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Conceptions of rebirth among the Druze: Summary of the research results of the FWF Stand-Alone Project P28736 from an anthropological perspective

Topic of Investigation

Generally, this research project concerned ideas about rebirth among the Druze, a religious minority in the Middle East. The focus was less on scriptural theological conceptions of the transmigration of souls, but rather on concrete cases in which people (especially children) remember a past life, “talk” about it [*nataqa*], and finally find their former family again. Based on ethnological field research and episodic interviews with affected persons, the project sought to reconstruct such “*nuṭq* cases” and their discursive embedding. Particular attention was given to possible kinship constructions as well as related personal and collective identity formation processes.

Research Results

The comparative research on the phenomenon of “speaking”/ “remembering” children (sing. masc.: *nāṭiq*, sing. fem.: *nāṭiqa*; pl.: *nāṭiqīn*) and their possible reintegration into the setting of their former family was based on ethnographic surveys conducted in different nation-state contexts (Lebanon, northern Israel, the occupied Golan Heights, Syrian Druze in Europe etc.). The abundance of reconstructed cases, as well as the analysis of the connected discourses within the Druze community, revealed a series of remarkable research findings:

First, the project results show that *nuṭq* cases are a unique phenomenon within the Druze community in all social and educational strata. They are independent of gender, the degree of urbanization, religiosity, or the political-ideological orientation of the people concerned. However, kinship ties based on *nuṭq* cases seem to occur more frequently in certain localities, and some family groups can look back on a long tradition in this regard than others. From an emic point of view, these frequencies are explained by the fact that people who have already had (positive) experiences with *nuṭq* meet their children's speaking with greater awareness if the case arises and are more willing to support such children in their search for their former families. Comparing the cases as documented in the project regarding their nation-state embeddedness, (positively lived) *nuṭq* relationships occur much more frequently in northern Israel than among Syrian and Lebanese Druze. In this regard, we developed the working hypothesis that *nuṭq*-based kinship ties play an important role, especially in places where Druze settlement areas are cut off from one another into small areas.

Second, it was possible to establish in the course of the research project that all *nuṭq* cases are subject to a uniform typology: For a *nuṭq* case to be classified as authentic and socially recognized, (1.) the deceased must be „forcibly,“ torn from their life at an inopportune moment (apart from rare exceptions); (2.) the reborn child must be able to give very specific details from their previous life and bring certain skills, character traits, or bodily marks from the previous life; (3.) the moment of discovering the former family must be clearly described; (4.) the child must be able to prove his former identity (for example, by knowing secrets that only the deceased themselves can know). In addition, (5.) each case is involved in moralizing discourses that refer to collective identity constructions and are part of the plot formation.

What was astonishing in the project work was the uniformity of the content-related schemata according to which the documented *nuṭq* cases are woven. This shows, among other findings, that Druze reincarnation cases are by no means arbitrary but always follow a clear and specific pattern.

Third, the most lasting impact on future social anthropological theorizing is made to the field of kinship studies. These have always played a particularly important role in the *anthropology of the Middle East*, with segmented tribal societies have been the main focus of theorizing to date. Based on the current state of research, it is clear that

conceptions of kinship in the Middle East are not necessarily limited to biological kinship but are primarily socially constructed, and that some leeway exists in a person's genealogy (cf. instrument of *structural amnesia*; customary law regulations on adoption; the concept of milk kinship). In light of the research results, future social anthropological theorizing will arguably have to consider another form of kinship, namely one based on socially recognized *nuṭq* cases, generally referred to as *qarābat ar-rūḥ* among Druze. Surprising was the degree of authenticity with which some *nuṭq* kinships are lived by those involved. Thus, cases could be documented where “talking” children moved to their former families or built their house next to their former family after marriage. Unlike in the case of milk siblings, the perceived closeness does not only refer to the individuals in question but usually also includes the respective family members and even includes their descendants (even if the *nāṭiq* himself is no longer alive). Similar to “normal kinships”, “*nuṭq* kinships” are sometimes characterized by intra-family disputes and ambivalent feelings of duty.

However, *nuṭq* is a conditional form of kinship, i.e., not every *nuṭq* case automatically establishes a kinship relationship that is subsequently lived out socially by those affected. In the research process, working hypotheses were developed on the conditions that must be in place for such kinship relationships to unfold in the empirical everyday world and (be able to) be positively connoted by those affected.

Fourth, the project results seem particularly revealing concerning the interplay between empirical-evident *nuṭq* cases on the one hand and the Druze worldview of transmigration and the associated discourses of truth and divine justice on the other. Accordingly, Druze are always reborn as Druze - although this happens according to a social as well as a territorial (!) rotation principle: Sometimes one is reborn as a poor person, sometimes as a rich person, sometimes as a farmer, sometimes as a scholar (etc.); and: other times one is reborn in this house, other times in that house, other times in Israel, other times in Syria, other times in Lebanon (etc.). From this perspective, the different local settings do make sense. Druze identity is not necessarily connoted with a common, self-contained, and “ethnically homogeneous” settlement area, but with individual Druze sites. The fact that the souls of the Druze can also be reborn in the diaspora and – in the sense of a utopian model – also in imagined Druze communities in China and even in other worlds, makes a possible demand for a common Druze state (“Druzistan” in the sense of Kurdistan, Arabistan, ...) recede into the background. Druze identity is not thought of in terms of the

nation-state. The results suggest that currently existing explanatory approaches (based on the so-called *taqīya* principle or on the lack of real political possibilities for action) fall short in this context. From this perspective, neighboring disciplines such as Islamic Studies and Political Science could also benefit from the project's findings.

Fifth: In methodological terms, the experiences with the technique of the episodic interview were very positive – beyond the preliminary assumptions outlined in the project application. With this research tool, differentiation is already made in the course of data collection between semantic knowledge of the interview partners (principle of rebirth) and episodic-narrative knowledge (case description). In this way, overall societal discourses could be captured separately from narratives about empirically-evidenced *nuṭq* cases, which ultimately enabled the development of the aforementioned case typology and the elaboration of content schemata. In addition, particularly productive experiences were made with participatory research approaches: By involving (Druze) research partners not only in data collection but also in data acquisition and data analysis, it was possible to discuss emic explanatory models in the course of collaborative interview archiving, which not only “contextualized” the audio recordings, but also served to generate further hypotheses in the sense of the research questions.

The present research project is regarded as the initial impulse for a broader methodological research approach, which will be established at the host institution in the future (project proposals are being prepared) and has already found expression in new research programs and target agreements.

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>.