

Middle East

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'By going through this wonderful website, I saw myself walking the street of my village long time ago with my cousins. That was the best time of my life.' 'It gives me a big pleasure to belong to the big family of Joun. I will always have the wonderful days in my memory and my heart that I spent in this dear village. These memories I will pass on to my children and grandchildren.' 'Proud to be a Jouni. It is a wonderful page that reminds me of my village.' These are a few comments found in the visitors book of the homepage of a Lebanese village called Joun (<http://joun.leb.net>).

The above-mentioned comments were made by people who presently live in the United States, in Europe, Australia or the Arab Gulf States, but feel in some way or other linked to their village of origin. Some of them spent their childhood in this multi-confessional (Maronite, Greek-Catholic, Shi'ite) Jouni community, which is situated in the southern part of Mount Lebanon, while others grew up in the capital city of Beirut and only spent their weekends in the village before emigrating. For other people, their village came to life only through family tales, always having lived far away.

Inside the Joun internet caf

At present, ten years after the end of the civil war, an increasing number of Lebanese – who once left the country because of the war or due to economic, family or professional reasons as well as those who were born abroad and those who were displaced inside Lebanon – are in the process of rediscovering their villages and redefining their (trans-)local identities. Many travel 'home' for their summer holidays, while some return for good. Others are returning to places that they were forced to leave due to confessional cleavages or wars. How have their images of their home locality changed over time and from a distance and how do these images influence the remaking of their local identities? Why do the Lebanese actually cling to their local identity, re-approaching and redefining it in a globalized world which offers an immense variety of different opportunities for identification?

The emergence of trans-local villages

'I enjoy visiting Joun's homepage and learning more about my village while living in Canada', says a 35-year-old man standing in front of a dilapidated house in the village which he hopes to renovate one day. The old building belonged to his grandfather and fell into ruin when he died. Other members of the family fled to Beirut during the war in 1985, when the Christian population was expelled from the village. Since the end of the war, the grandson, who has spent most of his life in Canada and has family all over the world, comes to Lebanon regularly for his summer holidays, together with his wife and two small children. They stay in Beirut, but sometimes travel to the village for a short visit. They walk up the old stairs of their house of memories, remember the grandfather taking care of his roses and yelling at the neighbour's children. The village of this Lebanese-Canadian man has turned into an emotional landscape, a place of happy childhood memories, of continuity and rootedness in an ever-changing world. While continuously moving from place to place in the 'real' world due to professional and family reasons, the place from which he and his family originate becomes an important fixed point of reference, providing an imaginary stability in a world of increasing mobility and change. The village becomes a metaphor for social relations, in general, and family and kin relations, in particular.

Locality in Lebanon Between Home and Homepage



PHOTO: ANJA PELEIKIS

Large family and kinship groups have always fought over local politics and economics, over influence and power in the different neighbourhoods of the village – and they still do. However, nowadays members of the same family, of the same neighbourhood and the same village, no longer share their everyday life. They live in Joun, as well as in Beirut, in Paris, Berlin, Detroit, Abu Dhabi or Sydney. Nevertheless, family and local identity remain important and kin groups form social networks beyond local, regional and national boundaries.

As a matter of fact, the Lebanese personal status laws reinforce the strong ties to the paternal village of origin, since all personal affairs are registered there and the Lebanese rarely change their place of registration. Documents necessary for the registration of births, marriages and deaths as well as polling cards can only be obtained from the local mayor. The same applies to people who no longer reside in the village or who have never lived there, but whose patrilineage has always been registered there. In the event that migrants in Beirut or abroad need certificates of any kind, they have to go to their village of registration or engage a family relative to carry out the task. Thus, national registration and election practices encourage the establishment of trans-local connections. Elections are actually a typical example of the mobilization of trans-local links: People move from Beirut to their villages of registration or are even flown in from abroad, sometimes at the expense of local political representatives.

In many cases, family members are continuously in touch and interacting, which is made possible by new forms of communication. For more and more people, and especially for the younger generation, using the internet has become exceedingly attractive. They exchange e-mails and voice-mails with friends and family, and they also send photos or make direct calls via the internet. Many have computers in their homes, and in every Lebanese city and in many villages one can find internet cafés. 'Joun online', a local internet café, is the place where the young people of the village send and receive their mail, where they chat with their friends online, exchange the latest local

news and also feel close to their peers and kin far away.

One can sense the emergence of 'pluri-local' or 'trans-local' villages where the social sphere no longer coincides with the geographical sphere. Everyday experiences that were once necessarily derived from a close face-to-face relationship are currently being extended. One could argue that people whose life-worlds are closely linked share 'habitats of meaning' and form a 'community of sentiment'; they begin to share thoughts and feelings despite the fact that they live hundreds or thousands of kilometres apart. Primarily, these groups can be defined as overlapping, de-territorialized social – often close-knit family – networks of people who strengthen their unity with their discourses on and fantasies about their village of origin. Despite the fact that people are dispersed all over the world, moving between places of residence, places of registration and imaginary places, they are involved in ongoing negotiations and struggles to define and 'produce' the meaning of their village, thereby directly or indirectly influencing local political and social developments.

The struggle over locality

'Got a burning desire to explore the peaceful hill and valleys of Joun and a green nature well preserved? Or wander among the tales of history and its events? Then you've landed at the right place.' (<http://joun.leb.net/jmain.htm>) 'Joun offers a unique view of the sunset. Hospitality has always been a great tradition. Joun is well known for its virgin olive oil production.' (<http://joun.leb.net/jmain1.htm>) With these village descriptions on the Joun website, set up by members of the municipality, local politicians assume a certain position in the struggle over locality. Most of the 15 members of the district council – doctors, engineers and lawyers – have had migration experiences. Some of them have returned only recently, such as the mayor, a 45-year-old doctor, who grew up in Beirut and spent eight years in France. Presently, he and most of the other district councillors live and work in Beirut and only spend their weekends in Joun. The images of the village conveyed by them have been strongly influ-

enced by their lives in the city and abroad. By pursuing a discourse of nostalgia, praising old traditions and the famous history of the village, they contribute to the formation of emotional landscapes, trying to encourage more people to visit and support their home village. Their local development projects are strongly influenced by this image of the village as a holiday and weekend resort. While restoring old village walls, planting trees and laying out small parks and an impressive sports stadium, the main interest is to transform the village into a beautiful, clean weekend resort full of tourist attractions, with historical sites, an impressive cultural history and a relaxed environment. It is quite clear they are acting in the interest of the other Jounis who, like themselves, live in Beirut or abroad and share their image of locality. Most of the people who actually live in the village have a different image of their locality. It is their place of everyday life, where they have to make their living. They often complain that the municipality does not contribute to economic development or local education. 'They have no time, no experience and are only here at the weekend' is the opinion of many people who live in Joun.

New and conflicting images of locality – resulting from people's movements – can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century when the first people migrated overseas, and also to rural-urban migration in the 1950s and 1960s. Although these movements were mainly initiated by the Christian population in the village, later all confessions and families participated in these movements. Thus, changing and conflicting views of locality have largely developed trans-confessionally. The situation changed during the civil war when the Christians were expelled and the Shiites remained in the village. To this day, they constitute the majority of the Joun population, while most of the Christians settled in Beirut or elsewhere and presently do not want to fully return to the village. They only come for the weekend and for their holidays, for religious celebrations and elections, and they try to influence local politics from outside. Given this fact, the struggle over locality is at present becoming increasingly confessionalized and the conflicts between confessional groups – built up during long war years – are reinforced, rather than overcome. Here the struggle over the nature of locality in a globalized, de-territorialized world still continues. ◆

Notes

- 1 See Hannerz, Ulf (1996), *Transnational Connections. Culture, People, Places*, London: Routledge, p. 22.
- 2 See Appadurai, Arjun (1996), 'Sovereignty Without Territoriality: Notes for a Postnational Geography', in: Patricia Yaeger (ed.), *The Geography of Identity*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, pp. 8, 40-58.

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