

Lebanese Masculinity in Australia Australian-Grown Or Australian-Misinterpreted

Victor A, Khachan

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Lebanese American University
Byblos, Lebanon
vkhachan@lau.edu.lb

Abstract—Amidst interpretations of Lebanese masculinity (i.e. hypermasculinity, Lebs Rule, swarming packs of Lebanese), this paper attempts to introduce masculinity in Lebanon in the framework of Lebanese social identity and its possible links to the Lebanese community in Australia. Investigating the social identity roots of masculinity in Lebanon may help clarify whether the ‘phenomenal’ social performance associated with the Lebanese community in Australia is Australian-grown or Australian- misinterpreted. Accordingly, this paper sheds light on the socio-political structure of village identity in Lebanon and its functional dimension as ‘imagined’ community for Lebanese immigrants, specifically for Australian-Lebanese. Lebanese-Australians unlike any other Lebanese community outside Lebanon duplicate the Lebanese social fabric. This functionality necessitates a two-fold task. Firstly, it requires demarcating masculinity in the Lebanese village identity. Secondly, it entails the analysis of the grouping patterns of Lebanese community in Australia and the resemblance of such patterns to those in Lebanon in order to trace possible ‘imagined’ village-based identity which may be responsible for fostering a masculinity version of the ‘Lebanese masculinity’ in Australia.

Keywords-*Lebanese village identity; Lebanese masculinity; Lebanese-Australian grouping patterns; imagined identity; Lebanese Diaspora.*

I. INTRODUCTION

- *Lebanese people ‘tend to be hot blooded and get emotional more than Australians’* (according to Ossama Harris, 23, a second-generation Lebanese-Australians) (p.1) [1].
- *People ‘always talk about the Lebanese boys and how rowdy they are’* (As perceived by a Lebanese-Australian High-School girl) (p.1) [2].
- *‘The cops hate and fear the swarming packs of Lebanese who respond when some of their numbers are confronted’* (p.2) [3].

The above statements highlight issues facing the Lebanese community in schools, in the streets and in politics in Australia. Such a stereotypical portrayal of Lebanese-Australians’ social behavior has lately become problematic in the understanding and perception of the Lebanese community in Australia. Despite the underlying truth to these statements, the validity of their causal starting point remains in question. Poynting, Noble and Tabar (1997) [2] define the

Lebanese-Australians male youths’ hierarchy of masculinity as ‘hypermasculinity/protest masculinity’, justifying the ‘Lebs Rule’ mythology and its related violence. That is, this violence-related hypermasculinity is a means to balance out the ‘humiliation of racism’ that is directly associated with what the Lebanese youths’ fathers have endured of “lack of honour and respect in the world of work [which] is compounded with loss of honour and respect in the family” (p.7) [2]. Accordingly, Lebanese ‘hypermasculinity’ is viewed as an Australian phenomenon and an ultimate determiner of Lebanese-Australians’ ethnic identity [2]. Similarly, many researchers reject the association of the term ‘gang’ with Lebanese groups and label Lebanese-Australians male youths’ ‘anti-social’ behavior as a tool against ethnic stereotyping and discrimination [4], [5] and [6]. Another straightforward depiction of the ethnic discrimination-based ordeal of Lebanese families in Australia is mirrored in the 2009 Australian films “The Combination” [7] and “Cedar Boys” [8]. Amidst this ‘conclusive’ ethnic discrimination framework, this paper embarks on the study of masculinity in Lebanon and its possible influences on the formation of Lebanese-Australian masculinity, in an attempt to understand whether the Lebanese-Australian males’ anti-social behavioral patterns (i.e. masculinity) are Australian-grown or Australian-misinterpreted. This association between Lebanese and Lebanese-Australian masculinities necessitates a two-fold task. Firstly, it requires demarcating masculinity in the Lebanese village identity by shedding light on the socio-political structure of village membership/identity in Lebanon and its direct impact on the shaping of Lebanese masculinity. Secondly, it entails the analysis of the grouping patterns of Lebanese community in Australia and the resemblance of such patterns to those in Lebanon in order to trace possible ‘imagined’ village-based identity which may be responsible for fostering a masculinity version of ‘Lebanese masculinity’ in Australia (i.e. imagined masculinity).

II. VILLAGE IDENTITY AND SOCIO-POLITICAL MASCULINITY

This section establishes a socio-political causal platform, highlighting factors attributing to the social weight and dynamics of Lebanese village membership/identity. The five major rural rebellions in Lebanon’s modern history, the 1821, 1840, 1858, 1860 and 1889, are a clear indication of

the socio-political functioning of village identity in the formation and organization of these revolts. Regardless of the reasons for the revolts, be they economic, religious and/or political, their systematic structuring, organization and initiation were only possible due to the agreement and unity among the different villages involved. The young men, *Shabab* (singular *Shab*) of each of the involved villages full-heartedly supported the leadership and village-loyalty of the *Sheikh Shabab*, a popular local village representative. Hence, the psychology of *Shabab* is a crucial characteristic to the understanding of the interaction of *Shabab* in the social hierarchy of village membership. Remarkably, During the 1975 civil war, warring militias modernized and shifted the concept of *Sheikh-Shabab* to *Rayyess* (*boss; president in Lebanese Arabic*); more interesting, however, is that the nomenclature *Shabab* had stayed in circulation, referring to militants, with almost the same concept and context highlighted in this paper. *Shabab*, in its Lebanese context, is generally defined by highlighting social, physical and even vocal characteristics; all of which are expectations that necessitate the approval of village members. Though Gilsean (1996) [9] defines the term *Shabab* in the *Akkar* context (a district in north Lebanon), his definition, however, has been widely observed across Lebanon's villages and towns for centuries. The use of the term *Shabab* is synonymous to the village revolts and the 1975 civil war. *Shabab* must show readiness to act at once and to unleash 'fearful forces' in a public display. As portrayed by [9]: "In his teens and early twenties the *shab*, the young man, was expected to begin to show how well he had absorbed these central lessons of male life [the mastery of *the pitch and tones of voice*, the facial expressions, body postures and hand gestures, the pacing and control of the rhythm of the encounter etc.]" (p.207) [Words in bold are for emphasis]. A comprehensive definition of *Shabab* necessitates the inclusion of the archetypal qualities of *Shabab* manifested in *Qabaday*, a tough and courageous man, a definition that is beyond tough men who work for political leaders and protect their interests. *Qabaday* in Lebanon is characterized by being tough and brave and by having moral leadership and communal championship [6]. "The young *Qabaday* afraid of nothing, *ready to shout*, challenge and demand satisfaction at any real or imagined challenge, and provocatively self-assertive" (p.258) [Words in bold are for emphasis] [9]. In the village context, the characteristics of *Qabaday* and *Shabab* overlap. Both *Qabaday* and *Shab* are imprinted in the collective identity of the village and their qualities (e.g. vocal identity) are fostered and cherished by the competitive nature of social life in the village. It is all about exercising pressure on others. The *Qabaday's* very same qualities are the archetypal *Shebab's*. However, these qualities are over-emphasized in the *Qabaday*, making his reputation both feared and respected. This overlapping in characteristics between *Shebab* and *Qabaday*, mainly vocal behavior, is an essential factor in the maintenance of village identity in Lebanon. In Lebanon, the socio-cultural connotations of vocal loudness may vary between 'manhood' (for villagers) and 'lack of social refinement/attainment (for coastal towners) [10]; thus, vocal behavior plays a crucial role in the

socio-cultural standing of a village, fundamental to the development and maintenance of village identity. The socio-cultural profile of both *Qabaday* and *Shab/Shabab* highlights the vocal dimension of the Lebanese village identity. This profile also helps establish a common identity platform between the Lebanese village and the Lebanese community in Australia. Lebanese-Australian youths' masculinity, when interpreted, needs to account for the collective characteristics responsible for the shaping of masculinity in Lebanon, mainly Lebanese villages. And thus, Lebanese-Australian masculinity may be considered in the framework of the Lebanese village identity (i.e. 'imagined' Lebanese village masculinity).

III. LEBANESE COMMUNITY GROUPING PATTERNS

Ethnocentrism occurs "when individuals take their own cultural norms as a benchmark from which another culture is judged inferior" (p.31) [11]. Generally, ethnocentrism devises unidirectional definitions, highlighting intolerances by the dominant group (i.e. self) against ethnic minorities (i.e. other). However, this rigidity in defining ethnocentrism does not stand strong when accounting for cultural differences of Middle East ethnic groups in Australia, mainly Lebanese-Australians. In Australia, racism is differentiated along 'old' and 'new' categories [12]. This is explained through the transformation of 'old racism' (i.e. belief in racial hierarchy and separatism) into 'new racism' in terms of cultural differences between dominant cultural group (Anglo-Celtic) and ethnic minorities ('inferiorisation') [12]. This social status-quo changes the status of racial confrontation from a dominant-minor continuum to a dominant- pseudo dominant one (the 'culture of difference') (pp.410 and 423) [12]. In addition, [13] points out the centrality of culture in social movements. Cultural centrality requires an 'internalist' approach [13], since cultural dynamics are fundamental to the understanding of social movements/behavioral patterns rather than the nurturing factors leading to their prevalence/salience in extreme social circumstances ('manifest external presentation' i.e. violence) (pp.120 and 23) [13]. A case in point is the linguistic dimension of Lebanese-Australian masculinity boundary construction. [14] investigates second-generation Lebanese-Australians' phenomenal use of the Lebanese-Arabic words in day-to-day English conversations. He argues that 'Lebspeak' is indicative of Lebanese-Australian youths' "challenge of the white-centered terms of ethnic capital, identity, masculinity, marginality and power" (p.170). This reverse momentum in defining ethnocentrism is also influenced by what is known as the geography of racism. [15] stresses the importance of locality/geography in the assessment of racism. Geography of racism manifests itself best in working class districts of Sydney and Brisbane. One major study indicates the readiness of surveyed subjects from non-English speaking background to identify themselves as 'Australians' was as high as 10% [15]. In this context, for a better understanding of Lebanese-Australians' masculinity, a turning point in ethnocentrism is essential to establish and thus requires a further explanation of the category 'socially distant' ethnic group [11]. 'Socially distant' may be explained in terms of

self-distancing, in a fashion similar to those manifested by the dominant group rather than a minority group (for a behavioral privilege-pattern of the dominant group see [12], [16] and [11]. Down the same line, regardless of the treatment of the host country, migrants' commitment to the "maintenance of their ethnic traditions and perhaps community" is intentional (p.37) [17]. In addition, Lebanese-Australians' demographic distribution in Australia, mainly in Sydney, is another factor implying dominance or at least a village-based congregation, a self identification as more masculine than that of the real dominant group (accordingly, perceived as 'minority'). In this context, the present work takes advantage of 'hegemonic' masculinity, as reformulated by [18]. Hegemonic masculinity does not exclude the multiplicity of masculinity context in societies; although it is not 'fixed' nor 'transhistorical', hegemonic masculinity manifests itself at a specific time and place, giving rise to an agreed upon group masculinity at the expense of all other masculinities (multiple masculinities); to illustrate, in Turkey, Egypt and the Maghrib, masculinity extends itself to the sexual dominance of men by men. Such sexual activities are not perceived homosexual, for most men are 'functional' bisexuals. On the contrary, these sexual activities are defined as hypermasculinity; hyper-masculinity is also reflected in heterosexual relations that lack sexual equality (i.e. love and affection) [19]. As explained by [18], "men can adopt hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable; but the same men can distance themselves strategically from hegemonic masculinity at other moments. Consequently, 'masculinity' represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices" (p. 841). Accordingly, there are 'local' and 'regional' levels of hegemonic masculinity [18]. In this case, Lebanese-Australian masculinity will be treated here as hegemonic in a quasi-village patterning (i.e. imagined) with unifying characteristics highlighted in the confrontation of another hegemonic masculinity (Anglo-Celtic vs. Lebanese vs. village). 'Imagined community' is defined as the representation of the image of the communion of the members of a nation, even the smallest ones, in the mind of each member despite the members' inability to have known, met or heard of each other [20]. [21] extends [20]'s framework of 'imagined community' to include forms other than Anderson's 'nation', essential in defining popular movements. [22] refers to 'communities of imagination' in the context of [23]'s definition of "imagination" as "a creative process of producing new images of possibility and new ways of understanding one's relation to the world that transcends more immediate acts of engagement" (pp.163-164). Similarly, [24]'s, 'imagined community' is the uniformity of 'social consciousness' defined by constructs such as domestic life, neighborhood encounters, participation in village association activities etc. (p.123). In the Australian context, an 'imagined' Lebanese village identity can be traced back through Lebanese grouping patterns: village affiliation. Lebanese-Australians, unlike any other Lebanese community outside Lebanon, duplicate the Lebanese social fabric (village clustering), the source of Lebanese migration to Australia. Despite the establishment of religious

associations (e.g. Maronite Youth Association, Lebanese Muslim Association, Australian Druze Community, Muslim Alawi Society) and national associations (e.g. Lebanese Community Council of N.S.W, Australian Lebanese Cultural Union, Australian Lebanese Association, Lebanese Cultural Society, Lebanese Social and Cultural Association), the Lebanese community did not disregard the importance of village affiliation in identity formation as Lebanese-Australians or Lebanese-Australians (Australian *Kfarsghab* Lebanese association, Australian *Becharry* Association, Association of *Zgharta*). Village associations (around 250 Lebanese community associations mainly village associations [24] remarkably outnumber Lebanese religious and national associations in Australia. This village-based representation, if mapped geographically, covers a great number of north Lebanon's villages [25]. This portrayal of village affiliation across the village-roots of Lebanese-Australians brings with it real and/or imagined characteristics of village membership. The duplication of the composition of the Lebanese village, the physical and social village environment (i.e. Lebanese social fabric, village-based identity) shapes similar socio-cultural ambiance in Australia. Lebanese-Australians' 'imagined' village identity is made viable due to the social fabric of their communities (i.e. locality) that resemble the fabric of the Lebanese village during the 40s and 50s and to a certain extent the 60s [26]. The available literature on Lebanese-Australians implies neither directly nor indirectly a conscious decision to duplicate Lebanese village social patterns; the decision may rather be a need to recreate a socio-cultural ceiling, a simulation of their expectations of group membership. It is a membership that is well defined by the physical proximity of houses and people. As observed by [1], in Sydney's inner west, the Christian community is centered in Punchbowl and Parramatta, the Sunnis in Lakemba and Bankstown and the Shiites in Arncliffe and Rockdale. Although the divisions referred to here are clearly religious, it is important to note that the majority of villages in Lebanon are grouped within religious geographic boundaries. To further explain collective aspects of village affiliation, maintenance of imagined village identity extends beyond the context of the host country. It extends to the real village. 95% of the population of the Christian Maronite village of *Kfarsgab* are immigrants (20 000 worldwide of which 11 000 in Parramatta, Sydney). Yet, the village is still 100% owned by the people of *Kfarsgab* across the world [27]. As revealed in the 2006 census, 0.9 % of the Australian population identified themselves with Lebanese ancestral origin [28] and the high level of in-marriage (for the years 1991 to 1999) for second generation Lebanese-Australians with spouses from Lebanon is due to "the parents' desire for a culturally 'pure' spouse" (p.43) [17]. Lebanese-Australians owe their loyalty to their village membership, which is second only to their extended family [6]. All in all, for the Lebanese community in Australia, as stressed by [24], the "celebration of the village is a reaffirmation of the continued significance of place-bound identity among immigrants" (p.125). This socio-cultural importance associated with the Lebanese village establishes the foundations for the village

membership to potentially dominate the hierarchy of social identity in Lebanon. When Lebanese immigrants, and even second generation Lebanese immigrants, refer back to their Lebanese socio-cultural heritage, their reference is strictly linked to their village identity (real or 'imagined') and not to their national identity. Categorically, village identity inspires and shapes all other identities, be they on the family or national levels. In the same vein, the village for Lebanese-Australians has a potential greater than just a reminder of a past that has no continuity in the present. The village for them is an 'imagined' village-based identity which represents their social belief systems, same as experienced in their villages before migration or in second generation Lebanese-Australians' recollections of their parents' legend-like stories of honor, courage and family patriarchal values.

IV. CONCLUSION

Having initiated an identity framework for Lebanese-Australians, it is now urgent to further research the degree to which Lebanese-Australians perceive themselves as Australians on both ends of the Australian-Lebanese and Lebanese-Australian continuum. It is a research necessity to help Australianize Lebanese masculinity or, to say the least, understand the social identity background of Lebanese-Australians, a crucial factor in any solution proposed to abridge the gap between the Lebanese community and the Australian society. Only then [4]'s (2004) solution that is based on parameters outside the Lebanese-Australians community (i.e. teachers, police, politicians and media) would be viable and thus reduce the problem of ethnic racism and stereotyping by familiarizing concerned Australian authorities with Lebanese masculinity.

REFERENCES

- [1] Pearlman, J. (2002). Mum's the word: every day is mother's day. Retrieved March 20, 2009, from smh.com.au Web site: <http://www.smh.com.au/cgi-bin/common>
- [2] Poynting, S., G. Noble and P. Tabar (1997). We stay Lebanese together: a study in 'protest masculinity'. *Educational Australia*, Retrieved April 05, 2009, Web site: <http://edoz.com.au/educationaustralia/issues/masc.html>
- [3] Kelly, R. (2005). Government and media provocations spark racist violence on Sydney beaches. Retrieved May 03, 2009 from World Socialist Web site: http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/dec2005/riot-d12_pm.shtml
- [4] White, P. (2004). Media savages Lebanese-Australian youth. Retrieved May 08, 2009, from On Line Opinion: Australia's e-journal of social and political debate Web site: <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au>
- [5] Perrone, S. and R.White (2000). Young people and gangs. *Trends and issues in crime and criminal justice*, 167. Retrieved April 02, 2009, from Australian Institute of Criminology <http://www.aic.gov.au>
- [6] Kennedy, M. H. (2000). Zero tolerance policing and Arabic-speaking young people. Unpublished dissertation. University of Western Sydney, Macarthur.
- [7] Pirrie, J. (Producer), and Field, D. (Director). (2009). The Combination [motion picture]. See Thru Films, Australia.
- [8] Purser, J. (Producer), and Caradee, S. (Director). (2009). Cedar Boys. Mushroom Pictures, Australia.
- [9] Gilsean, M. (1996). Lords of the Lebanese marches: violence and narrative in an Arab society. London: I.B. Tauris.
- [10] Khachan, V. (2005). Vocal behaviour as a group characteristic: a socio-acoustic study across four villages in North Lebanon. Unpublished dissertation. Macquarie University. Sydney, Australia.
- [11] Dunn, K. M and A. McDonald (2001). The geography of racism in NSW: a theoretical exploration and some preliminary findings from the mid-1990s. *Australian Geographer*, 32(1): 29-44
- [12] Dunn, K. M., J. Forrest, I. Burnley and A. McDonald (2004). Constructing racism in Australia. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 39(4): 409-430.
- [13] Blee, K. L. (2007). Ethnographies of the far right. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 36(2): 119-128.
- [14] Tabar, P. (2007). "Habiibs" in Australia: Language, identity and masculinity. *Journal of cultural studies*, 28(2):157-172.
- [15] Dunn, K. M. (2003). Racism in Australia: findings of a survey on racist attitudes and experiences of racism. Paper presented to the Challenges of Immigration and Integration in the European Union and Australia Conference. University of Sydney, February 18-20
- [16] Jureidini, R. (2002). Immigration, racism and ethnicity. In R. Jureidini and M. Poole (Eds.), *Sociology: Australian connections* (pp.183-209). Allen & Unwin.
- [17] Birrell, B. and E. Healy (n.d.). Out-marriage and the survival of ethnic communities in Australia *People and Place*, 08(03), 37-46.
- [18] Connell, R. W., and Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: rethinking the concept. *Gender and Society*, 19 (6): 829-859.
- [19] Dunne, B. (1998). Power and sexuality in the Middle East. *Middle East Report*, no. 206: 8-11.
- [20] Anderson, B. (1983). Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism. London: Verso.
- [21] Bedford, I. (1996). Nationalism and belonging in India, Pakistan and South Central Asia: some comparative observations. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 7:104(17).
- [22] Norton, B. (2001). Non-participation, imagined communities and the language classroom. In M. Breen (Ed.), *Learner contributions to language learning: New directions in research* (pp.159-171). Harlow: U.K: Pearson Education
- [23] Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice learning as a social system. Retrieved April 02, 2009, from CoP: Best Practices Web site: <http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml>
- [24] Humphrey, M. (1998). *Islam, multiculturalism, and transnationalism: From the Lebanese Diaspora*. London: Centre for Lebanese Studies in Association with I.B. Tauris
- [25] Arabic Resource Directory (1985). Compiled by the Lebanese Community Council in conjunction with the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs.
- [26] Murr, G. G. (1987). *The Lebanese Village: an old Culture in a New Era*. Beirut: Librairie du Liban.
- [27] Aoun, T. (2001) Lebanese immigration to Australia (Part I) Beginnings and Development.
- [28] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008). Year Book Australia, 2008. Retrieved April 02, 2009, from Web site: <http://www.abs.gov.au>