women to the surface at a time where the country is in a multidimensional crisis. In chapter 3, I present the healing side of *tobsir*, where I give the *bassara* the role of a healer who after building a connection with the women being read that enables the exchange of emotions, she transforms through her cup reading the narratives of these women into ones about the universe away from every day worries. Lastly, in chapter 4, I study the two modes of interpretations the *bassarat* use while practicing *tobsir*: the

form-based interpretation and the intuition-based interpretation. I go deeper into the formed signs in the coffee cups and their meanings and how these *bassarat* activate their intuition in this kind of divination.

My interlocutors in this ethnography are women from Bint Jbeil in their 20s and 30s, and *bassarat* in their 50s and 60s. In terms of methods, I conducted fieldwork in Bint Jbeil from March 2021 until September 2022, where I visited the *bassarat* in their houses, used life histories to collect the stories and experience of the *bassarat* in *tobsir* and oral history to have a historical glimpse of the history of *tobsir* in the town, informally interviewed the *bassarat* and the women of the town, adopted participant observation to engage in the practice and carefully analyze the interpretations of the coffee cups and the instructions the *bassarat* gave to the women being read. I audio recorded these interpretations, transcribed and translated them to English and resorted to anonymity as well by using pseudonyms.

Before delving into the essence of this research, I want to share some of the difficulties I faced while conducting fieldwork in the town. It is true that I grew up in Bint Jbeil, but my social relations in the town are very limited. I mostly know people in my neighborhood, including my childhood friends and their parents. This is because I never went to the town school but to another school in Ain Ebel, a nearby town of Bint Jbeil. Throughout this project, I had the chance to get to know the people of my hometown, and thanks to my mom and her acquaintances, I had the opportunity to meet other *bassarat* like Samia and Kamila. Additionally, when my cat, Bino, went missing for 21 days I met new faces, since I was searching for him every single day on the streets in the town and asking people around me if they saw him. For those who didn't know me well in Bint Jbeil, after this incident, Bino and I became famous, and some people even gave me the nickname "The Girl Who Lost Her Cat". The time I started this

research was a bit critical as well. I wanted to meet more participants at the *bassarat*' houses, but this practice seemed to have reduced to a certain extent after the spread of COVID-19. Also, some of the *bassarat* were annoyed in the past by the visitors who came only for the sake of engaging in *tobsir*. This behavior made the *bassarat* feel exploited and mistreated, hence pushing the townies away in order to protect themselves. Conducting research in my hometown, my house, and my comfort zone may sound easy, but it was in fact hard at some point. One of the challenges I faced on a personal level was that I had my mother as one of my interlocutors. I have known her for the past 26 years as the mother who raised me and took great care of me. Through this study, I had the chance to look at her as Zahra, the *bassara*. However, some circumstances pushed me to another edge. An edge that made me a bit anxious concerning my research. I had to be caught up in *tobsir* for several reasons while doing fieldwork. This reminded me of Favret-Saadeh's fieldwork journey on witchcraft in Bocage, France (Favret-Saadeh 1990). In this work, she presented how anthropologists around the world used different participation techniques while conducting their fieldwork on witchcraft. When she first started her fieldwork in the Bocage in 1968 on rural witchcraft, she found an abundance of anthropological work by European folklorists and Anglo-Saxon anthropologists, especially Africanists and functionalists, on the topic. However, the European folklorists did not have direct knowledge of rural witchcraft, so they were asking people around, like local elites and a few peasants, about it, but "this was usually followed by a few skeptical anecdotes that made fun of the believers" (p. 190). The French ethnographers had no interest in conducting research about witchcraft, and the Anglo-Saxon anthropologists adopted more participant observation as a tool to collect information about witchcraft. As for Favret-Saada, she "had no choice but to accept being affected by witchcraft" (p. 189). She was not merely

a participant-observer; She had to be involved in witchcraft to better understand it and gather information about it from her interlocutors. Being caught up in witchcraft, meaning being either a bewitcher or a bewitched, was her only resort to get to the information she wanted since her interlocutors refused to talk to her if she wasn't one of them. The peasants wanted her to be involved in witchcraft for her own sake and not for research and science. As a result, she felt torn between two pitfalls: if she participated in her fieldwork, her research would turn into a "personal adventure." And if she tried to observe and keep her distance, she would not get a fruitful result as she wanted. As an outcome, she experienced some struggles in her fieldwork because she was caught up in the witchcraft sessions and was not able to write down fieldnotes. She also had anxiety because of this personal involvement (Favret-Saada, 1990). Even though my interlocutors were smooth with me and answered all my questions, like Favret-Saadeh, I felt the need to be closely engaged in *tobsir* to better understand it and see what kind of impacts it had on the women of the town. Nevertheless, I had the fear this anthropologist had, which is turning my research into a personal adventure, especially when my cat went missing. At that time, I felt that I was in dire need of any source that gave me hope after trying so many ways to find my cat, and *tobsir* was this source. In chapter 3, you see two sides of me- the anthropologist, and the desperate emotional human being who wants to find her lost cat. I was torn between these two sides. And the close engagement in *tobsir*, affected my personal behavior for a while. Since I was a child, like my mother, I've had a strong intuition. But mine is manifested through vivid dreams that usually give me signs and warnings in my daily life. So, after being caught up in *tobsir*, I started to dream about *bassarat* and weird stuff that I find hard to remember. This situation changed my psyche for a certain amount of time. Also, when I used to hear bad news from the *tobsir* readings, I felt scared and worried and my dream

visions and intuition intensified. That being said, I can tell that I felt and understood the reactions and feelings evoked by my interlocutors, whether the *bassarat* or the women being read, when they practice and engage in *tobsir*. After spending a lot of time with them, I started to feel their excitement and joy when the women being read heard good news from the *bassarat*, and their disappointment and fear when they received bad news. In the latter case, I went through some guilt tripping phases as well, because somehow I felt that I'm being responsible for causing such bad feelings or psychological harm for these women, even though I had their full consent for their participation in this research. Through this journey, I discovered and unraveled so many layers about *tobsir*. These layers will be addressed and explained in detail in the following chapters. But, from my personal experience, I can tell that this practice can have a strong and close relationship with human beings, but at the same time, engaging in it is not easy and does in fact take a great amount of energy.

CHAPTER 2

TOBSIR AND THE WAYS IT BRINGS OUT ANXIETIES TO A CHOREOGRAPHED CONVERSATION

At the beginning of my fieldwork, the word "Jamaa", meaning "gathering", was repeated over and over again by my interlocutors. The fact that it was a gathering and that it was all women made me think of *tobsir* as a form of gendered sociability that kept the women of Bint Jbeil together. I thought of *tobsir* in this case as a practice that leads to creating a close relationship among women where they have the chance to be intimate with each other and strengthen social bonds (it is not always the case though, as I will show in the next chapter, because some women would be only exploiting the *bassarat* or looking at them as the weirdos of the town who have extraordinary powers, i.e., intuition or sixth sense). The anthropologist Amy Mills examined divination through coffee-reading (*fal bakmak* in Turkish) as one of the daily practices that links neighbors together in bonds of sharing, support, and reciprocity and as a way to enter the community of neighbors and build friendships in Kuzguncuk, a neighborhood in Istanbul (Mills 2007, 339–340). In my work, I also observed *tobsir* to be a practice that brought neighbors together. However, with time, I came to observe another essential side to *tobsir*: it is also a site where fears and worries related to marriage, livelihoods, and class are getting discussed in a controlled and choreographed manner by the *bassara*.

In this second chapter, I reflect on *tobsir* as a site that creates bonds, as a site of fun and leisure, but most importantly, as a site where the *bassara* brings out anxieties in a choreographed conversation. After further digging and listening to numerous stories about *tobsir* from the *bassarat* and the women being read in Bint Jbeil, I discovered that

this practice opens an opportunity for the townies not only to spend quality time together, bond, and "have fun" (*tesleye*), but also to reveal their anxieties and to remember and feel nostalgic for the past. Every time I opened the subject of *tobsir* during my fieldwork, I noticed a glowing spark in the eyes of the *bassarat* and the other women who engage in *tobsir* in the town. The first thing that came to their mind when I uttered the word "tosbir" was their "Jamaa". Whether it is a group of girls or a one-on-one session with the *bassara*, the women spoke of the enormous and precious value of the practice for these women. "You know, we were young girls among ourselves who used to gather every day and *nbassir* (coffee-read)", said one of the *bassarat* to me. In Bint Jbeil, the *bassarat* are mostly women. However, the people being read could be men or women. The presence of men, though, happens merely when the *bassara* is from their family or someone very close to them. And when these men gather, there have to be women among them. In other words, men can be read and may engage in *tobsir*, but they don't visit the *bassarat* in their houses for this reason. Indeed, *tobsir* is part of a gendered division of homes, visits, and leisure activities.

At least since the late 1980s, historians and anthropologists have written about Bint Jbeil. The writers are mainly well-educated men from the famous Baydoun and Bazzi families. Hassan Baydoun and Waddah Joumaa published a thick book of annotated pictures. They include photographs and descriptions of the way women in Bint Jbeil used to cook and clean together with their neighbors. They write about how the traditional food list was passed from grandmothers to mothers to daughters. The *Markouk* bread, for example, was one of the dining table essentials. Its making requires a collective effort from the women in the neighborhoods. Cooking *Hareesa* was another traditional food that women made together during *Ashura*. The authors discuss cooking-together as an entertaining tool for the women in the town, where they gathered in one

place not only to bake the bread but also to bond and socialize (Baydoun and Joumaa, 146–148). They also include pictures of women sitting on the shore of the Bint Jbeil pond back in the 1960s to wash the dishes, which they consider another meeting point for the women of the town (Baydoun and Joumaa, 75). They have pictures as well of Southern women carrying jars on their heads all the way to their homes after filling them with water from the natural spring (Baydoun and Joumaa, 146). In this regard, I recall my mother telling me about my grandmother carrying such jars for her family back in the 1950s and 1960s and waking up at dawn to collect firewood to warm up the water for showering and housekeeping use. My neighbor Hana told me as well how she and her siblings used to wake up at 4:00 AM in the late 1970s and early 1980s to make the *Saj* bread with their mother, collect olives from their fields next to Ain Ebel, a nearby town of Bint Jbeil, plant tobacco, and prepare their *moune*, meaning food storage, for the upcoming year, such as *Zaatar*, *Makdous*, *Zeit Zaytoun*, *Kaak*, *Kammoun*, and *Maamoul*. Indeed, domestic work has changed significantly in the past decades with the extension of running water and electricity to homes, and with the shift to global kitchens with new kinds of spices, goods, and recipes. Yet, women in the town continue to be raised with the idea that they should help their mothers in any activity related to food or housekeeping. The historians and anthropologists of the town note this and write about it as a site of women's sociability.

Historians, anthropologists, and writers of the town write about women getting together to cook and clean; however, they rarely write about other forms of women's gatherings. Gathering around *tobsir* is a widespread practice among the women of the town, yet rarely do scholars write about it. As I previously mentioned, the historian Mustafa Bazzi wrote a book of 1730 pages about Bint Jbeil's past and present political, social, economic, and cultural developments but never mentioned coffee reading or

tobsir (Bazzi 1998). The same applies to the anthropologist Ali Bazzi, who wrote an ethnography of Bint Jbeil focusing on memory and comparing before and after the 2006 war that destroyed huge parts of the village (Bazzi 2007). The only local writer who mentions a divinatory practice is Hikmat Bazzi. He wrote a short section entitled "Al Tobsir aw Fateh al Kitab" ("Divination or Opening the Book")—a form of Quranic reading that sheikhs (men) perform—in his history of the town. In this section, he explained that even when people say "Katheb al mounajjimoun wa law sadakou", which translates to "Do not believe the astrologists even if their predictions are right", they still somehow believe in fortune tellers and palm readers. And this is where he shared a personal story about visiting a sheikh who did *fateh el kitab* for him. Here, he quickly added that "I don't believe in this stuff," but that he needs to tell this story because the sheikh's predictions became credible. The latter predicted that Bazzi will experience a dangerous accident when he reaches his thirties, and if he survives it, he will live until he is 80 years old. Indeed, Bazzi, after a while on November 27, 1947, did experience this accident—he was shot and survived (Bazzi 1998, 291-293). Thus, Hikmat Bazzi mentions *fateh el kitab* as one of the divination practices in the village and tells this anecdote that revolves around believing and fate. However, again, he did not mention coffee reading among the women of the town, and most of his book is about the political and social history of the town.

I suggest that there are a number of reasons for this silence in the "official" histories of Bint Jbeil. First, *tobsir*, as I reflected in the introduction, is looked down upon as a rural and pre-modern practice. This is observable in Hikmat Bazzi's note, where he writes, "I don't believe in this stuff, but I need to write it". And because of the victory against Israel in 2006, historians and anthropologists write about Bint Jbeil in terms of resistance and war and probably consider coffee reading a practice that is part of a

separate, female, private sphere disconnected from the public, political, and military sphere. Finally, I would say that the official writers' silence about *tobsir* has to do with the gendered lens through which they are writing. In their books, women's activities include cooking and cleaning but do not include leisurely get-togethers or divination. Thus, writers have mainly refrained from making *tobsir* the focus of books and articles, yet they are visible practices of everyday life in Bint Jbeil.

In the following sections, I will discuss how *tobsir* appeared in my fieldwork among the "jamaa" of Bint Jbeily women.

"The tobsir is for fun because we are usually a group of people sitting together every day in the afternoon"- Hawraa, a woman from the town.

On a cozy Saturday afternoon in February 2022, at 4:45 pm, a bonding scene filled with joy took place in our living room. Four young women from the town—Hawraa, Aya, Hiba, and Mariam—had arrived and were waiting at the front door of our house after showing interest in participating in my research. I've known these women since my childhood, but we weren't close friends. In fact, they were the friends of a close friend who moved to the United States with her husband five years ago and now has two little boys. Their giggles and excitement were radiating all over the place, giving me a reason to cheer up after a long day. I went down the stairs, opened the front door for them, and welcomed each one with a tight hug. Then, we went upstairs and entered the living room. My cats were sitting and snuggling on the couches next to the *Sobia* (a heater with fuel oil). One of them, Bino, jumped and ran towards the girls to welcome them. When Hiba saw him approaching, she freaked out and hid behind Aya's back, as she has a big fear of cats. We all burst into laughter at that moment, spreading

joy and positive vibes in the room. To avoid any further scares, I carried my cats and took them outside the living room.

The scene, as always with *tobsir*, is a choreographed performance. Everything is set. The girls sat on the big couch next to each other, and I sat on the small one facing them. My mom came, welcomed the girls, and left the room for a while, as she wanted to get showered and change her clothes before joining the sitting. It is not uncommon for the *bassara* to arrive a bit later after the women have gathered and started chatting. I went to the kitchen and prepared the Arabic coffee. When the coffee was ready, I entered the living room and served it to the girls. We started to chit-chat to fill each other in on some updates about our lives in the past six years. Hawraa is a 24-year-old married woman, a mom of a 6-year-old boy, and a translator. Hiba is a 23-year-old single woman and a physicist who is trying to move to France to pursue a Ph.D. Aya is a 24-year-old single woman and a social worker who works at the Red Cross, Bint Jbeil office. Mariam is a 23-year-old newlywed woman and an architect. They are all well-educated working women who, since the economic collapse in Lebanon started, have been wondering how to protect their livelihoods and middle-class living conditions, either by emigrating and getting higher degrees or by finding ways to provide the best possible education for their children to be able to emigrate one day.

My mom finally came and joined the gathering. She took the girls' cups of coffee and turned them upside down and left them aside to cool. When they cooled, my mom prepared herself to start reading them. The girls grew a bit quieter and sat in a circle around my mom. Hiba was the first to start. She sat in front of mom and crossed her legs and hands, waiting with curious eyes for my mom's reading. The rest of the girls were also eagerly waiting to hear about my mom's predictions for Hiba. When she started to gaze into the latter's cup, Aya and Mariam, who were sitting on my mom's

left, held their phones, opened their cameras, and started to record Hiba to see her reaction to the reading and laugh.

Hiba's Cup Interpretation

- **My mom:** *Despite your fear of cats, a cat has appeared in your cup! But it is a beautiful cat. It is praying for you! You have a bright future. You will succeed in your life. Your journey is a bit long, but all roads are open for you. You may become concerned at times, but no need to be because all doors are opening for you!*
- **My mom:** *Sorry... I have to tell you something. But please don't be upset.*

Hiba gets a bit anxious.

- **My mom:** *There are people around you who are kind of jealous of you. Their eyes are on you. You feel that they love you, but in fact they are jealous of you. They envy you! You have a very kind heart; that's why you open up so fast. Sometimes, you know, it's better to keep things for yourself. As I said, because you have a kind heart, you think that all the people around you are like you. I don't know... That's what's showing up in the cup.*
- **My mom:** *What is making you so nervous? You're constantly thinking about a certain thing. I don't know... Did someone propose to you? I see something... Like... engagement. Or maybe it's a man who tried to open up to you about his feelings.*
- **Hawraa:** *There are a lot of them!*

- **My mom:** *But she does not want any of them. She only wants to focus on her education. I don't know... I could be wrong, but either way, if this is true, I want to congratulate you! Bravo! Keep it up!*
- **My mom:** *You have a woman (Enteye) standing in your cup.*
- **Hiba:** *What does this mean?*
- **My mom:** *It could be your mom praying for you.*
- **My mom:** *You have a beautiful gathering inside your house.*
- **One of the girls:** *Is your sister coming from abroad?*
- **Hiba:** *Yes.*
- **My mom:** *You have the letter "Ain" (in Arabic) in your cup. He is a man who has his eyes on you. But you don't care about him.*
- **My mom:** *You have a letter. It's not necessarily a written one, meaning it could be a message from somewhere. Maybe you will be notified of something, and it will surprise you.*
- **My mom:** *Don't lie to me. This man showed up again!*
- **Hiba:** *The one with the letter "Ain"?*
- **Aya:** *Hiba, where is Ali (a random common name that came to Aya's mind to make fun of Hiba)?*

They all burst into laughter.

Hiba stamped, made her wish, and her turn was over. Then my mom did the cup interpretation for Hawraa, Aya, and Mariam, respectively.

I could feel how much fun the women were having. Laughter, smiles, oohing, and aahing frequently interrupted my mother's speech, especially when she shared positive and exciting news about romance and love. The fun effect is the first thing

women tell you when they talk about engaging in *tobsir*. And sometimes, I felt like they talked about the leisure of *tobsir* as a sort of excuse since it is looked down upon by some religious and conservative people in the town. So, women say that "we are just having fun" as a kind of protection from being criticized. By saying that *tobsir* is fun, they protect themselves from the critiques of the more conservative sectors of the village. They also protect themselves from another kind of critique—a modernist, rational, and scientific critique of the backwardness of village culture. This modernist critique is exemplified by a conversation I had in the early stages of my research. A woman from the town found out that my research topic was *tobsir*, and she said to me in a sarcastic tone, "Ghada, how can you believe in this stuff; you are an educated person!" She directly linked the topic to superstition, lack of education, and the backwardness of village culture. But, for professional women like Hawraa, Aya, Mariam, and Hiba, engaging in *tobsir* was never something that they refrained from doing just because they are "educated". Indeed, women with no formal education and women with university degrees practiced this kind of divination, and they would say: "It is just for "tesleye," or fun. In other words, it is not a belief; it is a game.

At first, I took these women's interpretation of "*tobsir* is for fun" at face value. But with time, I came to detect other things happening during *tobsir*. In light of Lebanon's multidimensional crisis, so many things are changing in the lives of the Lebanese. We have a corrupted political system with merciless leaders and severe economic instability since the Lebanese lira lost more than 90% of its value against the U.S. dollar, which led to a huge shortage in basic services such as fuel, water, bread, medicine, electricity, and others. Not to mention the spread of the global pandemic COVID-19 that also affected the country between 2020 and 2022. There is also a very crucial factor that has nurtured insecurity in Lebanon, and that is the massive Beirut

Blast that happened on August 4, 2020. Adding to this the sudden earthquake and wars that might happen at any minute.

Because my father owns a supermarket in the town, I heard endless stories from the townies that reflect the bad economic situation. People are fighting among each other to buy bread for their families. The collapse has brought so much uncertainty. One day your 100, 000 LBP can get you eggs, milk, and bread, and one day it can no longer get you eggs. Cornflakes are available on the market one day and then gone the next. One day you can get 1 million Lebanese lira from the bank, and one day you cannot. One day, schools' payments are in lira; the next, they are in dollars. There is so much uncertainty and fluctuation that they are anxious about life.

Hiba, as my mother rightly noted in her reading, is obsessed with education. Indeed, her whole family is focused on getting an education. My mother and I have known and heard a lot about them since I was a kid. Hiba's father is a high school teacher; her older brother is a math teacher; and her other siblings studied for so long that they became doctors. I often heard from friends about Hiba's achievements at school and how much she was dedicated to her studies. And since the collapse, all this effort and work to educate families has been put into question. Should a young woman continue her studies or focus on getting married and having children? Were her family's sacrifices for her education worth it? Will she ever get married and have children if she focuses on getting an education? The collapse has brought these questions to the surface in new ways. And an attention to emotions, words, and other hints and clues make me think that Hiba and other women look to *tosbir* not just for fun, but also for guidance and to assuage their worries.

Hawraa came to coffee-reading with worries of her own, also connected to education, money, and family. Hawraa got married at 18. She comes from a

conservative family that likes to make the daughters marry at a young age and be under male protection. Right after she finished high school, she had a passionate love story with Hassan, who was at that time 20 years of age. Hassan seems to be a good husband to Hawraa, and he knows that she loves education, so he did not stand in her way. She went and got registered in the translation program at AUST University, Bint Jbeil campus. Her husband did not continue his education, and he works in trade.

Hawraa's Cup Interpretation

- **My Mom:** *You have good news. You will hear about a flight (Khabar tayyara). Do you have someone abroad?*
- **Hawraa:** *I have many of them!*
- **My Mom:** *You will hear very good news very soon. I can see it on the door of the cup (beb el fenjen).*
- **My Mom:** *You are standing under a tree (shajaret ezz). It is a success for you and your house. It is a very good tree.*
- **My mom:** *Sometimes you are worried and concerned inside your house. Just forget about it and move on. Don't be sad. Problems happen. I feel that you're overthinking about something. Don't do that; it will pass.*
- **My mom:** *You have a fish! Do you know what it means?*
- **Hawraa:** *Rezka! (good fortune).*
- **My Mom:** *Yes! You have good fortune coming your way. It has already come or will come. It's suddenly entering your house. You will be surprised. It's not necessarily money. It could be something else. But it is a good fortune. A very beautiful one. It could be for your husband.*

- **My Mom:** *I don't know... There is something you are planning for. It will happen. That's what is showing.*
- **My Mom:** *There is a snake entering your house; be careful!*
- **Hawraa:** *It is entering my house!*
- **My Mom:** *Yes! It is not a real snake... but be careful!*
- **Hawraa:** *Yes, you mean a bad person.*
- **My Mom:** *Yes, it is someone who wants to know a lot about you, but does not share anything about him or her, so be aware.*
- **My Mom:** *You really have a good fortune coming! It is showing up again on the door of the cup.*

In this *tobsir* reading, the *bassara*, my mother, seems to be bringing out the worries about how Hawraa and her husband will manage to continue paying for private schools for their son and how she will continue to pay for her own education, as well as their worries about how to survive as a middle-class family amidst the losses they incurred during the collapse. When the *bassara* says "you have good fortune coming", good news and a surprise, or when she says that you can soften your worries because something good will come from within the house, she is bringing the worries out into a conversation between people, but not just any conversation; it is a choreographed conversation where the *bassara* is in control of the situation. She thereby has a calming effect. But she doesn't tell Hawraa to completely relax. At the same time, she warns her about some sort of danger, bad energy, or "enemy" entering her house. She tells her that she needs to calm down, but she also needs to stay alert and aware because there is a snake lurking at her doorstep. Thus, *tobsir* brings anxieties about class, education, and livelihoods out into a choreographed conversation that often calms and keeps people aware at the same time.

In addition to discussions of class, education, and livelihoods, I observed the *bassara* bring out worries about marriage into this kind of choreographed conversation. Especially if the women are in their 20s and still single, they live under social pressure in the town to get married and have kids. If a woman reaches her 30s and still hasn't gotten married, they refer to her as "m'anse," or someone with hard luck. No matter how beautiful and educated a woman is, she needs to get married or else she will be stigmatized and labeled as "m'anse". A woman who can have a husband who can "yestor alaya" or "protect her" and kids who supposedly prevent her feeling of loneliness when she gets old is honored and respected among the townies. I, personally, felt bullied several times in the town regarding this topic. I'm a 26-year-old woman who fits in the category of "m'anse" in the town. "Instead of having cats, go have kids", "Go throw your education in the garbage", "Shu baadik natra" (what are you still waiting for)," and "aymata badna nofrah fike" (when can we celebrate you as in your wedding) are sentences I often hear from people there. So most women in Bint Jbeil are raised with the idea that getting married is a must. The fear of staying unmarried grows in them bit by bit. In other cases, they might be in love with a certain man, and they want the hope of reconciliation with him that the *bassarat* usually can give in *tobsir*. With the collapse and the deep uncertainties of life, the questions regarding marriage are more intense and obviously connected to financial issues than they were at other times. Indeed, the question of "Am I better off financially if I am married?" "Am I a burden on my family of descent by not being married?" "Will I find someone to "marry up with?" "Can I continue my education if I marry?" "Is continuing education worthwhile?" "Does marriage mean an additional income or does it mean more mouths to feed when resources are low?" Young women are in intense dilemmas about whether or not

marriage is a good thing for them. And for my generation, given the current living conditions, the answer to these questions is not straightforward.

Since I was a teenager, I've heard how easily men can fall in love with Aya. She is a well-educated woman with an attractive physical appearance. She is the eldest of her two sisters, and her father is known for his overprotectiveness of his daughters. A few years ago, she was engaged to a lieutenant from the town, but their relationship didn't last long. In the following *tobsir* reading, I show how my mother brings Aya's concern about marriage and her love life to the surface.

Aya's Cup Interpretation

-My Mom: *Aya... You have a lot of fans!*

They all burst into laughter.

- My Mom: *They are countless. They are standing in a queue for you. But the pillar of your house, meaning your dad, is protective of you in a way that the mind cannot imagine. He is hugging you and does not want to leave you. But you have a lot of fans. All eyes are on you! I told you I would reveal everything!*

-Aya: *Which one of them is the most interested?*

-One of the girls: *Reveal for us the first letter of his name.*

-My Mom: *Literally, I'm not joking. You have so many!*

-Hawraa: *Very nice!*

-My Mom: *But your father is so hard-to-please. Tell him that Em Khalil (my mom) tells you to "calm down a bit".*

-Aya: My father is not the reason; I am.

-My Mom: There is someone who has proposed to you several times. Am I right or wrong?

-Aya: You're right.

-My Mom: You have the number 7. It is very good. It is an accomplishment you are planning to do.

-Aya: True.

-My Mom: It will be accomplished, and you will be so happy.

-My Mom: You have a deer (ghazele). The deer is something very good for you. It will give you good news. Someone will send it to you. Don't tell me you don't have someone in your life!

-Aya: No! I swear to God!

-Mariam: Come on, Aya, confess!

-My Mom: It's done... We revealed your secret! You can't say a word anymore.

-My Mom: This person is sending this deer to you. He's sending you a message. You're on his mind.

In this *tosbir* reading, I hear my mother bringing out Aya's worries about marriage into this choreographed conversation. Aya's reply "Which one of them is the most interested", affirms her curiosity and worry about the man she wants to spend her life

with, but in a light and funny manner. The women and I laugh with excitement at the prospect of juicy romantic stories—the countless men standing in a queue and the man who proposed to Aya several times. After the initial burst of laughter, my mother slows things down, and I hear her telling Aya about the good news coming ahead and the letter she will be receiving from a secret lover. My mother as well is somehow pushing Aya to take her courage into her own hands, and don't worry too much about her protective and hard-to-please father.

Go ahead and imagine the following scenery with me: A blue sky, a beautiful green landscape, birds chirping in the background, a warm sunray from the sun, the ringing tones of traditional cups of coffee, the smell of roasted coffee beans, and an echo of laughter sounds. This is the scenery that my mother described, with a nostalgic tone and glowing eyes, when she was telling me about her gathering with her friends in the field to coffee-read in the morning or the afternoon. The kind of friendship—loyal, pure, trustworthy, and jealousy-free—she had with this group of friends was irreplaceable. The past always lingers in my mom's heart. She always values the smallest things, the happy moments, and even the sad ones. She once said to me, "Hatta rannet fenjen l ahweh ken ela maana. Kel shi ken ahla," which translates to "Even the ringing tone of the coffee cup had an importance. Everything was more beautiful."

I have noticed how the *bassara* boosts and refreshes nostalgic memories of the women in the town while drinking their coffee cups, which is another reason that encouraged them to gather and coffee-read. A wave of memories started to emerge in the living room when the women and my mother were talking about the current social life of Bint Jbeil, which was fading bit by bit, especially after the spread of COVID-19. "I still picture the old Bint Jbeil in my head," my mom said to the women. She missed the old architecture in the town and how places and houses were placed. Now,

everything is misplaced, and new buildings have replaced the old ones. The girls also talked about missing their regular meetings and gatherings. After the spread of the pandemic and due to their busy lives—marriage and work—they seemed to be drifting apart. As the women drank their cups of coffee, a nostalgic tone resounded throughout the room, and the past lingered with its precious memories. Another wave of memories took place as well when my mother, my best friend Marwa, and I were sitting on July 25, 2021, in our garden under our precious 80-year-old orange tree to coffee-read. My mom remembered when she used to hold our hands so that we could cross the road to buy "Merry Cream," a soft serve from the ice cream bus. Remembering moments when people cared for each other and were together was common during *tobsir* sessions, and I think it has the effect of bringing the people together in the present gathering.

There is a reason why *the tobsir* in these “Jamaas” reactivates the memory. Samia, *the bassara*, shared with me the importance of the senses in this kind of practice; sight is the gateway for analyzing the signs shown in the cup. Touch is to stamp in the cup, which is considered the mark that reveals what is hidden in the heart of the person being read. Taste is to see if the coffee has a good taste or not (according to her, it is better if the coffee is without sugar since the latter leaves a sticky substance in the cup that might hinder the coffee sediment from taking a clear shape). Smelling is to enjoy the smell of coffee. Hearing is to listen carefully to the predictions; the women being read should be attentive to the *bassara* to see if what she says is logical or not, and the *bassara*, in return, should be careful about what she says and think deeply before saying anything to the women she’s reading. I’m mentioning this because the coffee cup represents the human body; it is read by its different parts (the heart, eyes, ears, etc.), and these parts are transformed into the cup as coffee sediments that represent the feelings, thoughts, and senses of the human being (Seremetakis 2009, 345). And

memory activation is common while drinking coffee and practicing *the tobsir* because there is a co-mingling of the memory and senses (Seremetakis 1994, 9).

In this second chapter of my research, I showed you how my thoughts about *tosbir* among the women of Bint Jbeil have shifted bit by bit. It shifted from a site that brings social bonding among neighbors to a justified leisure activity by the women to protect themselves from the different kinds of critiques—*tosbir* as being looked down upon and as a backward and superstitious practice—and finally, and most importantly, to a site that brings to the surface anxieties related to marriage, livelihoods, and class and at the same time good nostalgic memories related to various subjects like old architecture in the town, loyal friendships, and childhood.

CHAPTER 3

TOBSIR AND THE WORK OF HEALING

Nowadays human beings are in dire need of a source that brings them positive energy that eases and heals their troubled souls in a world that is witnessing uncertainties, insecurities, and multi-dimensional crises. In Chapter 2, I presented how the *bassara* in Bint Jbeil brings out the different kinds of anxieties that are born from deep uncertainties, whether social or economic. However, this is not the only job that she does, because I have noticed as well that she has calming and soothing effects on the women while reading their cups, thus, unraveling another side of *tobsir* that is a work of healing. The narrative she creates, which is her coffee cup interpretation of the signs, does in fact play an essential role in leading to this healing.

The anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly explored the intersection of narrative and healing within the context of healthcare. She argued that people construct "therapeutic plots" or narratives to make sense of their experiences and to seek healing and transformation. Mattingly drew on her research in diverse healthcare settings, including hospitals, clinics, and communities, to examine how individuals and communities create and utilize therapeutic plots. She explored how narratives can shape the course of illness, influence treatment decisions, and provide a sense of coherence and agency in the face of health challenges. Her work emphasizes the importance of understanding the cultural and social dimensions of illness and healing. Mattingly highlighted how healthcare professionals, patients, and families co-create narratives that shape the therapeutic process. For instance, physical therapists when working with patients who have had acute physical traumas like car accidents and got paralyzed, the therapists reframe the story in terms of the little every day activities to make the patient refocus

his energy on making tiny advances every day to retrain muscles to a bit of work.

Mattingly also delved into the role of empathy and compassion in healthcare interactions, showing how narratives can foster understanding and connection. Through rich ethnographic examples and theoretical analysis, Mattingly offered insights into the complexities of navigating healthcare systems and the power of storytelling in the healing process. She ultimately advocated for a more nuanced and narrative-informed approach to healthcare that acknowledges the significance of personal narratives and their potential for promoting well-being and resilience (Mattingly 1998).

Drawing on this work by Mattingly, I see that there is an intersection between the *bassara's* coffee interpretations of the signs and the healing journey of the women. From this lens, I give the *bassara* in Bint Jbeil the role of a healer who, through observing the women she's reading and taking what she feels and knows about them, transforms the gathered information into a narrative she creates from interpreting the coffee sediments. She re-narrates the stories of these women in different words, with different values. It's like she takes our everyday conversations about the price of this or that or how we will pay for this or that or how expensive this or that is, and transforms the story into another level, a story about the universe, about long history.

Through using a particular language, deploying a set of signs, performing choreographed movements with the cup and looking from the cup to the woman's eyes, the *bassara* warns women, gives them advice and hopes to continue their life journeys. Through watching the body movement of the women during the *tobsir* sessions, the way they looked at the *bassara*, and how they reacted to her predictions, I could also tell that the *bassara*, like it is the case with the healthcare interactions that Mattingly referred to, foster a connection between her and the women she is reading. And once this connection is built, a flow and an exchange of both, negative feelings like fear,

overthinking, anxiety, and exploitation, and positive feelings, like excitement, joy, calm, hope, trust, and positive energy start to take place in the *tobsir* sessions. The anthropologist Zeynep Korkmaz looked at coffee-reading from this perspective, and she coined the term "feeling labor" to refer to the kind of work that this form of divination does. For her, this practice creates an "affective space" (Korkmaz 2015, 195), where the coffee readers and their customers in public cafes in Istanbul can talk about their feelings. In this third chapter, I talk about how the *bassara* in Bint Jbeil creates through her own narratives, a connection that leads to such emotional exchange, but I also extend my research to present *tobsir* as a form of symbolic healing where there is a close interplay between the *bassarat* (the healers) and the women they read (the healed) once this connection is created. The close connection has to do with many things. For one, Bint Jbeil is a village. It is a small town and the *bassara* often knows the families and family histories of the women whose coffee cups she is reading and she may have heard about some of their life struggles through village relationships. Thus, the relationship is intimate and not necessarily anonymous the way it would be in a large city like Istanbul. Cultivating that relationship, the *bassara* is able to make women leave the sessions feeling like they have a bit more courage to face their fears and problems.

Anthropologists have studied symbolic healing by documenting a rich array of different non-biomedical healing practices, such as shamanism, rituals, ceremonies and exorcism in different places around the world. In all these practices, there is a common goal: the transformation of a person from being afflicted to being healed (Kirmayer 2004, 34). In this chapter, I suggest that divinatory practices such as coffee-reading in the context of contemporary Lebanon work as a form of symbolic healing. Indeed, I write about the work of the *bassara* as a form of care and healing labor.

Throughout my fieldwork, my interlocutors told me again and again that the coffee-reading apps don't work. There are popular apps like "Coffee and Beyond" and "Kaave", where you upload your name, marital status, occupation, and birth date. You take a picture of your coffee cup, you post it on the app, and a few minutes later the app sends a digital report of the signs. My interlocutors often told me that they use it because they don't know a *bassara* in their surroundings, but they complained at the same time because there is no human connection, only a coffee cup interpretation.

Azza, a midwife who works at the Salah Ghandour Hospital in Bint Jbeil explained to me the importance of the human connection in coffee reading. She loves engaging in *tobsir* and has faith in it. For her, it is not a "superstitious" act but rather a "reading of someone's mind" that brings inner peace to a person and lifts his or her mood when feeling down. She told me that the *bassara* engages all of her senses while reading the cup for her. Using a coffee-reading application on the phone does not bring her joy because "you won't be sitting in front of a *bassara* who is transferring her emotions to you," she said to me. For her, the human and social connection is more important than the interpretation itself.

Marwa too insisted that the physical presence of the *bassara* was essential to the efficiency of the reading. On July 25, 2021, Bint Jbeil was in mourning and heartbroken after hearing about the sudden death of a young man from the village. The sky was foggy, the roads were empty, and no car engine was running. There was complete silence. I decided to call Marwa, my childhood friend, to invite her for a cup of coffee. Marwa came and sat with my mother in the garden under our giant, 80-year-old orange tree. Meanwhile, I went to the kitchen to prepare Arabic coffee, which is something I'm not very good at doing, but who cares! Marwa and I don't like Arabic coffee in general, but we were excited knowing that my mother would end up reading

our cups. After 5 minutes, I went outside to join Marwa and my mother with a steaming *raqwet ahwe* (coffee pot) on an aluminum tray along with three Arabic coffee cups. Then, I handed over the tray on the table and started to pour coffee into the cups. Marwa tasted the coffee, and she liked it for the first time! Thank God! I guess my coffee can be drinkable sometimes. My father had just come from his supermarket at the same time, complaining about the acceleration of the dollar rate and how hard the situation became for him to add new prices to the products every single day and to see the look of shock on his clients every single day. My mother was listening to him while holding a cigarette in her left hand and crossing her legs. She asked him to join the sitting, but he was in a rush. While drinking our coffee, we started chatting about Marwa's sister, Ghada, who lives in France. Marwa was preparing herself to travel to France for her Master's degree.

A sudden silence broke the atmosphere. Marwa finished drinking her coffee and gave it to me. I turned it upside down and left it aside to cool. Meanwhile, a conversation started about how much Beirut felt like a haunted city due to the absence of safety. Here, my mother engaged in the conversation with a low and worried voice, thinking about her daughter, myself, who lived alone in Beirut. When the cup was ready to be read, my mother turned off her beloved cigarette, took off her scrunchie from her long curly hair, and started to gaze multidimensionally through Marwa's cup. In order to better focus, she started the interpretation by placing her hand around her ear. It's her way to carefully predict the coffee sediments.

Marwa's Cup Interpretation

- ***My mom:*** *At the door of your cup, there is a welcoming dog telling you good news. This dog represents a friend who dearly loves you.*

- **Marwa (by giving me the “I know it’s you” look):** Hayete, Ghada!
- **My mom (with a tender voice):** I see the Eiffel Tower in front of you! You have beautiful days coming along, Marwa!
- **Marwa:** Inchallah!
- **My mom (after giving a deep gaze into the cup):** Why are you overthinking my darling? But, no worries! You have open roads.
- **Marwa remained calm and kept on listening to the interpretation.**
- **My mom:** You have a big fish! It means you have good fortune (rezka kbire).
- **Marwa (while laughing):** So it’s done! I will succeed in my Master’s!
- **My mom:** Something huge will come true.
- **Marwa (with excitement):** It’s done, it’s done! This is related to my Master’s, It’s guaranteed!
- **My mom (with narrowed and sharpening eyes):** You have some evil eyes. Don’t worry though, they are useless. I see your mother praying for you. You were passing through some rough times but they passed.
- **Marwa remained silent.**
- **My mom:** Don’t be scared, you have beautiful days coming ahead. You have the number 7. This number represents accomplished work. You will be so happy about it. It will be unexpected.
- **Marwa (while looking at me with blushed cheeks):** Write this down! this is the most important point!
- **My mom:** You will receive an amount of money, Marwa!
- **Marwa (by giving a happy surprised look):** Really?! I don’t even have a penny!
- **My mom (while laughing):** But, no, really this fish ... like Wow!
- **My mom:** You’re holding a basket of flowers.

- **Marwa (while looking at me):** *I mean I love myself (she meant that she brought this basket for herself).*
- **My mom:** *You have a fox too!*
- **Marwa (with a surprised tone):** *A fox? Really? Is it something good?*
- **My mom:** *Yes, it's a friend!*
- **My mom (by opening a new subject):** *You're constantly thinking about something. It is sticking in your mind.*
- **Marwa:** *It's my Master's.*
- **My mom:** *It's something related to your personal life. It needs time. You're trapped by your thoughts. Sometimes you feel sad about it.*
- **Marwa:** *It's my Master's.*
- **My mom (with an insistent tone):** *Marwa, are you fooling me? There is someone! You will remind me when you go to France.*

Here, the interpretation came to an end and Marwa stamped in the cup to make a wish. Her stamp didn't mark the first time. "Hayda min albik el abiad" (This is because you have a pure heart), my mom said. Then, Marwa re-stamped, made a wish, and returned the cup to my mom. The latter gazed carefully and silently at the cup. After gathering her thoughts, she looked at Marwa and stated: "Everything you wished for will come true. You have a rising sun!" Marwa then ended the coffee reading session by saying: "I want to take this cup with me and hide it at home inside a box".

The cup reading shows that it can lift the spirit. Marwa was happy and satisfied of the face to face connection that she built with my mother in this coffee-reading session. She told me to write down the things that excited her (like the beautiful days coming ahead and the accomplished work that my mother predicted for her). Her mood was lifted to an extent that she wanted to take the coffee cup with her and hide it inside a

box in her house. In face to face *tobsir* sessions, emotions like excitement, happiness and surprises are heightened and can be clearly and easily expressed. Indeed, it is not simply the signs of good news, like the good fortune, traveling to France and success, that Marwa liked, but also the attention that the *bassara* was giving to her life. In addition, the pre-stage of *tobsir*, which is preparing the coffee and sharing stories about the everyday life while drinking the coffee is another crucial element that reinforces the connection between Marwa and the *bassara*. So, this kind of attention to details and the space given to share personal stories are part of a conversation that can only be shown in a face to face connection with the *bassara*, and not through a coffee-reading app that gives merely a digital report behind the screen.

Moreover, some of the *bassarat* in Bint Jbeil believe that there is a certain time of the day and a certain day of the week where *tobsir* is preferred to be performed, because this is a good time for connection between people and a time when no harm or bad luck can be caused. The *bassarat* said that for *tobsir* to work well, it needs to be a time when emotions will flow between the *bassara* and the woman, and this time is either in the morning or afternoon but never at night. My mom, for example, does not coffee-read when there is *Athan al Maghrib* (the call for prayer). She once explained to Azza that at this time or in the late night hours, people should refrain from doing this practice since it is "mich moustahab" (an Islamic term to refer to something that is not recommended). Azza agreed and justified this belief by telling my mom that "beleil el maleyke mejtemaa", which translates to "at night the angels assemble". This means that any divination practice or unpleasant act must be stopped by humans so that these angels do not cause them any harm. Usually angels don't cause harm, but late night hours are not the time of humans, it is the time of the angels. Em Khodor gave me as well a weekly schedule for *tobsir*. Most of the women's gatherings took place on Saturdays in her

house because, according to her, *tobsir* on this day is more accurate and whatever is seen in the cup will come true. Her explanation for this is that weekends are for family gatherings and it is a time when people feel happy, relaxed, and connected in their "Jamaa". In fact, this practice can be done all over the weekdays, but not on a Wednesday since it includes one hour of bad luck (it could be in the morning, afternoon, or at night). Em Khodor highlighted further that Monday and Friday are for prayer and worship, which is why it is preferable not to coffee-read on these two days.

When I asked the *bassarat* how they knew when the right time was for *tobsir* or when it was a time of bad luck, they said that it was a passed-on-belief from their mothers, grandmothers, the *bassarat* who taught them *tobsir*, and other women from the town. Even though they don't have another valid explanation for this, they just acted based on what they heard from their ancestors and others. And when I asked what kind of harm or bad luck could be produced, they usually referred to predicting terrible events such as the death of someone close or someone in the village and to the psychological effects the predictions may have on people (such as their feeling of disappointment when they hear something they don't want to hear). For example, once Kamila the *bassara* saw that a woman will hear about the death of someone from her family. The woman was frightened because she immediately thought of her mother. She told Kamila "I hope it's not my mother. It's still early. I can't without her". "I did not say it's your mother", Kamila answered. Few days later, this woman heard about the passing of an old man from her extended family. In addition, for some *bassarat* like Samia, *tobsir* is also connected to the mood of the *bassara*. Thus, she never coffee-reads when she is feeling down, since this will affect her reading negatively and bring bad luck to the woman she's reading for. Unlike Em Khodor, who believes that Wednesday is the bad-luck-day, Samia thinks that Mondays would bring her bad luck—

that's why she would never do laundry on this day or perform coffee-reading. She justified the reason by referring to a quote said by al *Sayida EL Zahraa* to her enemies, which is "ma yeb'alon ghassil w ma yeb'alon habib", which translates to "neither laundry nor loved one would remain for them". She said this quote when the enemies of *Ahl al-Bayt* attacked and burned their tents, so she prayed that everything, including loved ones and belongings may be destroyed. This attack took place on a Monday, and since the time Samia's grandfather told her this story, she believes that Mondays bring bad luck. Hence, Samia refrained from practicing *tobsir* or doing her laundry on this day.

Nevertheless, I want to clarify here an important point concerning the validity of these beliefs. The day on which Kamila did the cup reading for the woman was not a Wednesday, it was a Sunday. And my mother's belief of *tobsir* that it should not be performed at night is something that Em Hassan, the *bassara* who taught her the practice, had told her when she was still a teenager. My mother never heard of someone's death after a *bassara's* cup reading at night. This was never proven. How or what brings bad luck is just a transferred and widespread knowledge among the *bassarat* in the town. It is connected to the history of coffee-reading in the town and to some old stories that they heard from their ancestors. But, my mother for example can't take the risk of performing coffee-reading for someone at night, since it is a belief that has been rooted in her from a younger age. So, because of these rooted beliefs, *bassarat* tend to avoid performing *tobsir* at night or on certain weekdays even if no bad luck or harm was proven to happen. And because the ethics of *tobsir* involves always telling the truth of what the signs mean in the coffee cup and never to avoid bad news and complicated predictions, is another important reason why *bassarat* insist on performing *tobsir* mostly throughout the day. Samia, for instance, believes that it is her

responsibility to tell exactly what she sees in the cup, or else it becomes a burden on her shoulders and the effects on people may be more dangerous. This way there are fewer chances of bad luck when *tosbir* is done in the morning or afternoon or on a specific day, and this is why *bassarat* believe that these are the best times where they can build face to face connections with the women they are reading.

In the following sections, I delve into the *bassara*'s narration of the women's stories in her own words (her coffee cup interpretation) and show how this intersects with the women's healing and track the emotional work that *tobsir* produces in the lives of these women.

On January 23, 2022, a cozy Sunday morning, Azza visited us to have her *tobsir* session with my mom. After preparing the coffee and providing what was needed for this sitting, my mom held Azza's cup in her right hand and rotated it with care. Her main job was to look through the cup, where she put her heart into analyzing the coffee sediments to see what lies ahead for Azza. She glanced at every edge and corner of the cup, leaving Azza with unquestioned thoughts. Azza, in turn, looked at my mom with keen eyes and attentive ears, waiting for her reading to end.

"You have good fortune (rezka kbire) coming soon! It is not necessarily money. It could be anything good! You were a little bit worried and unstable lately, but you surpassed the hardships.

You have an ostrich! And this ostrich is standing tall inside your house. It could be a person who loves you—maybe your husband or anyone from your family. In front of this person, there is a "fashet bayad" (meaning white space, and it refers to success or good luck).

You will hear about someone coming from abroad.

There is calm in your life. You have a calm personality. You are patient, and this will serve you well. You deal with things in a very mature way, even the hardest things.

You have pigeons. Pigeons represent peace. They are your kids. You or your husband promised them a present that would make them happy when receiving it.

You have a gathering in your house, and it will be a surprise to you.

You have two evil eyes as well. Be careful! There is someone in your house who is a bit worried. He or she is waiting to hear a response from somewhere or someone. Maybe a job offer. "

When the interpretation came to an end, my mom asked Azza to make a wish and stamp it in the cup. Azza stamped and gave back the cup to my mom for a final glance and examination.

On February 6, two weeks after Azza visited us, around 10:30 AM, I saw her again with Mahdi, a taxi driver from Bint Jbeil who takes passengers on a daily basis from Beirut to the town and vice versa. We were heading from Bint Jbeil to Beirut on that day. It was a Sunday, and I had a class the day after at AUB, and Azza had just finished her shift at the hospital and was going back to her house in the city. During the *tosbir* session with my mother, Azza did not say much because she is a calm and shy person. She was mainly smiling at her. However, when we were in the car that day, she shared with me her thoughts concerning my mother's reading. "Your mother has a beautiful way of telling what she sees in the cup. Her way is convincing. I went home feeling happy. The majority of her predictions came true. I told my cousin, my neighbor, and my friends at the hospital about your mother's *tobsir*!" She said. My mother gave Azza through this reading the needed reassurance of being a mature and calm person. She

needed to hear those soothing words at that time to loosen her worries. Signs like “good fortune”, “ostrich”, “pigeons”, and “fashet bayad”, which all carry a positive meaning as my mother explained to her, play an important role in nurturing the positivity and calmness that Azza needed in her life at a time of uncertainty and doubts. The fact that the majority of my mother’s predictions came true, her attention to the smallest details and her deep gaze into every edge of the cup, and her confident way in narrating Azza’s story, gave Azza as well an extra positive boost and trust in my mother’s skills, to an extent that she spread a good reputation of her among her acquaintances. All these modes of communication from the *bassara*’s side, bring calm and positivity that the women of town need. Dunia, a 19-year-old lady from the town, reaffirmed to me that engaging in *tobsir* every now and then is helping her "gain some amount of positivity". This practice brings her mother joy as well, and she likes to see her mother happy. Thus, often, my interlocutors spoke to me about how *tobsir* soothes their depressed souls and brings them calm in their daily lives. In the upcoming passages I give further ethnographic examples on how the *bassara* in Bint Jbeil soothes the anxieties of the women through transforming their stories of despair into ones full of hope.

Throughout my fieldwork, my interlocutors have told me that *tobsir* soothes their anxieties because it gives them “amal”, meaning hope. Anthropologists have interest in investigating the objects of people’s hopes and their attempts to fulfill them. They also reflect on hope as an affect and disposition, and as a method of knowledge production (Jansen 2021). “*Tosbir* is a way to make a person get rid of hopelessness”, Samia, the *bassara*, told me. And from my observations, I felt like something was going on with hope during the coffee-reading sessions, especially that Kamila also told me that she coffee-reads for people to give them hope. Not that she lies or does not tell the truth, but she gives people soothing words and advice, and tells them what they need

to hear based on their current mental state or what they lack in their lives. And some people listen to her because they “have trust in the coffee cup”, she told me. So what the *bassara* does here is that she transforms the stories of the women into a narrative she creates and manipulates. In the *tobsir* sessions, the *bassara* took what she knew about the woman she was reading, observed the coffee sediments and re-narrated her experiences in terms of the big picture in the universe (jealousy, love, luck, friendships, envy etc...). This level of the story is neither at the everyday level (when should I buy onions, I can't fall asleep) nor is it about the contemporary macro political world we live in (the economy has collapsed, the political elites stole our money and exploded our city, Iran and Saudi Arabia have signed an agreement, etc.). It employs a language that is at the level of the universe and re-positions people in a long history of beings on the earth. One of my interlocutors, Yara, who happens to be my friend from high school, uses the online coffee-reading app "Kaave", so that she can get some daily motivation about her future. For the past couple of months, she has been trying to apply for visas to the U.S., Italy, and Sweden to leave the country because of the harsh instability in the country. Unfortunately, all her visa applications were refused. "I open the application to listen to good words. Every human wants to listen to good words to get motivated.", she told me. Yara does not know much *bassarat* in her surroundings; that's why using the coffee-reading application was more convenient and easy for her. However, when she knew that my mother could coffee-read, she told me that she would be more than happy if she could read for her one day.

On August 31, 2022, Yara came to our house and had her coffee read by my mother for the first time. Through interpreting her cup, my mother narrated to her all the blocked roads i.e Yara's plans to leave the country and her failure to achieve what she wanted. And, at the same time, she lifted her mood by telling her that these blocked

roads will eventually open and the best is yet to come. Shifting the narrative from visa rejections one after the other to blocked roads that eventually open one way or the other, reframes the way Yara thinks of what is happening to her. When the reading was over and my mother had stepped out, Yara whispered into my ear, "How did she know about the Nazr³ I made? She is surreal!" At that moment, I sensed Yara's dynamic energy coming back to her body after my mother had shifted her story from an unjust, suffocating event to one about the greater logics of the universe where doors of hope sometimes open.

I would also like to share with you a personal story that happened with me while conducting my fieldwork in the town, where I show that, like my interlocutors, I needed *tobsir* to give me strength and hope in my hard times. Back on February 14, 2019, on my 22nd birthday, I received a precious gift: my 1-month-and-a-half-year-old kitten, Bino. Since that day, Bino has added a new meaning to our lives and filled our home with love, laughter, and warmth. He is loved by every member of our family, even by my dad, who is not an animal lover in general. Three and a half years later, an unexpected incident happens with Bino, leaving our family in total shock and frustration.

It was Wednesday, May 11, 2022. My mom and I were in our apartment in Beirut, having dinner. It was around 9:00 PM, and I was supposed to stop eating and drinking before 12:00 AM since I had surgery for my nose at 6:30 AM the next day. Suddenly, my mom's phone rings. It was my dad calling from Bint Jbeil. My mom goes to the balcony to talk to him. I thought that they were having a normal conversation, so

³ It is a vow or commitment to carry out an act. Usually, people use it the most when they want something so badly so they pledge that if what they wish for comes true, they will pay something in return. The failure to fulfill it results in the need to take compensating action, often of a charitable nature, such as feeding the poor or giving them money.

I stayed inside. While eating, I overheard my dad saying to my mom, "Bino is missing. Hours have passed and we still can't find him." My heart started to beat very fast after hearing this, and I couldn't feel my legs. I rushed to the balcony and asked my mom what was going on. She, as well, was very shocked. I was furious at my dad at that moment for telling us such bad news, knowing that I had surgery the next day. I was heartbroken and shocked. My mom started to randomly call people that we knew to calm me down. We tried to call my brother who was searching for Bino in the dark around the neighborhood in Bint Jbeil. He was out of reach. He was also desperately searching for him and worried about him. My mom kept on calling him until he picked up his phone. "Stop calling, please. I'm searching for him. As soon as I find him, I will let you know," he said to my mom. I called my best friends, Ghada and Marwa, who live in France, and asked them for help. Ghada went and opened the Quran for me to do a *khira* to see whether Bino would find his way back home or not. She randomly opened a *Surah* in the Quran and started to read it out loud for me. I can't remember which *Surah* that was or what Ghada was reading to me. But based on what she told me, it was a good one. It showed that Bino would come back, but it might take some time. I couldn't believe or understand anything. Everything was blank in front of me. Two hours had passed after we got informed of the news, and my brother still hadn't found Bino. Everyone in the house in Bint Jbeil went to sleep, and my mother and I kept waiting for a while. Then, I tried to sleep because I had a strong migraine attack.

I had a vivid dream that night. I dreamt that Bino found his way back home. He came from the upper side of the house, jumped onto the rooftop, and went down to the garden. He happily ran towards me to pet him. Then I saw my best friend in bad shape. Her eyes were tired. Her body was so skinny. I didn't know what this meant or why I saw her in this condition. Anyways, I woke up at 5 AM the other day to go to the

hospital and prepare myself for the surgery. I woke up with a huge pain in my chest. I still can't explain the feeling. "How am I supposed to enter the operation room with such a mental state?" I thought to myself. I was trying so hard to hold back my tears and pull myself together.

I arrived at the hospital with my mom at 6:15 a.m., took the elevator, and went to the 5th floor, where the admissions office had reserved a room for me. The nurse, Rajaa, whom I had met a day before by coincidence at my hairdresser's salon, welcomed us with a huge smile on her face. Then, my mom told her what happened and asked her to give me some motivation to cheer me up. Almost all of the medical staff on the 5th floor and in the operating room knew about the story. They all tried to calm me down and tell me that Bino would find his way home. When the surgeon came, they took me to the operation room and put me to sleep. After five hours, I woke up from anesthesia to hear the surgeon calling my name. Then, I saw my mom wearing scrubs and a surgical cap and heading towards me. She kissed me on the forehead and gave me a warm smile. "Did they find Bino?" I asked her. "No, not yet, mama," she answered with a low tone.

Two days have passed, and we still haven't heard any news about Bino. I was randomly posting pictures of him on my social media accounts and asking people for help. My mom was calling the neighbors and people who knew sheikhs who could predict Bino's location by opening the Quran. My brother and his friends were still searching for him day and night on the streets of the neighborhood. Every time the phone rings, my mom says, "Kheir, ya rab," hoping that the hour of relief has come. In the meantime, we were still in Beirut because my health was not yet stable after the surgery. We wanted to stay next to the Clemenceau Medical Center in case of an emergency since it is a 2-minute-walk from our apartment in Beirut. I hated the nights

so much. I couldn't sleep for a split second because of my physical and psychological pain. Sometimes I felt that I would pass out of pain. I have never felt like this before. Everything around me was so dark. I also had a skin rash that came out of nowhere. My mom never left me alone. She slept next to me every night to calm me down and say a prayer while caressing my hair and forehead.

Days and days have passed. There is still no news about Bino. So, my mom and I went to Bint Jbeil to search for him. The town was so crowded at that time because people were preparing for the 2022 Lebanese parliamentary elections. My mom, Em Khodor's daughter Hanadi, my brother, and his friends were searching for him throughout the day and night. I couldn't go with them at the beginning because I shouldn't expose myself to the sun too much after the surgery. This is why I went and searched for him at night in the neighborhood. I stood on the corner of every street while holding his favorite treats and calling his name. No answer. No trace. My brother decided to post the news on bintjbeil.org, as this website has more than 5 million followers and it would help us spread the news not only in Bint Jbeil but also all over south Lebanon. Just in case someone outside the town saw him on the street and took him, he or she can see the news on the website and give us a call.

This made me deeply depressed, like most people around us during this time. We were seeking help in multiple ways, and one of them was using *tobsir* and *Fath al Kitab* to search for Bino. My mom and I started to act based on what we were hearing in the readings because we had no other option. We went to specific places and searched for the specific people and houses described in the readings, hoping to find a small trace. This is what gave us motivation every day for 21 days. Motivation not to lose hope of finding Bino. In one of the readings, Em Khodor gave me some hints and saw

that Bino would be found, but it would take some time. Here is the description of my coffee cup interpretation that Em Khodor did on May 18, 2022.

Ghada, you are so confused. Remove this confusion from your head to set yourself free. With God's will, you will receive good news (bchara helwe). You have a wide door that you will enter, and through this door you will gain your relief. You have the number 9. It could be 9 hours or 9 days, and you will be surprised by something that will make you extremely happy. Ghada... something will be compensated for you. Inchallah, with God's will... Inchallah, if the cup is not lying to me, after only one week, you will have this beautiful surprise. You have the word "God". You made a nazr, and, inshallah, you will fulfill it very soon. There is a lady at the bottom of your cup (bi ared el fenjen) who is prolonging her hands towards you. She's giving you something. What she's giving you will relieve you. Could it be Bino? I stamped and gave my cup back to Em Khodor. Your stamp is so beautiful. You have the number 8. This means something will be accomplished in your house, and you will be very pleased. You will hit a road, and you will be relieved with exciting news when you return home.

A lot of people helped us search for Bino, but thanks go to Hanadi and our gardener, Abou Samir, who played a huge role in finding the traces that led us to him. On a Wednesday afternoon, Hanadi was talking to my mother over the phone, since we were in Beirut at that time, while standing on the road next to our house and randomly asking people about Bino and showing them his picture. Meanwhile, a man shows up and confesses in a sarcastic tone that he saw Bino standing next to my father's supermarket, under our house, and he took him. Hanadi became very furious at him and shouted "Where did you take the cat?! His owners have been desperately searching for him for 3 weeks! When the man saw Hanadi's reaction, he started to shake and told

Hanadi "I took him, but I returned him back to where I found him". We did not believe the man, because if he was actually telling the truth, Bino would have returned home a long time ago since he was near the house as he said. So my mother told Hanadi to not let go of him and to take him immediately to our house so that my brother can talk to him. Hanadi did what my mother asked her to do. She went to our house and called my brother and told him what happened. My brother behaved nicely with the man to calm him down so that he could take personal information about him- his address, his workplace etc. My brother made him feel that he believed him and requested from him to return Bino back home in case he encountered him again. Hanadi and the man left, and my brother started to investigate the man in the town. After gathering all the needed information, my brother found the man's house and went at midnight with his friends to return Bino back home. When the man saw my brother again he freaked out. "I don't know what you did with the cat. You gave him to someone or you sold him; I don't know. But what I know is that you will return him immediately", my brother said to him. Of course, the man lied and did not confess that he stole Bino. However, he was scared and nervous based on what my brother told us. The next day, at 7 a.m., our helper Sharon went to search for Bino as she usually does. She climbed the stairs that lead to the upper part of our house and sat there to watch the neighborhood from above for a better view. Suddenly, she hears two cats fighting and hissing at each other. An inner voice inside of her told her that one of the cats is Bino, so she yelled "Binooo, Binooo" from the bottom of her heart. A few seconds later, Bino shows up and starts meowing out loud. She couldn't believe her eyes and was in complete shock, so she jumped from a 2-meter-long wall when she saw him. The minute her legs hit the floor, Bino ran towards Sharon's arms. She carried him, gave him a tight hug, and returned him home. We discovered later that the man who stole Bino returned him and left him

near the olive field next to our house to make it look like Bino found his way back home by himself.

Bino's story took me back to Jeanne Favret-Saada's work about unbewitching as therapy (Saada 1989). In this work, the anthropologist describes unbewitching as a form of symbolic healing, and I, too, experienced coffee-reading as this kind of healing with Bino's story. And this is how I was caught up in the practice and became part of my own research. The *bassara* took control of the situation. She gave us advice, told us what to do, and organized our day in a very precise manner. What is most important here is that she transformed Bino's story from being painful into one of relief and hope that eventually helped me think positively in such hard times.

Before shifting perspectives and talking about how *bassarat* feel during the *tobsir* sessions, I want to refer to another situation where the *bassara* acts as a healer in the town. In chapter 2, I showed how the *bassara* brings out different kinds of anxieties to the surface. By doing that, she is pointing out the problems people have in their lives. In such cases, some of the *bassarat* in the town have a sort of healing energy for the people who are passing through troubles in their daily lives, especially if the source of these troubles is being struck by an evil eye. To illustrate, I provide in the following section an example on the healing energy of the *bassara*.

On January 16, 2022, my mother received a call from my brother, telling her that he had a bad dream. My mother called Samia for some advice, knowing that she is also a dream interpreter and not only a *bassara*. Samia told my mother that she would coffee-read for my brother to reveal what was going on in his life so that she could give the needed advice for his case. However, my brother was in Beirut, so Samia said to my mother that she will read for him based on his intention, meaning that Samia will drink the coffee cup for my brother and refer to the cup as being his by saying "On the

intention of Khalil, the son of Zahra". This is one of the ways that men can have their coffee read. The *bassara* can read the cup of any person who is not present by naming this person's maternal line. In *tobsir*, nothing is more powerful than "silat al raham," the relationship with the mother.

After reading my brother's cup, Samia called my mother the next day. She informed her that a potent evil eye had struck my brother. It was so powerful that she felt a pain in her stomach while drinking and felt nauseous. She couldn't continue the cup reading. Infliction by the evil eye is a very serious matter if seen in the cup. "Hasad" or envy must be treated or else it will keep on affecting the daily life of a person. Samia saw in my brother's cup that someone at his work was causing him a huge amount of pressure and was very envious of him. So, she told my mother to ask him to pray regularly before going to sleep so as to keep the nightmares and the evil eye away. Based on this diagnosis, Samia prepared another sort of remedy for my brother to get rid of the evil eye. She brought for him a bottle of water, opened it, and said a prayer called "Roukkiya" or "Ra'we" in colloquial Arabic, so that he could drink from it later. In Islam, this kind of prayer is specified to heal from "Hasad". The prayed-on-water becomes holy and takes away the malevolent energy sent to the inflicted person when he or she drinks from it. So, this is one of the cases where the *bassara* releases the sickness of people residing in their bodies, which is the evil eye in this case, and sends them the needed healing energy to heal them.

Finally, I want to shift perspectives in this chapter to show you what *bassarat* feel while practicing *tobsir* in Bint Jbeil. People in the village interact with the *bassara* in different ways. While many people go to get their coffee cup read, the *bassara* does not fit well in the village. On the one hand, people treat her with respect because of her intuition and power to heal, on the other hand people fear her because she sees things

that ordinary people cannot see. Others as well see her as a crazy woman who doesn't fit with modern science and religion, because some think of themselves as religious and conservative and shun coffee reading or any divination practices. And some are exploitative of her and use her, especially if she doesn't practice *tobsir* in exchange for money. Thus, the *bassara* sometimes feels gratified and at other times feels exploited.

Usually, if the *bassara* predicts a good marriage, job opportunity, or new relationship, the woman who is being read responds by saying sentences like "el bchara elik" or "el helwayne la elik", meaning she will bring the *bassara* a gift if her predictions were accurate. But most of the time, these women do not bring any gifts or fulfill their promises. Hence, the *bassara* feels mistreated. Back in the mid-2000s, Alia, a young girl from the village, fell in love with a man who came and proposed to her, but her parents were against their marriage. One day, Alia came with her mom to Em Khodor's house to have her coffee cup read. Em Khodor saw in her cup that there was a woman from her family who had in mind another future husband for her. "You have a wedding," she said to them. The mother promised Em Khodor a gift when this becomes true. Indeed, after two weeks, Em Khodor heard that Alia got engaged to the son of our neighbor and that it was Najwa, the aunt of Alia, who arranged this marriage. After this incident, Alia and her mother never came back again to visit Em Khodor or brought her the promised gift.

Not only Em Khodor felt mistreated, Samia did as well. When I first met Samia on January 14, 2022, she told me that she was a retired *bassara*. I asked her about the reason, and she said that two years ago she swore to stop practicing *tobsir* because of the greedy women of the town who came to her solely to have their coffee cups read. Samia is known for her esteemed coffee-reading skills, which led a huge number of women, inside and outside Bint Jbeil, to knock on her door. In some cases, these

women used to drink their coffee in their houses and bring their ready-made coffee cups to her so that she could do the reading. This situation was annoying her and she said to me, “Neswen el balad ma byena’to wej”⁴. However, when I saw Samia again two months later, I discovered that she lied about the swearing thing. She told me that she has been saying this to the villagers to push them away from her. And I felt at the beginning of my research that she also wanted to protect herself from me. She was somehow trying to deliver to me the message “because I love your parents, I’m helping you in your research”. Before revealing to me that she was lying, she told me “Now because of you I broke my swearing and I need to fast for 3 days to compensate for it”. Frankly speaking, this made me feel guilty for a while, but when she told me the truth I understood her and put myself in her shoes. Lying is sometimes the only effective way to protect one’s privacy and several reasons lead to it (Van der Geest 2018). In Samia’s case, lying was her way of protecting herself from being exploited again.

This lying technique was also used by Em Khodor to save herself from being used. Once she visited a townie's house in the *Dawra* neighborhood in Bint Jbeil one Saturday morning with her friend Nawal. At that time, she didn’t have an eye problem. As far as she knew, she was only going to coffee-read for this townie's daughter. A few minutes after she reached the house, a great number of women from the neighborhood started to fill the living room. It was the townie who spread the word about Em Khodor’s visit, and, of course, the women didn’t think twice about coming over. This behavior was embarrassing and annoying for Em Khodor. It was a Saturday morning, and she was assuming that it would be a short visit before she goes back home and prepares lunch for her family. Seeing around 30 women filling the room that day was so

⁴ An expression used by a Lebanese when he/she gets annoyed because of a person who was using him/her and getting advantage of him/her in a certain situation.

unexpected. Coffee-reading for each one of them would have taken her forever to finish, so she thought to herself that finding a lie at that moment would be a way to save herself from that situation. "I'm sorry I can't coffee-read for you. I just had a fight with my husband about me practicing coffee-reading," Em Khodor said to the townies. The moment Em Khodor uttered this sentence, every woman in the room just vanished. "Did you really have a fight with your husband about you practicing coffee-reading?", Nawal asked Em Khodor when heading back home. "No, I had to lie to save myself from the situation," Em Khodor answered. Nawal burst into laughter.

On the contrary, when their *tobsir* works and their predictions come true, *bassarat* feel gratified. They somehow, deep inside, expect the women to praise them and acknowledge their astute skills. During my fieldwork, I frequently heard the women who were feeling happy and impressed by the *bassarat*' readings and skills saying to them sentences like "I'm not saying this to your face, but every word you said is true", or "You are surreal". It's not always about a materialistic gift, but sometimes it is about these kind praising words that the *bassarat* care about. This is when they feel confident and get encouraged to share stories with other people about the times their predictions were right. The fact that the *bassara* was able to reveal a woman's accurate future would also make the latter feel even more connected to the *bassara*. Thus, this again underlines that the connection—in this case, the "trust" given by these women to the *bassarat* of the town—during *tobsir* is the most important part of the exchange of emotions.

In this chapter, I presented *tobsir* as a work of healing. In such a kind of divination practice, a connection is built between the *bassara* and the women that allows a flow and exchange of emotions and space for healing. This is because the *bassara* in this case embodies the role of a healer that transforms through her cup

reading the stories of the women in the town to a universal level. Through this narrative transformation, she eases their anxieties, solves their problems and shifts their stories from being unjust to being hopeful, refreshing and positive.

CHAPTER 4

TOBSIR, INTERPRETING SIGNS AND ACTIVATING INTUITION

When people finish drinking their cup of coffee, they usually wash out the cup and the coffee residues. The residue is not dirty like other dishes such as those that have animal fat or a particular type of smell that we call “zankha” or “rancid”. But it is a clean type of remains that people throw out. Among the *bassarat*, however, as you saw earlier, these coffee residues are signs that have meanings that go back to a long history. Throughout the *tobsir* sessions, my interlocutors were invested in digging into the meaning of these signs. This digging was highly important for them so they could better understand the *bassara*'s message, give it context in their lives, and take what resonates with them based on their concerns.

Barbara Tedlock reflected on how divination practices can be a unique way to obtain knowledge (Tedlock 2001). Rather than dismissing these practices as mere superstition or irrational belief, she argued that divination plays a significant role in various cultures as a means of gaining insight into the unknown (Tedlock 2001). The anthropologist also shed light on two different modes of interpretation in divination: the presentational symbolism (Tedlock 2001, 62), where the divination is felt and based on a free-flowing context, and the representational symbolism (Tedlock 2001, 62), where the divination is based on an intentional reference within a certain controlled reality. To deliver their messages through *tobsir*, *bassarat* in Bint Jbeil, do use in fact these two modes of interpretation. In my work, I refer to these modes with different labels: an intuition-based, or *al hasse*, interpretation and a form-based, or *shakel*, interpretation. Based on this, in this chapter, my analysis revolves around my distinction between these

two modes by delving more into the levels and types of each mode and showcasing when *bassarat* shifts from one mode to the other.

After spending a significant amount of time listening to the *bassarat' tobsir* scripts, transcribing them in colloquial Arabic with a Bint Jbeily accent, and translating them into English, I noticed that *bassarat* in Bint Jbeil have a common list of signs they share among themselves while practicing *tobsir*. I collected all these signs and created a dictionary that contains the categories of these signs, the sign itself, and its meaning.

Table 2. A Dictionary for the Coffee Signs.

<i>Tobsir</i> Signs		
Category of Signs	Signs	Meaning
Animal-Related	Snake (hayye), Mouse (fara), Fox (ta'lab)	Enemy (a'dū)
	Fish (samake), Sheep (kharouf)	Good fortune (rezka) or good luck
	Dog (kalb), Deer (ghazele)	Friend (sadiq), Loyalty (wafa)
	Bird (a'sfur), Butterfly (frashe)	Good news (khabar helo)
	Scorpion (a'qrabe), Chameleon (herbeye), Cat (bsayne)	Envy (hasad), Jealousy (ghire)
	Ostrich (na'mi), Horse (hsan)	Standing tall (waqfet ezz)
	Eagle (neser)	Success (najeh, nasr)
	Pigeon (hameme)	Peace (salem), Good news (khabar helo)
Object-Related	Suitcase (shanta)	Travel (safar) or interview (moqabale)
	Candle (sham'a)	Light (nour)
	Letter (risele)	News (khabar)
	Currency (e'mle)	Good fortune (rezqa) or money
	Wall (het)	Obstacle (a'qa)
	Ladder (sellom)	Success (najeh)
	Ring	Engagement or marriage
	Coffin	Funeral

	Black line (khat aswad)	Death, accident or any bad news
	Crescent (hlel)	Relief (faraj), New beginning
Universe-Related	Sun (shams)	Surprise (moufejaa)
	Flower (warde)	Beautiful life (hayet helwe)
	Tree (shajara)	Beautiful days (eyyem helwe)
	Mountain (jabal)	Standing high, High position (najeh)
	1	Success (najeh) and win (nasr)
Numeral	7	Win (nasr)
	8	Accomplishment (etmem amer) like signing a job offer or getting married. Meaning that there is something that needs to be achieved in the life of the person being read.
	9	When this number shows up in the cup it means that whatever the person wished for will come true. All doors will be open for the own benefit of this person and good things will happen in his/her life.
	Dates could be possible as well. For example, the <i>bassarat</i> can say something like “On the 21th of the next month something good will happen with you...”	This is only to make the person more attentive to the date on which a certain event will happen in his/her life.
	The word “sign” (ishara)	This is one of the signs that is frequently used in <i>tobsir</i> by the <i>bassarat</i> . For example, they say something like “you have 3 signs (isharat)”. This means that after 3 days, 3 weeks or 3 months, an important event is expected to happen in the life of the person being read.
	Group of People (Jam’aa)	Gathering, wedding (farah), engagement (khotbe)
	Woman (enteye)	A female figure in the life of the person.
	Eyes (’uyun)	Being enviously watched by others or evil eyes.
	Face (wejj)	A person’s face.
	Hand (iid)	Praying

Human/Body-Related	Name (isim) and Letter (harf)	To identify certain people.
	Sadness (za'al)	These abstract signs express and represent the mental state and the feelings of the person being read.
Abstract	Happiness (farah)	These abstract signs express and represent the mental state and the feelings of the person being read.
	Teary eye (ain dam'a)	
	Concern or worry (telbik)	
	Hope (amal)	This is another frequent sign that shows up in the cup. It is a vow or commitment to carry out an act. Usually, people use it the most when they want something so badly so they pledge that if what they wish for comes true, they will pay something in return. The failure to fulfill it results in the need to take compensating action, often of a charitable nature, such as feeding the poor or giving them money.
	Relief (faraj)	
	Nazr	
	Heaviness of the coffee cup	Being struck by an evil eye (hasad).
Sensorial (mainly the touch sense)	Stamping in the coffee cup	To reveal what's hidden in the person's heart or what he/she wishes for.
	Dark coffee (ghamqa)	Bad news (akhbar besh'a)
Coffee-Related	Bright coffee (shaqra)	Good news (akhbar helwe)
	Uncooled coffee sediments after turning the cup upside down.	Crying (dam'a nezle)
	Bottom of the cup (ard el fenjen)	News related to one's family (ahl el beit)
Cup-Related	Side of the cup (taraf el fenjen)	News related to people outside one's family.
	Size of the cup (hajem el fenjen)	The traditional Arabic coffee comes in different sizes. When the cup is big, the <i>bassara</i> can see and predict more news than when it is a small one.
	"Khabar tayyara"	This means that the person being read will receive news

		from abroad or will hear about someone coming from abroad.
Common Expressions	“Fashet amal”	This translates to “space of hope”. <i>Bassarat</i> frequently use it when they see that the person being read has good news coming ahead, or a relief, or an end of a problem.
	“Tariq bayda”	This translates to “white road”, meaning that the person being read has a bright future, or an open road with no obstacles.
	“Khat telefon”	This translates to “phone call”, meaning that the person being read will receive a phone call soon.
	“Mqas hake”	This means there are new beginnings in the life of the woman being read or an engagement.
	“Amoud el Beit”	This translates to “the column of the house” and it refers to the husband of the woman being read.
	Low tone, narrowed eyes, silence after a deep gaze into the cup.	This means the <i>bassara</i> will be telling bad news to the person being read.
Paralinguistic signs, facial expressions and body movement that are produced when the <i>bassarat</i> hold the coffee cup to interpret it	Hand around the ear, leaning towards the cup, rolling the cup with the hand.	This means that the <i>bassara</i> is putting her heart into the reading and that she is being attentive to the details.
	Leaning towards the woman being read while coffee-reading.	This means that the <i>bassara</i> wants the person being read to feel comfortable and to listen carefully to her.

As you can see from this dictionary, there are numerous signs that *bassarat* use in the town. Nevertheless, two crucial factors must be kept in mind when it comes to these signs: 1) Some of the *bassarat*, like Em Khodor, do not have the ability to read all the signs, and this is because she is illiterate; hence, she can't read names and letters in the coffee cup; 2) *Bassarat* have a "Gestalt" mentality or perception while doing the readings. "Gestalt," a word used in modern German to refer to the way a thing has been

placed or put together. The best translated English word for it would be "form" or "shape." Gestalt psychology was founded in the 20th century to study perception (Gestalt Psychology 2009). In *tobsir*, this perception varies, though, from one *bassara* to another. What appears as a snake form to one *bassara* may appear in a completely different form to another. This is why several *bassarat* can read and analyze the coffee residues of the same cup in different ways, hence raising a question concerning the mode of sign interpretation used by the *bassara* when she coffee-reads. "What did she base her interpretation on to recognize these signs?", is a question that I repeatedly asked myself throughout my fieldwork. In other words, I thought to myself about her ways of knowing- meaning if the *bassara* had a gut feeling about the predictions or if she did an analogy between the form shown in the cup and the form of an actual bird or snake, for example, to recognize these signs. In the upcoming sections, I share different stories and events that happened in front of me or were told to me during my fieldwork. I present how these two modes adopted by the *bassarat* appeared in their reading of the women's cups.

Bassarat in Bint Jbeil take the floor when they read coffee cups. Kamila is one of a kind when it comes to her interpretative way of the coffee signs. On September 4, 2022, I went to her house for the first time, along with Youmna, a young woman from the town. I was led to Kamila thanks to my mother's acquaintances. She has a humble house with a narrow entrance, warm atmosphere, and a blooming garden with flowers and trees. We waited for a few minutes upon our arrival while asking the neighbors for Kamila. Then, a short woman with eyeglasses shows up wearing all black. "Hello, I am asking for Kamila", I said to her. "I am Kamila", she answered. Then, I introduced myself and told her about the reason behind my visit. Even though it was our first-time meeting her, she was very welcoming.

When we were heading to Kamila's house, Youmna shared with me why she was interested in visiting her. She needed some guidance related to her love life, since she was confused and heartbroken after her first love. When she was 21, she met a man in his late 20s. She fell for him and made him the center of her life. "He was the beam of hope in my life", she said to me. From the moment she saw this man, she couldn't give her heart to any other man. She was blinded. She waited for him for years, hoping that one day he will be able to come to terms about their relationship. He always gave her mixed signals and left the door of hope open for her without giving her an honest and direct answer. Even though this broke her heart, she waited and was never bored of waiting. On our way to Kamila's, she was eager to know what the latter would be predicting for her concerning this man and to know whether she should keep on waiting for him or move on.

Youmna's Cup Interpretation

- **Kamila:** *In front of you, there is a **road**. You will leave your house and hit this road. It will end with success.*
- **Kamila:** *You have a **Nazr**. You said to yourself, "If this thing happens to me, I will do this... and this... in return." You will fulfill this **Nazr**. Following this fulfillment, you will have a **scissor**.*
- **Youmna:** *What does this mean?*
- **Kamila:** *You will be preparing for something new. A new project. You will buy new clothes. You will buy something very special. You will achieve something and be so happy about it. You will achieve success very soon.*
- **Kamila:** *You have a very beautiful **space of hope** (*fashet amal*). Look how big your heart is! By the way, you have grooms. There are a lot of them who want to approach you, but they are scared. For example, if a man sees you, he feels like*

coming and proposing to you, but then he changes his mind. He stays away.

People have a certain image of you. They think that you are very "ghannouje".⁵

- ***Youmna:*** *This is so not true!*

Kamila stopped gazing at Youmna's cup, looked at her, and said, *"Look, I want to tell you about your character, not about what I see in the cup." You are kind and innocent, and you don't know how to show off. However, people see you differently. They think that you have an ego (sheyfe halik).*

- ***Youmna:*** *Maybe men think like that.*

- ***Kamila:*** *No, not only men, even in society. For example, if you passed someone on the street, people would comment, "Look how much ego she has!" Maybe at that moment you are thinking about something else, and you think to yourself that you said "hi." Let them think like that! This is better for you. You are down-to-earth and a kind person, but you are "ghannouje."*

- ***Youmna:*** *I'm not "ghannouje". I don't like being like that!*

- ***Kamila:*** *You are "ghannouje" in your house, with your parents. I was like that with my parents. That's why I didn't get married. I don't like to be controlled by anyone.*

Kamila started looking again at Youmna's cup to interpret it.

- ***Kamila:*** *You are so so so passionate! You will rise and shine! You have a huge success ahead of you. You have someone in your corner who supports you so much.*

⁵ Someone who is pampered.

- **Kamila:** *You don't open any space for men. You only care about studying. Open up a little bit of space! Build friendships so that you can have new perspectives and a better vision of men. You have a **ring!** A very big one!*
- **Kamila:** *Are you willing to travel?*
- **Youmna:** *Yes.*
- **Kamila:** *Yalla! Get ready; it won't be that long.*
- **Kamila:** *Something very important will happen to you. It is still small, but growing. It will be accomplished with huge success. You will be **standing proudly** (waqfet ezz). Your **candle**, Smallah, is illuminated, and you have a bright future! Your sun is rising, and you have a beautiful **space of hope!** Don't say this is untrue! You will be a very successful person! However, most importantly, don't let anyone use you. You have kindness in you, and you're still innocent.*
- **Kamila:** *Something will happen to you, or has already happened; I don't know... You're in tears while sleeping on someone's lap. Your tears are falling out of a broken heart. You had your hope in someone, and he broke it. Your tears are falling, and you're so sad... Advice from me to you: Don't build your hopes on anyone! Keep yourself a priority, and then come the other people. The person who broke your heart is not the right one for you. And by the way, you don't love him... You just love the idea of love. You say, "My heart is aching and I love him," but in fact it's all an illusion. It's true that you are in pain, but you have a void, and this is why you got attached to him... You don't love him.*

From this cup reading, I can tell that Kamila unraveled various aspects in Youmna's life and not only her love life as she wanted. She informed her that she will have a bright future, a space of hope that will lead to new beginnings, and that she will

be successful in her educational and professional status. And at the same time, she did a deep analysis of Youmna's personality traits and how other people see her. She tells her that she is innocent, kind, down-to-earth, passionate and "ghannouje". Most importantly, she gave her the advice she was waiting for concerning her love life. First, she told her to stay as she is in terms of her personality, and then, after revealing her recent heartbreak, she gave her a golden advice, which is not to build her hopes on anyone and that she must put herself first. Based on this, she offers her a better way to deal with her love life, which is to be more open to new encounters and build friendships with men so that she can get a better vision of them.

I got the impression from Youmna's cup reading that Kamila heavily relied on her intuition, especially when she told Youmna "Look, I want to tell you about your character, not what I see in the cup." From this, it's clear that she doesn't just use the formed signs (scissor, ring, road) in the coffee cup to figure out Youmna's personality. She also uses a hidden, abstract source that only she can feel. The coffee cup in Kamila's hand, produces some sort of vibration of Youmna's feelings that Kamila eventually catches. This vibration is the hint that Kamila depends on to dig deeper into her reading. She catches allusions and looks at Youmna and turns her predictions into a universal story. And usually when there are abstract signs, such as "Nazr" and "hope" in Youmna's cup, and sensorial and event-related signs, *bassarat* rely more on their intuition to detect them.

The intuition of these *bassarat* allows them to connect emotionally and energetically with these signs, enabling them to perceive the subtle meanings and messages that resonate with the situation or question at hand. In other words, in order to reveal the unknown of these women they happen to catch their energy. Ghada, being a

huge fan of my mother's *tobsir* skills, had once shared with me her opinion concerning my mother's energy and intuition every time she read her cup.

"After my experience with Zahra's tobsir, I noticed that each time she succeeded in reading what I was feeling and going through at the moment without me actually telling her. We have to keep in mind that I don't actually live close to her, and I don't keep her up to date with what's going on in my personal life or in my life in general, yet each time she read my coffee cup, she succeeded in telling me in detail about my personal life. She catches energy from me, or something like that, and she builds on what she takes from this energy through activating her intuition. If I keep doing tobsir sessions with Zahra continuously, every month, for example, I assume she's going to keep getting to know what I'm going through in my personal life. Zahra keeps up with me through tobsir readings based on the energy she catches from me, as if my cup is an open door to my secrets and private life!"

From Ghada's opinion, I could tell that she and my mother were connected through the transference of Ghada's energy to my mother and vice versa. Nevertheless, there are other cases, where *bassarat* use the intuitive mode in *tobsir*. Even though Em Khodor lost her sight partly, this never stopped her from practicing *tobsir* as I previously stated. She is still one of the best *bassarat* in the town. "When I carry the cup in my hand, I start to feel that it is black," she explained. Ever since she lost her sight, Em Khodor's interpretation in *tobsir* became more intuitive. For her, activating her gut feeling in this case is needed because the formed coffee grounds became misleading or unclear. Whenever she wants to detect a lost object or anything valuable for a person, she heavily relies on her intuition as well. A woman came to her one time to have her coffee cup read, so she sensed that the woman had lost something and was searching for

it. Later that day, the woman went back home and indeed discovered that she had lost a gold bracelet.

On another note, the *bassarat* reveal past, present, and future events in the lives of the Bint Jbeily women. All the *bassarat* I met in my fieldwork have the ability to detect at the same time the past, the present, and the future of these women. However, I realized that each one of them has a tendency to focus more on a certain time. In other words, their intuition makes them connect to different times. They tend to have a closer relationship or bond with a certain time when interpreting the women's coffee cups. For instance, in my cup reading that my mother did on March 19, 2021 (in the introduction), she used more the present tense, "You have this and this..." She was more present-oriented in this reading. She was giving an accurate description of the ongoing events that were happening with me at the time. She was warning me about the "snake" and the "scorpions" that represented my "enemies" who were part of my life back then, and she was describing my current overwhelming situation and my struggle to move on and get rid of the past at that moment. If we go to Em Khodor's intuitive time-focusing, I see that she is more future-oriented in her reading. In Chapter 3, when she did the reading for me when Bino went missing, it showed her excessive usage of the future tense "you will " all over the reading. As for the past events, all the *bassarat* I've met were able to detect them. Their intuition paved the way for them to see the women's past, but they tend to talk more about the present and the future. The past is commonly used by *bassarat* to explain to the women that they should let go of it if it was harsh, and think instead about their present moments and upcoming future to avoid repeating the same mistakes they made in the past.

Last but not least, the intuition of these *bassarat* comes in different levels, making their *tobsir* skills different from one another and unique. As I mentioned before,

Samia has the ability to coffee-read and stamp in a person's cup without his or her physical presence. She does it on the intention of the latter by mentioning the mother's name. And her intuition can make her see events related to a whole family from only one single cup (usually the mother's cup). Kamila has more powerful abilities as well. She can predict events on a national level. For example, she predicted the August 4 blast in 2020 and the crash of the Ethiopian flight back in 2011 while reading cups for people. Before August 27, 2022, she was having a *tobsir* session with her neighbor, and she predicted that the latter would hear about something that would be "hadith el sa'aa" in Lebanon. This means that a shocking event is about to occur, and people will be talking a lot about it. Indeed, after a couple of days and on August 27, the news was going crazy about the tragic car accident that led to the passing of the 39-year-old Lebanese singer George el Rassi.

Finally, *Bassarat* shift to the form-based mode of interpretation in *tobsir* when there are mostly animal-related, object-related, human-related, coffee-related, cup-related, universe-related, and numeral signs, as it is easier for them to detect the form through making an analogy between what they see in the cup and an actual object in the real world. Samia for instance once told me, "I see your face at a birthday party," while reading my cup. She saw a resemblance between the coffee residues and my face features. However, I want to note again here that even when there are these categories of signs, the intuition of the *bassarat* play an essential role in detecting a certain form in the cup. This is why coffee cup interpretations are not fixed in the town; they can vary among different readers. Hence, this is what makes *tobsir* a subjective and personal practice among the community of *bassarat* in Bint Jbeil, where, most of the times, they can't answer how they see stuff, they just "feel" what they see. And this intuition in *tobsir* can vary depending on the *bassara*'s beliefs, experience, and it is often integrated

with her knowledge of symbolism, tradition, and technique to provide a well-rounded and insightful reading.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In Bint Jbeil, every cup of coffee has a story. Stories never end when it comes to *tobsir*. In this research, I went deeper into this form of divination that was neglected by historians and anthropologists of the town. Other than focusing on *tobsir* as being a superstitious, useless, and religiously forbidden practice, I unraveled its other important aspects and showed that it can build a close relationship with humans and affect their emotions.

In the introduction, I introduced to you my mother and narrated how I discovered that she can practice *tobsir*. I also introduced my neighbor Em Khodor and her journey in *tobsir* that started since she was 17. Then, I showed you in the rest of the chapters how throughout my fieldwork from March 2021 till September 2022, my thoughts about this divination practice have shifted bit by bit as it turned to be more complex than I expected.

In chapter 2, it shifted from a site that brings social bonding among neighbors to a justified leisure activity by the women to protect themselves from the different kinds of critiques—*tobsir* as being looked down upon and as a backward and superstitious practice. I presented the reasons why the women of Bint Jbeil need *tobsir* in their daily lives. In this part of my research, the *bassara* has a role of bringing out the women's anxieties and uncertainties about marriage, education, and livelihoods into the surface, at a time where Lebanon is facing a multidimensional crisis. Additionally, I unraveled at the same time how these women find in *tobsir* an escape and a release from stress and how it refreshes their nostalgic happy memories.

In chapter 3, it shifted to be seen as a work of symbolic healing, where a connection is built between the *bassara* and the women being read that allows a flow and exchange of emotions and creates a space for this healing. In this site, the *bassara* embodies the role of a healer who transforms through her cup reading the stories of the women in the town to a universal level. Through this narrative transformation, she eases their anxieties, solves their problems and shifts their stories from being unjust to being hopeful, refreshing and positive. Since this effect of *tobsir* was the most important one according to my interlocutors, I therefore came with the thesis title “Coffee Reading and Narrative Healing in Bint Jbeil”.

Last but not least, in chapter 4, I delved into the two modes of interpretation the *bassara* use in *tobsir*; the form-based and the intuition-based interpretations. In *tobsir* there is a long dictionary that contains common signs along with their meanings. In order to detect them, the *bassara* use these two modes. In the form-based interpretation, she does an analogy of the formed sign in the cup and an object in the real world (for example a thin long body is usually a snake), and in the intuition-based interpretation, she activates her intuition and catches allusions and energy from the woman she’s reading. And I showed how this intuition can come in different levels and how it can be related to different times. I as well highlighted an important point in this chapter which was the importance of the *bassara*’s perception of the signs. It is important to keep in mind that one coffee cup can be read differently by different *bassarats*. And this is what makes *tobsir* a subjective and personal practice among the community of *bassarats* in Bint Jbeil, where, most of the times, they can’t answer how they see stuff, they just “feel” what they see. Indeed, the concept of intuition has weight in *tobsir*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bazzi, Ali. "Bint Jbeil al Thakira wal Hareb." (2007).
- Bazzi, Hikmat. "Min Hakibati al Tarikhiya." (1998).
- Bazzi, Mustafa. "Bint Jubayl: Hadirat Jabal 'Amil." (1998).
- Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "Gestalt psychology". Encyclopedia Britannica, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/science/Gestalt-psychology>. Accessed 27 February 2023
- Favret-Saada, Jeanne. "Unbewitching as therapy." *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 1 (1989): 40-56.
- Gürsel, Zeynep. "Following Coffee Futures: Reflections on Speculative Traditions and Visual Politics." *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism* (2012): 372-93.
- Jansen, Stef. "The Anthropology of Hope." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. 2021.
- Joumaa, Waddah and Baydoun, Hassan. "Bint Jbeil Captured Memories." (2011).
- Kirmayer, Laurence J. "The cultural diversity of healing: meaning, metaphor and mechanism." *British medical bulletin* 69, no. 1 (2004): 33-48.
- Korkman, Zeynep Kurtulus. "Feeling labor: Commercial divination and commodified intimacy in Turkey." *Gender & Society* 29, no. 2 (2015): 195-218.
- Mattingly, Cheryl. *Healing dramas and clinical plots: The narrative structure of experience*. Vol. 7. Cambridge university press, 1998.
- Mills, Amy. "Gender and mahalle (neighborhood) space in Istanbul." *Gender, Place and Culture* 14, no. 3 (2007): 335-354.
- Seremetakis, C. Nadia, ed. *The senses still*. Taylor and Francis, 1994.
- Seremetakis, C. Nadia. "Divination, media, and the networked body of modernity." *American Ethnologist* 36, no. 2 (2009): 337-350.
- Shannon, Laura. "Kafemanteia: Women Reading the Coffee Cup by Laura Shannon." (2017)
- Tedlock, Barbara. "Divination as a way of knowing: Embodiment, visualisation, narrative, and interpretation." *Folklore* 112, no. 2 (2001): 189-197.
- Van der Geest, Sjaak. "Lying in defence of privacy: anthropological and methodological observations." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 21, no. 5 (2018): 541-552.