

## Druze Reincarnation in Fiction: Anīs Yaḥyà's Novel *Jasad kāna lī* as a Source for Literary Anthropology\*

LORENZ NIGST

### Abstract

In the Druze outlook, each human soul completes successive life-circuits as different human beings. If one of these human beings dies, the soul immediately migrates to the body of a newborn child. Normally, it is unknown who the soul was previously. However, in exceptional cases, mostly young children remember and “speak” about a previous life that usually came to an unexpected and tragic end. This also represents the backdrop of Anīs Yaḥyà's novel *Jasad kāna lī*, which is set in a Druze context and revolves around a murder case and a little girl that remembers her death and names her murderer. The subject of transmigration is omnipresent in the novel. As this article seeks to show, this turns the novel into a highly relevant source for anthropological research into the Druze understanding of transmigration. The novel not only corroborates respective findings, but also complements them and thus contributes to a fuller understanding of the social and discursive presence of transmigration and “speaking” in Druze contexts. At the same time, anthropological research seems essential for a more profound understanding of this particular thematic dimension of the novel.

*Key words:* Druze; reincarnation; *taqammuṣ*, *nuṭq*, previous-life memories; literary anthropology.

### Introduction

In line with their belief in reincarnation, many Druze<sup>1</sup> claim that when a person dies, his or her soul migrates to the body of a newborn child, starting a new life. According to their explanations, souls normally do not retain memories of their previous lives, but especially the souls of people whose lives ended violently occasionally do. In this case, the children, into whose bodies these souls have moved, can “speak”<sup>2</sup> about previous lives as someone else. Sometimes, these other and previous persons are identified. In this case, an individual

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1 In this article, the prevalent designation of “Druze” is used. However, this religious community prefers *al-Muwahḥidūn*, *ṭāʾifat al-Muwahḥidīn ad-Durūz*, *Banū Maʾrūf*, *Aṭ-Ṭāʾifa al-maʾrūfiyya*, and other designations. For further background on the Druze, see FIRRO 2011; OPPENHEIMER 1980; BENNETT 1999; RIVOAL 2000; RIVOAL 2016; ARMANET 2011.

2 In this article, “speaking” in quotation marks refers to the technical meaning that a child speaks about a previous life.

who was lost to death, in a sense, “returns,” which pushes the abstract idea that souls migrate to the level of concrete human beings and their families.

This article<sup>3</sup> addresses Druze ideas about transmigration and the subject of such “returns” through focusing on Anīs Yaḥyā’s novel *Jasad kāna lī*, published by Dār al-Fārābī in 2002. Set during the time of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990), the novel revolves around the death of Najlā’, a young Druze woman from Lebanon, who allegedly drowned in the sea off the coast of the United Arab Emirates. Najlā’’s family does not believe that her death was an accident and suspects that her husband and brother-in-law murdered her. They take the case to court, but due to insufficient evidence, the case is closed. However, the suspicion that Najlā’’s brother-in-law killed her finally proves to be true when Šāliḥa, a Druze girl from Michigan in the United States, starts to “speak” about her previous life, names her murderer, and describes how he drowned her.<sup>4</sup> Seven years after Najlā’’s death, Šāliḥa’s father visits Najlā’’s parents in Lebanon accompanied by an American psychiatrist who has for many years been conducting research on reincarnation (see YAḤYĀ 2002: 184) and who wants to find out whether Najlā’’s parents can confirm the details of what Šāliḥa has told him. After Šāliḥa’s father has told the story of his daughter “from the very beginning” (see YAḤYĀ 2002: 186 ff.), and revealed the statements she made regarding her death, people who know details about the homicide finally come out with the truth, testify in court, and the brother-in-law is convicted of murder. The novel is narrated from the perspective of Rājī Abū ‘Alī, a Druze lawyer who becomes caught up in the case and represents the parents of the victim before court. Its themes include coping with violent death; human efforts to achieve justice; fears of not doing enough in that respect; bonds between the living and the dead; fears of being drawn into the case; familial ties and duties. Not least, it is novel about a “return” through “speaking” and the lasting presence of unpunished violence.

If this article focuses upon a literary text, it does so based on the fundamental assumption of literary anthropology that “social science scholars can profit profoundly by reading, thinking, writing about, and teaching literary works” (STOLLER 2015: 144).<sup>5</sup> Literary texts indeed “provide a rich source of insight into society” and often contain “ethnographic specificities,” and engaging with literature often provides “philosophical insights about the human condition that are, for the most part, inadequately expressed in the discourses of the social sciences” (STOLLER 2015: 144).<sup>6</sup>

Anīs Yaḥyā’s novel *Jasad kāna lī* contains all sorts of ethnographic information about the Druze communities in Lebanon,<sup>7</sup> but is an interesting source for anthropology most

3 This article has been written during the course of the research project P28736 funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) and based at the Phonogrammarchiv of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW) in Vienna. Based on a range of different sources including field research in Lebanon, Israel, and among Syrian Druze refugees in Austria as well, this project explores how transmigration surfaces in Druze discourse and in the Druze communities.

4 The novel links Najlā’ with Šāliḥa at a relatively late point (see YAḤYĀ 2002: 177).

5 For the topic of literary anthropology, see also COHEN 2013, CRAITH and FOURNIER 2016.

6 See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu’s careful readings of Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, and Virginia Woolf, or Angelika FRÜHWIRTH’s (2016) study about the prose writing of Iranian women writers in exile.

7 The novel addresses topics such as mixed marriages (*zījāt mukhtalaṭa*) between Druze and Christians in Mount Lebanon; it explains how Druze address their husbands or wives; it mentions important migration destinations of the Lebanese such as Canada or Australia; it claims that in 1982 when the Israeli

notably with regard to the complex presence of transmigration in a Druze context, which it mirrors, and to a fuller understanding of which it contributes precisely in its capacity as a novel.

In the Druze context, the presence transmigration is complex for a variety of reasons:

First, transmigration and previous-life memories do not only occur in the more narrowly Druze sense and in the form of recounts of characteristically Druze cases of “speaking.” If one talks to Druze, it is not uncommon that they draw on widely disparate sources that somehow seem to relate to the idea of previous lives.<sup>8</sup> Druze publications explicitly refer to “worldwide evidence for reincarnation” (see PLAYFAIR 2006),<sup>9</sup> and people occasionally also claim that previous-life memories can be retrieved through hypnosis (see e.g. Ṭalīf 2001: 91–104).

Mirroring this variegated discursive presence of transmigration, the novel, on the one hand, includes cases of “speaking.” Apart from the case linking Najlā’ and Ṣāliḥa, the text addresses the case of the narrator’s sister Nahlā who remembers her previous life as a woman named Widād (see YAHYĀ 2002: 30–31). In the form of the case of Najm as-Sirḥāl, a figure who takes revenge on the person who murdered him in his previous life, when he was Aḥmad al-Bārūdī (see YAHYĀ 2002: 99–100), and who blames his family for not having avenged him, the novel furthermore mentions an example of what Isabelle Rivoal has termed the “more legendary” cases of transmigration (see RIVOAL 2000: 382–383) whose chief purpose is communicating a moral message, but in which no one is emotionally involved.<sup>10</sup>

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armed forces and Christian militias advanced into Mount Lebanon, many Druze all of a sudden started to “become religious” and documents respective local language usage (“*ihṭadat*”) (YAHYĀ 2002: 140); it suggests that some perceived this military advancement to indicate the “end of time” and that some Druze shaykhs abused the foreign military presence to push people on a religious path (see YAHYĀ 2002: 141).

- 8 For an explanation that refers to the terminology of the natural sciences, see e.g. NIGST 2017: 75, fn. 41. The heterogeneous material and ideas on reincarnation, on which Druze can draw in abstract and more individual speculations about the subject, is extremely voluminous. For example, a young Druze refugee Syria now living in Vienna mentioned the concept of “ethereal body;” for this concept, see also al-BĀSHĀ 2009: 244. It is furthermore tempting to think that the ideas of Ron Hubbard, founder of Scientology, are attractive to some Druze because he refers to reincarnation. Thus, Wikipedia s.v. *Scientology* states: “Some practitioners of Dianetics reported experiences which they believed had occurred in past lives, or previous incarnations. In early 1951, reincarnation became a subject of intense debate within the Dianetics community. Hubbard took the reports of past life events seriously and introduced the concept of thetan, an immortal being analogous to the soul.” Significantly, Scientology has uploaded a video on YouTube with Israeli Druze shaykh Ḥusayn Abū r-Rukun praising Ron Hubbard. The video is accessible at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBZyMB-khDU&index=26&list=PL90m3yUGK-MIFVWGL5LNZquKH7-0p531O>> (accessed 15 January 2019).
- 9 See also ṬALĪF 2001; LATĪF 2014; al-BĀSHĀ 2009. Druze are for the most part well aware of the research of Ian Stevenson and Erlendur Haraldsson. See e.g. STEVENSON 2001; STEVENSON and HARALDSSON 2003; HARALDSSON and ABU IZZEDIN 2002.
- 10 The novel is remarkably accurate in its implicit observation that no one speaks about individuals close to them using their last names. With regard to the cases in the novel in which people are emotionally involved, only the forenames are used (Najlā’, Widād, Ṣāliḥa, Nahlā). By contrast, referring to the legendary case of Najm as-Sirḥāl, the last names are used (Najm *as-Sirḥāl*; Aḥmad *al-Bārūdī*).

On the other hand, it includes previous-life memories that do *not* operate within the frame of “speaking” in the Druze sense. It does so in connection with Kamāl Jumblāt (see YAḤYÀ 2002: 36–37): “I know thirteen of my previous life-circuits. However, I have closed them as we close a book. We have to move forward” (YAḤYÀ 2002: 37).<sup>11</sup> Previous-life memories that do not surface within the routine set-up of a Druze case of “speaking”<sup>12</sup> furthermore surface in connection with a non-Druze character called Marta (see YAḤYÀ 2002: 66–68).<sup>13</sup>

Second, the subject of transmigration is complex insofar as it is primarily a *discursive reality*, which corresponds to specific ideas of how the world works and what happens to the soul if someone dies (for details see below). But transmigration also relates to *particular* situations of loss. In the latter, transmigration through “speaking” occasionally turns into full *sociological reality* if a family acknowledges that a concrete “speaking” individual is their passed-away relative in new bodily form, which offers the concrete social space in which a person lost to death may “return.” This “return” may be full of warmth, but it still holds ready sociological and emotional difficulties. One only needs to imagine the situation, in which a father, son, or uncle (etc.), who belongs to a particular family, passes way unexpectedly and “returns” in the shape of a “speaking” young boy who belongs to another family.

However, transmigration does not only relate to particular situations of loss in the sense that a lost individual “returns” through “speaking,” or that such a “return” is hoped for; the “return” may also correspond to the haunting presence of unpunished past violence, for example, if a murder victim “returns.”

Insofar as “speaking” and “returns” constitute a normal occurrence in the Druze world of transmigration, they form part of the discursive reality of transmigration. People talk about all of this; they have ideas about when it is likely to happen, how it normally unfolds, or how it feels; they tell (legendary) stories about “returns;” reflect on their purpose, and so forth. Logically, this discursive reality is important because it allows people not only to interpret and judge particular phenomena in the world,<sup>14</sup> but also to anticipate what is likely

11 The writings of Kamal Jumblat indeed suggest a fervent interest in “spiritual” topics. See e.g. his autobiographical text *Waṣīyyatī* (JUMBLĀT 1978: 51–55).

12 The concrete cases of such “speaking” unfold in a fairly typical way; see e.g. DWAIRY 2006; FRENCH 2016; NIGST 2017; NIGST 2019; FARTACEK 2017.

13 Marta claims to be an example of xenoglossy and to know Russian and English without having studied them (YAḤYÀ 2002: 66–67), which is corroborated by her memories of having been a Soviet spy living in London (for details, see YAḤYÀ 2002: 67). It is interesting to note that the narrator at one point tells Marta with regard to her previous-life memories that she is “living a beautiful illusion” (YAḤYÀ 2002: 68), to which she protests vigorously: “No one does have a right to say that I am only imagining this.” This seems to corroborate that previous-life memories that do not rest on accepted “proof” and operate without even the existence of a family that could recognize the individual and his or her memories, feel completely unauthentic from a Druze perspective, although they might at times be used to underline that transmigration is real.

14 For example, Ṣāliḥa is an extremely upset newborn. At some point, drawing upon the discursive reality of transmigration, the grandparents insist that she must have lost something precious in her previous life, and that her death must have been painful and harrowing (see YAḤYÀ 2002: 187). The discursive reality of “speaking” also supplies Ṣāliḥa’s relatives with different interpretations for the girl’s first utterances. For example, the grandmother thinks that the first word pronounced by the girl must be the

to happen in particular situations; at the same time, the experiences made when transmigration becomes a sociological reality feed into the discursive reality of “speaking” and not least surface in the form of the anticipation of “speaking” as a difficult experience (see NIGST 2019).

As this article suggests, beyond containing many passages that are relevant and informative with regard to transmigration and “speaking,” *Jasad kāna lī* is especially valuable with regard to anthropology and constitutes a complement to generalizing statements about transmigration *in its capacity as a novel*. Its characters necessarily being *particular* human beings and its plot necessarily unfolding in time, it is precisely as a novel that it makes the readers witness how *particular* characters suffer a loss that is *their own*; how “speaking” erupts into the lives of *particular* individuals and produces effects for *them*; how all of a sudden things known from the “stories” about “speaking” might turn into something that concerns and preoccupies *them*; how traumatic and violent events overshadow and linger on in *their* lives; how they are caught in the flow of events. Not least, in contrast to research focused more narrowly on cases of “speaking,” to the characters in a novel, cases of “speaking” are not always in the foreground and are present in their lives in different ways.

### The discursive reality of transmigration

As a discursive reality, transmigration presupposes the quasi-theoretical assertions (BOUVERESSE 2007: 233) which the Druze make regarding the subject.<sup>15</sup> At the heart of the matter is their assertion that each individual human soul (*rūh*, pl. *arwāh*) completes successive sojourns or “life-circuits” (*ajyāl*, sg. *jāl*)<sup>16</sup> in this world, and in each life-circuit it puts on a different body like a “shirt” (*qamīṣ*, pl. *aqmīṣa*).<sup>17</sup> From this perspective, the individual human body is a replaceable envelope of little importance. Death does not really exist because the soul always lives on in a different bodily form (see also RIVOAL 2000: 352).

Nevertheless, in the Druze understanding, the soul needs a body (see LATĪF 2014: 79–80)<sup>18</sup> to think and act and therefore moves to a new body immediately after someone’s death (see also RIVOAL 2000: 17). As a result, it is always inside a body, which serves as a

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name of someone of importance to her in her previous life. The grandfather suggests that the word belongs to a different language, which in turn reflects his conviction that there are Druze living everywhere in the world (see YAḤYĀ 2002: 188).

15 This is not to say that all Druze necessarily believe in transmigration. As Bennett states, they “have a range of stances on reincarnation: dismissal, skepticism, reluctant belief, and acceptance” (BENNETT 2006: 95). Even representatives of the Druze religious establishment emphasize that people do not cease to be Druze just because they do not believe in transmigration (“*man lā ya‘taqīd bi-t-taqammūṣ lā yakhruj min al-milla*”). See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uN4levEgl0Y>> (accessed 08 January 2019); min 08:00 ff.

16 Alternatively, the term *dawr* (pl. *adwār*) occurs.

17 The Arabic term for “transmigration” (*taqammūṣ*) is derived from the same root as “shirt” (*qamīṣ*). More specifically, *taqammūṣ* is the verbal noun of the verb *taqammaṣa*, which literally means “to put on a shirt.”

18 See also SEYBOLD 1902: 30: “iḥtiyāj an-nafs ilā l-jism,” “lā tastaghni ‘anhu ṭarfāt ‘ayn.”

“veil” (*ḥijāb*)<sup>19</sup> through which it “manifests” itself, and by which it is “hidden” at the same time.<sup>20</sup> Referring to this constant habitation of souls within bodies, Druze often explain that “not one breath gets lost” and that the dying breath of the individual from which the soul departs corresponds to the first breath of the newborn into which it moves.<sup>21</sup> In this regard, every death is only the flipside of a birth (see ARMANET 2011: 150). A character in the novel *Jasad kāna lī* explicitly refers to these assertions: “According to our learned men, not one breath escapes the soul; one has to do with death and birth at the same time” (YAḤYĀ 2002: 203).<sup>22</sup> An identical soul thus manifests as different human beings in its successive life-circuits.<sup>23</sup>

An important part of the Druze discourse on transmigration does not really focus on these human beings, but on the migration of anonymous souls and its moral purpose. In essence, this part of Druze discourse imagines a non-human, or divine, perspective, from which the full number of the successive life-circuits can be overlooked and thus organized in a reasonable way. Druze often claim that, instead of randomly succeeding each other,<sup>24</sup> God uses the successive life-circuits for a full realization of divine justice (*al-‘adāla al-ilāhiyya*), in the sense that divine justice materializes as the sum total of these life-circuits. For example, there are poor and rich people, but if *every* soul lives through wealth and poverty during the course of its successive life-circuits, the perception of inequality stems from the limited human perspective. Moreover, and more importantly, the notion occurs that through successive exposure to all possible states (see RIVOAL 2000: 33), every soul has a chance to prove itself and relate to God from all life conditions, and final judgement is thus with ample evidence. Additionally, Druze occasionally point out that present-life suffering or adverse conditions are the retaliation for previous-life wrongdoing. If one pushes this notion further, the perception of a gigantic machinery of causalities arises where everything comes and disappears just at the appropriate moment and in the appropriate way.

In any case, the perception that divine justice works across the boundaries of individual life-circuits forms part of the general perception that things are just the way they have to be. Everything makes sense.

This perspective has a certain immunizing, or consoling, effect when it comes to reflecting upon human suffering because, ultimately, everything corresponds to the working of divine wisdom and a good and just will,<sup>25</sup> to which people ideally submit. It seems that

19 For the notion that the body is a “veil” for the soul, see SEYBOLD 1902: 30.

20 See SEYBOLD 1902: 30–31; KASTRINOU 2016: 65–67.

21 See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fr5T4TTBr6w>> (accessed 07/10/2017); see also ARMANET 2011: 150.

22 “*Mā birūh ‘alēhā nafas wāhed, mōt u-wilāde fī waqt wāhed.*” For problems addressed in the context of this quote, see also SEYBOLD 1902: 31.

23 NIGST 2017: 60–61; NIGST 2019.

24 Rivoal documents a narrative in which a woman finds her husband’s idea that transmigration is a random “change of shirts” without any further sense upsetting (see RIVOAL 2000: 384).

25 It has often been emphasised that Druze ascetic practice is close to Sufism; see, e.g., RIVOAL 2016: 165. Significantly, the novel *Jasad kāna lī* explicitly mentions [Shaqīq] al-Balkhī (d. 810 AD) in this context (see YAḤYĀ 2002: 18–19). The effort of lovingly embracing God’s decisions forms part of the Islamic concept of *tawakkul*. For a careful study of the latter term, see REINERT 1968.

such a rather detached stance has some normative force. In the novel *Jasad kāna lī*, the characters commend it with regard to particular situations of loss, and implicitly or explicitly bring up terms such as *tawakkul*<sup>26</sup> or *taslīm*,<sup>27</sup> which embody it. For example, the narrator's sister gives him a copy of the Druze epistle *Ar-Riḍā wa-t-taslīm* after the death of their father (see YAḤYÀ 2002: 134). In similar fashion, the narrator expresses his admiration for several sayings that condense this stance (see YAḤYÀ 2002: 29).<sup>28</sup>

Other sizeable parts of the Druze discourse on transmigration engage a more or less limited human perspective. To the latter, the human beings which a soul successively is, as well as their places in the social world, clearly matter, whereby the focus can either be on their *social* identity or their *personal* identity. In fact, from an analytical perspective, human beings, on the one hand, are members in different groups, in which they are equivalent and replaceable with regard to the specific aspect that constitutes the group (e.g. "Druze"). On the other hand, they have names and occupy social places that are uniquely theirs. In this regard, they are singular and irreplaceable (see NIGST 2017: 60–61).<sup>29</sup>

According to the Druze, human beings normally only know *that* they were, and respectively will be, others in the other life-circuits, but they do not know *who* (see NIGST 2017: 61; NIGST 2019). As Druze shaykh Bahjat Ghayth states in an interview, "I decidedly know through my belief that I existed [before this current life]."<sup>30</sup>

This specific lack of knowledge is mirrored in the Druze perception that their newborn children are "strangers" and "adults" that were with others before (see ARMANET 2011: 151).

However, Druze often temper it with claims about permanent forms of social identity. This most notably surfaces in the pervasive claim that Druze males will always be reborn as Druze males, and Druze females as Druze females, so that transmigration never transgresses the natural boundary of sex and the social boundary of confessional belonging (see RIVOAL 2000: 33).<sup>31</sup> That is, even if the personal identity in the other life-circuits remains unknown, specific forms of social identity are claimed to be stable. In *Jasad kāna lī*, this claim is held by the parents of Šāliḥa's father, who explain that Druze are always reborn in a Druze family ("*ad-Darzī mā byakhlaq illā 'and la-Drūz'*"). Evidently, this idea conveys a strong sense of ethnic unity (see also NIGST 2019).<sup>32</sup> Considering that the successive life-circuits take place in different (Druze) families, transmigration furthermore cuts across the boundaries of the familial groups, so that Druze "are born in each other's houses" (OPPEN-

26 That is, "putting absolute trust in God."

27 That is, "submitting to God."

28 "*Mā kāna yumkin an yaḥduth illā mā ḥadath;*" "*lā shay' yu'akhhir mā yanbaghī an yakūn.*"

29 In *Jasad kāna lī*, these singular, and normally entirely separate, personal identities are expressed, for instance, when a character states that Najlā', the young woman who drowned in the United Arab Emirates, "won't be the one we knew, the spouse of Ziyād and the mother of Rīm, although the chance is there that she will remember her previous life" (YAḤYÀ 2002: 124).

30 See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tEy3mjXD8s>> (accessed 17 May 2018), min 01:10 ff. My emphasis.

31 For this topic, see also NIGST 2017: 63–65. In the Druze understanding, their own collective consists of the same pool of souls that joined the Druze at the time of their emergence in the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD.

32 For more detailed ideas regarding the movement of the souls within the Druze collective, see YAḤYÀ 2002: 206–207.

HEIMER 1980), which relativizes the importance of familial belonging (at least at this level of discourse). The notion that Druze souls forever migrate within the Druze collective not only mitigates the anxiety of not knowing who (some)one was and will be, but also transforms that collective into an emotional and solidary space. Not least in situations of loss, the thought that one's own lost relative again will be a part of the world as a Druze is comforting.

This lack of knowledge regarding a previous-life personal identity may come to an end if someone remembers and “speaks” about his or her previous life in another family and concrete episodes of that other life. Evidently, in such situations of “speaking” (*nutq*), the focus shifts from “moving on” within the same sex and confessional group to the “coming back” of a concrete previous life and a concrete person.

### “Speaking” as a sociological reality

According to the Druze, “speaking” represents a real chance that the previous-life personal identity of the “speaking” individual becomes known (see NIGST 2019). It develops into such a full sociological reality when it is recognized that the “speaking” individual and a passed-away human being are the successive manifestations of the same soul. Obviously, it is difficult to claim that a *concrete* individual has replaced another *concrete* individual as the manifestation of a particular soul. Language is key to establishing this relation, and it is necessary that relatives of the passed-away individual open the place their relative occupied to the “speaking” individual. Thus, there can be no sociologically real cases of transmigration without discursive processes during the course of which the claim of the “speaking” individual that he or she “is” a concrete other person is substantiated through “proof” (see FRENCH 2016: 90–91; NIGST 2017: 68–69).

In case of such recognition, what from the perspective of the soul is a relation between “past” and “present,” is transformed sociologically speaking into *a relation between two different unique places in Druze social space*. As has been said, such cases of a “return” often acquire a significance beyond the particular individuals or families that are involved, becoming stories (*qişaş*; sg. *qişşa*) that often serve as guidelines in particular social or moral situations, project visions of an ideal society, or inculcate perceptions and criteria of honourable or shameful behaviour (see RIVOAL 2000: 382–384). Not only does moral misbehaviour resurface through “speaking,” as we will see below, but also the situation that a soul, which was in family A in one life-circuit, and is known to be in family B in the next life-circuit may, for example, render absurd conflicts between descent groups (or at least relativizes or confronts them with an alternative divine logic). What is the meaning of “us” and “them,” if the same soul which is now “one of “us” was previously one of “them”?<sup>33</sup>

However, insofar as they are a sociological reality for particular people and groups, cases of “speaking” are a source of both unique possibilities and difficulties. On the one hand, they offer the social space that allows a person lost to death to “return” in different bodily form, bring together “members of families who otherwise would never have cause to know

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33 See NIGST 2019.



each other” (BENNETT 2006: 94–95), and create emotional bonds with persons one might otherwise not have known.<sup>34</sup> This is not only reflected in characteristic statements people make, such as, “I died from cancer in my previous life,”<sup>35</sup> but (often) also in the usage of kin terms: “Kin terms are used to refer to individuals who claim to be reincarnated kin” (BENNETT 2006: 103). On the other hand, they are full of difficulties and inconsistencies. Druze often anticipate these difficulties that bestow an overall “bittersweet” character on the phenomenon of “speaking” (BENNETT 1999: 108) and form an important part of the discursive reality of transmigration. The social and emotional stakes implicated in sociologically real cases are not difficult to imagine.

### The possibility of “repairing” loss

“Speaking” seems to cater to more or less traumatic forms of loss that do not correspond to “natural” death at an old age (see RIVOAL 2000: 350–355).<sup>36</sup> It usually involve accidents, disease leading to death at an early age, lethal injury, and murder (see e.g. BENNETT 2006; STEVENSON and HARALDSSON 2003: 286–287; FRENCH 2016: 88; al-BĀSHĀ 2009: 243). Death came “out of the blue” and way too soon. As Druze explain, having been ripped out of its previous life-circuit unexpectedly, violently, and involuntarily, the soul still clings to the lost life and wants it back (see also NIGST 2019). The “return” of a soul in different bodily form, in a sense, allows easing that pain and “repairing” the havoc wreaked by sudden death.

### The case of Nahlā / Widād

In *Jasad kāna lī*, the case of Nahlā, the narrator’s sister, exemplifies such a “return” and the relationship-forming force of recognized “speaking.” Nahlā remembers a previous life in which she was Widād. It is of particular interest for anthropology how this “soul-based” relationship is introduced in the novel. Within the plot of the novel, the reader learns about it when Shaykh Sulaymān, an old religious man in his eighties, and Nahlā’s brother, narrator Rājī Abū ‘Alī, meet while paying their condolences to the parents of Najlā’. During the

<sup>34</sup> This social function of “speaking” of establishing relationships has been highlighted in the scholarly literature (see BENNETT 2006).

<sup>35</sup> Many statements by Druze interview partners say just that: “This is me in my previous life;” “I was called XY;” “I saw myself hanging in the safety belt;” “This man is surely Marwan” (BENNETT 2006: 92). Although such statements probably are a shortcut for the more complex statement that “person X is the current manifestation of the same soul that previously manifested as person Y” and that the same soul is involved, it is conspicuous how often people say that “X = Y.” At least partially, this seems to correspond to how people feel.

<sup>36</sup> See also NIGST 2019. In an interesting passage (see YAḤYĀ 2002: 13), the narrator implicitly addresses the radical difference between expected “natural” death at an old age and unexpected death. The passage states that the soul, slowly coming to realize that it inhabits an old body more and more limited in its radius of action and fragile, is free to escape through the “cracks” of that old body. That is, the wrinkles that ridge an old body are all possibilities through which the soul can leave.

course of their conversation, it turns out that Rājī Abū ‘Alī owns a house in a mountain village called Kfar Barake. This arouses the interest of shaykh Sulaymān, who mentions that he had a friend from the Abū ‘Alī family in Kfar Barake named shaykh Jahjāh. When shaykh Sulaymān finds out that this shaykh Jahjāh is Rājī Abū ‘Alī’s father, he gets up, takes the head of the narrator between his hands and kisses him several times on the forehead (see YAḤYĀ 2002: 23). He proceeds to sit next to Rājī Abū ‘Alī, placing his hand on the younger man’s knee and asking after his relatives. When he finds out that Ṭa‘ān, Rājī Abū ‘Alī’s brother, was killed in the war, he cries (see YAḤYĀ 2002: 24). It is in this context that the reader discovers that there is a special relationship between the two families which is based on a case of “speaking.”

With his hand still on the narrator’s knee, Sulaymān relates how he got to know shaykh Jahjāh via Widād, the wife of his brother Yūnus, an oil vendor. Widād died at a young age, leaving behind four or five children. Six or seven years after her death, Yūnus walks behind his donkey in Kfar Barake, when all of a sudden he hears the voice of a little girl calling his name and asking him whether he did not recognise her: “Don’t you know me, I’m Widād!” This girl was shaykh Jahjāh’s daughter Nahlā, the sister of the narrator. Jahjāh accepts Yūnus’ invitation to his home, and everyone understands that this little girl, Nahlā, is the present manifestation of Widād’s soul (*rūḥ*). Shortly after that, shaykh Jahjāh and his family visit Yūnus in his village. Nahlā meets her (previous-life) children and relatives.

The novel does not make explicit the process of “proof” delivery without which there can be no sociologically real and recognized case of “speaking” (see DWAIRY 2006; FRENCH 2016; NIGST 2017). But, based on anthropological literature, it is easy to imagine that the girl, for example, could identify her previous-life relatives in front of assembled family (see DWAIRY 2006, NIGST 2017). In a specific sense, the “return” of Widād in the form of Nahlā “repairs” the premature loss of a mother of five. The previous-life family does not only open the unique place held by their lost member, Widād, to Nahlā, but they also transfer the emotional bonds that they maintained, and continue to maintain, with Widād, onto Nahlā. Since Widād has become Nahlā, the feelings for Widād, in a sense, have become the feelings for Nahlā.<sup>37</sup> The emotional relationship that links Nahlā with her previous-life children, who “visit and love her” (“*bizūrūhā w-biḥibbūhā*”), is emphasized (YAḤYĀ 2002: 30). Focusing on the perspective of a family that has found a lost member, the novel thus highlights the positive and joyful dimensions of a sociologically real “return,” although individual family members may feel differently.

As the narrator recalls, the acknowledgement that a previous-life adult woman is “speaking” through his sister Nahlā, led to a different treatment (“*mu‘āmala mumayyiza*”) of her during her childhood insofar as her father insisted that she is not a child, but an adult in the body of a child (“*Nahlā masha ṭafle!*”) (see YAḤYĀ 2002: 31).<sup>38</sup>

37 Reincarnated individuals at times may feel that this transfer is too much. For example, a Lebanese interview partner told us in 2016 that she had come to dislike seeing her previous-life mother because the latter hugged our interview partner so much and still cried so much about her lost daughter whose reincarnation our interview partner was (see NIGST 2019).

38 One of our interviewees stated that precisely the anticipation of the awkward consequence of having a “child that is not a child at the same time” made some people anxious (see NIGST 2019). Several people mentioned to us that children occasionally demand to be treated with more respect by their mothers.

It is particularly worthwhile emphasizing how much the text enregisters shaykh Sulaymān's emotions and gestures towards the narrator (kissing; hand on the other's knee; crying). These emotions and gestures are even more significant considering that the novel elsewhere depicts shaykh Sulaymān as an utterly self-controlled person (“*huwa sayyid nafsihī bi-mtiyāz*”) (YAḤYĀ 2002: 13). This shaykh, about whose old body the narrator muses elsewhere in the novel, is furthermore described as arising in a markedly energetic and “non-old-age”-way (“*waqaf bi-himmat ash-shabāb*”) (YAḤYĀ 2002: 23) when he finds out who the narrator is. These passages are so relevant for anthropological research because they show how sociologically real cases that in many contexts are nothing but a discursive reality (“story”), all of a sudden may crop up as a sociological reality that concerns particular people and produces certain effects on them, and *only* on them. As the novel points out, the case of the narrator's sister circulates in the Druze communities as a “story” (see YAḤYĀ 2002: 30). But the moment shaykh Sulaymān finds out that the narrator and he belong to two families linked through the “speaking” of the narrator's sister Nahlā, this sociological reality surfaces in a fundamentally altered and much more intimate bodily behaviour on the part of that old man towards the narrator.<sup>39</sup> This bodily behaviour is a reminder that not everyone can be a part of the sociological and emotional reality of the “return” of Widād in the form of Nahlā. Those who are not may hear the story of that “return,” but the “return” does not affect them and produces no consequences for them, because *they* did not lose someone. To put it differently, even if a particular instance of “speaking” has been met with recognition on the part of the previous-life family, the respective sociological reality cannot be *felt* by everyone as a particular sociological reality concerning them. The literary text makes the reader *feel* this impossibility through showing the feelings of those who *are* emotionally affected by a particular reality.

### The difficulty of the “return”

Despite fulfilling the positive function of bringing back someone lost to death, “speaking” potentially is difficult, and Druze discourse highlights these difficulties. In one regard, it again considers them from the perspective of the soul, highlighting the conflict between the past and the present life-circuits of a soul, the resulting inconsistencies, the rejection of the present family, the feeling of being torn (etc.), and the unpleasant character of all this (see NIGST 2019).<sup>40</sup> In *Jasad kāna lī*, Nahlā openly states that the presence of the past for the

<sup>39</sup> Several of our interviewees showed goose bumps on their arms as proof of how emotionally affected they were by a case of “speaking” concerning specifically *them*, often years after “speaking” had first set in.

<sup>40</sup> Druze often mention that “speaking” children complain about being misplaced (see NIGST 2017: 66–67; NIGST 2019; BENNETT 1999: 88) and point to odd statements made by these “speaking” children that most strikingly reveal this misplacement such as demands to see their husbands, wives, or children (see STEVENSON and HARALDSSON 2003: 286; FRENCH 2016: 90; NIGST 2019) or rejections of their personal identity. In *Jasad kāna lī*, for example, Šāliḥa tells her parents that they are not her parents (see YAḤYĀ 2002: 188). As Druze furthermore explain, being “adults in the bodies of children,” “speaking” children often make the impression of being older than they actually are (see NIGST 2019). This is expressed in *Jasad kāna lī*, where it is stated with regard to Šāliḥa that “[t]he things she said were not coming from a child at all. It was as if she was reading from a book” (YAḤYĀ 2002: 191).

most part is unwanted (“*ghāliban mā yakūn huḍūr al-māḍī ghayr wuddī*”), and expresses her hope that the little girl Ṣāliḥa does not suffer too much (“*‘asā allā takūn muta’allimā*”) (YAḤYĀ 2002: 203). Talking about how it felt to remember a previous life, she says that

[...] My memory was like a sponge that had been born soaked, and which could not absorb any more liquid. Anything alive in my memory was so by virtue of my previous life. I was obstinately refusing that even the slightest part of all of this be erased because all of it was close and alive... In short, I was refusing that anything be added to what I already knew. This was very painful, but, slowly, life could drive away what was sitting on my memory like on a throne so that it could slowly accommodate the new with the least amount of struggle and rejection possible. (YAḤYĀ 2002: 204–205).

This reflects the oft-heard Druze claim that the soul adapts to its new life in a new body only little by little (see NIGST 2017: 76–77). Against this backdrop, it makes sense that Druze often emphasize that it is desirable for people to forget previous-life memories (see NIGST 2019; see also YAḤYĀ 2002: 144). But within Druze discourse, it is also believed that part of the difficulties of remembrance stem from the traumatic nature of the death in question. In the novel *Jasad kāna lī*, this is illustrated by Ṣāliḥa’s memories. According to her father, during the course of her “speaking,” gruesome details about how her brother-in-law murdered her came up, which the girl cannot forget (see YAḤYĀ 2002: 200).<sup>41</sup>

However, the difficulties potentially brought about by recognized “speaking” reach further. As has been said, if the previous-life family open the singular place that was occupied by their deceased relative to the “speaking” individual and recognize that his soul previously manifested as their relative whose life he remembers, they necessarily grant that recognition to someone who is the living relative of others. The relationship between a soul’s “past” and “present” life thus is transformed into a relationship between the familial groups to which the two singular human beings, which correspond to the two successive manifestations of this particular soul, belong. The Druze idea that this is how the world works may make this situation acceptable and people may desire it for different reasons, but it is conspicuous how often difficulties are anticipated. There is not only the problem that the proximity forced on families may be unpleasant at times or a burden (“like any other familial relationship,” see BENNETT 1999: 92), but there is also the problem that a living human being with a unique place is pulled towards additional unique place (see NIGST 2019).<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> The novel explicitly refers to the Druze perception that “speaking” individuals often remember the moment of death (see YAḤYĀ 2002: 190).

<sup>42</sup> Druze publications explicitly attest to a perception of difficulties in this context although they sometimes simply explain the problem away (see e.g. al-BĀSHĀ 2009: 239–243). In *Jasad kāna lī*, this is also mirrored in a remark that the first-person narrator makes with regard to his sister: “I have heard my sister Nahlā talk about her previous life many times. Every time, the same feeling befalls me. I feel that she is not my sister but like all other women on this earth with whom I am not linked through bonds of kinship. This feeling of mine scares me. But then again, without the slightest effort, I cross over to the opposite feeling. Nahlā is my sister and all the women on this earth are my sisters” (YAḤYĀ 2002: 202). Recognition that Nahlā “is” Widād pulls her away from the present-life familial belonging, towards a place in which she is not the narrator’s sister; but at the same time, by virtue of the singular place she currently occupies, the narrator knows (feels) Nahlā to be his sister.

Furthermore, in contradistinction to the abstract idea that the body is replaceable, it would seem that people who lost a relative may sometimes find it difficult to reconcile their inner representation of the person lost to death with the new bodily presence. Finding out how individuals come to terms with the different bodily presence of a loved relative requires careful research about personal grieving in a Druze context.<sup>43</sup>

It seems that there is a wide range of possibilities of how people cope with these problems and how seriously they take them. An interview partner in Lebanon told us that the situation brought about by “returns” was not that dramatic (see NIGST 2017: 77). But the more individuals and families talk about “speaking” as a sociological reality concerning them, the more the potential difficulties associated with “speaking” seem to surface.

### Different perspectives on the same “return”

“Speaking” and the “return” are experienced differently and have different implications for the previous-life and the current-life familial groups. In fact, the notion of a “return” is equivocal. From the perspective of the previous-life family and people who related to the previous-life individual, it is tantamount to someone “coming to” them; from the perspective of the present-life family, the same “return” is tantamount to someone “leaving” them or moving “away” from them. “Speaking” thus reverses the direction of transmigration / death. The affected families can react in different ways to “speaking”, and act accordingly.<sup>44</sup> In *Jasad kāna lī*, for example, Nahlā’s father accepted the approaches of her previous-life husband’s family insofar as he went to their house, thus allowing the process of recognition to be initiated (see YAHYÀ 2002: 30). By contrast, it seems that the family of Šāliḥa, the little girl from Michigan, does not want the girl to meet her previous-life family.

For the previous-life family, the choice is between “opening up” or “letting in” (maybe to the extent of actively seeking out the families of “speaking” children) versus “turning away.” For the present-life family, the choice is between “letting go” versus “keeping in,” which also may include “warding off” people who want to reach out to oneself. Efforts on the part of the present-life family of keeping the child firmly within the boundaries of his or her current life-circuit mostly consist in “silencing” (*sakkata*) the “speaking” child, and “deafening” (*tarrasha*) him or her vis-à-vis the memories of a previous life. While this may be the choice of some, others are more willing to accept the needs of the soul and let the child “return” to an additional familial context, from which it may also disappear again (see NIGST 2017: 76–77; NIGST 2019). Not only the different choices themselves, but also the reactions to them reflect the ambivalent and often difficult

43 For the subject of inner representations of individuals lost to death, see KLASS, SILVERMAN, and NICKMAN 1996. Maybe the time lag caused by the fact that children “speak” only after a few years makes it easier to accept another physical presence.

44 This outlook on “speaking” implies that any attempt of (ab-)using the “speaking” of a child to force one’s way into a soul-based relationship with another family falls outside the category of “speaking.” In regard to local terminology, this is mirrored in the occurrence of the verb *nattāqa* “to make to speak,” which as the cynical and voluntary fabrication of “speaking” is pitted against involuntary and true “speaking.”

nature of “speaking.” Some perhaps insinuate that the current-life parents are responsible for keeping their child within the confinements of his or her current life. Others consider parents who attempt to stall the “speaking” of their child selfish or egoistic, because they are not responsive to the needs and pain of a soul ripped out of its former life-circuit and the wish of this soul of a (temporal) “return.” They may express similar thoughts with respect to the previous-life family.

The different choices made in the face of “speaking” are clearly informed by the *anticipation* of these different effects. For example, attempts to “silence” “speaking” children are clearly meant to avert the problematic effects that the phenomenon could bring about.

But different perspectives are also palpable if the “return” *itself* is anticipated, that is, if “speaking” has not yet set in (see also below). “Returns” may be considered positive and desirable. Bennett recalls that people told a girl whose mother had died: “God willing, your mother is reincarnated” (BENNETT 2006: 92). But the knowledge of the “speaking” and “returning” individual may also be abhorred and feared, wherever shameful, disgraceful, or downright criminal behaviour is involved (see also FARTACEK 2017; NIGST 2019). More generally, through “speaking” and the “return,” buried knowledge or perspectives pushed aside potentially must be heard again. Presumably, “speaking” thus should be considered functional with regard to coping with conflicts and injustices that cannot be laid to rest.<sup>45</sup>

### The possibility of remedying injustice

Almost always involving the loss of lives that, under normal circumstances, could have lasted longer, “speaking” has to do with deaths that feel unjust. Although the notion that everything is ultimately just may provide some comfort here, it does not necessarily satisfy the bereaved. By enabling the individual lost to death to “continue with his previous life as if he were still alive,” as a Syrian interview partner put it, the “return” to an extent remedies this injustice. This need for more personal, intimate justice is even more evident in the case of unpunished murder.

The entire plot of *Jasad kāna lī* is predicated upon the victim’s parents’ inability to let go of their daughter’s unpunished murder. When a religious figure asks Najlā’s father to resign to the will of God (“*sallim amrak ilā llāh*”), for, “where should the murderer hide from God?” (YAḤYĀ 2002: 18), the father states that he wants to kill his daughter’s murderer in revenge (*thaʿr*).<sup>46</sup> Indeed, submitting to God’s will in virtuoso and unadulterated acceptance of what has happened, hardly promises to be a successful coping strategy if the death in question was caused by an outrageous injustice such as murder.

<sup>45</sup> In a presentation at the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna on 30 November 2017, Eléonore ARMANET pointed out that “speaking” individuals in this specific regard often are “subversive figures.”

<sup>46</sup> See also the explicit reference of Najlā’s father Fuʿād to ties through “blood” (YAḤYĀ 2002: 146).

### “Returning” murder victims: The narrative about Najm as-Sirḥāl

Druze tell many stories about murder victims who in the form of “speaking” individuals “come after” someone. An example is provided by Laṭīf Ilyās Laṭīf. Recalling his experience as a teacher in the Lebanese village of Mtein, he states:

One spring day of the year 1969, one of my students in the first year of intermediate level named Zuhayr surprised me with the statement: “I have to take blood revenge against you!” I said to him: “And how is that when you have only known me for a few months?” He replied: “Someone from your family killed me in my previous life.” (LAṬĪF 2014: 251)

In many Druze narratives, such “returns” fulfil a *retaliatory* function, insofar as the murder victim metes out punishment and avenges the murder to which s/he has fallen victim, either directly through taking blood revenge, or indirectly, by bringing the murderer to justice.

*Jasad kāna lī* introduces a “returning” murder victim not only in the form of Šālīḥa, but also through the narrative about “Najm as-Sirḥāl.” The central character of the narrative is an Aḥmad al-Bārūdī, one of the young men from Marj al-Qaṣab who are known for their manliness and physical strength. At the age of twenty-three, he has a disagreement with a neighbour concerning his share of the village well. The neighbour is roughly of the age of Aḥmad’s father, and the neighbour’s sons are Aḥmad’s friends. Maybe because Aḥmad feels like a son to him, the neighbour scolds Aḥmad and says some harsh words to him. When Aḥmad talks back and refuses to give in, the neighbour slaps him, and Aḥmad grabs him and throws him to the ground. The incident, which represents a serious violation of the neighbour’s honour, becomes known, and conciliators step in to try to solve the affair, especially to prevent the neighbour’s sons from taking revenge upon Aḥmad. The hostile sides meet, Aḥmad apologizes, and they are made to shake hands in the presence of some villagers. One of the neighbour’s sons, who used to have the best relationship with Aḥmad, refuses to attend the reconciliation session, but his relatives promise that he poses no threat to Aḥmad. Shortly after, this young man confronts Aḥmad, and kills him. The villagers who witnessed the incident unanimously testify that the youth had said, “My honour is more precious than my friendship with you!” Seventeen years pass and people have almost forgotten the murder, when the afore-mentioned Najm as-Sirḥāl passes through Marj al-Qaṣab and states that he is Aḥmad al-Bārūdī (“*akkada annahū ‘naḥs Aḥmad al-Bārūdī’*”). He meets his previous-life family and learns from them how the issue of his murder was solved.<sup>47</sup> Finding that his family had failed to avenge his blood, he angrily leaves Marj al-Qaṣab. A few days later, the inhabitants of numerous villages in the mountains learn that Najm as-Sirḥāl ambushed the man who had murdered him in his previous life and murdered him in revenge (see YAḤYÀ 2002: 99–100). Summing up the moral of the case, the narrator states: “This Najm blamed his family for not having avenged him and for having treated his murderer mildly” (YAḤYÀ 2002: 99).

It is precisely in this context that the narrative is brought up in the novel. In the novel, it is somewhat mystifying why Najlā’s parents want the court to convict her husband Ziyād

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<sup>47</sup> See below.

and her brother-in-law Salīm for her murder, even though they have no evidence of their guilt. When people associated with Ziyād and Salīm try to convince Najlā’'s parents to agree to an out-of-court settlement and accept an offer of blood money, Najlā’'s father Fu’ād emits a crucial sentence: “I don’t want money...I want Najlā’ to know that we didn’t abandon her... they must pay what she paid” (“*mā baddī maṣārī...baddī Najlā ta’ref ənna mā tkhallēna ‘anha...lāzim yədfā’u illi da’əto*”) (YAḤYÀ 2002: 98). The narrator starts to wonder about this sentence: “How does Mr. Fu’ād intend to let his daughter, who died, know that he did not abandon her?” (YAḤYÀ 2002: 98) It is just at this point that he remembers the story of Aḥmad al-Bārūdī/Najm as-Sirḥāl:

I kept thinking about this expression [i.e. “we didn’t abandon her, they must pay what she paid”] even after Mr. Fu’ād had gone to another room. At first, I thought that it was anger alone which was driving Mr. Fu’ād. Then I had to think of an incident known to many Druze, and even a few Christians, in Mount Lebanon. Why would Mr. Fu’ād not know the story of Najm as-Sirḥāl? This Najm blamed his family for not having avenged him and for being mild towards him who killed him. They accepted a sum of money, in addition to that his murderers had to leave for another village. (YAḤYÀ 2002: 98–99)<sup>48</sup>

Thus, “returning” murder victims not only come after their murderers, but maybe also blame their family for having failed to take appropriate revenge.

### The importance of anticipation

Like the passages about the narrator and shakyh Sulaymān, which highlight the fact of *forming part* of a particular sociological reality, of which others cannot be a part, the way in which the novel relates the situation of the family of Najlā’ to the narrative around Najm as-Sirḥāl is of much conceptual relevance for anthropology. The reason is that it directs the attention towards the importance of anticipation in the context of “speaking” (which is often eclipsed by a focus on “speaking” which has already been recognized). It furthermore invites more careful reflection on the fundamental difference between *knowing* what is contained in stories about “speaking,” on the one hand, and *anticipating* “speaking” as something that might erupt into *one’s own life*, on the other hand.

To the parents of Najlā’, the narrator assumes, the legendary story of Najm as-Sirḥāl who blames his relatives for not having done enough to avenge him is less a good story than it is an incitement to action. What, if their daughter will inform the local social world about the disgrace that they “have not done enough” to avenge her death? In its capacity as a literary text, the novel necessarily makes its readers experience these worries as the worries of particular people who alone face this uncertainty—it is Najlā’'s parents with their particular loss whose faults would be exposed. Najlā’ was *their* daughter.

<sup>48</sup> Interview partners from Lebanon in October 2016 similarly told us about the case of a man who took revenge in his next life. Here, too, the collective moving away of a family formed part of the narrative.



The novel thus implicitly highlights that there is not only the *hope* that a beloved person will “return,” but also a form of *fearfully* picturing the coming of something that will expose one’s own involvement in past atrocities, or one’s own failure to assume one’s responsibility and take the appropriate actions. It suggests that this form of anticipation, and the fear to end up in a situation where one would feel the enduring presence of one’s own wrongs, is likely to make one do certain things. (Although this is beyond the scope of the present article, Najlā’s father actually kills his daughter’s husband in revenge—but this revenge is “wrong” not least insofar as the true murderer was the brother-in-law, who finally is sentenced in a court of law after the case has been reopened through Šāliḥa’s “speaking.”)

The novel thus implicitly addresses the vehemence with which, and the peculiar way in which, past violence and the loss it caused linger on in people’s lives. Of course, anticipation may simply refer to some *future* outcome, for example, a “speaking” individual torn between different familial belongings. But is not there also a form of anticipation that is nothing but the enduring, and maybe haunting, presence of traumatic *past* events? Of some wrong committed that haunts a particular individual or group? Thus, is not there a form of anticipation that is a forceful reminder that the “being past” of something does not necessarily equal its “being over”?

This maybe also allows the detection of a further layer of meaning in this novel from Lebanon. Although it does not explicitly make this connection, is not the haunting presence of unpunished atrocities, enduring trauma, and the need for justice and “repair” also of immediate relevance with regard to the situation caused by the Lebanese civil war? Is not there a haunting presence of wrongs that may “return” at any moment in time and maybe also need to be spoken about in order to come to rest? Are not there different scenarios for satisfying the need for justice, some of which might lead to new violence? Does not speaking offer a chance for justice through courts of law?

Furthermore, are not questions of belonging and questions of who is part of, or drawn into, a particular social reality that the novel implicitly raises at the level of families, immediately relevant in a civil war and with regard to a society that went through a civil war?

As has already been suggested further above, from the perspective of relatives bereaved by unexpected death or even murder, the prospect of their loved one’s “return” in another bodily form furthermore nourishes hope (see BENNETT 2006: 94), and upholding it may be considered a functional cultural mechanism for coping with loss and grief. In the novel, Mr. Fu’ād’s sense of commitment to his daughter Najlā’ maybe also takes this specific sense, and it also is a reminder that loved human beings lost to death are not simply gone, but linger on with those who miss and maintain continuing bonds with them. In a remarkable passage, Fu’ād describes how his murdered daughter is still with him—how he drinks his morning coffee with her, how she picks all the songs he loves for him, how she hugs him, how he touches her hair, etc. (see YAḤYÀ 2002: 146).

### Being sucked into a case

As the novel furthermore suggests, if the family of a murder victim recognizes that a “speaking” individual is their murdered relative in different bodily form, or at least confirms that the evidence voiced by the “speaking” individual is true, the family of the

“speaking” individual becomes involved in a murder case. This is logical because under these circumstances, “speaking” objectively establishes a relation between the family of the “speaking” child and the murderer (and his family). However, the only concern of the present-life family is the *current* manifestation of the soul, that is, the singular human being that is their child. Whatever happened to the soul’s *previous* manifestation is the concern and responsibility of others.

In *Jasad kāna lī*, Šāliḥa “speaks” and names the person who murdered her in her previous life when she was Najlā’. Nevertheless, from the perspective of her current family, Šāliḥa is not the murder victim, but their own living child. The murder victim Najlā’ was someone else, and belonged to others. As the novel thus implicitly points out, even if one holds that souls successively manifest as different human beings, the moment one talks about concrete human beings, it is impossible to do away with the perception that they have a unique belonging and separate life. The fear of getting caught up in a murder case (see also YAḤYĀ 2002: 192–193) that does not concern one only adds an additional weight and twist to all of this.

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In a remarkable passage of the novel, Šāliḥa’s father emphasizes explicitly that he is “neutral.” The murder case links the family of the murderers and the family of the murder victim:

Najlā’ is not my daughter, my daughter is Šāliḥa. Najlā’’s defense is the duty of others. What happened to her makes me sad, but in the same way that it makes me sad that some Hutu was killed in Africa. What I am about to say is a testimony about what my daughter ‘spoke,’ but the results do not concern me. In the end, I know that the things my daughter said do not qualify as testimony in court. You are free to do whatever you want, and you can well ignore everything you are going to hear from me. But it is my duty to repeat everything I heard from my daughter about Najlā’’s death, regardless of the consequences. (YAḤYĀ 2002: 199)

Nevertheless, he is deeply worried that he will be sucked into the case. The narrator describes the father’s reluctance, saying that the man said “‘Najlā’ was murdered’ very quietly and slowly, as if crossing that threshold of caution was exhausting him.”

*Jasad kāna lī* implicitly also addresses the question of who becomes a part of a sociologically real case through the character of the psychiatrist who accompanies Šāliḥa’s father to Lebanon to verify the information he heard from Šāliḥa during her treatment in Michigan. This character, professor Bill Hartson, who has for many years been conducting research about what happens to the soul after death (see YAḤYĀ 2002: 184; 203) has his own agenda in Lebanon. He wants to engage in philosophical discussions about transmigration, gather information about other cases of “speaking,” and so forth. Not unlike anthropologists, he is on a scientific mission, but the Šāliḥa/Najlā’ case does not affect him as a sociological reality of which he is a part. Although a welcome conversation partner at times, he becomes a sort of nuisance for the characters involved in Najlā’’s murder case because his perspective is not that of those emotionally affected by a case that has been haunting them for seven years. They are within the case, he is not. They are filled with fears, hopes, the fearful question of whether human beings they love have suffered, and so forth. He is not.

This invites the question which criteria determine who is and who is not part of a par-

ticular case? Kinship ties certainly play a very important, and complex, role. However, maybe also shared and felt grief, as well as caring and hoping for someone make someone part of a particular sociological reality, for such a reality is, in fact, the community of love that a particular human threaded about him or her during their lifetime. This certainly is a more human and inclusive perspective on belonging.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

The novel *Jasad kāna lī* by Anīs Yahyà is a multi-faceted source with regard to transmigration in a Druze context. It corroborates that there are not only abstract thoughts about transmigration, speculations about its overall purpose, or cases of “speaking” which people tell as a “story.” But also that transmigration sometimes also affects and enmeshes people as an ambivalent reality concerning them in particular. Most notably, this happens in the context of “speaking.” It is in its capacity as a novel, the characters of which are necessarily particular singular human beings, that *Jasad kāna lī* makes us perceive more fully how “speaking” affects and relates to particular and contingent lives. It communicates rather well that people maybe already live the situation brought about by “speaking” as a sociological reality. However, “speaking” also may not have occurred yet, but there is the pain of unhealed traumatic loss, or even the haunting presence of past atrocities. In this case, “speaking” may be hoped for in order to bring a beloved human being back into (one’s) life, or it may epitomize the peculiar “return” of past violent events or atrocities. The latter are not quite over as long as they are unresolved or unpunished, and in a way, they must resurface if they shall be resolved and justice shall prevail. It seems that combining the literary text of *Jasad kāna lī* with anthropological research makes for a more complete understanding of the subject of “speaking” and transmigration among the Druze, but it also makes for a more nuanced reading of the literary text itself.

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<sup>49</sup> For the importance of shared grief, see KASTRINOU 2016; ARMANET 2011.

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