National Identity of a Group of Young Australian Maronite Adults

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Abstract

This paper analyses characteristics of the identities of 33 young Maronite adults who worshipped at Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Church in western Sydney, Australia. The research examined how the young Maronite adults assimilated new experiences (being Australian) into an already existing framework (being Maronite and of Lebanese background). A case study methodology was used and ethnographic methods included semi-structured focus group interviews and in-depth interviews. Grounded theory, applying the constant comparison method, was used for analysis of data, accounting for emerging themes. Participants in the age bracket of 18-25 were selected with varied socio-economic status to reflect the general cohort that attended the Church. After interviewing thirty three participants, saturation point was achieved. No trend emerged in their construction of identity that was dependent upon their age, socio-economic background or gender. Data gathered and collated revealed four emerging and fluid identities that included Australians of Lebanese background, Lebanese, Lebanese-Australian and Australian. The paper examines each identity construct within the multicultural debate, and discusses the factors that contributed to the participants' identity negotiation. Emerging determinants in identity construction for this cohort included citizenship, culture, family traditions and religious affiliation.

Introduction

The analysis presented in this paper is drawn from the case study that was conducted among 33 young adult Maronites who worshipped at Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Parish in western Sydney. The case study was concerned with both identity and spirituality issues but this paper focuses only on identity construction. In order to understand the identity constructs of these young Maronite adults, a brief background is offered of the history and spirituality of Maronites.

Maronites

The Maronites trace their beginnings to Saint Maroun who led a monastic life in the latter part of the fourth century in Syria Secunda. His eremetical way of living attracted disciples who consecrated themselves to worship and austerity, in a life of seclusion and silence.

By the fifth century the Maronites had left Syria to seek refuge in the mountains of North Lebanon. Here the community led a daily eremitical life in work, prayer, obedience to the Church and devotion to spiritual authorities. The Maronites became known as a monastic people as it was around the monasteries that the Maronite community continually re-formed.[1]

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[1] Guita G. Hourani and Antoine B. Habchi, "The Maronite eremitical tradition: a contemporary revival," *Heythorp Journal* 45(2004): 452, 455.

While the spiritual and monastic roots of the Maronite Church are traced to the fourth century, the ecclesiastical organization of the Maronite Patriarchate of Antioch dates to the eighth century. Thus Maronites belong to a Maronite Catholic Eastern Rite with a particular spirituality and tradition which include attachment to the land, ecumenical openness, emphasis on the suffering, crucified and risen Christ and a monastic character.[2]

With recent decades of civil violence in Lebanon, many Maronites opted to leave in search of a better life. Lebanese migration to Australia first occurred with a wave in 1880-1946, followed by mass migration from 1947-1974 and the post civil war period from 1975 onwards. Between 1975-1977 over 10,000 Christian refugees from the Lebanese civil war settled in Sydney, many the relatives of earlier settlers. By 1980 it was estimated there were approximately 38,000 Lebanese-born persons in Sydney, constituting 75 percent of all Lebanese in Australia, with 20 percent in Victoria and much smaller numbers in other States.[3]

Yet the years after 1975 saw the influx of more than 20,000 civil war refugees who were largely poor, and over half of whom were Muslim, transforming the character of the Lebanese Maronite community in Australia. The Lebanese civil war in the late 1980s led to a recovery of Lebanese identity across generations and their support of communities back in the homeland.[4]

Cultural maintenance among the Maronite Lebanese community in Australia is seen through preservation of the Arabic language and the close familial ties maintained through settlement near one's kin, marriage within the Lebanese community and visits overseas. Religious practices and dietary intake indicate a Lebanese community in Australia that insists on retaining a religious and ethnic identity.

With this brief outline of Maronite history and the establishment of the Maronite community in Australia, the following examines the unique characteristics that young Maronite adults residing in western Sydney exhibit, as citizens of Australia, and the role their cultural and religious backgrounds play in this negotiation.

Australian of Lebanese background

Of the participants interviewed, the hybrid identity of 'Australian of Lebanese background' was the most referred to, with fourteen choosing this construction. The reason for participants' Australian identity was that they were born in Australia or had resided there for most of their lives, claiming citizenship. However at the same time, they also affirmed their Lebanese heritage.

> I say I'm Australian because obviously I was born in Australia, I'm an Australian citizen and Lebanese because of my Lebanese culture.

The reasons participants included Lebanese in their hybrid identification derived from their parents' background and the Lebanese culture and traditions practised at home. The construct of 'Australian of Lebanese background' arises from the reception by the host community of such characteristics as place of birth, cultural traditions and parental background. Participants who acknowledged this identity were able to

[2] Hourani and Habchi, "The Maronite eremitical tradition: a contemporary revival," 452.

[3] I. H. Burnley, "Lebanese Migration and settlement in Sydney, Australia," *International Migration Review* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 103.

[4] Michael Humphrey, "Lebanese Identities: between cities, nations and trans-nations," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 47.

negotiate between being Australian and Lebanese. For these young Maronite adults, enculturation into Australian life came easily and was coupled with a fondness for their Lebanese heritage.

In order to understand this hybrid identity, a brief examination of Australia's attitude to multiculturalism may be helpful. Beginning with the Australian 'populate or perish' motto, migrants were originally expected to merge with the dominant culture. By the mid 1970s new immigrants had been granted rights to 'maintain' cultural identity. The trend that followed was to emphasize the economic benefits of immigrant workers and business people. The value of ethnic identity thus emerged. However in recent years the government has redefined migrants in terms of citizenship and community relations, negating the ethnically diverse character of Australian society. As Sir William Deane, former Governor General of Australia, summed up:

> Our multiculturalism recognises the entitlement of all Australians to preserve and cherish with affection, with respect and with pride, the customs, cultures and religions which they or their forebears have brought from the lands or regions of their birth but subjects that entitlement to the limitation that all Australians are bound by the overriding loyalties and obligations of their Australian citizenship and their duties under valid Australian laws.[5]

This research revealed that the shifting definition of multiculturalism was reflected in the variable identity constructs of these young Maronite adults.

Lebanese Identity

Thirteen participants of this study identified themselves solely as Lebanese. They constructed their identity based on Lebanese tradition and culture as practised at home, the Arabic language spoken, their Maronite Catholic religious affiliation and their parents' Lebanese heritage.

> The language that I speak at home is my parents' and my family's. Like Arabic. Yeah I do speak English but… I was born in Australia… I still hold my Lebanese traditions and that everything I do… I say Lebanese because its like my culture, it's in my blood.

Other respondents identified themselves as Lebanese, commenting that people who asked the question about nationality already knew they were Australian but insisted on knowing the background.

> The people that normally ask me are someone … what is your background… straight out I'll say that I'm Lebanese because that's what they're asking for. Deep down I know I'm Australian because I am here.

This experience of being categorized as a foreigner to Australia is obvious in the repeated comment, 'Where are you really from?' Yet by commenting 'deep down I know I'm Australian' suggests a desire to assert oneself as an 'Australian.' At the same time they may feel they have a vibrant ethnic heritage that they wish to embrace but this is not always affirmed by the host nation. Pettman explains that nationality, race, ethnicity

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[5] William Deane, *Directions. A vision for Australia* (NSW: St Pauls Publication, 2002), 59.

and gender are all crucial dimensions of social identity. Yet they can also be used as political constructs and ways of drawing boundaries, and relations of dominance and subordination.[6]

Although most participants were confident in acknowledging their ethnic identity, the fear of being labelled as an ethnic was consolidated by one participant's comment:

> I say that I am Australian. And when I go to Lebanon I say I am Australian. Aren't we all supposed to be Australian? I think the people want to get the reaction out of you that you're Australian-Lebanese… that you're not willing to integrate into Australian society.

The participant saw Australian identity as necessitating assimilation. Yet to argue for an Australian identity based on cultural homogeneity ignores the fact that Australia consists of ethnic and cultural diversity. However the notion that Australia is still mono-cultural is prevalent. Another commented, 'If I say I'm Australian I never get away with it!' Even though said in jest, the response indicated that narratives of Anglo-Australian identity have influenced the social construction of identity. The Anglo Saxon vision of blond hair and blue eyes did not apply to the respondent who was of dark, Middle Eastern appearance! Participants suggested that people judged their Australian identities through visual biological aspects that are racialised. In response to being different from other Australians in regard to physical appearance, there were participants who held hyphenated ethnic-Australian identities, while other participants simply reverted to an ethnic identity.

Though ethnic identity provides people with group membership, status and personal meaning, it can also be constructed as a way to celebrate difference.

> I actually like the reaction I get when I say I am Lebanese. Because if they actually start to know me and find out I am Lebanese, then they can know that I am a good person and start to change their perception of the Lebanese.

Lebanese identity construction was negotiated from positive and negative experiences that the participants had encountered, in which they identified strongly with the Lebanese heritage, as interpreted by them.

According to Hyndman-Rizik, lack of acceptance and belonging in Australia is experienced by Lebanese such that 'members of the second generation are attempting to strengthen their links back to Lebanon and have developed a more diasporic Lebanese identity.'[7] Yet in this research young Maronite adults embraced their Lebanese identity both as a reaction to lack of Australian acceptance but more so as an appreciation of what Lebanese culture and tradition afforded them.

Lebanese-Australian Identity

The Lebanese-Australian identity construct was a third response. The Lebanese culture, Church/faith, friends, local Maronite school and Arabic language, played a role in the way participants' viewed themselves as Lebanese.

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[6] Jan Pettman, *Living in the margins. Racism, sexism and feminism in Australia* (NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1992), 2-3.
[7] Nelia Hyndman-Rizik, "'Shrinking World': Cronulla, Anti-Lebanese Racism and Return visits in the Sydney Hadchiti Lebanese Community," *Anthropological Forum* 18, no. 1 (March 2008): 50.

> Lebanese-Australian cause I came to this school (Our Lady of Lebanon) and go to Mass here. I don't know. I see more the Lebanese culture… but I get corrected into saying Australian-Lebanese. Like we'd be sitting in the playground and our sentences would be half English, half Arabic.

The respondents expressed that an ethnic-Australian identity may be offensive to others yet they still maintained it. One participant indicated that the offence taken was in reference to her parents, if she failed to identify with being Lebanese. This raises the question as to what extent parents influence the identity of their children. It also raises questions about how migrant parents identify themselves, having spent a large proportion of their lives in Australia.

One participant identified herself as Lebanese Maronite Australian, indicating that her identity construct included nationality and religious identity.

> I always say Lebanese Catholic Australian but then I specify Maronite because it comes up in the conversation… Lebanese is my background but I am an Australian having been born here and a citizen here.

Hyndman-Rizik noted in her study of the Sydney Hadchiti Lebanese community that the wearing of large crosses by Lebanese Christians was a way to 'differentiate themselves from Lebanese Muslims.'[8] This marking out of differences in religion, is a result of negative media images of particular groups within Australian society. Currently some Muslim youth in Australia are experiencing discrimination as a result of race related rioting that took place on Cronulla Beach in Sydney in 2005, gang rapes and other acts of violence perpetrated by a small and unrepresentative number of Muslim youth, Lebanese gangs and the fear of terrorism from Muslim fanatics erroneously associated all too often with all Australian Muslims. In reaction, young Maronites of Lebanese background choose to distance themselves from young Muslims of Lebanese background. Yet this sense that one must speak up as a Maronite may have nothing to do with religiosity. As Modood explains, like all forms of difference, it comes into being as a result of pressures from 'outside' a group as well as from the 'inside.'[9]

Australian Identity

There were only four of the thirty three participants who identified solely as Australian. Living in Australia, not only does one experience a multicultural society with its secular nature, but for those of Lebanese background, there is fear of racism due to negative media coverage of people of Middle Eastern background, as noted earlier. This has led to participants denying their ethnic background.

> Initially I used to say Lebanese. Growing up now and given what's happened in the media, like in the past couple of years or so, my first reaction is to say Australian… it's mixed in with a bit of embarrassment but I just feel people respond to me differently when I say what I am.

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[8] Hyndman-Rizik, "Shrinking World," 43.
[9] Tariq Modood, "Multiculturalism, citizenship and national identity, "*Polity* (May 2007*). (database on-line); available at www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe_islam/multiculturalism_4627.jsp

In a study by Dunn et al, respondents were asked whether they believed there were cultural or ethnic groups that did not fit into Australian society. The results overwhelmingly indicated the outsider status of Muslims, Australians of Middle-Eastern background and less so, Asians.[10] Yet only two respondents in this study reverted to an Australian identity in response to ethnic intolerance.

Fluid Identities

Noble, Poynting and Tabar studied a group of Christian and Muslim boys who described themselves as Lebanese-Australian. Their friendship groups at school were based either on ethnicity or religion. Their Lebanese identity was based on shared symbols of language, family, values, customs, tradition and religion. The study indicated that fluidity of identity depended on the social milieu in which participants found themselves.[11] A similar scenario was observed among participants interviewed for this case study. One participant interchanged his identity between Australian and Lebanese, depending on who was asking, and in which situation.

> I say I am Australian. But when you're in say like a bar or somewhere and the girls ask you what nationality you are, I say I am Lebanese.

A further study by Noble et al revealed that identity was 'defined around family, values, customs, language, tradition or religion, this sense of ethnicity is nevertheless essentialised, often a caricature, including beliefs such as that the Lebanese fight hard, are 'dumb', are family-oriented.'[12] Yet these caricatures were not evident among the participants in this research who held their ethnic identity with pride. However the process of identity construction was constantly changing and adapting as these young Maronite adults negotiated their place in society.

Further reflections on identity

Seven of the thirty three participants in this study were born overseas, yet had migrated to Australia early in their lives. Among these participants, some stated their identity as Lebanese, Australian-Lebanese or Lebanese-Australian, indicating that place of birth was not the defining factor for national identity. This was also verified by a number of Australian born participants who identified themselves as Lebanese. People may be born outside a country, yet still identify with it. Furthermore most participants were determined to construct their own identity regardless of media slurs, national expectations, multiculturalism or societal attitudes. The participants took pride in their ethnicity as well as their Australian identity, as constructed and understood by them. Perhaps the pride taken in their Lebanese ethnicity is a result of long term chain migration and establishment of Lebanese institutional structures in association with residential concentrations in Sydney. This has assisted Lebanese Maronites to integrate into their own community, thereby also reinforcing ethnic identity.[13] Yet as Bauman points out, though community provides the security of being with your own kind, the

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[10] Kevin M. Dunn, James Forrest, Ian Burnley and Amy McDonald, "Constructing Racism in Australia," *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 39, no. 4 (November 2004): 414, 418.
[11] Greg Noble, Scott Poynting and Paul Tabar, "Lebanese youth and social identity," *Australian Clearing House for Youth Studies Australian Youth Subcultures: On the margins and in the mainstream,* ed. Rob White (Tasmania: Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, 1999), 132.
[12] Greg Noble, Scott Poynting and Paul Tabar. "Youth, Ethnicity and the Mapping of Identities: Strategic Essentialism and Strategic Hybridity among Male Arabic-speaking Youth in South-western Sydney," *Communal/Plural,* 7 no. 1 (1999):37.
[13] Burnley, 'Lebanese Migration and settlement in Sydney, Australia,' 110.

more you are immersed in community, the more you feel threatened by the other. Security and insecurity become intertwined, feeding 'mutual derision, contempt and hatred,' making multiculturalism impossible.[14]

Defining an Australian and Lebanese identity

In order to investigate the phenomenon of identity formation in multicultural Australia further, the young adults were asked to express the characteristics they considered as constituting an Australian identity and those constituting a Lebanese identity.

What makes for an Australian Identity?

Among the characteristics that contributed to an Australian identity there were cultural practices, place of birth, people with whom one associates, and being part of a workplace or educational institution. The most common marker of an Australian identity was place of birth or citizenship.

> Beside the fact that I pay tax to Australia, I'm an Australian citizen. I've lived here all my life and I feel like Australia is my home. I went to Lebanon and it was sort of like, I felt like an outsider even though I spoke the language and my family was there. This is my home. This is where I lived most of my life.

The author Stockton indicated the notion of feeling Australian only when one returned as a visitor to the homeland of one's parents. He suggested that Australian-born children enjoyed a more harmonious mix of two identities. Later generations identified simply as Australian, retaining varying degrees of ethnic identity, ranging from no special feeling, to sentimental attachment, to a sense of pride and spiritual rootedness.[15] This study involved interviews with first and second generation children of Lebanese migrants, with no emerging consensus as to the degree of ethnic identity, although most participants included Lebanese in their construction and contrary to Stockton's observation, most participants expressed a sense of being at home in Lebanon.

In reflecting on what made them Australian, participants took into account their past and what had taught and influenced them. These included the educational institutions attended, along with place of employment. Abiding by Australian legislation was considered, as well as enjoying a beer, watching the cricket or football and being good at sport. While a number of respondents were happy to take on the 'stereotypical' images of Australia, one respondent negated the stereotypes.

> I mean we all come from somewhere else. No one is a real Australian except Aboriginals... I don't think you necessarily have to believe in mateship and things like that to be an Australian.... Wherever you go to represent yourself in the highest possible standard.

In a twist, another participant stereotyped Australians. A sport loving, secular and 'laid-back' attitude was scorned particularly since Lebanon has struggled for political rights and religious freedom.

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[14] Gerd Bauman, *The Multicultural Riddle. Rethinking National, Ethnic and Religious Identities* (New York & London: Routledge, 1999).
[15] Eugene D. Stockton, "Multiculturalism and the Australian Church," *Faith and Culture. Living the Gospel Today,* ed. Margaret Press and Neil Brown (NSW: Catholic Institute of Sydney, 1987). 3.

> But there's a lot of things about Australians that they accept but I don't. Their minds are too simple, they take things too easy. They haven't got much depth in their personality. I look at everything in a religious way and I see they are far from religion. That's the most thing I dislike about them, you know. I wouldn't want my kids growing up in that way.

The participant described Australian ethnicity through the lack of legitimate cultural traditions. Furthermore Anglo-Australian was his main reference point in his construction of Australian culture.

In considering characteristics attached to Australian identity, a number of respondents compared Australian life with life in Lebanon. Job opportunities, education, freedom, peace, privileges and equality for all Australian citizens became the differentiating factors between being an Australian, in contrast with being a Lebanese, whom participants viewed as someone enduring political corruption, interfering outside forces and lack of basic essentials. The participants highly valued their Australian citizenship and felt positive about their lives in Australia.

What makes for a Lebanese Identity?

What constituted a Lebanese identity for these participants included the markers of parents' background and family influence, culture and tradition maintained at home and people with whom they associated. Importantly, the Maronite religious faith was associated with nationality. This is supported by a study by Ata who wrote, 'religion is the very essence of self-identification. Lebanese identity is based on religion rather than nationality.'[16]

> My Maronite faith. That's probably the biggest identifier of what it means to be Lebanese, the fact that I'm Maronite. The second you say I'm Maronite they identify you're Lebanese.

The total number of Maronites worldwide is about 1.5 million, of which about 800,000 live in Lebanon. This means that 60% of all Maronites live in Lebanon, and they represent 25% of the country's population.[17] Yet extreme Islamist movements have threatened Lebanese Maronite identity today. The consequence is widespread social disenchantment as observed in the young Maronite adults who took part in this study. Their religious identity was part of an ethnic identification that was rigorously maintained as a result of the turmoil surrounding the history and current status of Maronites in Lebanon. Reader says about the idea of belonging and the role of religion and place in this belonging:

> What is meant by belonging to a particular community or locality? Attachment to place may only be one of a number of possible components upon which people draw in order to create their identity. Instead of one clear and constant sense of self, there is more likely to be a proliferation of identities as one's expanse of relationships and contacts widens, sometimes on a daily basis… The capacity to learn and adapt is crucial and that process will draw upon the resources one has in creating a

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[16] Abe W. Ata, "Ethnic Arab-Lebanese churches in Australia," *Religion and ethnic identity: An Australian Study,* ed. Abe (I.) Wade Ata (Victoria: Spectrum Publications, 1988), 270.

[17] Maronite Church, http://looklex.com/e.o/maronite.htm Accessed 29/4/2009. In Egypt there are 5000, in Israel 7000, in Syria 50, 000 and in other countries a total of 650, 000.

changing identity. One of those resources may well be a sense of place. Another may also be a sense of oneself as a person of faith.[18]

The most frequently mentioned characteristic of what makes one Lebanese was culture and tradition. A further observation of this research and others, is that the Lebanese are a family oriented people who visit and live with extended family. Lebanese migrants to Australia settled mostly in Sydney and relatives also migrated and resided in the same neighbourhood.[19]

> It means the strong presence of my family… I think you can't separate family from Lebanese… I'm Australian. I have a Lebanese background. But there's more a part of my family that's kind of more Lebanese in their way of sort of maybe their values and I think those values are very strongly connected with the faith and the culture.

Though being appropriate under certain circumstances, speaking of cultures as being specifically 'Maronite,' 'Muslim,' 'Lebanese' or 'Australian' is a crude simplification. Although the concept of culture is a key term in multicultural issues, often it leads to a rigid classification into 'us' and 'them.' More fruitful, Bauman argues, is the view in which culture is performed and comes to life in social interaction. He proposes moving the viewpoint from 'identity' as an absolute, to 'identification' as a negotiated element that is highly flexible. Eventually 'identity' will no longer resemble the concept of culture but reveals the choices of 'identification' made by the person. Living successfully in a multicultural Australia would require people to operate with this flexible concept of 'identification.'[20]

Conclusion

Four identities emerged in this study of 33 young Maronite adults living in inner western Sydney, Australia. These identities included Australian-Lebanese, Lebanese, Lebanese-Australian and Australian. Fluidity of identity was also evident. Most participants shared a hyphenated identity that refused to be assimilated. A multicultural Australia meant that young Maronite adults constructed their own cultural systems and identity by drawing upon a variety of values and experiences. Interactions between Lebanese and Australian cultural values led to hybrid identities.

The young Maronite adults' identity was influenced to a significant degree by ethnicity and religious heritage, personal needs and by family. Simultaneously the young Maronite adults dealt with issues surrounding religion, culture, ethnicity and values.

The experience of others and the experience as 'other' was an essential drive in the search for self-identity. Most participants claimed their given cultural-ethnic-religious heritage, reclaiming their past and the past of their parents. Participants revealed vigilance in maintaining their ethnic Lebanese and Maronite religious identities, while also using them as separateness markers against Lebanese Muslim identification. With this distancing of ethnic and religious groups from one another the question is raised of whether there can be

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[18] John Reader, *Reconstructing practical theology. The impact of globalisation* (England Ashgate, 2008), 32-33.

[19] Trevor Batrouney, "Lebanese-Australian families," *Families and Cultural Diversity in Australia,* ed. Robyn Hartley (NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1995). 197.

[20] Gerd Bauman, *The Multicultural Riddle*, 132.

common neutral ground, as immigration brings tension between maintaining a particular cultural identity and formation of a cohesive society.

As observed in the comments by the young Maronite adult participants in this study, there was a passionate preference for maintaining their Lebanese ethnic identity which involved the preservation of history, language, customs and religion, against what some viewed as the eroding effects of the host Australian culture. This is in contrast to the government's recent efforts to highlight citizenship in place of ethnicity. So ethnicity is not only a form of self expression, but also has a supportive and defensive function, particularly if the group is marginalized as in the case of people from a Middle Eastern background. Furthermore, ethnicity is maintained for its distinctiveness in terms of cultural continuity in the context of the wider secularized and westernized Australian culture.

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