

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

EXPERIENCES OF MARONITE MEMBERSHIP –  
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF FAMILY AND  
COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

by  
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# ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Joy Camille Saade

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This thesis seeks to unpack sentiments of belonging and exclusion within the parameters of Lebanese Christian families and community. As a result, topics within the themes of kinship, inclusion, responsibility, security, religious identity, and solidarity are explored. The objective of this study is to explore whether instances of racism, xenophobia, and sexism are a necessary condition or accidental circumstance of Lebanese Christian community preservation and development. With this objective in mind, this thesis aims to understand (1) the relationship between sectarian identity and family expectations, upbringing, and morals (2) the spectrum of unconscious to deliberate processes of othering (3) the threat and fear associated with exclusion from belonging to Christian communities, as well as (4) the effects of rejecting social norms and family expectations.

The data presented in this thesis is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted sporadically between the years 2020 to 2024. As a result, this thesis presents a nuanced perspective of the COVID19 pandemic and lockdown period, economic crisis and nationwide electricity shortages, as well as the emergence of right-wing alternative security groups in the historically Christian-majority neighborhood of Ashrafieh in Beirut.

## PREFACE

### TO EACH THEIR OWN CATASTROPHE

I originally started this thesis thinking it was time to unpack my resistance to writing about the Maronite people and Christian cultural formations in Lebanon. I assumed exploring this topic should first and foremost start with me, as I consider myself a Maronite despite not practicing the religion, but quickly noticed that the more questions I directed onto myself the more burdened I felt with having to secure an “answer.” My struggle to put my thoughts to paper stemmed from my rejection to think. As a result, I found my mind compiling questions upon questions – because naturally the mind is inquisitive and often does not know when to stop asking – and I was not willing at this time to think through those questions to generate any type of response. In a seminar called “Writing Catastrophe,” facilitated at the American University of Beirut, Dr. Livia Wick directed me to consider the role of time and distance when working with material that may be considered traumatic or catastrophic to the writer. She encouraged me to consider how distance from events, experiences, or even thoughts that have come to strongly influence one’s research topic can help facilitate clarity and the renewed energy needed to pursue a project considered delicate to the ethnographer. At the time I did not think this advice pertained to my research interests on Christian families and communities, and the intergenerational relationships within them.

I had used the term catastrophic to refer to other studies I’ve completed – some on the Beirut port explosion in 2020, others on subjects of refugee wellbeing and access and availability of medication during the economic crisis, among others with a similar tone of urgency. Next to topics concerned with access, privilege, health, social and economic wellbeing, etc., I expected my questions on identity and cultural formations would be refreshingly enjoyable to explore. This is why my writer’s block (and thinker’s block, if we can call it that) came as such a surprise to me. While my mind stayed busy, constantly thinking through questions of why certain traditions exist, who they serve, how they are practiced, why they may be ignored, etc., I found that my analysis would stay surface-level, asking the questions in repetitive motions without managing to truly answer them. My notebooks reflected a similar surface-level chaos and became filled with a series of questions but no content on where or through what method to further unpack them. As the questions continued to pile up, I began to wonder if my inability to go beyond this stage of my study was due to my sudden disinterest in seeking knowledge through academia. I knew I still cared deeply for the topic and to learn more about the lives and experiences of Christian families in Lebanon but questioned whether an academic approach would provide me with the satisfaction I was looking for.

Why am I interested in studying Lebanese Christian families? Even my answer to this question had remained surface level. For the longest time, I told myself that my interest in this topic comes from my desire to compare my upbringing as a Lebanese Christian diaspora to the Lebanese Christians born and raised in Lebanon. Despite growing up in Toronto Canada, I very much felt like a Lebanese girl – what I ate, the customs and ethics that I was raised in, the traditions I followed, etc., were all explicitly prescribed to me as customs, ethics, and traditions of Lebanese Maronites living in Lebanon. Almost every Sunday, my family would drive for an hour to take my siblings

and me to Sunday mass at the only Maronite church in the city (since then, two other Maronite churches have opened in the Greater Toronto Area). After mass at Our Lady of Lebanon Church, we would proceed to join the rest of the community in the church basement for coffee, tea, and *manaesh*. The men would remain standing in the center of the basement hall, separate from the women, discussing both outdated and recent Lebanese politics. The women would occupy the chairs that surround the circumference of the hall and would take this time to update each other on the wellbeing of their relatives back home. The kids, my siblings and I, would spend this time running around playing tag. As we got older, we began to imitate our parents – the young girls would sit dainty and sweet on the chairs with their other girlfriends, gossiping and sharing their updates of the week, while the young boys would stand with their fathers and nod, contributing their political opinions wherever they could. Years of this Sunday morning routine forced me to reflect on the relationship between the traditions we create abroad and those that are practiced in Lebanon. Are children as keen on imitating their parents in Lebanon as we are in Toronto? Is the basement-party post-Sunday mass routine something that takes place in all Lebanese churches in Lebanon too? And is sex segregation as apparent in Maronite social circles as it is among my diaspora church community? I also came to notice how repetitive the conversations were in both the men's and women's circles and after some time found this routine boring. These were only a few of my contemplations.

When I find myself lost in my topic, I revert to memories of Our Lady of Lebanon Church in Toronto and the tornado of questions that surround it. This familiar activity hints to distance and time as nonlinear phenomena. While it has been over seven years since I last visited the Our Lady of Lebanon Church, the memories I carry remain at the forefront of my mind, recalled as though they are much more recent memories than time would suggest. The mind has not granted me the luxury and peace of distance despite my time away from the Church. With this realization, and under the guidance of Dr. Elizabeth Saleh, I came to reconsider my research topic as one that may be categorized as catastrophic. In no sense is it catastrophic in the same sense that topics requiring immediate action or activism are. However, within its own right, the topic of Christian cultural formations became situated as catastrophic due to my proximity to the topic and inability to push through my fieldwork without including myself at the forefront of my study. Ethnography often requires the researcher to include themselves as participants of their study to some extent. However, the researcher is never the only participant, and it is possible that the learnings gained from fieldwork may begin to overcorrect the researcher's desire to understand themselves in relation to their field. I believe the tension of where and how to include myself versus pull myself away from my field is the cause of my stagnation. To overcome this, I repeatedly reminded myself of Dr. Saleh's wise words as I worked through this project: "there is no need to inflict yourself with torture for an MA thesis."

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# INTRODUCTION

## **A. Research Problem**

Belonging to a sectarian identity is essentially an entry level requirement to holding a Lebanese citizenship. Whether it is part of our self-designated identity or legal affiliation, each Lebanese person is assigned a sectarian affiliation at birth in accordance with the sect of their father. Each sectarian community then enforces a set of expectations, historical narratives, customs, and traditions; and it is the responsibility of the individual within that sect to conform to the characteristics of the sect's identity in exchange for inclusion, protection, and privilege as a member of that community.

As a young girl raised in Canada, this is how I came to understand what it means to be "Lebanese." From the lessons of my father, I learned that my Lebanese-ness depended on my ability to be a "good Christian" and without being a "good Christian" I was not a rightful Lebanese person. Much of my interest in the topics of community, kinship, exclusion, and sectarianism stem from my life-long bewilderment of what a "good Christian" is, as the guidelines that were presented to me in Canada through my father and his family, as well as in Lebanon while living among extended family, have made me question the relevance of religious piety to sectarian identities and the Lebanese identity.

This study is an opportunity to explore how Lebanese religious-cultural expectations and customs create tensions among kinfolk, whereby tension refers to the division of family members that occur in the process of adhering to social norms. Within my own family, I have witnessed subliminal forms of racism, xenophobia, and sexism unintentionally perpetuated to preserve Christian social norms and expectations. I write "unintentionally" because often discrimination within kin occurs inadvertently without

malicious intent. It is not the objective but simply the unintended outcome of enforcing socially viable norms. I have also fallen victim to family pressure to conform and family shaming when I do not adhere to the preservation of Christian social standards, and consequentially felt the burden of representing an identity that I have not chosen for myself. As a result of this, I have also experienced a sense of alienation that stems from my failure to maintain my family's devotion to Christian social norms.

I question instances where racism, xenophobia, and sexism are a result of adhering to social norms and expectations. Is the process of othering a necessary condition to securing one's own belonging within a community? And does this suggest that the process of othering is an accidental circumstance of community preservation? How does the threat of being misconstrued as an outsider of the community play a role in one's dedication and enforcement of sectarian traditions, customs, and ideologies? Studying the perspectives and experiences of Lebanese Christians, Christian non-Lebanese people living in Lebanon, and Christian Lebanese people who carry a second nationality can best help me understand the range of realities that influence one's commitment to securing a sense of belonging and the rationality behind the fear of exclusion or being deemed other.

## **B. Research Questions**

In light of the questions I have been grappling with, the objective of my study of Christian Lebanese religious-cultural expectations and customs is to (1) understand the relationship between sectarian identity and family expectations, traditions, upbringing, and morals (2) to explore the spectrum going from unconscious to deliberate processes of othering (3) to unpack the threat and fear associated with exclusion from belonging to Christian communities, as well as (4) to explore the effects of rejecting social norms and

family expectations. I have posed three research questions in respect to the objectives laid out:

1. What is the relationship between kinship and sectarian identity?
2. Who is protected and/or excluded from Christian unity/community and why? and
3. What role does racism, xenophobia, and sexism play in the establishment of one's sense of belonging?

### **C. Fieldwork and Methodology**

The data presented in this thesis is comprised of snapshots of my ethnographic findings between the years of 2020 to 2024. It is important to note that this thesis does not encapsulate the entirety of these four years and instead offers highlights of events, conversations, and observations that I have curated together to showcase experiences of social protection, belonging, inclusion and exclusion within the context of Lebanese Christian communities. As a result, this thesis predominantly focuses on my ethnographic fieldwork with two Lebanese Christian families who I have been conducting my ethnography with for the span of these four years. Over these years, I have spent almost every weekend with these two families, where I have engaged in participatory observation in the settings of their family homes and on occasions of both holidays and everyday life events. Both families may be understood as traditional nuclear families – each consisting of a mother, father, and two daughters who are between the ages of 19 and 26. Among these two families, one family is bi-racial, resulting from the mother's Filipina origins.

In addition to the fieldwork conducted with these two families, this thesis also features non-participatory observations that were collected during my time as a resident

in Sassine, Ashrafieh. Such observations include those that I had collected on walks to and from my home, observations composed while sitting in Sassine Square, as well as daily interactions within my neighborhood with neighbors, local shop owners, and workers such as the local seamstress and convenience store worker, parking lot workers, and currency exchange workers. Conversations that took place within my household with my friends and flat-mates of non-Lebanese and non-Christian background also contributed a great deal to my understanding and formulation of community integration in Christian-majority public and private spaces. Although this thesis aims to understand the relationship between kinship, sectarian identity, and unity/community, I found learning from non-Christian and foreign individuals about their experiences in Christian areas of Beirut to offer additional nuance to my understanding of inclusion and exclusion within my field.

Different ethnographic tools and approaches are seen within each chapter of this thesis. For this reason, further elaboration of the methods applied are located at the start of every chapter.

#### **D. Chapters Outline**

The thesis consists of a collection of snap-shot essays that when read together point to the idea of social protection and belonging as well as implications of exclusion and social alienation within Lebanese Christian communities. Binding these various chapters together are the themes of baggage, in/out, and considerations of gender which appear sporadically across the entirety of the thesis.

In Chapter One, I work through the ideas of baggage, being in and out, and the role of gender in an analysis of Maronite Christian cultural formation. I begin this thesis

by unpacking Maronite within the binary of a capital *M*-Maronite and lowercase *m*-maronite which is used as a heuristic device to explain how an individual may subscribe to being outside and inside Maronite institutions. Briefly put, capital *M*-Maronite encompasses the historiography and memory-play embodied and promoted by the Church, political parties, and their allies, whereas the lower-case *m*-maronite, are not defined by the institution, but as a *result of* the institutions domination of the Maronite title. To demonstrate this anomaly, I refer to the history and literature of the institution and juxtapose it to my experiences as someone who considers themselves neither in nor out, but rather, in a state of *in-between*, and unpack this state of in-betweenness through a series of ethnographic narratives and through a psychoanalytical framework.

In Chapter Two, I continue to think through the limitations of Lebanese Christian patriarchy within the context of the COVID19 pandemic and lockdown of 2020. The objective of this chapter is to explore sentiments of national and religious states of being and bring into question the subtle traditions of “othering” seen within practices of policing national and religious character by Lebanese Maronite Christians. The foundation of this paper is based on the experiences of a family who sought to avert the COVID-19 pandemic through piety and adherence to the miracles of Mar Charbel, who at this time was revered for holding a cure to the COVID19 illness. The reactions and behavior that emerged following the popularization of this modern-day miracle story brings forth questions pertaining to the limitations of modernity in times of crisis. Furthermore, this case study offers a reminder that principles of social exclusion are embedded within the national fabric of Lebanon, as a condition of self-proclaimed Maronite cultural supremacy of the Lebanese nation.

In the following chapter, I shift my focus from the public sphere to the private quarters of the Christian family with the intention of unfolding the gendered and intergenerational experiences of being a “good” Christian girl and woman. Chapter Three offers a glimpse into questions of power, gendered culture, and sovereignty by contextualizing the kitchen as an integral space for learning, teaching and being a woman within household patriarchy. This chapter also briefly touches on the double standards placed on motherhood in Lebanon and the limitations Christian non-Lebanese women face while raising children in Lebanon and of Lebanese nationality.

In Chapter Four, I return the reader to the public sphere and explore the sentiments of safety in Sassine Achrafieh that exist within the guise of sectarian protection. In doing so, I unpack assumptions of where safety is located and how safety is created or disturbed amidst economic crises. Despite the neighborhood’s classification as a Christian hub and “Christian-majority neighborhood,” many non-Christian and non-Lebanese people have taken up residency in Ashrafieh. Unlike the previous chapters, Chapter Four follows the stories of non-Christian individuals to better understand how security and safety are redefined in relation to environmental and cultural exclusion, and how amidst a lack of safety, a self-fashioned mode of security materializes. Through the support of the themes introduced across this thesis, I explore imaginaries of protection and specifically their temporality as a phenomenon moving between creation and disruption.

To conclude my thesis, I tie this collection of snap-shot essays together by returning to the overall intent of this study which has been to explore how Lebanese religious-cultural expectations and customs create tensions among kinfolk and community. While there are no overall conclusions that I wish to lay claim to, I attest to the bridging of time, space, history, and memory in the design and upkeep of

contemporary Christian membership and argue that there is a spectrum going from unconscious to deliberate processes of othering that unfold as a result of adhering to the cultural status quo. A discussion on contemporary Christian membership within kin and community must therefore be unpacked with the knowledge that past and present institutions, ideologies, social norms and cultural practices contribute to the exclusion of individuals just as much as they have the capacity to create community.

## CHAPTER I

### LIVING IN, OUT, AND IN-BETWEEN MARONITE CHRISTIAN PATRIARCHY

#### **A. Introduction**

The objective of this chapter is to challenge the Maronite Christian institutions' hegemony on the Maronite individual in Lebanon. To do so, I apply the themes of baggage, in/out, and the value of gender in my overall understanding of Maronite cultural formation to argue that there is more to the Maronite than depicted by the institution that claims to own its definition. I begin this chapter by introducing the Maronites as a binary: Maronite with a capital M and maronite with a lowercase m and use this as a heuristic device to explain how an individual may subscribe to being outside and inside the Maronite Christian institution and its social norms. To define the difference between Maronite and maronite, I look at the history and literature of the institution and juxtapose it to my experiences as someone who considers themselves neither in nor out, but rather, in a state of *in-between*. I unpack this state of in-betweenness through a short unravelling of the themes mentioned above all the while thinking through a psychoanalytical framework.

#### **B. Maronite (with a capital M) and maronite (with a lowercase m) – what is the difference?**

Before delving into the themes of this chapter, I must first clarify the distinction between Maronite (with a capital M letter) and maronite (with a lowercase m letter), as they not only hold a clear difference in purpose and definition but will be employed

regularly throughout the chapter as a heuristic device in support of exploring Maronite cultural formations.

When referring to Maronite with a capital letter *M*, I am referencing the Christian institution as well as all the components that give legitimacy to that institution. This includes the church and the figures who represent it, political parties that claim to adopt a Maronite ethos, as well the state who works in partnership with the Church to maintain a claim of legitimacy when implementing policies deemed favorable to the Maronite population. I argue that such institutions and their partners do not represent contemporary Maronite cultural formations but rather mobilize Maronite historiography and policies to legitimize their institution.

Now may be the best time to note that Maronite women are largely excluded from the creation and process of documenting the Maronites' histories and cultural experiences. Much of the early history written on the Maronites have been written by religious leaders and prominent political figures within the community, as opposed to scholars in the field of historical studies (Hojairi, 2021; Bualuan, 2023; Rabah, 2020; Salibi, 1959; Hage, 2005). Due to this condition, what has been developed into factual historical narratives are derived from stories and poetry that situate themselves in the non-fictional setting of the time they are being written (Hojairi, 2011, 2021; Hagopian, 1989; Haddad, 2002). The works of Maronite priest Gabriel Ibn al-Qila'i (1450-1516), is an example of myth turned to historical legitimacy. Ibn al-Qila'i's poetry and epics focus on celebrating the Maronites as a heroic community which unified in its defense of freedom against insurgents and tragedies that challenge their faithfulness to their religion. He speaks of a haven that is exclusive to the Maronite community, powered by the church and centered around the preservation of the Maronite people (Haddad 2002, 27-50).

Kamal Salibi and Ghassan Hage identify Ibn al-Qila'i's use of historical material, in combination with folklore, as a production of legends that establish the Maronite community as one that thrives best when it is unified and armed (Salibi 1959, 1988; Hage, 2005).

The themes located within Ibn al-Qila'i's works have trickled down into early Maronite historiography, and have developed into new motifs which include: rebellion (al-Duwayhi, Murad, al-Dibs), social order and hierarchy (Daw), a connection to Eastern traditions and rejection of the Arab identity (al-Duwayhi, Murad, al-Dibs, Dib and Daw), and the evolution from refuge community, to ethnic community, to finally, nation-community – as introduced through Murad (see Hojairi, 2011, 2021). The Maronite priests/writers' positions as both imagined historians and concurrent leaders within the faith/community provide legitimacy to their writing as a product of Maronite history, notwithstanding the historical inaccuracy that exists in the texts. As a result, the motifs located within their works continue to develop in social, political, and religious narratives of the Maronite peoples as characteristics of the community's origins and history. While some scholars argue that the Maronite's leading role in the political formation of Lebanon served to ensure the preservation of their "ancient particularism" (Firro 2004, 13) and survival within a culturally Arab-dominated region (Abraham, 2015; Azize; 2023; Firro 2004; Henley, 2008;), other scholars argue that their leading role within Lebanon's nation building project and insistence of morphing Maronite, i.e., Phoenician, cultural principles into national discourse served to reiterate and formalize Maronite supremacy (Bawardi 2016; Hagopian, 1989; Hartman and Alessandro, 2003; Hage, 2005; Kaufman, 2001).

Jan Assmann analysis of Freud's "Moses and Monotheism" (1934) in *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (1997) may offer an example of

how we may use questionable or potentially invalid historical narratives, or overcome the limitations of a genre of thought, to better understand the communities we care for. In this book, Assmann asks his readers to look beyond questions of historical validity and truth, to instead ask how the mobilization of these narratives construct our world, and the way identity, relationships and community may be formed and understood. In doing so, he shares an analytical breakdown of the term *mnemohistory*, which offers an analysis of history and memory as psychoanalytical tools for thinking about social and cultural formations.

Assmann's rendition of the concept of *mnemohistory* as one that "is not concerned with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered," resonates with me (Assman 1997, 9). The differentiation between memory and history is one that is clear: history is grounded in facts, events, places, etc., and memory is grounded in its capacity to transform social relations and shape identity. The conflation of memory and history is a result of the embodiment of history, which is what I understand to refer to *mnemohistory*. The nuance of history and memory is reflected in Maronite historiography and its translation into contemporary cultural formations. To this day, the themes prevalent in Maronite historiography remains to be defining characteristics of the Maronite institution. For this reason, much of what is construed as social norms among Maronites is founded on practices of memory, i.e., a set of stories that reaffirm a series of motifs rather than they speak to the factual occurrences of the past itself. The history (and memories) of the Maronites is therefore crafted to serve the image and sustenance of the Maronite institution. As a result, very little of the institution's narration of the community can attest to the life and culture of contemporary Maronites.

For this reason, I have separated my understanding of Maronites with a capital M Maronite – which encompasses the historiography and memory-play embodied and promoted by the Church, political parties, and their allies – to make room for a lower-case m maronite, who are not defined by the institution, but as a *result of* the institutions use of the term Maronite. Accordingly, maronite with a lowercase m refers to a person or group of people who consider themselves inevitable members of the sect (e.g., as a result of being baptized in the church or born to a Maronite parent) but may not subscribe to the religious and political representation prevalent in the historical and political branding of the Maronites.

Separating the maronite individual from the institution clarifies a few things. Firstly, it debunks the homogeneity of the maronite population and the idea of an “authentic Maronite” as portrayed in their histories. Secondly, it suggests there are different interpretations of the teachings of the Church and therefore different practices that characterize one’s religiosity. Lastly, and frankly the most relevant clarification, is it reaffirms that a maronite does not have to be a religious or political person to be maronite – that being or belonging to a religious sect, such as Maronite, is an automatic characteristic of belonging to the Lebanese nation state because personal, legal, and civil affairs are lawfully designated through sectarian affiliation.

Many maronites identify as such as a result of their cultural conditioning and the traditions/rituals they follow. There are many who consider the traditions and idioms they have grown accustomed to as characteristics of their family custom. Understanding maronite as separate from the religion or sect creates room to see how traditions that may have come from a purpose of expressed piety or religiosity have transformed into secular expressions of social formations and components of kinship relations. Looking at

Maronites as maronites with a lowercase *m* also removes any assumptions that they are a population rooted in faith, which creates space to analyze the maronite people as separate from the history and themes that have been imposed on them by religious entities. Unfortunately, much of the knowledge on the maronite people is political propaganda produced and published by those who profit from reaffirming the historical themes of al-Qila'i and co. In order to move away from this archaic and linear representation of identity and culture, this chapter presents a bottom-up approach to exploring maronites as a people that are nonlinear, free for individualized characterization beyond the scope of the institution, and thereby removed from the limitations of the definitive notions defining the Maronite sect. In other words, this chapter adopts the assumption that there is no such thing as an authentic Maronite.

### **C. Baggage**

Ghassan Hage (2021) has inspired my questions about the bag, luggage, baggage, and the ways this tool may be translated in academic and psychoanalytical conversations about individual and social burden, responsibility, and migration. My understanding of baggage falls within the literal and figurative sense of the word. In the literal and personal sense, I see the concept of baggage in relation to my carrying of bags back and forth between Lebanon and Canada as a diaspora person living in between two countries (in a way, this literal understanding of baggage may transition to sentiments of being in between two countries, which will be explored later in the section on in/out). The literal meaning of baggage can be applied to other groups of immigrants (i.e., refugees, expats, etc.) whose physical relation to baggage implies the carrying of one's material world during travel. We can apply this idea of baggage and travel figuratively as well. The

“baggage” of moving back and forth between two locations and the content of that “bag” depends on the weight of the load one is carrying in their luggage. In other words, an individual’s relation to the expectations attributed to being diaspora, expat, refugee, immigrant, etc. and their solace with that status suggests the weight or heaviness of their baggage. For example, those who view expectations as burdening may consider their baggage to weigh heavier than someone who does not feel burdened by their categorization as an immigrant.

Grappling with societal expectations plays a large role in the weight of an individual’s baggage. We can almost use the words *baggage* and *expectations* interchangeably when thinking about how societal norms are passed down from one generation to the next, i.e., what baggage has been handed to us from our families, and what do we pass down to the generations that follow? How do the expectations/ baggage we carry shape our way of thinking? Questions on the responsibility of upholding societal norms can be metaphorically translated into contemplations of the responsibility attached to carrying a bag. Similarly, then, what does leaving the bag behind (i.e., breaking away from societal expectations) mean? And can we ever leave that bag behind?

I think of these questions when I behave in ways that may suggest my own religiosity. In such contexts, certain actions, words, or behaviors may be perceived as a show of piety which in truth may be suggestive of cultural expectations beyond any piousness. For example, as a child I had learned that it is customary to utter the phrase *b’ism el saleeb* (i.e., in the name of the cross) when driving or walking past a church. When I would inquire as to why we say this, my parents would say it is a way to show respect and gratitude to God. Beyond this explanation, it became evident that my parents were expecting my siblings and I to say *b’ism el saleeb* as an indication of our religiosity

(and despite this being the lesson and expectations set by my parents, it is necessary to note that the reason behind *their* utterance of the phrase is still in question). In any case, it is often treated as shameful if I do not acknowledge a church with the phrase *b'ism el saleeb*. Knowing this, I came to adopt the phrase habitually and apply it in contexts where my family is around to hear me say it. Yet when I am driving alone in my car, or walking passed any church, I do so in silence and without any regret that my relationship with God has faltered as a result. In fact, my dedication to implementing this ritual has nothing to do with my relationship to God despite what I was taught. Committing to saying *b'ism el saleeb* is largely a result of my desire to appease my family's expectations and avoid the duress that accompanies letting them down, i.e., breaking from their traditions and expectations, which metaphorically translates to putting down their bags or letting go of the baggage they have imposed on me.

William James (1902) would identify this behavior as belonging to an “ordinary religious believer, who follows the conventional observances of his country...” (James 1992, 10). In *The Varieties of Religious Experience: a Study in Human Nature* (1902), he categorizes this “ordinary” religious believer as one who embodies religious life as “second-hand” or inherited by tradition, community, and/or discourse that defines the “how to” of religious life. James writes: “religion has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit” (James 1992, 10). In the process of imitated conduct and feeling, religiosity is uncreative and dull, but continues to exist as belonging to the sphere of religion. Yet what happens when such behavior is done without religious intention? For example, and in some cases, I have grown to say *b'ism el saleeb* out of pure habit and have thereby removed all religious meaning and societal expectations from the phrase. For example, I

find myself saying *b'ism el saleeb* in moments where I am alone and abruptly startled, and thereby in need of comforting myself through words, e.g., when lightning strikes, when a car horn suddenly honks, when my cat breaks a cup or drops a book off my bookshelf, etc. In this sense, I acknowledge that the soothing power of the dialogue is a result of the contexts of origin in which I learned to utter the sentence, i.e., the soothing power of the presence of family and implied community. Therefore, my use of the phrase is not connected to the learned figure of God, for although the actions of this tradition imply religiosity, the value and construction of the phrase as a religious one is lost. Often I wonder, if my parents knew I was only saying *b'ism el saleeb* during our church drive-bys just to satisfy their expectations, would they still be gratified and consider their expectations met? Or would my parents be shattered by the thought of what appears to be my lost piety?

Much of these questions arise from the assumption that religious expression and religiosity stem from an “objective toolkit” that uses Christianity as a prototype for the concept and enactment of institutionalized religion (Cannell, 2015). Talal Asad (1993, 2003) argues that the history of institutionalized Christianity may be traced back to medieval Christianity; a period where different legalities were devised in the name of Christianity to solidify a set of regulations that have come to define what is today referred to as “religion” (Asad 1993, 161). In this context, the Christian institution may be viewed as baggage to Eastern and non-English speaking Christians. We may use Eastern Christian funeral customs as an example to build this argument. In the Maronite church, it is common courtesy, or *wejbet*, to say *allah yerhamo/a* (may God have mercy on him/her) when someone passes away. While the literal translation of the phrase suggests an invocation of God, the pragmatic meaning of the phrase simply translates to “my

condolences” in English. The conflation of religiosity and common courtesy in this Arabic phrase complicates our ability to decipher whether someone means to use the phrase literally or figuratively. In fact, questions that seek to decipher between literal and figurative meaning, and in this case delimit where the religious starts and stops, is an exact product of secularism as defined by Asad.

The application of the metaphorical concept of baggage is intricate due to nuances that concern the many different bags we carry, where those bags come from/who have given them to us, and how heavy they are. Baggage, i.e., expectations, increase and decrease in weight in accordance with one’s relationship to the conditions that set the expectation itself. By this I am referring to one’s relationship to the institution or authority that claims ownership of certain phrases/ behaviors. This is the case for Arabic phrases that tend to carry secular as well as religious meaning, such as *b’ism el saleeb* and *allah yerhamo/a*.

#### **D. In / out (and in-between)**

Thinking through an *in and out* binary allows us to qualify experiences that are suggestive of belonging or exclusion. We may consider that sentiments of being *in* (e.g., welcomed, included, and accepted by a social group, comfortably conformed to their social norms, etc.), and sentiments of being *out* (e.g., unwelcomed, excluded, and rejected by a social group) are determined by cultural factors that fluctuate and change. For example, and only in some cases, a sense of being *in* depends largely on an individual’s desire to belong within a social group. How characteristics of that social world, i.e., traditions, rituals, habits, etc., are adopted and implemented as part of the individual’s

daily life speaks to their own sense of being *in* as well as their access to the social group's acceptance and acknowledgement of their membership.

Likewise, sentiments of being *out* are similarly sanctioned by both the individual and the group. To be considered *out* by a social group would mean that the individual either does not possess the characteristics needed to belong to the social group, or that they have been excluded due to their possession of inherent characteristics that challenge or contradict the group's overall ethos. Just like sentiments of being *in*, the decision to be completely outside of a social group may be dependent on the individual and their desire to be *seen* as outside it. Performance, and the ways we wish to be seen (and I say *may*, because it is also possible that somebody wishes to be *in* but gets ostracized), may therefore be an inevitable part of being both *in and out*. What becomes interesting is looking beyond the performance as a predictable part of seeking belonging and instead focusing on what modes of performance are exercised.

The use of the *in and out* binary has proven to be a popular tool in anthropological studies on diaspora people and migration. My first introduction to this binary, and what remains to be my favorite interpretation, is through the works of Dorinne Kondo in her article titled "Dissolution and reconstitution of self: Implications for anthropological epistemology," (1986). In this article, Kondo builds upon the assumption that "there can be no understanding free of value of presupposition," and positions herself at the center of her ethnography of a Japanese social world. In her paper she conceptualizes "distance" to represent feelings of being inside and outside the culture under study. In doing so, Kondo introduces definitions of "Other," by making statements such as "the Other was not totally Other for me" as a way of pointing to her personal experiences and knowledge of the culture she considers herself to be in and out of (Kondo 1986, 75). The paper

unfolds in a way where the reader witnesses Kondo's "collapse of identity," as she begins to introduce distance between herself and her interlocutors, followed by what she calls a moment of "epiphany," where she comes to peel down layers of self that form when assessing identity in a state of temporality and in conversation with a temporal social world (Kondo 1986, 76). Temporality and the temporal social world, as I understand it, refer to existing and understanding cultural formations as dependent and reflective of the transience of time and space.

I have interpreted Kondo's work to suggest that we are likely in a state of *in-between*, more often than we are *in or out*. The *in-between* seems to characterize the temporality of belonging in either in or out. This can be understood through the example of the Maronite with a capital M and maronite with a lowercase m. Despite the separation of these categories, it is likely that no one ever exists within the limitation of one or the other. Rather, we fluidly transition between being Maronite and maronite, in accordance with fluid states of our social world, time, and need. Nuanced spaces that make up the setting of our social world such as home, school, church, etc., may influence our relation to the capital M and lowercase m categories proposed. These settings become complementary to the relationships we have with individuals who characterize themselves inside or outside the Maronite institution. To complicate this further, we can assess the role time plays in relation to our state of being *in-between* categories of identity within the Maronite social world. We may even go as far as to argue that our state of being inside or outside Maronite and maronite categories shift frequently throughout a single day in harmony with our social environment, which include elements of the relationships we keep and the spaces we are in.

There is also the consideration of *need* that is critical to how we perform and analyze the *in and out* binary and sentiments of being *in-between*. Beyond the social benefits of presenting as *in or out* is the material benefits that are rewarded to individuals inside a social group. It can be advantageous for someone to perform the characteristics needed to belong as a way to receive access to resources, opportunities, love, and even security and safety. In some cases, being seen as belonging or inside can also grant access to one's search for independence and subsequent othering from the social group. I have experienced this myself – often behaving in a way in front of my family that I know will please them (e.g., attending church regularly, serving my extended family coffee and tea without resistance, “listening” to the lessons of my father etc.) so that I may acquire enough “trust” to disengage quietly and proceed with experimenting with my own boundaries of *being* M/maronite.

I am not the first ethnographer to go back and forth within the *in-between*. Arab female writers before me, such as Suad Joseph, Soraya Altorki, Soheir Morsy, Camillia Fawzi el-Solh, and Lila Abu-Lughod address the questions that arise when studying one's own society as an Arab woman (see *Arab women in the field: Studying your own society*, 1988). The advantages and limitations of being seen as a daughter or wife or being seen as a diaspora or local are also conditions of the *in and out* whereby the researcher's status of belonging is largely subject to the conclusions drawn by interlocutors. This brings me to consider the limitations and labor (both emotional and physical) that goes into studying our own communities and how that labor may be translated into different phases of our work as well as the final written product that is shared with both academic and local readers.

## **E. Girlhood and Maronite matriarchy**

It was brought to my attention by a professor of mine during my MA degree that I tend to misrepresent myself as a girl, rather than the 29-year-old woman that I am, when I am reflecting on my position within Maronite cultural formations. Believe it or not, this was not something I ever noticed, nor cared to truly consider, until it was mentioned to me. Although I am still contemplating whether the difference between categorizing myself as a girl or woman makes much of a difference in the scope of Maronite patriarchy (as girlhood and womanhood are both subjects of patriarchal limitations), I have come to a few conclusions that suggest why I have subconsciously continued to refer to myself as a girl instead of a woman and thought it would benefit my exploration of the constraints of the Maronite institution on maronite personhood to explore it within this chapter.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, Maronite Christian women are largely excluded from the creation and process of documenting the Maronites' histories and experiences. This exclusion has thereby allowed men to oversee and decide how women are to be represented in historical and cultural writings. As a result, what we learn from books and history about female cultural practices is truthfully a reflection of how the patriarchy expects women to perform roles and customs created by and for men. This is the case in the Maronite patriarchy, which has come to define role(s) of Maronite women in relation to duties dedicated to the appeasement of the father, brother, husband, and God. The penalty for not performing expectations (or performing them "poorly" whereby poorly, again, is defined through patriarchal expectations) are rejection and shaming often inflicted by society towards women who fail to meet normative standards of womanhood.

Central to the Maronite patriarchy is marriage. The expectation that women are to be married and thereafter become mothers sets the stage for normative standards that suggest women must necessarily be domestic and nurturing. While these normative expectations are patriarchal in essence, they are often implemented and upheld by women. Our mothers begin to mold us into future wives at a young age by teaching us to adopt characteristics deemed agreeable by societal standards, and to learn the practical duties of womanhood such as how to clean and cook with the assumption that these skills are fundamental to a Maronite woman's future.

However, our socialization into womanhood goes beyond what we learn from our parents and in our home. Maronite assumptions about the role of women largely lie within the depiction of women in the Bible. Women in the Bible play the role of mothers, daughters, and wives. Alternatively, female characters that play the role of servants, slaves, beggars, and prostitutes are often presented in narratives where redemption is seen to be the forefront of the narrative's purpose. The Maronite institution's understanding of the value and potential of women in Maronite society goes back to these depictions of women represented in the Bible and are applied to the way we structure our society. In the Maronite Christian faith, the Virgin Mary is depicted as a model woman, and her transition from girlhood to womanhood is structured around the birth of her son, Jesus. Through this example, it is apparent that motherhood defines the climax of a girl's growth from girl to woman to lastly, caregiver. Upon the birth of Jesus, not only is Mary charged with the responsibility of caring for a child, but her role is consistently defined in relation to the needs of her son. From the moment of conception, she sheds her girl-ness and any individuality she may have had and becomes dedicated to the selfless act of nurturing and caregiving to another. If we seek to define girlhood and womanhood within the definitions

of the Bible, then we may argue there is no state of being in between girlhood or womanhood, and so our options are restricted to belonging to one or the other category.

For this reason, defining myself as a girl becomes the inevitable option, as I am not a mother and have no offspring to care for beyond myself and my cat (which, again within this framework, would not be a valid portrayal of womanhood). Referring to oneself as a girl rather than woman implies that the duties of womanhood are not *yet* applicable. This means the responsibilities of marriage, motherhood, and all the characteristics that fold within it are not yet concerns or responsibilities of a girl. A girl is therefore expected to be in the process of learning these characteristics, which leaves her in a domain where errors and imperfection are still tolerated more so than they would be for a woman who is expected to have already fully embodied the qualities of a “good woman.” Through this logic, the repercussions of not fitting the expectations of womanhood are not my concern, so long as I continue to categorize myself as a girl.

Unfortunately, presenting as a girl comes with its own set of social expectations and rules. Much of these rules fall under the limitations of playing the role of an individual who does not have free autonomy or agency from their fathers. Girls living under patriarchy are expected to continue needing nurture and care from their family until they come to create their own families through marriage. For this reason, the categorization of girl versus woman makes little difference in the grand scheme of female social representation within the Maronite patriarchy because both are subjected to abiding the expectations of the institution despite the differences of those expectations. Moreover, it proves that there are limitations to the maronite with a lowercase m, not only because it remains subject of the Maronite institution’s social norms and expectations, but because

it is a reminder that our perception of our identity and how we position our sense of belonging is dependent on our social encounters.

## **F. Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter has been to think through how Maronites exist in parallel to the expectations of the Maronite institution. In order to do this, it was essential to first introduce maronite with a lowercase *m* to enable an understanding that not all Maronites are defined by Maronite institutions (i.e., church, political parties that claim a Maronite ethos, etc.). Moreover, it is relevant to note that individuals who define themselves beyond the Maronite institution are not victims of Maronite patriarchy. Rather, they are individuals crossing through and within a set of cultural expectations that they must navigate. Thinking of Maronites through baggage as a heuristic device, through sentiments of being in, out, and in-between, and through the lens of gender reaffirms that Maronite cultural formations are everchanging and unfixed. Applying my ethnographic experiences to these three concepts has also served as a reminder that there is no conclusiveness to the deductions made in this chapter and that it could be of great help to let go of any assumptions that suggest learning, questioning and findings answers offer finality. In other words, while I may have been able to locate some sort of truth within the use of these concepts, thereby reconciling experiences and observations that for a long time felt unsorted, it remains to be a subjective truth open to reinterpretation and further probing. In the following chapter, I will continue to explore the impact of Lebanese Christian patriarchy on everyday forms of local religious cultural expression.

## CHAPTER II

### POLICING PURITY – PREDISPOSITIONS OF MARONITE CULTURAL SUPREMACY DURING THE COVID19 PANDEMIC

“Ideologies are always oriented toward history, even when, as in the case of racism, they seemingly proceed from the premise of nature; here, nature serves merely to explain historical matters and reduce them to matters of nature. The claim to total explanation promises to explain all historical happenings, the total explanation of the past, the total knowledge of the present, and the reliable prediction of the future.”

Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1976), 470.

#### **A. Introduction**

Formations of national identity often rely on historical narratives to demarcate the spatial borders of a nation and assign possession of those borders on the premise of imagined socio-political belonging. Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1976), suggests that nature is often manipulated in discourse to justify totalitarian attitudes that push for racism and intolerance (Arendt 1976, 470). Nature is therefore exploited as a tool to justify historical narratives that reaffirm principles of national sentiment, such as exclusion and racism. This design relieves people from acknowledging individual ownership of their bigotry, by implying that such attitude and behavior fall within the characteristics of their national identity. Additionally, individuals may never identify their attitude and behavior as all together racist, thereby manufacturing a population of individuals who understand their behavior to be in service of protecting and reaffirming their national identity. This was the case in Nazi Germany, where the superiority of German culture stemmed from reaffirming the biological bond of their race to the land, seen in the suggestive phrase, “blood and soil” (*Blut und Boden*) (Haney 2022,

3). Zionism also insists on the principles of “blood and soil,” in its political and national requirement to homogenize its population, and as a result, rendering non-Jewish individuals, largely the Palestinian indigenous population, as a threatening “other” (O’Brian 2007, 99). In Lebanon, “blood and soil” are depicted through the conflation of Maronite history as Lebanon’s national discourse, which both literally and figuratively reinforces Maronite cultural and political supremacy.

Michel Chiha and Charles Corm are often credited for spearheading the direction of Lebanese nationalism (Firro, 2004; Traboulsi, 2012; Hartman and Alessandro, 2003). While Chiha’s role in the construction of Lebanon’s national identity drew on the Phoenician’s legacy of trade and commerce to justify partnerships between the West and Lebanon (Hartman and Olsaretti 2003), Corm’s poetry sought to inspire cohesion across sects locally under a Phoenician banner. Much of his work indirectly pushes against or goes further than the Arab histories of the region to invoke memories of Lebanon’s “Phoenician forefathers” while romanticizing the natural elements of Lebanon, i.e., the cedars, mountains, sea, etc. (Corm, 2004). Hage argues that the nationalization of Maronite identity serves to politicize the ‘other,’ i.e., the Muslims, Druze, and Jews, whereby the politicization of the other is synonymous to viewing them as a military threat (Hage 2005, 193). It may be argued that this intolerance directly correlates to Maronite historiography and depictions of the other as oppressors and persecutors of the Maronite people (Abraham, 2015; Azize, 2023; Bawardi, 2016). This intolerance towards the other, largely directed towards Muslim people, traces back to Maronite narratives of the Mardaite who defended themselves from the Islamic conquests of the seventh century AD (Hojairi 2011, Hage 2005). The nationalization of Maronite identity and the demarcation of an “other” offered the Maronite people a recognizable antagonist to their

sovereignty – as well as a recognizable ally, rooted once again in a Maronite desire to separate Lebanon from its Arab heritage and reaffirm its cultural connection to the Western world (Bawardi 2016; Hojairi 2011; Firro 2004).

The insistence of a global, Western-oriented imaginary is most clearly exemplified in the discourse of Maronite political leaders, most notable Bashir Gemayel (1947-1982) who often insisted on the value of Maronite Christianity to the Western world by iterating that the Maronites are “the ones today who are witnessing [Christianity] for all Christians of the world” (Gemayel, 2010). It is evident that Maronite sovereignty and supremacy remains tied to the production of literature and discourse that reaffirms the motifs of Maronite legends. However, scholars such as Elaine Hagopian claim that Maronitism has ultimately failed in its mission to secure its hegemony. In making this argument, she identifies the ideological similarities between Zionism and Maronitism, seen through their commitment to exclude other groups and closely control the manufacturing of their historical narratives (Hagopian, 1989). She attributes this failure to “historical timing and context, and the degree of Maronite ideological self-delusion” (Hagopian, 1989, 101-102).

This chapter explores sentiments of national and religious states of being and brings into question the subtle traditions of “othering” seen within practices of policing national and religious character by Lebanese Maronite Christians. The foundation of this paper is structured on ethnographic findings collected in the year 2020, during the COVID19 pandemic in Lebanon, with specific attention to the fervor that resulted from stories describing the miraculous healing of COVID19 cases resulting from the holy blessings of the Lebanese saint, Mar Charbel. The reactions and behavior that emerged following the popularization of this modern-day miracle story brings forth questions

pertaining to the limitations of modernity in times of crisis. However, responses to the COVID19 pandemic, and the social limitations pertaining to who may access and benefit from the holy miracles of Mar Charbel, speak to the relationship between land and nation, as well as religion and healing. Soil is conceptualized as an integral characteristic of the biological and social bond of the Lebanese Christian people to the land, which can be understood through dichotomies of purity and impurity, religion and reason, and tolerance and intolerance. In reflection of these oppositions, this paper's aim is to argue that principles of social exclusion are embedded within the national fabric of Lebanon, as a condition of self-proclaimed Maronite cultural supremacy of the Lebanese nation.

## **B. Legacies of Mar Charbel and the holy dirt of Annaya**

News of the miraculous healing properties of Mar Charbel's holy soil first emerged publicly on the OTV television channel (a Christian-owned and politically affiliated multi-media station) in early March 2020. Father Louis Mater, the bursar of the Saint Maron-Annaya monastery and burial ground of Mar Charbel, revealed the story of a 25-year old woman who visited the monastery in Annaya with the intention of retrieving a spoonful of dirt from Mar Charbel's original burial ground.<sup>1</sup> Father Mater contextualized the young girl's actions by sharing that the Saint had visited her in her dreams, asking her to boil a little dirt taken from the earth covering his vault, and to deliver the liquid to the COVID19 patients located in the Rafiq Hariri public hospital. The Rafiq Hariri public hospital was the first hospital to designate a ward with the

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<sup>1</sup> There are stories of a supernatural light emerging from this exact burial ground for four months following Mar Charbel's death, which led to the unearthing of his corpse, revealing that his body had remained preserved without decay (Noun, 2020). As a result, his body was removed from the original burial ground, and is displayed today in a glass-like coffin, located within the monastery.

capacity of 100 beds for COVID19 patients (Noun, 2020). Located in southern Beirut in the Jnah neighborhood, this hospital is often associated with public service shortfalls, i.e., outdated infrastructure, little access to resources, financial difficulties, overworked and understaffed labor, and is additionally dismissed by Christian Lebanese people for being located within a pre-dominantly Muslim-majority neighborhood consisting of Lebanese Shia and Sunni populations as well as Palestinian and Syrian refugees.

A few days following OTV's original endorsement of the holy dirt from Annaya, the young woman joins OTV for a follow-up interview where she relays that she has been unable to deliver the holy dirt, now in the form of liquid, to the COVID19 patients. In her interview with OTV, she mentions that she was not only unable to enter the quarantined ward, but that she was told "in a less than polite manner, that he [the doctor she spoke to] simply won't take it" (Blog Baladi, 2020). However, by the following day, the young woman received a call from a nurse within the hospital, telling her that news had spread of the holy dirt via social media and patients were requesting the bottle (Noun, 2020). Towards the end of the segment, the interviewer on OTV matched the hurt and frustrated tone of the woman by politicizing the rejection of the unsanctioned liquid and entry of an unauthorized person in a quarantine ward as an insult to his Christianity by saying, "this is not how you behave with [the gifts of] Mar Charbel, and he is not a saint for Lebanon, but a saint for all people and all sects..." (Blog Baladi, 2020). Accompanied by an OTV camera crew, the young woman finally hand-delivered the bottle to Dr. Firas el-Abiad, in the presence of Dr. Mahmoud Hassoun, who she claims to have been the recipient of the bottle in her dream (Noun, 2020).

This event sparked a fervor among the people in Lebanon, particularly among those who believe in the miracle works of Mar Charbel. Stories of his miracles supersede his

mortal life (1828-1898), with emphasis placed on his wonders after-death. These miracles have emerged through the figuration of spirits, or in people's dreams, that then manifest themselves into actuality (Dahdouh, 2010). Mar Charbel's miracles often serve to address and heal incurable and malignant diseases, and to restore health or prevent illness. The miracles of Mar Charbel up until the year 2012 have been cataloged in the Saint Maron-Annaya monastery website, whereby the monastery defines a miracle as "generally a blessing for healing and the like" (from the Saint Charbel of Annaya "Introduction," webpage).

The holy dirt is found above Mar Charbel's original place of burial from 1898, currently located at the entrance of the monastery [see Figure 1]. This mound of earth is honored with an adornment of regularly freshly planted flowers and is bounded by a meter long rectangular hedge, made of yellow-ish cobblestone to match the walls of the monastery's exterior façade. Circling the hedge, at the foot of the gravesite, is a step allocated for adults to kneel and pray, or for children who wish to stand taller and closer to the earth. As a result of the growing excavation of the holy dirt, the green, grassy exterior has been replaced on the circumference of the designated burial ground with exposed pits of dark brown dirt, indicating where spoonfuls of earth have been excavated for consumption. In response to the exhumation during the period following the story of the holy dirt, the burial ground of Mar Charbel has repeatedly been replenished with fresh dirt and covered with new turf" (Noun, 2020).



Figure 1: The original burial grounds of the Saint Charbel and what has been indicated as the location of the holy dirt. Photo retrieved from: Alice Fordam. “In Lebanon, Some Turn to Beloved Local Saint for Solace and Protection from COVID-19.” *NPR*, March 31, 2020.

### **C. Processing the ingestion / Digesting the process**

Despite the clear instructions in the young girl’s dream, the ritual of the dirt’s consumption began to shift. While some people continued to take the dirt home to steep in hot water and to drink as a tea, others were consuming the holy dirt as if ingesting raw sugar: taking a pinch between their fingers and consuming it on site. Many who indulged the story of the holy dirt visited the Monastery prepared with little baggies and spoons, ready to scoop the dirt and carry it home for themselves, their loved ones or those who could not visit the monastery at the time. Many people continued to visit Mar Charbel’s burial ground despite the ongoing lockdowns and social gathering restrictions. In full transparency, I was not one of those people and did not visit the Saint Maron-Annaya monastery during the period of the pandemic. Instead, I chose to monitor the holy soil

phenomena and the monastery's visitation traffic by ethnographically mapping the engagement of two families who did visit the monastery and consumed its holy soil.

These two families may be defined as both traditional nuclear families, each consisting of a mother, a father, and two daughters. One family, which consists of Joseph (father), Theresa (mother), Michelle, and Sara (two daughters, ages 26 and 23), is a Maronite Lebanese family, which here on out will be referred to as Family A. The second family is a Greek Orthodox Lebanese-Filipina family, which includes George (father), Bernadette (mother), Mary and Rima (the two daughters, ages 21 and 18), here on referred to as Family B. Despite being two separate nuclear families, Family A and Family B form an extended family joined together by the mother in Family A, Theresa, and George, the father from Family B. Much of my understanding regarding the lived experiences and ritual processes of consuming and engaging with the holy dirt stems directly from the stories these two families shared with me of their visit to the monastery in early December 2020 and its aftermath.

I had grown accustomed to visiting these families weekly before the instillation of the COVID19 lockdown and social distancing measures. As a result of the pandemic and especially following the increased lockdown enforcement following the Beirut Port explosion on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August, my visits became less frequent. While my engagement with both George and Joseph suffered as a result, my relationship with the women in the family continued over casual and regular phone calls. I had developed a particularly special relationship with Mary and Rima, the Lebanese Filipina daughters of Family B, who I felt often spoke to me with the reverence for an older sister. It was through them that I first learned about the families' visit to the Saint Maron-Annaya monastery. Over what was meant to be a short catch-up phone call, the girl's took turns recounting the

process of how they came to digest the holy dirt. They described the consumption of the dirt as a “subtle” process, one that they did not realize was unfolding right before their eyes until their eldest cousin, Michelle, brought it to their attention by pointing to the pits of dug-up dirt and left-behind silver spoons in Mar Charbel’s designated burial ground. Leaning above the holy earth with Mary, Rima, and Sarah watching, Michelle pinched a smidge of dirt between her thumb and index finger, raised her hand to her mouth and released the pinched dirt into her mouth. When I asked them how they felt after seeing Michelle eat the dirt, they both shyly giggled, but only Rima responded: “it was weird, I didn’t know people were *really* doing that.” I had learned that this was Family B’s first outing since the start of the pandemic, and when I probed Rima to explain what she meant by her response, she attributed her confusion of Michelle’s behavior to the potential that customs had changed during the lockdown, and because of her disconnect from Lebanese public life, she was left unaware.

I was cautious to avoid directing the conversation with any prejudices I may carry, and focused on asking them questions that I thought would help us all process the events that unfolded instead. After hearing that Michelle consumed the dirt ever-so-casually in front of her sister and cousins, I asked what happened next. Both Mary and Rima, speaking over each other began to say: “she told us ‘yalla, eat it,’ *heke b’kil basata*” (“like this, with utmost simplicity”). Despite not wanting to sound too eager, I could not help asking fervently: “So? What did you do! Did you eat it?” Their response indicated a sudden shift in the tone of the conversation. What began as an amusing and absurd conversation abruptly took a serious tone. After a moment of silence, Rima, the youngest, was first to respond: “We did...and so did Sarah of course...actually everyone did...but we didn’t want to.” To clarify who she meant by “everyone,” I asked: “*yanne*, your

parents, and your aunt, and your uncle George ate it, *kamen?*” (“*which means...too?*”). Here, Mary said, “Mom was the only one who refused, and I think *Khalto* Theresa [Aunt Theresa] was mad.” Wanting to respect boundaries and noticing that the conversation was taking a toll on Mary and Rima, I changed the subject. The topic of the Mar Charbel holy dirt, however, continued to emerge organically for months following, particularly in contexts where the girls were sharing stories about experiences and sentiments of peer pressure and bullying from their older cousins.

All members of both Family A and Family B caught COVID19 within a couple of weeks of their visit to the Saint Maron-Annaya monastery. I continuously called to check on their health and the trajectory of their healing. Both families seemed to have their symptoms under control, apart from Auntie Bernadette, whose cough, fever, and loss of taste and smell exceeded the rest of the families’ symptoms. After Family A tested negative, I immediately made a trip to visit *Khalto* Theresa. Within Family A, my relationship with *Khalto* Theresa is the strongest. We speak regularly, and regularly have much to speak about. Visits to *Khalto* Theresa’s house consist of a very specific routine: I come in through the front door, greet George with formality and distance, greet her daughters, Michelle and Sarah, with warm hugs, and then make my way to the kitchen, where I take my seat on a barstool facing the kitchen counter while *Khalto* prepares our tea. Her kitchen is dimly lit, with three doors that always remain closed during my visits: the door to the entryway, the door to the dining room, and the balcony door. She insists on creating the physical conditions suitable for a private conversation. This is largely because we tend to spend our time together chuckling and gossiping.

I did not need to ask *Khalto* Theresa about the holy dirt, whether she ate it, or how she felt about it. Rather, this discussion arose organically as she retold her experiences

with COVID19. She said: “I felt as though the coronavirus was no different than the common cold,” relaying that she experienced a couple days of fever, laziness, and a sticky cough, but overall, it passed with much more ease than she anticipated. In discussing this ease, she repeatedly thanked God and attributed her ability to overcome her illness to “*nehmet Allah*” (“God’s blessing,”) – which presented itself materially in the form of the holy dirt. The conversation in the kitchen with Khalto Theresa shifted from her experiences with the coronavirus, to the intimate details of everyone else’s symptoms and struggles over the past two weeks. It is in this portion of our conversation that Khalto Theresa began gossiping that the person who fell the most ill from COVID19 in the family was Auntie Bernadette. According to Khalto Theresa, Auntie Bernadette experienced heavy coughing, a prolonged fever, and dimmed senses for an extended period that exceeded symptoms in the rest of the family. She communicated all this as if speaking a *WhatsApp* voice message – I barely needed to do more than just nod and make eye contact to hold my end of the conversation. In a matter-of-fact tone, she came to identify the cause of Auntie Bernadette’s illness as lying beyond COVID19. She said: “if she [Bernadette] had only accepted the *trab* (“dirt”), she would not have gotten this sick, but God is punishing her for not listening to us.”

#### **D. Purity and modernity in tension**

One way to theorize perceptions of the dirt as inherently holy may be through principles of affect. Sara Ahmed, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2013), argues “emotions are relational: they involve (re)actions or relations of ‘towardsness’ or ‘awayness,’ relative to objects” (Ahmad, 2013, 6). Within the context of this study, the object creating the relationality of emotions is the dirt, and the sentiments of pulling

“towardsness” or pushing “awayness” is dependent on whether the value of the dirt, i.e., its holiness, resonates with the individual. As a result of this affective processing, the material function of the dirt is subject to alterations, as it is no longer representative of the materiality, dirt, and becomes representative of a different function beyond its original material purpose. Khalto Theresa’s reference to the dirt as “*nehmet Allah*” is an example of pulling “towards” the dirt, whereby the dirt is no longer interpreted as soil or earth, but instead serves as a material symbol of divinity. The use of “*nehmet Allah*” not only adjusts the material reality of the object in question but plays a role in the mobilization of collective emotional experience. According to Ahmed, emotions are not purely physiological but are rather cultural (Ahmed, 2013, 1). They arise in relation to objects, speech, and experiences that involve the participation of others. Symbolic terms, such as “*nehmet Allah*” function to unite people belonging to a specific cultural category with the expectation that the use of the metaphor invokes a specific emotion.

But what happens if that expectation is unmet and the metacommunication (i.e., the secondary meaning) of the dirt as “*nehmet Allah*” is not understood? This was the case with Auntie Bernadette who understood the holy dirt to be simply just dirt. According to Mary and Rima, their mother, Bernadette was not shy to share her thoughts about the consumption of the holy dirt. On the day they visited the monastery, Auntie Bernadette was allegedly making faces of disgust and disbelief, and when Khalto Theresa probed her to join in on taking a pinch of dirt for consumption, Auntie Bernadette was not shy to say no, rejecting the offer. Auntie Bernadette’s rejection of the holy dirt and facial responses were mentioned to me that day in the kitchen with Khalto Theresa, who described her expressions as “rude faces.” It was clear Khalto Theresa felt offended by Auntie Bernadette’s reaction to the dirt. This was indicated in the way she linked

Bernadette's rejection of the holy dirt with her hard-hitting symptoms. Borrowing from Bateson's analysis of "play," we may argue that perhaps Theresa felt offended by Bernadette's refusal to "play" with her. This was signified through Bernadette's refusal to see the dirt as holy. Bateson suggests that metacommunication through processes of play only occur when signals of that play are understood and agreed upon by all players (Bateson 2000, 179). When this is not the case, complications in the form of miscommunication and tensions arise (Bateson 2000, 179). The tensions that thus arose between Theresa and Bernadette's differing interpretations of the dirt revealed themselves through Theresa's affective response to alienate Bernadette.

Auntie Bernadette's rejection of the dirt as holy does not seem farfetched in the context of a global pandemic and at a time where health and sanitation were a hyper-priority. In fact, the consumption of dirt, outside of the context of a global pandemic and under modern scientific rationality, is already associated with health risks. Bernadette's rejection of the dirt can therefore be interpreted as anchored in reason and rationality, rather than a place of feelings. Rejecting the realm of feelings from which Khalto Theresa's rationality lies and superseding it with rationality rooted in modern and scientific thought is justified. However, in choosing to go with modern reason, Bernadette rejected both religious feeling and kinship feeling, thereby creating space to allow for her alienation. In the eyes of Khalto Theresa, and for those who saw the dirt as holy, Auntie Bernadette's actions were not only irrational but posed a threat to any who sought to preserve the dirt's holy power.

One approach in considering this argument is to draw a connection with Mary Douglas' main premise in *Purity and danger* (2003). Douglas bases her understanding of purity and order in accordance with established boundaries of social and cultural norms,

whereby the maintenance of cultural order ensures purity is intact (Douglas 2003, 2-3). Impurity is therefore a condition of disrupting or violating boundaries of cultural ordinance (Douglas 2003, 2-3). For Bernadette, the boundaries of social norms rest within global modernity. Her behavior was therefore congruent with modernist rationality and faith in science that consuming dirt might be a health hazard. Within the framework of this cultural order, Bernadette was adhering to principles of purity. However, Theresa's understanding of cultural order differed from Bernadette's, and therefore suggests Bernadette's response to the dirt is complicit of disrupting social order. As a result of this, Bernadette is classified as impure. Processes of rationalizing behaviors as impure result from feeling out of control (Douglas 2003, 2-3). Reactions associated with that feeling can transpire into acts of oppression, discrimination, bullying, and other forms of alienation that serve to further exclude those deemed "impure" from society.

The dichotomy of religious reasoning and modern/scientific rationality embodied by Khalto Theresa and Auntie Bernadette speaks to the limitations of cultural conformity. Just as Theresa was left offended and disturbed by Bernadette's rejection of the dirt, Bernadette, too, saw Theresa's inclination towards the consumption of the dirt as impure owing to the disruption of scientific reasoning, i.e., Bernadette's formulation of purity. The contradictions between Theresa and Bernadette's conflicting embodiment of purity and impurity speak to dynamics of social hierarchy that are superimposed within this framework. Who retains the social leverage to dictate what is pure and impure? In this context, that is the Lebanese Maronite woman, who in the form of her language, appearance, dress, and upbringing, is a natural authority on Lebanese national purity. On the other hand, Bernadette's broken Arabic and unavoidable Filipina physical features, not to mention the negative class and labor-based stereotypes perpetuated onto Filipina

women in Lebanon, almost immediately render her impure, regardless of her adherence to Lebanese cultural norms. This is unfortunately true because Lebanese nationalism is formed around principles of exclusion and Lebanese racial supremacy (Hage 2005, 193; Hagopian 1989, 101). Sentiments of modernity and scientific reasoning therefore come second place to Lebanese national principles rooted in religious reasoning.

### **E. Policing Lebanese-ness**

I invited Mary and Rima to the house for lunch one day following the December and early January holidays. At this time, their mother had finally tested negative for COVID19, with only the lingering symptom of a cough remaining. Before having lunch, we reopened our discussion about their trip to the Saint Maron of Annaya monastery in early December 2020, where I took the opportunity to ask them about their feelings regarding the dirt as holy. Mary, who had been quieter than her sister Rima the last time we spoke on the topic, perked up as if she had been waiting for an opportunity to share a thought she had mulled over for some time. According to Mary, there were several reasons that justified her consumption of the dirt. However, none of them were related to the belief that the dirt held holy or protectionary properties. Speaking on behalf of herself and her sister, she explained how being the youngest in the extended family implies that they must follow the example set by their older cousins. Mary referenced her consumption of the dirt as a condition of a “habit” of obedience to her elders, coupled with her fear of upsetting the extended family if she chose to reject the dirt. While Rima seconded her sister’s reflection and agreed to experiencing the same sentiment of peer pressure, she added that eating the dirt was an opportunity to test and convince herself, as well as convince her relatives, that she shares the same understanding of the Lebanese culture

and Christian faith as they do. She transparently told me: “I convinced myself that this is a good idea. Taking the dirt means I’m a good Lebanese [person].”

The need to prove religiosity often has very little to do with being religious and much to do with appeasing social and cultural expectations that dictate the shape of one’s inclusion in society. This is articulated in Rima’s equating being a “good Lebanese person” to the apt performance of religiosity. However, it is also indicated in Mary’s reflections of fearing social judgement and therefore behaving in a way that does not challenge the status quo. I am inspired to refer to Gayle Rubin’s notion of good and bad beliefs and practices of sex, in what she calls the “Charmed Circle;” only instead of referring to sex, my applying the principles of the “Charmed Circle” refers to good and bad beliefs and practices of religiosity (Rubin 2002, Fig. 1). Good, normal, natural, and blessed religiosity, and bad, abnormal, unnatural, and damned religiosity are dependent on their relationality and service to Lebanese nationalism. In the context of the holy dirt of Annaya, good religiosity is denoted by the consumption of the dirt, whereas bad religiosity is rejecting consumption. Alternatively, someone who questions the premise of the dirt as holy but proceeds to consume it, as shown in Mary and Rima’s case, retain the branding of good religiosity (as long as their skepticism remains unheard by others who believe in the dirt’s holiness).

Policing the beliefs and practices pertaining to an ideology become possible when that ideology is produced within a framework denoting hierarchy. In other words, the policing of religiosity has become possible through the measurability of an individual’s interaction and opinions of the holy dirt as either good or bad. In this case, policing and ensuring good religiosity offers a direct path to ensuring one’s own characterization of goodness. This is often why parents encourage their children to acquire and practice

socially acceptable mannerisms. This is also why Michelle from Family A encouraged her cousin's Mary and Rima to consume the dirt and pushed them to perform rituals signifying good religiosity. In doing so, she is not only claiming a stake in their goodness, but more importantly, is reaffirming her goodness by demonstrating and motivating good religiosity within her social circle. However, the opposite can be said as well. When your social circle is devoid of goodness or consists of a deviant, their deviance transcends and taints the purity of the entire group – a reference to Mary Douglas' theory of social contamination (Douglas 2003, 3). This is articulated in the way Khalto Theresa speaks about Auntie Bernadette's rejection of the dirt as if it was a personal affront to her. Rather than holding any embarrassment for having consumed dirt, she instead expresses both embarrassment and disappointment in Bernadette's refusal of the dirt as holy, and applies those feelings when critiquing Bernadette's intense run with coronavirus. Khalto Theresa appears to separate Bernadette's experience of COVID19 from those who did consume the holy dirt while also equating her suffering as "punish[ment] for not listening," i.e., conforming to cultural standards befitting a good Lebanese Christian. This reminds me of a statement by Sara Ahmed in the introduction of *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2013): "those who are not us, and who in not being us, endanger what is ours" (Ahmed, 2013, 1). As suggested, Bernadette is perceived as a threat to the extended family's sense of being within Lebanese society.

Moreover, this sentiment speaks to the implications of Lebanese nationalist ideologies, which as a result of their Maronite foundations, have a tendency to elevate racialized world views that push for Maronite cultural hierarchy. This is a direct result of Christian self-perceptions of being 'European' and 'white' rather than 'Arab' and 'brown.' (Hage 2005, 185). We may therefore interpret the dynamics between Family A

and Family B reflective of these characteristics, whereby Family A matches the standards denoted in Lebanese nationalist ideologies and Family B does not. As a result, indications of supremacy (Family A) and inferiority (Family B) between the two families translate into behaviors of intolerance (Family A) and conformity (Family B). However, because they are family, any indications of intolerance or racism is disguised as efforts to provide guidance and protection from society. This is why the peer pressure faced by Mary and Rima by their cousin Michelle, or Khalto Theresa's alienation of Auntie Bernadette, will never be deemed as racist behavior within the extended family. Instead, indications of supremacy and inferiority within the extended family echo social expectations of Lebanese nationalism. Absolving racist and discriminatory behavior by way of Lebanese nationalist ideology occurs among Lebanese people of different sects as well. Such is the case during OTV's interview segment with the young girl and the interviewer's attempt to ignite sectarian tensions between Muslims and Christians by insinuating that the young girl was turned away at the Rafiq Hariri Hospital because the doctors lacked a respect for the saint, Mar Charbel (and not because it was a health safety measure to avoid unauthorized entry into the quarantine ward).

## **F. Conclusion**

This chapter centers the case of the holy dirt of Annaya around questions of Lebanese nationalism, racism, purity, and tolerance. This is achieved by tracking the trajectory of Family A and Family B's engagement with the holy dirt – which began from their visit to the Saint Maron of Annaya monastery, following the process of their consumption of the holy dirt, to the aftermath which included discussions reflecting on the dirt's impact in their individual lives and among their kin. The public reactions and

behaviors that emerged following the popularization of the holy dirt brings forth questions pertaining to the limitations of modernity in times of crisis and amidst hierarchies of social capital. Conclusions suggest sentiments of modernity and scientific reasoning come second place to the adherence of Lebanese national principles rooted in religious reasoning. The policing of social inclusion in Lebanon is therefore a condition of Lebanese Christian nationalist ideologies that continue to support the racialized practices of othering through the manipulation of history, kinship, and land. In the following chapter, I return to the notion of a “good Christian” and explore the ways Lebanese patriarchy intervenes and/or contributes to the production of gendered social norms in a Christian household.

## CHAPTER III

### A PLACE OF POWER AND SOVEREIGNTY – CHRISTIAN CULTURAL NORMS AND INTERGENERATIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN A LEBANESE KITCHEN

#### A. Introduction

This chapter is set in the kitchen of a Christian Maronite family in Beirut. In it, I explore the value of the kitchen space beyond its functional purpose. In homes situated within the expectations of patriarchal norms, the kitchen operates as a space that grants the matriarch of the house a sense of liberation and autonomy from the rule of the household patriarch. Contrariwise, the kitchen is also a space where normative, patriarchal, and religious expectations are not only passively embodied but passed down from the matriarch to her children, and more specifically, daughters. From what I have grown to understand, and despite shared gender, daughters of the household do not share the same attraction to the kitchen space as a mother tends to. I argue that this suggests that the value of the kitchen beyond its functional purpose lies largely with the individual who mobilizes power within it.

This is a study of power, gender, culture, and sovereignty within the context of Lebanon and more specifically, among urban Christians residing in Beirut. To explore these relations, I unpack the impact mother-daughter relationships have on the upbringing of a “good Christian girl” and the ways which the patriarch figure (i.e., father, church, and state) intervenes and/or contributes to that upbringing. To define the constructs of a “good Christian girl,” I draw on Gayle Rubin’s theories of “good sex” and “bad sex,” in *Thinking Sex* and Audre Lorde’s *Uses of the Erotic* (1978) to juxtapose the dimensions of what accounts for “good” and “bad” in relation to normative values reproduced and

shared among the Christian families comprised in my fieldwork. This chapter also briefly touches on the double standards towards motherhood in Lebanon and the limitations Christian non-Lebanese women face while raising children in Lebanon and of Lebanese nationality. The works of Yasmine and Sukkar (2019) contextualize my observations of domestic and gendered performativity within existing power structures in Lebanon. In addition, I draw on the works of Foucault, Schmitt, and Agamben, who provide a foundation for understanding the construction and limitations of power. Although these texts serve to unpack power dynamics in settings related to public governance, I have found that their theories can be interestingly applied to domestic spaces that mimic public structures of power, i.e., the kitchen. To build on this, I contextualize the layered formations of patriarchy by breaking down the function of gendered performance(s) as exemplified by both mothers and daughters in and beyond the kitchen space.

There are social, political, and economic constraints to the role of the mother that complicate her sovereignty and expression of power. This complication can best be understood in terms of a dilemma reflected in the way power and sovereignty are imposed and embodied. She fills the role of oppressor and lawgiver (to her children) while being subject to oppression and law (by patriarchal structures that govern her domestic and public conduct). As a result, she is both powerful and powerless, and in a position where her sovereignty is consistently limited by grander structures of power that override and determine her own. A mother may wield power within domestic spaces, such as the kitchen, where her sovereignty is respected and expected. However, that sovereignty which she enacts is one that exists because of patriarchal expectations – which is the grander structure referenced in the sentence above – and can therefore be taken from her when it is no longer in service of patriarchal norms for her to have it. Here, it is important

to note that these contradictions and dichotomies are my analytical undertakings of motherhood as I could witness unfolding within my fieldwork.

## **B. Fieldwork and methods**

The analytical undertakings presented in this study evolve from my continued ethnography with Family A and Family B from Chapter Two. These families are two middle-to-lower class Christian families living in the Greater Beirut area. My chief engagement while in the field is with the matriarchs of the household, Theresa (Family A) and Bernadette (Family B), and their daughter(s). As part of my fieldwork, I repeatedly visited the homes of my interlocutors, and I would join them for their daily routine in their kitchens. After a period, the formalities of hosting a houseguest dwindled and I was treated less like a guest and more like a daughter. This allowed me to not only assist in kitchen chores with greater capacity and engage in casual conversation more freely, but also implied that my presence and performance in the kitchen was being measured and matched (to a certain extent) to that of my interlocutor's daughters.

When sharing with my interlocutors that I was interested in exploring their relationship to the kitchen space and how they parent from within it, they were pleasantly surprised and responded with interval bursts of laughter, shyness, and questions of "*akid hek badik?*" ("*are you sure this is what you want?*"). It seemed that they did not share my understanding of the kitchen as a site for rich data collection (and why would they?). Nor did they see the relationship between patriarchy and the kitchen beyond a physical space where the matter of a mother's labor is enacted out of responsibility and necessity. The kitchen, therefore, was construed by my interlocutors as a space where the job of motherhood is primarily fulfilled and was overlooked as a space where sovereignty and

power are enacted. This is largely why the kitchen space became such an interesting site to me. It offered me an opportunity to learn by depending on my ethnographic engagement and analytically translate those experiences. I found that when I asked direct questions specific to the value of the kitchen, I was met with confused expressions by my interlocutors, as if the answer was “obvious” and only connected to the functionality of the kitchen itself. Some of those questions were as follows:

1. What is the purpose of your kitchen?
2. Does your kitchen symbolize anything beyond being a space for cooking?
3. How much time do you spend here?
4. What are the reasons you like being in the kitchen? What are the reasons you don't like being in the kitchen?
5. Do you spend time with your daughter(s) in the kitchen? What do you speak about here? What do you teach them here?

My questions resulted in one-dimensional answers by my interlocutors who largely answered them in reflection of the function of the kitchen. For example, “*I taught my daughters how to prepare lunch,*” or “*I am always in the kitchen because there is so much work to do here!*” are samples of the extent of their responses. For this reason, I came to favor the method of participatory observation and ethnography, as it allowed me to learn about the kitchen's value and the exercise of power within it through example and experience.

### **C. A place of power and sovereignty: The kitchen**

The location and architectural design of a Lebanese kitchen suggests a power structure and distribution of power internal to a household. This argument has previously

been made in relation to migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, whose small and often windowless living quarters located within or directly beside the kitchen index their value and role within the household (Saad, 2016). Power exercised between a husband and wife, and between husband/wife and children can also be observed through the architectural design of the kitchen. Moreover, the architectural and organizational structure of the kitchen in a traditional middle-class Lebanese home indexes the subject of power and how power is bestowed and embodied.

For one, the kitchen is often separated from the rest of the house with doors. This allows the kitchen to operate as a separate and isolated room from the rest of the apartment or house. This also means that whoever is in the kitchen is separated from the rest of the people in the domestic space. In both the homes where I conducted my fieldwork, the kitchens were located relatively close to the front door yet seemed to be peripheral spaces within the house by the way they were isolated away from the rest of the rooms (i.e., living room, dining room, bedrooms, solarium, etc.). This indicates that the spatial formation of the kitchen is structured around its functionality rather than its social function: the assumption is that people who are in the kitchen are there to do a job, and spaces for entertainment or conversations are to be had beyond the kitchen space. Despite the many conversations I have been a part of and have witnessed in the kitchen, I cannot underestimate how much the kitchen space always feels like a room designed to reject socialization through its spatial organization. To explore this idea further, I look at the assembly of the two kitchens where I conducted my fieldwork to better understand how the kitchen's shape and position within the household plays an integral role in the social formations that unfold within it. From here on out, I will be referring to the two kitchens as Kitchen A and Kitchen B.

Kitchen A has a rectangular shape. On one side of the rectangular room is a long dull brown countertop that spans the length of the kitchen. At the center of the counter there is a silver kitchen sink, with a window the size of the sink, centered right above it. To the left and right of the window are cabinets where dry food and plates are stored. On the other side of the kitchen's perimeters, parallel to the counter, is the fridge. The small size of the kitchen suggests that the fridge is a little out of place and seems too big for where it is located. Next to the fridge to the right is a small square shaped table pressed against the wall, with two chairs tucked in on the sides that remain free from the wall and the left-side of the fridge. Space for walking through the kitchen is limited to the pathway between the countertop and the side with the fridge and table. This kitchen may fit about four people comfortably – two seated on the chairs, and two standing in front of the kitchen countertop. Often when I visited the family in Kitchen A, this is how we would situate ourselves in the space. It is possible that two more people could have stood at the doorway – however that would have meant that the kitchen door would need to remain opened if any more than four people were to enter.

Kitchen B is smaller than Kitchen A and has a square shape. Yet, it resembles a “space for hosting” due to the built-in island countertop that is joined to the rest of the kitchen-counter space. Like Kitchen A, Kitchen B only has space for two chairs, only these chairs are taller (to accommodate the height of the island counter). The height of the chair/stools also means that the people seated are more or less the same height as those standing and working. On three of the four corners of the kitchen are the large kitchen appliances: the fridge is parallel to the oven, next to the oven on the right there is the kitchen sink, and on the fourth corner of the kitchen, completing the square, is the kitchen door.

In both kitchens, there is a clear spatial limitation that constrains the number of people that can enter and remain in the kitchen comfortably. It gives the impression that the kitchen is not a place for socializing for many reasons embodied in the architectural structure of the kitchen. For one, the prioritization of appliances indicates that the kitchen is a space for cooking, preparing, and storage. Secondly, the way both Kitchen A and Kitchen B cater to the kitchen's functional purpose inevitably creates a spatial limitation that makes moving around difficult and available to only a small number of people. Yet, I see these architectural limitations as an opportunity to understand power relations from a place of resistance and an effort to dissociate from these limitations. I take this inspiration from Foucault's "The Subject and Power," where he endeavors to understand power relations "through the antagonism of strategies," as opposed to from "the point of view of its internal rationality" (Foucault 1982, 780). In this piece, Foucault suggests that forms of resistance or indications of anti-power, i.e., where we assume there is a lack-of-power, should be where we begin our search for understanding the economy of power. The kitchen presents itself as such a site, where we may deduce – based on the functional purpose it serves, the architectural and structural limitations in its design, and who frequents and labors within it – that it is a site of anti-power. However, it is exactly this sort of deduction that, in Foucault's framework, gives purpose to our study of the kitchen because it meets the objective of studying a form, tool, or technique of power which "subjugates and makes subject to" (Foucault 1982, 781). Despite our attention on the kitchen, it is not our primary subject of interest. Rather, the kitchen is merely a tool of power where the matriarch is both subject to and subjugated by – and so, our topic of interest remains to be the matriarch's capacity to overcome social and cultural limitations that infringe on her sovereignty.

#### **D. A place of power and sovereignty: The matriarch**

Despite the kitchen's size or shape, Kitchen A and Kitchen B remain spaces where the matriarchs of both families congregate to host private conversations (often meant to be kept from the ears of the men of the house). The decision to gather in the kitchen has an inevitable connection to the labor that is conducted in the kitchen space and to whose responsibility it is to tend to that labor. The expectation that the matriarch is to prepare all meals in a lower-middle class family indicatively suggests that her time is largely occupied within the confines of the kitchen. Such gendered expectations also suggest that the father or patriarch of the family has very little business being in the kitchen and therefore does not frequent it often. As a result, the kitchen becomes a space reserved for the matriarch's labor, social interactions, and authority.

According to Theresa (Kitchen B), "Talking while working in the kitchen makes the work feel less like work." She pressed on to make the point that her talks in the kitchen do not, in fact, always include other individuals. Rather, she finds herself talking to herself, often repeating her task list out loud or contemplating a current event she had heard in the news, or even repeating the contents of a conversation she had had earlier with a friend or neighbor. This habit was shared with Bernadette (Kitchen A), who is of non-Lebanese origin. Many times, I had witnessed her speaking in the kitchen in her native tongue Tagalog, alone, while standing over the stove or doing the dishes. Out of curiosity, I once asked her what she was saying. She laughed and told me she was complaining out-loud about the bad habits of her Lebanese husband and children. She then told me that she enjoys being alone in the kitchen because it is her time to speak her native tongue without anyone pestering her to speak in English or Lebanese.

To a certain extent, the matriarch makes her own rules in the kitchen. It is her domain where she may decide how things are organized and what takes place there. Often, she is also at liberty to invite anyone in or to kick them out of the kitchen. In addition, it is a place where she parents and passes on her teachings to her children – a non-insignificant detail I will be exploring further in the following subsection of this chapter. Most importantly, it is a place designed and dedicated to her. As a result, she carries a level of autonomy within the kitchen that does not exist within the boundaries of the rest of the house. The mothers of both Kitchen A and Kitchen B express their devotion to their kitchen space and consider it to be their favorite room in the house. They explained to me that this is because most of their time is spent there, and so naturally they have grown accustomed to it. They also added that it is a room rarely visited by their husbands and so it offers them a space in which they can take a step back from their spousal duties.

Nevertheless, the sentiment of taking a step back inherently contradicts the ultimate function and labor performed in the kitchen. This contradiction is present in the matriarch's capacity to both govern and serve within the domestic space. While on the one hand the kitchen grants the matriarch full authority within its physical boundaries, it concurrently operates as a space designed for labor and servitude to the rest of the inhabitants of the household. I have noticed several times how both Theresa and Bernadette abandon whatever it is they are doing, whether that be preparing a meal for lunch or dinner for the family, or preparing themselves some tea or coffee, to accommodate the urgent-sounding requests of their children or husbands. "*Give me a cup of water,*" "*make me a snack, I'm hungry,*" or even "*I don't like what you're cooking, what else is there to eat?*" are just examples of some of the phrases I repeatedly heard during my fieldwork that required their immediate attention.

There is a tension between the matriarchs' desire and willingness to give and serve her family versus her resistance and frustration to their requests and expectations. However, Theresa often seemed quick to remedy her children or husband's demands without complaint. In fact, she articulated that serving her husband and children is part of her duties as a Lebanese mother and enjoys giving to them. Despite the appearance of resigning her authority and sovereignty over to gender norms and societal expectations, I argue that it is her adherence to her family's demands that reaffirms the sovereignty she claims. According to Carl Schmitt, sovereignty is granted by "he [or in this case, she] who decides on the exception" (Schmitt 2005, 5). This model of sovereignty – which in this context translates to authority and freedom from patriarchy – is reflected in the affective embodiment of the kitchen's function. Despite the structural limitations of the kitchen space, freedom is found within the kitchen because of the matriarch's embodiment of the role she fills within it. As a result, serving the family and meeting their demands only reaffirms her own power. I cannot help but bring Agamben's critique of Schmitt into the discussion and suggest that such an "exception" only exists to reiterate normativity and suppress sentiments of vulnerability on the topic of motherhood.

In comparison, Bernadette, who is of non-Lebanese origins, finds requests like the one's made above inappropriate and an interruption to her day. Nevertheless, she expressed feeling obligated to perform in the way a "Lebanese mother would" to avoid whatever repercussions would come from not conforming to patriarchal social norms that dictate the role of a mother in Lebanon. She therefore attends to her family's requests despite her own reluctance and desire to do so. In the example provided by Bernadette, there is no indication of power, authority, pride, or sovereignty in the labor fulfilled because unlike Theresa, she has not embodied her role within the kitchen as a source of

her power. Rather, her power may be identified as existing beyond the confinements of social norms and expectations, and for this reason it is not located within the kitchen. Audre Lorde in *Uses of the Erotic* (1978) says: “as women, we need to examine the ways in which our world can be truly different. I am speaking here of the necessity for reassessing the quality of all the aspects of our lives and of our work, and of how we move towards and through them” (Lorde 1978, 3). Such reflections allow for the recognition of the suppression of sovereignty, which Lorde defines as the corruption and distortion of women’s various sources of power (Lorde 1978, 1). Bernadette’s reluctance to view her domestic labor in the same positive light as Theresa indicates that she does not feel empowered by her domestic role.

#### **E. A place of power and sovereignty: Intergenerational exchanges**

Both Theresa and Bernadette have two daughters each, between the ages of 19 and 26. I have noticed that the daughters in both families tend to spend a lot of time accompanying their mothers in the kitchen. Sometimes they are helping with the preparations for mealtimes, but most often they join their mothers in the kitchen to speak with them away from the earshot of their fathers. Seeking out the kitchen as a setting for conversation between mothers and daughters indicates that there are specific topics that are not – or should not – be openly discussed in front of men and/or fathers. Theresa’s daughters, Michelle and Sara, refer to these topics as “girl talk.” I asked what topics fall under the category of “girl talk,” and was informed that girl talk consists of any conversations that include dating and relationships, and topics that concern the body such as menstruation or how to dress and decorate the self. I observed that “girl talk” consists of conversations that instruct on how women and girls should behave in both public and

domestic contexts and include the teaching and learning of skills such as cooking, cleaning, and modesty as inherent characteristics of “womanhood.”

I recall participating in similar conversations in my family’s kitchen when I first moved to Lebanon. During that time, around eight years ago, I was eagerly invested in learning from the women in my family and welcomed the perspectives of my aunts, great-aunts, and female cousins on “how to be a Lebanese woman” without much complaint. When I first moved to Lebanon, I was living in a studio apartment on my own in the neighborhood of Hamra, and I remember this being something that the women in my family would put into question quite often. While some of my aunts based their objection to my living situation on the fact that I was a girl living alone (arguing that this in itself is unacceptable), other female relatives’ criticisms were of a different nature: living alone would have possibly been a little more acceptable if I was living in Ashrafieh, the Christian neighborhood of Beirut, as opposed to Hamra, which they considered dangerous (i.e., not-Christian enough) in comparison. Often, I would be told that the way I dressed did not match the way other Lebanese girls dress, and that it made me look unavailable or unattainable to Lebanese men who would be interested in courting me. I was taught to always dress and act in a way that would make me look advantageous and desired for my company, and to seek out the attention of Christian men only. My Christianization by the women in my family was also internal to the small Arabic lessons they would give me, where often my pronunciation of Arabic words would be corrected with a specific objective: “this is how the Christian people in Lebanon say it.”

During my time with Bernadette and her daughters, Mary and Rima, I would repeatedly hear Bernadette tell her half-Lebanese half-Filipina daughters to look at their aunt on their father’s side, Theresa, and at their Lebanese cousins, Michelle and Sara, as

an example of what is appropriate versus inappropriate behavior in Lebanon. Mary and Rima had both once confessed to me that they feel their mother leaves the role of parenting to her sister-in-law/their aunt. Although I never pressed them on this topic further, I do wonder what kind of conversation we would have had if we continued to speak about this. My assumption is that their mother hopes to give them the best opportunity to acclimate within Lebanese society by limiting her own cultural influence on her children.

But why do mothers reaffirm cultural, sectarian, and gender stereotypes to their children? One of the reasons this may be the case is to secure the safety of the children through social inclusion and acceptance. The desire to perform the role of a good Christian girl, according to Lebanese standards, hinges on a clear binary of good versus bad. To unpack the topic of “goodness,” I refer to Gayle Rubin’s theory of the *Charmed Circle*. In Rubin’s work, the good and bad dichotomy is identified within the constructs of normative versus non-normative sexual behavior and interests, whereby interests that fall within the category of non-normative are considered deviant, dangerous, and ultimately challenge the safety and structure of what is assumed comes from normative perspectives and experiences (Rubin 2002, 152).

In the context of motherhood, being “good” is largely defined by a mother’s ability to prepare her child to conform to societal norms. However, it is important to note that Lebanese patriarchy has rules about who is fit to be a mother versus who is not. Yasmine and Sukkar discuss this in detail in their work *Restrained Motherhood*, where they argue that the Lebanese state and society have decided that queer, migrant, refugee bodies fall in the category of “unfit” and have therefore used political power to limit these people’s reproductive capacities (Yasmine and Sukkar 2019, 27). By deciding who

should and should not be a mother, Lebanese society in turn punishes those who are supposedly unfit to be mothers and inevitably punishes their children as well. This can be one of the reasons why Bernadette encourages her children to adopt the cultural norms of their Lebanese aunt and Lebanese cousins.

Power structures of Lebanese oligarchic rule that characterize public life can be witnessed as translated and reaffirmed within the dynamics of the household. What is taught about how to behave or what a mother/daughter/woman's role and limitations are within society and the household is dictated by the rule of political elite who benefit from the public's adherence to normative cultural expectations. By participating in Christian social norms and reaffirming their relevance, we are inadvertently serving the oligarchs and political elites who remain publicly unchallenged and therefore continue to profit by holding their positions of power and wealth. Thinking through Adorno's critique of Schmitt, I am compelled to rephrase the previous quote by stating that we continue to reaffirm the sovereignty of the status quo. While Julia Chouicair Vizosa identifies the Lebanese *oligarchiyya*'s methods of "supplying the coercion that protects their wealth," through resources such as militias, private security services, private guards, etc., I also see their protection of wealth secured by the reaffirmation of their social capital through enforced cultural dominance (Chouicair, 2020). Reaffirming the standards of Lebanese patriarchy within private and domestic domains contributes to the consolidation of power among individuals who would otherwise suffer or lose their sovereignty if cultural norms were no longer respected. This includes the church, oligarchs and the political elite in the public sphere, and patriarchs of the household in the domestic sphere.

## **F. Conclusion**

Thinking with and through the kitchen as a site of unravelling power, sovereignty, womanhood, and gender dynamics is both a simple and challenging endeavor. Simple, because it is easy to recognize that the main subject of this chapter is not the kitchen. Rather, and as suggested by Foucault, the kitchen is the tool of power, and the subject at hand is the matriarchs in question. Yet, thinking through the kitchen as a tool of power becomes complicated when considering the nuances of power and gender politics at play and the multiple ways that sovereignty shifts in meaning and experience. In this chapter, I began by first breaking down the design of Kitchen A and Kitchen B to argue that the architectural and structural layout of the traditional Lebanese kitchen indexes the subject of power and how power is bestowed and embodied. Despite the kitchen's limited space for hosting, it tends to be a principal location within the household for womanly conversation and mother-daughter engagement. It has also proven to be a place where the matriarch of the household both governs and serves. On the one hand, she is empowered to rule over and design a space that is not often invaded by the man of the house. However, she is simultaneously expected to be serving the family whenever she is in the kitchen, which complicates her relationship – and our understanding – of the locus of power and sovereignty within the kitchen when seen from the perspective of the household matriarch. Finally, the chapter concluded by unpacking the intergenerational dissemination of culture and norms within Christian families in Lebanon. It did so by showcasing the tensions that arise in contexts where patriarchal norms are challenged. This is largely seen through the case of the family of Kitchen A, whose mixed ethnic background inadvertently complicates the mother and daughters' ability to conform to social expectations of a “good” Christian and Lebanese girl or woman, while additionally

constraining their capacity to self-determine their sovereignty beyond what is determined by gendered social norms.

## CHAPTER IV

### (IN)SECURITY IN SASSINE

#### **A. Introduction**

I moved to an old building in Sassine Square in June 2021. Right around this time was when the COVID19 restrictions were being lifted in Lebanon, and the economic crisis was well on its way to spread its darkness across the country (I am referring to metaphorical darkness, of course, but as well to the literal darkness that came with the shortage of electricity and lack of lights as a result). In the neighborhood of Hamra where I used to live, it was rare to see the streetlights on, and even rarer to see people walking around merrily and casual in the city as we once did just a couple years before. What was once a neighborhood known for international visitors and student life became a neighborhood stalked with remnants of protests by locals still waiting for access to their bank deposits during the day and an emerging site for sex tourism in the night. I felt the absence of women on the street and the gaze of men follow me as I walked home from my routine visit to the local Spinneys grocery store. I even began carrying my keys in my hand (my impromptu protective weapon) and made it a habit to send my live location on Whatsapp to my partner whenever I was walking alone. I blamed the change of the atmosphere specifically on the darkness resulting from the shortage of electricity. However, the lockdown, economic crisis, and shadows of the October 17 uprisings juxtaposed to the reemergence of traditional sectarianism undoubtedly added to Hamra's gloom. After living in Hamra, it was ignorant yet convenient to assume that the neighborhood of Ashrafieh was free from the concerns that burden the neighborhood of Hamra, and so I moved there in search of a safer and brighter place to live.

In this chapter, I explore the sentiments of safety under the guise of sectarian protection. In doing so, I unpack assumptions of where safety is located and how safety is created or disturbed amidst economic crisis. The interlocutors who have consented to share their experiences for the sake of this study live in Ashrafieh, a well-known middle-upper class Christian hub that spans the eastern side of Beirut and consists of the following neighborhoods: Geitawi, Sassine, Monot, and Karm el Zeitoun. Notwithstanding the widespread perception of the neighborhood as a Christian hub and “Christian-majority neighborhood,” many non-Christian and non-Lebanese people also live in Ashrafieh. The interlocutors introduced in this chapter represent this dimension as well. For this chapter I focus on understanding the sentiment of *being safe* through the stories shared with me by my interlocutors. Terms such as protection, care, security, stability, and comfort find new meanings as I come to understand the different conditions that imply safety. The framework of baggage and being in/out presented earlier in this thesis are mobilized to contextualize and interpret my interlocutors’ sentiments of safety or lack thereof in juxtaposition to sectarian norms and conditions of belonging. Furthermore, I rely on the framing of baggage and being in/out to deconstruct imaginaries of protection linked to experiences of crises and sectarian strife.

## **B. Born from Decay**

Many Lebanese Christians consider the Lebanese civil war to have resulted in their loss and defeat (Hage, 2021). This loss and defeat generated a population of ex-militiamen who have spent their post-war years living in the past and abandoning their bodies and minds to “decay,” as Ghassan Hage writes. In an article titled “Decay as Decline in Social Viability Among Ex-Militiamen in Lebanon,” Hage follows the lives

of three ex-militiamen who live in Ashrafieh and describe their sensory experiences of decline. When in conversation with one another, these ex-militiamen describe themselves as *m'affaneen* (moldy) and *'am nehtereh* (we're rotting), suggesting that their understanding of defeat has manifested as a shared physical experience (Hage 2021, 141). Through their shared "bundle of real and imagined complaints and suffering," exists an effort to reaffirm and validate their experiences of the past with their current state of being *m'affaneen* (Hage 2021, 140-141). But what if these indicators of defeat suggest more than a state of social and physical decline? In what ways can the sentiments of these ex-militiamen create individual or collective purpose and a rebirth from decay?

Alternative security groups in Ashrafieh had not emerged at the time of Hage's fieldwork in 2002. However, since the economic and overall collapse(s) in Lebanon beginning in Fall 2019, the neighborhood has seen the birth of security initiatives aimed, in the language of those who promote them, at "protecting" Ashrafieh by working separately from, yet in parallel to, existing municipal and federal security forces. Individuals who justify the existence and necessity of these groups argue that it is because legal security forces have failed to meet the security needs of the neighborhood since 2019, leading to an overall sense of insecurity among the public at times where electricity and overall public safety are in decline. This argument has largely come from the members of these new protection groups, who invoke the need for security to justify their presence. Those who saw themselves as the "Christian resistance" during the Lebanese civil war (such as Hage's ex-militiamen) have found a renewed purpose by continuing to (re)brand themselves as a "Christian resistance" against the deteriorating living and safety conditions in Christian neighborhoods in Beirut. The two groups that have become most popularly recognized within the neighborhoods of Ashrafieh and whose members have

been seen patrolling the streets regularly are known as *Jnoud el Rab* (Soldiers of God) and *Ayounet Ashrafieh* (which translates to Eyes of Ashrafieh, who in English go by the name Ashrafieh 2020). These two alternative security groups claim to have separate purposes.

During my fieldwork, I managed to secure a casual phone conversation with a member of *Jnoud el Rab* named Jon. A mutual friend had connected us, and so he immediately seemed comfortable and open to the conversation I was proposing to have with him. Jon seemed enthusiastically interested in my thesis topic when I told him it was about understanding Christian culture and security (as I have come to notice that most Christian people from the generation of the civil war tend to be when they find out there is a young researcher is interested in writing about them). Despite his enthusiasm and support, he continuously repeated during our conversation that “*Jnoud el Rab* are not the people for security,” and continued to encourage me to contact Ashrafieh 2020: according to him, my interests in neighborhood protection and security would be best answered by them. I told him I did not understand what he meant, and that I had heard and read that *Jnoud el Rab* is a group that offers “*himeye*” (protection, in English) He agreed that *himeye* is one the group’s objectives but explained that their primary goal is not the protection of people. He told me that while Ashrafieh 2020 aims to protect people, “*Jnoud el Rab* is doing the Bible’s work.”

“What does the Bible’s work mean exactly? And how are you doing it?” I asked. It took him some time to answer me. I could sense he was doubting the intentions that underlay my questions, and maybe even my relationship to the Bible. To convey that my intentions were not nefarious in a way that he would understand, I added that I do know what the Bible’s work is, because my father had raised me in the Maronite Church, but

that I am required to ask what may seem as “very obvious” questions to avoid any misinformation in my research study. He seemed satisfied with my response and went on to explain to me that the Bible’s work is what Jesus would do, and that they are protecting the sanctity of Jesus’ will on earth through their service to Him. He proceeded to tell me that they are *metel* (i.e., like) a militia group who limit their activity to *their* neighborhoods to keep them “*ndaf min el te’sirat el kherjiyye*” (i.e., clean of any outside influences). By the use of the term *kherjiyye* (i.e., outside) I understood him to mean both outside of Ashrafieh, but perhaps outside of the Bible as well. Although he did not say it directly, Jon was telling me that refugees, queer communities, activists, and feminists that push for civil marriage, the right to abortion, and any other policy and cultural modifications that challenge existing Christian patriarchal norms are in direct conflict with *Jnoud el Rab*.

For this reason, it made sense that Jon insisted that I speak to Ashrafieh 2020 for my questions about security. In this context, I argue that security and protection operate as two separate entities, whereby security refers to a service given to others, and protection is a service provided primarily to satisfy the self. Emotional and political baggage from the civil war period, whether carried in the form of direct memories of ex-militiamen or passed down through generations, contributes to one’s desire to participate in creating protection in the name of Christian resistance and servitude to Jesus. In this case, not only are members of *Jnoud el Rab* creating their own protection, but they are reconnecting with a collective force that exalts unity, security, strength, and other patriarchal values that are prevalent in Maronite historiography. In this regard, *feeling* protected is rooted in the desire to maintain the social and political dominance of Lebanese Christians in efforts to reject the suggestion that they are in a cultural state of

decay. For this reason, seeing the re-emergence of alternative security groups that claim to enact unity, security, and strength revives a social and collective sense of protection rooted in the current collapsing living conditions of Ashrafieh as a sectarian concern.

### **C. Negotiating Safety and Protection**

How have these alternative security groups impacted the inhabitants of Achrafieh? Despite the neighborhood's well-known characterization as a Christian-hub, inhabitants of Ashrafieh also include non-Christian Lebanese people such as international people, expat workers, students, and tourists of foreign backgrounds, as well as refugees. Ashrafieh's informal title as a "Christian-hub" comes from the fact that much of the land and property in Ashrafieh is owned by Christian people. In addition, during the civil war period, the ascription of a "Muslim side" and a "Christian side" to the city was established through the vocabulary of "West" and "East" Beirut. Moreover, many historical Christian political movements as well as current day Christian political rallies take place in Sassine.

The way people's safety is prioritized in Ashrafieh is based on both how this history ideologically resonates with its inhabitants as well as the length of one's family's history in the neighborhood. This is apparent in the way security is provided to the inhabitants of Ashrafieh with priority placed on favoring and securing the well-being of Christian residents. This not only means making sure residents feel safe in their homes, but that their access to resources and income remain consolidated in Christian hands. For example, I witnessed twice non-Christian scooter/taxi drivers bullied out of picking up customers from Sassine in just the first two months of my moving into the neighborhood. Similarly, I have heard stories of hijabi women who work in ABC Ashrafieh, the local mall, having been removed from their positions or relocated to ABC Verdun (the sister-

mall located in the Western side of Beirut). Additionally, I have witnessed Syrian and Palestinian people rejected from using the services of OMT and Western Union with the explanation that “these services are only available for locals.”

Alternative security forces such as *Jnoud el Rab* and Ashrafieh 2020 that emerged during the post-crisis years exacerbate non-Christian people’s sense of insecurity in Ashrafieh. Not only do non-Christian residents have to worry about dark streets and electricity shortages like all other residents, but they are also forced to worry about how their identity (i.e., sectarian affiliation, aesthetic self-expression, skin color, etc.) may contribute to their lack of safety. I learned this lesson second-hand through my Palestinian flat-mate, who when leaving the house to go out, tends to switch his accent from his Palestinian native tongue to a Lebanese-dialect of Arabic. At first, I did not think much of this, as I know many other Palestinians and Syrians who do the same, especially when they are getting into taxis or are in environments where they do not know how they will be received. However, after living in Sassine for a year, I came to notice details going beyond the changing of accents. For example, after a whole year of living in the building, no one in the neighborhood knew my flat-mate’s name. The *dikkenji* (shop owner) at the bottom of our building, the *natoor* (building concierge), the seamstress across the street from the building all knew him as “Joy’s fiancé” because that’s how he would refer to himself. It was not until one day when we had gone to the seamstress together and I had called his name out loud that I realized he had been concealing his name from our neighbors. Calling him by his name in public brought to my attention another strategy my flat-mate had applied in the pursuit of protection from the neighborhood itself, because his name would automatically denote that he is not Christian, and therefore lead him to be perceived as an outsider to the neighborhood.

The apprehension to be discovered as a non-Christian, or specifically in the case of my flat-mate, a Palestinian, is a result of historical baggage tied to identity constructs that stipulate who should be feared, hated, disregarded, etc. Despite not being alive during the period of the civil war, nor having any relatives in Lebanon or connection to the civil war's history, my flat-mate is made to feel like his presence in Ashrafieh is an imposition and infiltration of a space he often says he feels unwelcomed in. He often explains this feeling of being a misfit in the neighborhood by speaking of a deep-rooted fear he has of angering his neighbors simply through existing and living in Ashrafieh as a Palestinian and Muslim person. He was therefore wary of things as mundane as wearing his favorite t-shirt that says the word "Palestine," and would encourage me to avoid wearing it as well, arguing that "this shirt is disrespectful to the people in this area and will cause us problems."

The baggage of the civil war not only shapes non-Christian people's anxieties in Ashrafieh but influences how alternative security groups assess who deserves their protection and who is deemed the enemy. I would go as far as to argue that the conditions of the crisis have exacerbated wartime sectarian sentiments and a traditional approach to creating insecurity through the invocation of fear. Just four months ago, a friend of mine named Zahra' was in a car accident in Karm el Zeitoun. It was 9:30 pm when a taxi driver from the neighborhood crashed into the left side of her car as she was driving home. Zahra' immediately got out of the car to check on the damages. While telling me the story, she had insisted that she planned to leave without asking for compensation for the damages to her car. However, the taxi driver announced he was calling the insurance and so she stayed put. Less than five minutes later, a group of six men between the ages of 35-50 arrived on scooters to the immediate aid of the taxi driver. Zahra' described the

scrutiny she received from the group of men as aggressive and violent. Once the men knew her name (a name that denotes her Shia' background), all blame for the accident was placed on her and she was bombarded with questions such as "what are you doing driving through this neighborhood?" and "of all the roads to your home you picked this one?" She said she ignored engaging with their questioning as much as she could and pulled up her phone to call her brother instead. However, once her brother answered the call and she greeted him with a "Hello, Hamoudi?" one of the men snatched her phone and smashed it to the ground aggressively, while another started screaming at her: "*No Hamoudi, No Ali, No Mohamad! We don't have these kinds of names here! What are you doing? Trying to start a problem in our neighborhood?*" A third man started to run at her with his fist raised, as if he was about to hit her, but a fourth man held him back by the shoulders and said to him, "Hey! We don't hit girls, *we are not like them.*" Zahra' managed to pull herself out of the situation by promising the men that she would compensate the taxi driver with \$500 (despite his car being in fine shape) and drove off with her dented car.

How we choose to fashion ourselves or what name we use relates directly to our access to security and protection; and groups like *Jnoud el Rab* operate by capitalizing on this reality to denote who or what is the threat. The fault of the car accident was no longer relevant after the moment Zahra revealed her name. She was blamed for the accident, harassed, and punished for simply having the wrong name and being in the wrong neighborhood. The making of Zahra' into a threat falls in line with what Ghassan Hage calls "a fantasy of viability" (Hage 2021, 152). Imagining that Zahra' is a threat to the neighborhood grants these men a purpose that both connects them to their past and reaffirms their current value to society as "protectors." In his reflections on Paul, an ex-

Lebanese Forces “chief,” Hage writes: “The militiamen were undoubtedly an example of social subjects located at the wrong end of this distributional process. While war society had offered them the opportunity to exist in a meaningful manner, post-war society left them with no means of self-realization” (Hage 2021, 154). In my understanding, Zahra’s case shows how men’s efforts to overcome their irrelevance to society may perpetuate a reality rooted in imagination.

#### **D. The Boundaries of Cultural Conformity**

One way to attain protection is to understand and operate within the boundaries of social norms. In Ashrafieh, social norms largely parallel Christian patriarchal expectations that are channeled through the preaching of religious and cultural institutions as well as household traditions that have embodied public expectations of the culture. As we have already established earlier in this chapter, avoiding drawing attention to oneself especially when one’s identity falls outside of the lines of Christian identity norms is one way to protect oneself. This would suggest, by contrast, that capitalizing on the characteristics that would allow one to appear *in* as opposed to outside of the neighborhood’s culture brings an invisible benefit of protection. Feeling *in* or attaining a sense of belonging is often achieved through finding commonalities between oneself and one’s neighbors in hopes that these commonalities may override the characteristics that would otherwise create alienation. This means simultaneously separating oneself from individuals or distancing oneself from characteristics that would conflict with access to belonging. For Elie, the middle-aged Syrian refugee man who runs the parking lot in front of my building, this means ignoring his background as a Syrian and refugee and focusing on highlighting his shared identity with his neighbors as a devote Christian.

I have always found Elie a pleasant person to interact with. Often, he greets me with a “bonjour mademoiselle” and a “merci” instead of the Arabic equivalent to thank you, *shukran*. I never questioned his use of the French language instead of the Arabic, as it is customary in Ashrafieh to hear common niceties spoken in French. This was until my Palestinian flat-mate brought to my attention a conversation he and Elie had shared together, that made me reconsider the effect of cultural performativity for social hierarchies. Despite both being foreigners, my flat-mate noted that Elie often made remarks that would serve to distance himself from any commonalities they may share. Statements like: “They hate Palestinians more than Syrians around here” and “at least I am Christian, you’re both Palestinian and Muslim,” imply a hierarchy of belonging that even he was aware of. In such utterances, there is a clear effort by Elie to separate himself from my flat-mate by emphasizing what brings him closer to the culture and communities in Ashrafieh. Despite his efforts, both individuals would be viewed as outsiders if a local Christian person from the neighborhood had a say in the matter. However, performing and emphasizing the qualities that would suggest belonging (such as speaking French or bullying individuals who are also outsiders) perhaps operates in the pursuit of self-produced security.

Sometimes conforming to cultural expectations can feel like a burden even to individuals who already possess the foundations of being an insider, i.e., who were born Christian, grew up or are originally from the neighborhood, etc. When first moving to Ashrafieh from Hamra, I assumed I would feel safe and protected living in a neighborhood with people who look and have the same religious upbringing as me. I also felt reassured that I carry the characteristics that would qualify me to receive protection from groups like *Jnoud el Rab* and Ashrafieh 2020 if ever I needed it. However, after

living here for some time I have noticed feeling a lack-of-safety generated by what I once thought would give me security. I have asked myself several times why I shy away from accepting help and protection from these groups in cases especially where I am in potential danger, such as when being followed home on a late-night walk or when almost getting mugged. I have concluded that I am uncomfortable with the privilege and sectarian undertones that are undoubtedly a condition of this protection. Knowing that I do not align with the values of the Maronite institution but that I am an inevitable Maronite by birth forces me to regularly reflect on the in-between space of being Christian in Lebanon and how that particular characteristic grants me access to sectarian privileges such as the services of alternative security groups in Ashrafieh.

## **E. Conclusion**

Much of how I have come to understand safety and protection is structured around the self in juxtaposition to community building. Self-fashioning in proximity to or in distance of cultural and identity norms seem to largely impact the way both Christians and non-Christians view and experience safety. This is the case for members of alternative security groups who use their history and their imagination to create environments or situations where they can protect themselves. This is also the case for non-Christians living in Ashrafieh, who perform and highlight (or sometimes even fabricate) characteristics that can better help their inclusion and acceptance within the neighborhood. *Being safe* is therefore a fluid experience ultimately dependent or disrupted by the social environment around us.

## CONCLUSION

In the process of completing this research study I have come to learn that it is possible my precomposed assumptions of this field site and research interest may be the very cause that has hindered my ability to learn beyond what I believed I already knew. It is for this reason that the construction of this thesis has been harder than I originally anticipated. In *Prozak Diaries*, Orkideh Behrouzan writes that the “act of ‘working through’ [is] itself a mode of inquiry into the unfinished and unpolished nature of experience” (Behrouzan, 2016: 8). In the preface and introduction chapters of this thesis I mentioned that my interest in Christian cultural formations through Christian kinship relations was inspired by my desire to *compare* my upbringing as a Lebanese Christian diaspora to the Lebanese Christians born and raised in Lebanon. Now I realize that instead of drawing a comparison between diasporic and local conditions, I sought to affirm myself as “being Maronite” by justifying my experiences in relation to what I categorized as an “authentic” Maronite.

As Behrouzan suggests, exploring my resistance and simultaneous persistence in the characterization and traditions of the Maronite people is a testament to my efforts to work through experiences I continue to consider unfinished. Shying away from the lack of distance I have from the topic under study and conflating distance with time proved to be an ineffective approach to thinking through topics of Maronite religiosity, self-fashioning, kin relations, and rituals. Acknowledging this limitation shifted my analysis of the fieldwork to focusing deeply and intentionally on the experiences shared by my interlocutors as a means of learning about themes within the study of cultural formation that I have explored in the context of myself before. These themes include thoughts on baggage, sentiments of being in/out, as well as ideas of the role of women in the domestic

sphere. My attachment to heuristic devices such as Maronite with a capital M and maronite with a lowercase m, or my dependence on categorizing findings as baggage or in/out, were in fact reflections of how I tend to categorize my own position and sentiments within Christian communities in Lebanon and among the diaspora.

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In this thesis I have worked towards unpacking sentiments of belonging and exclusion within the parameters of Lebanese Christian families and community. As a result, topics within the themes of kinship, inclusion, responsibility, security, religious identity, and solidarity are explored. The objective of this study has been to explore whether instances of racism, xenophobia, and sexism are a necessary condition or accidental circumstance of Lebanese Christian community preservation and development. With this objective in mind, this thesis aimed to understand (1) the relationship between sectarian identity and family expectations, upbringing, and morals (2) the spectrum of unconscious to deliberate processes of othering (3) the threat and fear associated with exclusion from belonging to Christian communities, as well as (4) the effects of rejecting social norms and family expectations.

These aims have been reflected within a compilation of snapshot essays that encompass fieldwork between the years of 2020 to 2024. As a result of the period in which this thesis covers, there has been much nuanced reflection on the COVID19 pandemic and lockdown period, economic crisis and nationwide electricity shortages, as well as the emergence of right-wing alternative security groups in the historically Christian-majority neighborhood of Ashrafieh in Beirut.

While I do not claim that this project has resulted in any holistic or static conclusions, I do believe that this thesis has offered insight on the double sidedness of

community building and preservation in the context of contemporary Christian communities in Lebanon. I use the word double sidedness because I interpret the instances of racism, xenophobia, and sexism demonstrated in this thesis to be neither a solely necessary condition nor an accidental circumstance of Lebanese Christian community preservation and development, but rather, a combination of both condition and accident that fluidly interchange, just as one side of a double-sided coin would. The scope of this interchangeability is no doubt exacerbated by the current deteriorating living conditions in Lebanon. Additionally, I cannot help but point out the relevance and parallels of this small study to the early stages of right-wing neofascism that is emerging on a global scale across the Western world and throughout areas of the Global South. While this comparison goes beyond the scope of this study, it may be relevant to continue considering how ideas of social protection and belonging as well as implications of exclusion and social alienation are crafted, implemented, and rationalized in other parts of the world and how those processes are reflected back into Christian communities in Lebanon.

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