

Ethnologie française

Call for Papers

Lebanese Anthropologies

Diversity and Key Questions

Coordination

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Syrian Refugee Shelter in the Bekaa Valley (Photo credit: Houda Kassatly ©2017)

Which Lebanese Anthropologies?

This issue of *Ethnologie française* will feature contemporary anthropological studies by researchers trained, living, and/or working in Lebanon. The field of Lebanese anthropology mirrors the country's social fragmentation and diasporic tendencies, consequently the academic production is in French, English, and Arabic. It encompasses both foreign scholars—who tend to take a long-term approach towards certain of the country's realities—and Lebanese researchers living in Lebanon or abroad and who study their home country. Some colleagues hold faculty positions in local universities, including the American University of Beirut, Saint Joseph University, and Lebanese University (Lebanon's only public university, with over half of the country's university students), while others work for French, British, and American research centers.

Thus, two pioneers of anthropology in Lebanon, Selim Abou and Suad Joseph have very different careers. The first one was President of Saint Joseph University from 1995 to 2003 and studied migration and cultural exchanges. The second who completed her PhD at Columbia University in 1975 and studied kinship, gender, and citizenship in the region while teaching at the University of California at Davis is representative of the Lebanese scholars' international careers.

Then a French research institute--the *Institut Français du Proche-Orient*, formerly the CERMOC--that enables multi-year research visits to French and European scholars, including several anthropologists.

This diversity of positions and perspectives is reflected in the many research topics that anthropologists working on Lebanon have explored. Indeed, it is impossible for a single journal issue adequately represent the scope and diversity of this field. Several distinct strands of anthropological inquiry trends in Lebanese historiography that are linked through scholarly publications and series.

The goal of this special issue of *Ethnologie française* is to adopt an epistemological perspective on anthropological knowledge about Lebanon. By featuring empirical contributions from contributors seeking to comprehend the many faces of the country's contemporary realities and the conditions under which this knowledge has evolved, the issue will provide an overview of the field's breadth and diversity.

Do anthropology and close disciplines like human geography or oral history have specific and original things to say about the evolution and future of Lebanon, a country that is perceived as simultaneously nearby and remote? Can these disciplines adequately portray the country's complexities, contradictions, and fluidities beyond contrasting vibrant nightlife with fierce tensions between different factions of Lebanese society? Can we argue, finally, that these studies offer substantive contributions to anthropology in general?

Studies are able to answer such questions only if they are deeply rooted in their specific terrains. Anthropologists do not hold a monopoly over ethnography. Indeed, historians, geographers, and sociolinguists routinely use the same methodologies. This special issue is firmly grounded in anthropological studies about Lebanon, however, and contributors are encouraged to offer detailed portraits of the contours and timeframes of their respective fieldwork contexts. The cumulative effect of these portraits will be a bird's-eye view of the methods and approaches that constitute the "fieldwork of Lebanon," including the diverse methods and approaches used to grasp the country's many facets.

Our purpose in the following lines is to briefly sketch the scope of the field, but we make no claim to being exhaustive and are full aware of the risk of over-simplification.

Which Ethnographic Landscapes?

One of the most well remembered periods in contemporary Lebanese history is the interminable "uncivil" war (Beydoun, 1993) that began in 1975 and ended, almost collapsing from exhaustion, in 1990. But what is really known about this tormented nation, thirty years after the Taëf Accord (1989) and a bit more than ten years after another war, "thirty-day war," that bloodied the summer of 2006 (Mermier & Picard, 2007), at a time of demographic conflict following the influx of Syrian refugees (Kfoury & Puig, 2017, Dahdah & Puig, 2018)?

Lebanon is a highly complex human landscape in which polarized communities and groups, coupled with the diasporic tendencies of Lebanese *emigrés*, intersect with the various temporal frames of refugees and migrants from the region, from Asia, and from Africa. Lebanon thus finds itself at the crossroads of an intense circulation of human beings, objects, and ideas that traverse, influence, and occasionally put down roots. These circulations contribute to the local complexity of the concept of “foreignness” and of each individual’s position and status, while also calling attention to the need to understand the many facets of otherness that continuously reconfigure the country’s myriad social spaces. From the cliff sides of Beirut (Delpal, 2005) to the multi-ethnic quarter of Dawra (Dahdah, 2016) and the Sabra market, (Dimachki, Puig, 2016; Kassatly, Puig, & Tabet, 2016) unimagined urban contacts between individuals and groups endlessly foster the development of new norms and social contacts between national, ethnic, and other groups—between settled Arabs and Asian migrants, for example-- that ultimately interrogate established hierarchies based on status or length of residency.

Palestinian refugees have participated in the Lebanese human and academic landscape since 1948 and have inspired the curiosity of a number of anthropologists. The resulting studies have attempted to explain the genealogy of exile and cultural and memorial dynamics in order to understand the camps’ social dynamics and their functions as matrices of identities and political fermentation. No fewer than ten doctoral studies have focused on Palestinian camps and groups in Lebanon, including Hala Abou Zaki’s longitudinal dissertation project (2017, EHESS), which focused on memory and urbanity in Chatila.

These various circulations have been associated with recurrent conflicts of variable intensity, with neighbors or between communities, in turn triggering social and political fragmentation and imperiling the country’s political equilibrium, known as the “Lebanese formula” (*al-sira al-lubnaniya*).

Political territorialization divides spaces, while partisan community identities and practices evolve to take different forms (Mermier and Mervin, 2012) and insinuate themselves into the heart of the Nation-State. “Community modesty”—a cluster of political practices that the historian Ahmad Beydoun argues made the State’s presence possible in the space left free by the withdrawal of separate communities, lost considerable ground during the war (1993, p. 82, 83).

In this context, what becomes of ideals such as the coexistence of communities or *at-ta’ayush* [living-together] that reciprocal perspectives and shared rituals can potentially create (Kanafani-Zahar, 2004)?

Indeed, how can Lebanon even continue to exist amidst this complex baggage and social inventiveness? It occupies a unique position in the Arab world, in part due to a comparative lack of censorship that has helped sustain a prosperous book industry (Mermier, 2005), as well as *Idhafât*, the principal Arabic-language sociology and anthropology journal. Finally, Lebanese culture places “creativity at the heart of the growth Lebanese capitalism” (Hariri, Kassis, 2017).

These creative tendencies arise from an esthetic effort to perfect the still incomplete project of memorializing the Lebanese civil war. New artistic approaches have been used to explore various archival and narrative ideas—using both truth and fiction--in attempts to comprehend and process the past (Bellan, 2007). Unresolved questions related to wartime memories inspired a group of studies in 2010 (Mermier and Varin, Haugbølle, Volk) and continue even today to haunt Lebanese society, weighing heavily on social and political progress. There is an urgent need to honor requests for information about the fates of those who disappeared during the war that were filed with the political authorities at the time and most of remain unresolved. It is vital that old wounds be healed,

even if only minimal agreement on a historical narrative about the war can be achieved that gives voice to a convergence of positions despite persistent social divisions (Raymond, 2013).

Relationships between the city and the mountainous zones and the dynamics among city-dwellers continue to hold strong potential as research fields. During the civil war, Seurat became interested in the social organization of a neighborhood in Tripoli to which he applied the Khaldounian concept '*asabiyya*' (*esprit de corps*) in order to understand the relationship between the city as "the locus of nation-building, traversed by communities" and the more sectarian mountains (1985). After peace—and ruins (Brones, 2010)—returned, researchers began to focus on the reconstruction process. A number of studies explored urban sectarian appropriations, particularly in Beirut, including proponents of urbanism who are critical of free-market urban policies in the city center that have expelled residents and given rise to privately managed gated zones (Tabet, 2003, Akl & Beyhum, 2009). Beirut, whose rich, tragic history has inspired legions of narratives, is no longer the neglected city described by Mahmoud Darwich that "printed books, distributed newspapers, organized lectures and conferences that discussed planetary issues, while paying no attention to herself" (1994, p. 57). On the contrary, Beirut is now a shared space as much as it is a source of conflict.

Another group of studies has interrogated the evolution of leadership in the city, as well as the contemporary functioning of religious systems and patterns of patronage, social and political spheres are not reducible merely to power relations but that instead constitute zones of influence and forms of attachment between customers and managers or business owners (Rivoal, 2012).

In the field of bodily privacy, corporeal practices that are constitutive of "dialogic constructions of appearances" (Bartholeyns, 2011) have been observed to produce similarities and differences. Lebanon, for example, is one of the countries in which plastic surgery is most popular and where, as in Iran, rhinoplasty (changing the shape of the nose) is the most popular operation. This infatuation with the nose encourages the rapid development of esthetic norms and exemplifies growing attention to shaping physical appearances to reflect changing local norms of beauty, which in turn reflect familial and social norms and relationships. Appearance is unquestionably an important means for recognizing the Other, perhaps in Lebanon more than in other regions, while modifications of the body suggest problems in the meanings underlying Lebanese ethnicity ("Here, we have a problem with the Semitic nose," as one plastic surgeon observed).

With no claim to representing the full scope or ethnographic research about Lebanon, a further strand of inquiry focuses on the significant roles in everyday Lebanese life of played by religious institutions, beliefs, and practices play significant roles in. Every religious community has a powerful sense of belonging based on unifying--and often modernized--rituals that rally the faithful (Tabet, 2013), as well as diverse "arrangements" and "horizontal, religious, political, and social attachments, (...) between members of different religious communities" (Aubin-Boltanski, 2012, p. 295, Kanafani-Zahar, 2011). Evangelical churches are meanwhile attracting increasing numbers of worshipers and converts, particularly among women migrants for whom these new religious forms also constitute new social belongings "that affect existence in a discrete but decisive way" (Kaoues, 2016, p. 48).

Where to now¹?

This issue of *Ethnologie française* sheds new light on Lebanon by including classical ethnographic methods as well as audio, video, and other visual methodologies, such as research by the visual

¹ Quotation borrowed from Nadine Labaki's film, *Wa halla' la-weyn* (2011)

anthropologist Houda Kassatly (whose photograph is featured in the introduction). Our purpose is two-fold. First, contributions will reflect the diverse approaches used by anthropologists to explore the many facets of the Lebanese ethnographic landscape. This collection of articles will ultimately feature major research methods that seek to deepen our ethnographic understanding of the country. A second goal of the issue is to highlight the diversity of Lebanese anthropology for a francophone readership.

The coordinators of the issue are Nicolas Puig, *Institut de Recherche pour le Développement* anthropologist, and Michel Tabet, visual anthropologist, filmmaker, and an associate of the *Laboratoire d'anthropologie Sociale*. Contributors will include both foreign and Lebanese scholars who regularly publish about Lebanon.

Proposals, including titles and abstracts of between 750 and 1,000 words including references must be received by **September 30, 2019**. Proposals should describe the central arguments and the data and materials (such as studies and or archives) used as well as brief author bios.

Proposals should be e-mailed to Nicolas Puig (nicolas.puig@ird.fr) and Michel Tabet (michel@zwyx.org). Selections will be communicated in November 2019.

Full manuscripts (35,000 to 70,000 characters maximum, including spaces and bibliography) must be received by **March 30, 2020**. The special issue of *Ethnologie Française* is scheduled for publication in **Spring 2021**.

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