

FWF Stand-Alone Project P28736: *Death & Life: Local Conceptions of Reincarnation among the Druzes in the Middle East*

Summary of the project results for the public

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For the Druze, an ethno-religious minority in the Middle East, the belief in transmigration [*taqammuş*] is an integral part of their religion. When a person dies, their soul migrates into a newborn, whereby Druze are always reborn as Druze, just as men are reincarnated as men and women as women. In rare cases, individual children may remember their previous lives, search for, and find their former families. Precisely such special cases, commonly referred to by the Druze as *ʿAmalīyat an-nuṭq* [literally: operation of remembering and retelling], formed the starting point for this research project. In the course of ethnographic field research, biographical-narrative interviews were conducted with people who were either able to recall their past lives themselves or had such cases in their families or among their acquaintances. When describing their life story(s), those directly affected usually began with the moment of discovery: how they suddenly stood in front of the house of their previous life and recognised their former family members. Some of them reported that they were often met with scepticism at first but were able to successfully prove their former identity, for example, by knowing secrets that only the deceased could know. Almost all of them explained that they had died a violent death in their former life: they had been torn from life at an inappropriate time, had not been able to let go, which is the reason why they could still remember their past life today.

First, during the research process, we could prove that all these cases are subject to a uniform pattern: the same content elements (schemata) are common to all cases and form the precondition for the event to be regarded as authentic within the Druze community. In addition, such reincarnation cases are always integrated into moralising discourses that directly refer to truth and divine justice as well as to personal and collective identity constructions.

Second, in light of the research results, future anthropological theorising will arguably have to consider another form of kinship, namely one based on socially recognised cases of reincarnation, generally referred to as *qarābat ar-rūḥ* among Druze. Surprising was the high degree of authenticity with which some “speaking” (remembering their past lives) children were reintegrated into the setting of their former families. Thus, cases could be documented in which “speaking” children moved to their former families or built their house next to their former family after marriage. Interestingly, the closeness in kinship established that way does not only refer to individuals directly involved, but in many cases, also includes their descendants – even if the “speaking” links between the family groups die one day. Similar to “normal kinships”, kinships formed through reincarnation cases are often characterised by intra-family disputes, competitive situations, and ambivalent feelings of duty.

Third, for a community whose settlement areas are separated from each other by nation-state frontlines, NATO razor wire and minefields, such kinship constructions create not only an imaginary link to common Druze identity but also very concrete networks that are (or can be) lived empirically by those concerned. Looking back at the high degree of empathy with which the interviewees recounted their cases of reincarnation, the conceptions of rebirth among the Druze in the Middle East seem to be one thing above all: useful for personal and collective survival – across borders.

The research results can be accessed in the project publication *Druze Reincarnation Narratives: Previous Life Memories, Discourses, and the Construction of Identities*, which can be downloaded from this link: <https://www.peterlang.com/view/title/71546>.