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Syrian and Lebanese Identity in the American South

by

Caetlind Moudy

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford

May 2020

Approved by

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## ABSTRACT

CAETLIND MOUDY: Syrian and Lebanese Identity in the American South

(Under the direction of Kristin Gee Hickman)

### **Abstract**

For Americans of Arab descent, identity can present a number of difficulties to define within the existing ethnic and racial categories of the United States. While several scholars have looked at the ways that Muslims American of Arab descent navigate these categories, less attention has been paid to the complex self-identification Christian Arab Americans, many of whom come from Lebanese and Syrian backgrounds. It is the objective of this thesis to explore how Americans of Syrian and Lebanese descent understand their ethnic, racial, cultural, and national identities as well as how these identities both inform and are informed by religion. In this vein, this project analyzes fifty-eight video recorded oral histories from the Arab American National Museum, located in Houston, Texas. I argue that for Americans of Syrian and Lebanese descent who have been in the southern United States for several generations, expressions of their ethnic identity (e.g. Lebanese, Syrian, Arab) are inextricably entangled with expressions of their religious identity as Christian. Therefore, in contrast to previous research which shows trends among Muslims Arab Americans to increasingly identify as “Muslim Americans” (Naber 2012), my research suggests that Christian Arab Americans in the south prioritize their Lebanese, Syrian, and Arab identities – but in a way that covertly smuggles in their faith.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The room was like any other you might find in a conference hall, the colors of the furniture ranging from multiple muted shades of brown to a pop of blue here and there on the chair pattern. Light shined freely through the windowsill, only to be partially obstructed by thin, transparent curtains. This was to be the setting for the interview. The video camera panned quickly to Barbara, an older lady with short blonde hair and dark eyes. She took a breath and began her story. As she spoke, excitement gleamed in her eyes, almost as iridescent as the blue and orange necklace that was so carefully laced across her neck. On multiple occasions, she gazed lovingly off into the distance as she spoke about her family's Lebanese heritage. Through a multitude of stories, her life unfolds before the eyes of the viewer. And by the time her interview is over, a sense of relief seemed to wash over her now that she had told her story.

Like Barbara, many other Americans of Syrian and Lebanese ancestry have also stepped forward in recent years to share the stories of their families' history. These individuals have collectively contributed to an archive of fifty-nine oral histories that were video recorded by the Arab American National Museum (AANM), located in Houston, Texas starting in 2014. They now make up the Family History Archive of Syrian and Lebanese Families in the American South and they are publicly available online. According to the website for the project,

The launch of the Family History Archive coincides with the AANM's expansion of its program to document and preserve the stories and artifacts of Arabic-speaking immigrants and their American descendants. These collections inform researchers, scholars, and ethnic institutions about the rich and diverse history of the many generations of Arab immigrants who have made their home in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://aanm.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p16806coll4>, last accessed March 31, 2020.

This archive has provided an opportunity for an older generation of Americans of Lebanese and Syrian descent, like Barbara, to preserve their culture and heritage for their younger relatives.

While the creation of this archive responds to a growing desire for the preservation of cultural memory within the Syro-Lebanese American community – the oldest Arab community in the United States – this archive also offers insight into how this particular group of Arab Americans, many of whom identify as Christian, negotiate their identities in a post-9-11 world. Such a question is particularly interesting given the degree to which Syro-Lebanese immigrants and their children have historically been able to ‘blend into’ everyday white American society, more so than many other immigrants. Before I stumbled across this massive archive of oral histories, I had never heard of the existence of Syrian and Lebanese communities in the southern United States. Indeed, as the preeminent Arab American Studies scholar Michael Suleiman (2010) has noted, very little research has been done on Syrians and Lebanese in the United States, despite the fact that 1) they are the oldest Arab American community, and 2) they have left behind a wealth of archival data for potential researchers.

Suleiman argues that this lacuna is partly because Arab American Studies scholars are more focused on studying individuals of the present, while ignoring those of the past (ibid). Partly because of changes in immigration patterns and partly because of post-9-11 discrimination, there has been a boom in scholarship on Arab Americans which tends to focus on Muslim Arab Americans. Dallo, Arjrouch, and Soham (2008), for example, have analyzed responses to the census, focusing in particular on changes in salary and demographics among new immigrants and old. In contrast to such quantitative research, many of the more qualitative and ethnographic studies have looked at large communities of Arab Americans, many of which are in the north, such as the Arab American community in Dearborn, Michigan. Sengstock

(1974) conducted one such study, specifically focusing on the religious, racial, and national identity of Iraqi Americans in Michigan and how these identities have changed over time.

Another such study, one of the best thus far, is Naber's *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism* (2012), which offers a deep ethnographic dive into the lives of Muslim Arab Americans in the Bay Area in the post 9-11 climate. Notably, Naber shows that recent political events have pushed Muslim Arab Americans to increasingly identify with a larger multi-ethnic "Muslim American" community, and to identify less as "Arab American."

This thesis builds on Naber's insights by asking how Christian Arab Americans negotiate their identity, particularly as their 'fellow Arabs' start to prioritize a communal identification that excludes them on religious grounds. Using oral history videos made publicly available by the AANM, this paper investigates how Americans of Syrian and Lebanese origin situate themselves within ethnic, racial, cultural, national identities as well as how these identities intersect with other aspects of identification, such as religion. Whereas Naber focuses on the lives of Muslim Arab Americans, this project focuses on the individuals that cannot fit into all those categories: Americans of Syrian and Lebanese descent who consider themselves Christian.

This project did not intentionally start out as such. In fact, religion was not something I had initially considered as a point of critical identification among Arab Americans, mainly because I assumed that most Arab Americans were Muslim. As ignorant as this assumption may have been, it seems to be reflected in the academic literature which also tends to equate 'Arab' with 'Muslim.' Naber (2012, 141) writes about, "the conflation of the categories "Arab" and "Muslim," noting that, "a dominant conceptualization in U.S. popular discourses, assumes that all Arabs are Muslims and all Muslims are Arabs."



This thesis aims to fill in some of these gaps by focusing on Americans who live in the South and are of Syrian or Lebanese origin, and investigating how they situate themselves within American society. In order to understand how Americans of Syrian and Lebanese origins identify themselves, this project closely analyses oral history interviews through the lens of three questions. First, how do interviewees describe the process of immigration, integration, and assimilation experienced by their family members? This provides insight into how the interviewee fits their relatives into an American immigrant narrative and American history more broadly.

Second, this project asks how Americans of Syrian and Lebanese descent currently situate themselves and their families within the religious, ethnic, and racial identity patterns of the United States. This question is particularly interesting since racial identity paradigms in the Middle East are very different than those existing in the United States, which has often resulted in Arab Americans getting stuck between a white/black. Religion is also of particular interest in this question because of the predominance of Christianity in the United States.

The third and final question this project asks is how these Americans of Syrian and Lebanese ancestry maintain and pass down their culture within the United States. This idea is essential because deciding what is important enough to pass down intimately displays the expression of what these Americans consider to be most important from the Syrian or Lebanese side of their identity. This can come in many forms from ways of cooking, dancing, folktales, material items, and even religious practices.

But before diving into the oral histories, it is important to understand the changing historical contexts in which Lebanese and Syrian immigration to the United States took place, beginning with immigration during the time of the Ottoman Empire.

## II. BACKGROUND

### Early Immigration

In the late 1870s individuals from all over the Arab-speaking world traveled to America in the pursuit of new opportunities. This was due to a variety of reasons including war and famine. Many of these immigrants hailed from the Ottoman Empire (1299-1923), specifically from the area previously called Greater Syria, today known as the Levant region which includes what is now Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine. This empire ruled regions all across the modern-day Middle East, North Africa, Turkey, and the Balkans, an area now considered part of Europe.

In the later years of the empire, a process of Turkification took place and many choose to leave (Khater 2017). By the end of the 1800s, ideas of nationalism were omnipresent around the Ottoman Empire (Haddad 1994). In order to keep up with Europe, the Ottomans passed new laws that changed the education system in the empire. Now, each and every provincial capital was required to have a school (Provence 2011). This highlighted the Ottoman desire for the ability to compete and stay relevant on the world stage. Further, with more points of contact with their citizens, ideas rapidly spread across the empire.

Notably, the Ottomans mandated the use of Turkish in these schools (Provence 2011). This was a critical mistake on their part, and only created a stronger divide between ethno-linguistic groups within the empire, including the Arabs, Turks, and others. This mandate regarding the language of education was part of the Tanzimat Decree (Haddad 1994) and was a direct move towards the spread of Turkish Nationalism within the empire. The Ottomans neglected to understand their impact on the majority Arab population in the empire until it was

too late. The emergence of Arab Nationalism was a direct response to the pan-Turkism movement throughout the empire (Haddad 1994).

By trying to keep up with Europe and mandating Turkish in all schools, the Ottomans alienated a massive portion of their population. This was a terrible way to try to unify an assortment of multiple communities much too late after their initial point of contact. Consequently, the Ottomans' attempt to connect the empire under one identity came much too late (Dawn 1961). Indeed, their suppression of the Arabic language only further separated the Turks from the Arabs, stimulating a growing Arab national identity and, in many cases, the desire to flee the empire completely.

Many of the Lebanese and Syrians who left traveled to the Americas, both North and South. A lot of immigrants landed in Mexico and other parts of South America, such as Brazil and Chile (Khater 2017). Other individuals traveled to the United States. From the late 1800s into the very early 1900s over 300,000 immigrants traveled from the Levant to the United States. Notably, at that time individuals faced little difficulty in terms of immigration laws and they were able to freely travel back and forth between the United States and the Levant (Khater 2017).

Yet for many of these immigrants, their particular situations regarding national identity and even ethnic identity were tricky to nail down. Their departure from the Middle East coincided with the rise of Arab nationalism within the Ottoman Empire. Arab nationalism is a term that explains a movement that sought to unite all Arabs through the commonalities of the Arabic language as well as ethnicity, history, geography and culture, without giving much regard, if any, to religion within the Middle East (Lapidus 2014). This movement gave birth to an Arab renaissance in the Middle East, inspiring a new appreciation for Arab culture, literature,

and arts. It also called on all Arabs to unify their political views and come together as one entity (Farah 1963). In fact, 1870 marked the year in which writer Francis Marrash, a prominent Syrian-born scholar, defined the idea of "*umma*" (nation) and how it was different than that of "*waton*" (fatherland). He, among other writers began to develop these new concepts in the region of Greater Syrian (Francis 2019).

With that being said, the first group of immigrants to come to the United States from the Middle East in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were largely comprised of Levantines who did not necessarily have robust conceptions of nationalism with regard to particular nation-states or pan-Arab nationalism. Rather, recent immigrants from the Middle East were more likely to identify with a particular village, local region, linguistic-group, or even religion. Such identities were more salient to this first wave of immigrants than national or pan-national identities.

A later example of this phenomenon was investigated in a study done by Sengstock (1974) in Michigan. Sengstock's study analyzed religious, ethnic, and national identity among Iraqis in Michigan. In this study, Sengstock notes a difference in identity between an "older" generation of Iraqi immigrants and a "newer" generation of Iraqi immigrants. Researchers found that the "older" generation of immigrants tended to identify more with family ties, religion, or the particular area where their family came from. As a result, they typically did not identify themselves as "Arab." Conversely, the "newer" generation of Iraqi immigrants in Michigan were more open to nationalist/pan-Arab ideas and identities. Sengstock suggests that the "older" generation of immigrants might not have exhibited "Iraqi" or "Arab" identities because such identities were not prevalent when those immigrants were living the Middle East. Crucially, this study complicates the assumption that Arab Americans former national identities (e.g. as Iraqi, as Arab) are erased through processes of assimilation in the United States. Instead, it suggests that

national identity amongst some immigrants – such as an “older” generation of Iraqi immigrants – may never have existed to begin with.

While the late 1800s and early 1900s marked a boom in immigration to the United States, particularly for Levantine immigrants from the Ottoman Empire, this wave of immigration was stymied with the masses of regulations and a quota system that severely limited the intake of immigrants from those areas of the world. The Immigration Act of 1924 abruptly ended the majority of immigration from the Middle East and Asia and, in doing so, split apart many families (Ngai 1999). It was put into place in order to severely limit the number of immigrants coming into the United States after World War I, when there was a move toward more isolationist policies. This act also created a quota system to be used for all peoples coming into the United States and set hard limits on population intake by the U.S. It should be noted that the authors of the Quota system were not completely confident in being able to correctly estimate numbers of people. Even with the doubt, the quota system was still established (Ngai 1999).

### *Confusion with Race*

In “The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law” (1999), Ngai examines the effects on immigrants at the time that the act was implemented, ultimately arguing that the Immigration Act of 1924 coupled imagined concepts such as ‘race’ and ‘nationality’ in new ways. As Ngai (73) puts it,

Thus, while the national origins quota system was intended principally to restrict immigration from the nations of southern and eastern Europe and used the notion of national origins to justify discrimination against immigration from those nations, it did more than divide Europe. It also divided Europe from the non-European world.

This act privileged those of European nationality and also created a certain desirability amongst recent and potential immigrants to be considered “white” (Ngai 1999). This desire to be

considered “white,” with the goal of securing the possibility to immigrate and gain full citizenship, fueled a multitude of court cases in the United States about how to categorize various immigrants within an American racial paradigm.

Like immigrants from East Asia and South Asia, Middle Eastern immigrants to the United States had to negotiate these new legal racial paradigms as well as how they were to begin to fit into the American way of life in the wake of the Immigration Act of 1924. Building on Ngai, Gualtieri (2001) gives fascinating insight into the fight experienced by the first Arab immigrants, most of whom came from the Levant: wanting to be considered white in a country that only privileged whites. In her article, “Becoming ‘white’: Race, religion, and the foundations of Syrian/Lebanese ethnicity in the United States” (2001), Gualtieri details a variety of conflicting supreme court cases throughout the early 1900s that spell out why immigrants of the time sought to be legally recognized as ‘white’ : “a basic pattern persisted in the racial prerequisite cases: the ascription of darkness increased the chances of ineligibility, while that of lightness decreased them” (34). Interestingly, she notes that Syrian and Lebanese immigrants in the United States at the time had no recognition of what it meant to be ‘white’ until they saw that people who associated themselves with that distinction were also synonymous with having more privilege. She says, “like other immigrant groups, [Syrians] became white only after they had successfully claimed white ness, and when law and custom confirmed it.” (Gualtieri 2001, 30). With that being said, individuals from other groups found it much more difficult to obtain the legal status of ‘white’. This was especially true for individuals of religions outside that of Christianity, such as Hindus, as these were certainly less familiar to Americans (Gualtieri 2001, 40).

While this first generation of Syrian and Lebanese immigrants actively constructed a “white” identity in the United States, some later generations of Arab Americans took it for granted. In other words, some Arab Americans of later generations identified as ‘white’ because they knew no different (Ajrouch and Jamal 2007). Yet this identification as “white,” originally premised on the religious and cultural proximity of Christian Levantines to Americans of European descent, has become more complicated in a post-9-11 era. According to Ajrouch and Jamal (2007, 864), “Because Muslims feel less welcomed by the dominant culture, it may be that they exhibit a stronger affinity with a minority group (such as non-White) status.”

### *New Immigrants*

It is precisely this changing identity that is the focus of Naber’s (2012) study of Arab Americans in the Bay Area and their daily struggles of accepting the ‘binary of Arabness’. These binaries include: white or nonwhite, Christian or Muslim, or even whether to embrace themselves as a ‘good’ Arab or, what some would call, a ‘bad’ American. She draws connections between recent political events that have given rise to a different idea of Arab culture amongst second-generation, middle-class adults and also discusses the pressures involved in being a ‘good’ Arab and the effects of cultural authenticity on the second-generation Arabs.

Much like the Dallo, Ajrouch and Al-Snih (2008), Naber argues that heteronormative behavior and patriarchal standing create the ideas of Arab culture in the United States. First generation immigrants represent and romanticize the idea of pure Arabness, while the second generation suffers from an adulterated idea of Arabness. In other words, second generation Arabs are considered to be “less” Arab, or perhaps not the right kind of Arab.

A divide between old immigrants and new immigrants could potentially stem from the circumstances surrounding the reasons for immigration, or maybe even the development of fully formed nationalism ideas that now exist in the previously known Ottoman Empire. In Naber's *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism* (2012), she explores the differences between the generational divide and the identities surrounding it. In her ethnographic research, she found that Muslim Americans are more willing to claim their 'Muslim' identity before their 'Arab' identity, writing, "They reconfigure the idea of being "culturally Muslim" or "Arab Muslim" into the idea of being Muslim First, Arab Second" (Naber 2012, 121). She notes that this might be the case because younger individuals see their parents' "Arab" culture as being static and unchanging (Naber 2012, 124). Younger Arab American's that identify as Muslim also tend to use "Muslim First" as a way to step away from the "Arab" culture completely. In the past, we have seen groups that were under intense persecution rise and become deeper and prouder of their beliefs. Perhaps this may explain the new class of Arab Americans.

In what follows, this thesis investigates video oral histories from Americans of Syrian and Lebanese descent and how these individuals choose to identify themselves through ethnicity, religion, nationality, and culture. As a complement to Naber (2012), this project focuses on those who identify as Christian, rather than Muslim and older immigrants, rather than the newer generation.

### **III. METHODS**

This project analyzed a multitude of video recorded oral histories from the Arab American National Museum (AANM), located in Houston, Texas, in order to understand how Americans of Syrian and Lebanese descent understand and express their ethnic, racial, cultural, and national identities, as well as how these various identities intersect with other aspects of their



lives, such as religion. Here it is important to communicate that the even though the committee that recorded these oral histories did not put any restrictions on participation in terms of religion, the vast majority of the interviewees were Christian: 57 out of the 58 interviews (Family 2020). It is highly possible that this is a reflection of overall membership of the Southern Federation of Syrian-Lebanese American Clubs. All interviews took place in English and the Arabic language was only used when naming things such as foods or traditional names for relatives. Of the observed 58 interviews, 30 included more than one interviewee. Most of the time a few family members got together for the interview. With that being said, 57 women participated in interviews along with 37 men, making a total of 94 interviewees across the archive.

The recording process for these oral histories began in 2014 when the AANM launched the Family History Archive of Syrian and Lebanese Families in the American South. Video recordings were taken during the annual Southern Federation of Syrian-Lebanese American Clubs conventions in years 2014 (Houston, TX), 2015 (Memphis, TN), 2016 (Dallas, TX), 2017 (New Orleans, LA), 2019 (Charlotte, NC). According to the AANM, participants were invited to share their family histories and were video recorded in the process (Family 2020). Participants were also encouraged to share documents and photos that related to their family histories.

For this project, I watched and listened to 1,500 minutes of oral histories, spanning across 58 total interviews. I particularly watched for how the interviewed individuals spoke on three things regarding their family history. The first being the way they described their family's story of immigration to the United States. Every single interview included a comprehensive myth of origin. The next thing of critical importance to catch the specific identity terms used by the individuals (e.g. Arab, Arab American, Lebanese, white, Christian) and how these reflected their current identity and perhaps the identity of other Americans of Syrian and Lebanese origin. The

final aspect of the interviews that I looked at was the future of the Syrian or Lebanese American identity: what aspects of their culture the interviewees are continuing to pass down their culture to the next generation, and how they are doing that.

While the timeline of events for immigration has been incredibly simplified here to reflect the most common responses from the interviewees, it is important here to note that biases may exist throughout these oral histories and important information could have easily been left out or modified for a multitude of reasons. In order to use reflections and recollections as sources, the researcher has to understand the three levels of complexity involved: “the initial event or reality, the memory which is a selective, and the interpretive account recalled from memory by the witness/narrator” (Moss 1977, 431). Groups of oral histories must be compared to one another in order to create timelines that are pertinent to the study afoot and researchers must be very critical on the information given by the interviewees (Moss 1977). The following interviews were analyzed with these concerns in mind.

#### **IV. DATA ANALYSIS**

##### Past and Origin Stories

Interviews from this archive often begin with fantastical origin stories that allow the listener to grasp what life was like during the time of immigration. With that being said, it is important to delve into the stories from the past that interviewees present about their family. Interestingly enough, a trend is notable among the interviewees about how their relatives made their way to the United States. In fact, the stories are all quite simplified. These tales are so parallel to one another that it almost seems uncanny. The stories typically go in the following steps: 1. The interviewee’s grandfather travels to the United States. 2. He makes enough money

to bring his wife and children over. 3. He opens a business. 4. He lives happily ever after with the life and family he has created.

Middle-aged interviewee Elizabeth is from Mobile, Alabama and is of Syrian origin. At the beginning of her interview, she talks lovingly about her grandfather and how he made his way to the United States,

The story went that my grandfather saw my grandmother walking down the street [while in Lebanon]. He was in the barber chair, or something and he was so taken with her that he got out of the barber chair and they cut his ear or something like that. Anyway, he followed her and he ended up marrying her and he brought her to this country... They came through Ellis Island on their honeymoon and then they made their way down to Mobile, Alabama. (Elizabeth 2016)

Another example of one of these origin stories can be found in the interview with Laura who is of Lebanese ancestry. When speaking of her grandfather, she states,

My grandfather came over from Lebanon, the village of Hasbaiyya, when he was eighteen years old. He wanted to make a name for himself, he wanted to make some money, and to establish himself in America so he did not bring his girlfriend, my grandmother who was fifteen at the time... He made his way through Ellis Island to Bay Minnet, Alabama where he had some relatives that had already come over. (Laura 2016)

These stories seem glaze over the often-harsh realities of getting to America. Particularly given the difficulty in the immigration process to the United States for Arabs in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Gualtieri 2001). As previously mentioned, these difficulties were compounded by the Quota System in the United States. Under this structure, only a small amount of people of Middle Eastern descent were allowed to successfully be accepted for immigration into the United States. This system put strict limits on the number of spots available for the taking by these individuals that were hoping for a new life (ibid).

Consequently, it is striking that not a single interviewee in the oral history project has anything negative to say about the immigration process that their relatives may have faced. No

one talks about the difficulties of trying to get into the United States under the Immigration Act of 1924 (Ngai 1999). Even though, under this new law, immigration from the Middle East was virtually halted completely and trying to get into the United States became incredibly difficult and, in some cases, almost impossible.

More interestingly, none of the interviewees address the aforementioned court cases pursued by Syrian and Lebanese immigrants to be categorized as “white” under segregation. Considering the sheer amount of cases at hand, it is astonishing that the ideas of race and discrimination are left largely untouched throughout all of the interviews. This is especially interesting because there were so many Lebanese and Syrian that came to the United States and fought to be considered “white” (Gualtieri 2001).

Another trend is quite evident in many of the interviews: the formation of businesses right after migration and how that impacted the views of the descendants of the first immigrants. Joe is an interviewee of Lebanese origin. His grandfather immigrated to the United States in 1916 and again, like many others, began his own business. Joe reminisces about his grandfather for the entirety of the interview, explaining very carefully how he became incredibly wealthy by the discovery of oil and gas on his land, even calling him “the richest Lebanese man.” He then goes on to explain how his grandfather lost every dime for reasons that were completely out of his hands,

He unfortunately lost all of his money in 1929 in the crash. Not because he lost money in the stock market, but because when everything went down, he wouldn’t declare bankruptcy like his other partners. He paid them and their debts... and unfortunately for my grandfather, he died very poor.

Joe ends his interview by saying, “The greatest thing that I learned from my grandfather is integrity counts, wisdom and the fact that he always thought that listening was better than that’s

how you learned, and the great integrity that he imitated was how you do business.” Many of the others providing oral histories echoed these very same sentiments about their relatives in terms of their business acumen and moral uprightness. This seems to speak to feelings amongst interviewees that their relatives were exemplars of successful integration in the United States. Their businesses taking off stands in as the epitome of the American dream, as well as a symbol of economic and cultural integration during a time that garnered immense challenges for many immigrants.

Wissam is another interviewee who speaks about the resilience of the Lebanese spirit. In his interview he says,

The beauty I think being a Lebanese immigrant is, you know this is something my grandfather used to say all the time, you always stand on your feet no matter where you're thrown into the world and that's because you have to have a good attitude and seek education, seek being better, doing better, being a better person and always do your best.

In his statement, Wissam suggests that Lebanese can do anything they set their mind to because of the characteristics that have acquired. Again, this is a way of showing belonging and that Lebanese people can make it anywhere, including the United States.

As in the above excerpts from the interviews, the majority of the interviews express a romanticism of the past and a sense of heroism. For example, many interviewees chose to use words that fondly described their loved ones such as “hard working,” “integrity-driven,” or “honorable,” while others gazed longingly off into the distance as they reminisced, a sense of pride for their loved one shining brightly. These are examples of romanticizing the past and ignoring the struggles that created the individuals the interviewees know so well.

Interviewees might brush aside the struggles of the past for a multitude of reasons, including them not wanting to air dirty laundry, to possibly even them not even knowing the full

truth of what transpired as their loved one struggled to make a new life in the United States. Or perhaps these individuals' intentions were to "perform" a model minority identity, and thus to differentiate themselves from "bad" or "troublesome" immigrants (either in the past or in the contemporary moment). Perhaps brushing aside the struggle of immigrating to the United States might even be a way of proving the legitimacy of their current place in the United States, a way of contemporary belonging.

Nonetheless, these romanticized ideas of the first generation of immigrants persist in every interview, almost to the point where the interviewee insists that the idealized characteristics with which they chose to describe their relatives become part and parcel of claiming Syro-Lebanese identity. As interviewee Gerri states, "We are people like everyone else but we are strong, that's what I like very much about our culture" (Gerri 2019). By this, she seems to suggest that being hardworking is synonymous with Syro-Lebanese, and vice versa.

### Religion as Ethnicity

As stated earlier, the overwhelming majority of the people who sat down for an interview identified themselves directly or indirectly as Christian, although it was never stated under what denomination. Many of them cite religion as something extremely significant to pass down to generations to come. More interestingly, as I will show, it is also clear in the interviews that religious practices provide a mechanism for the preservation of ethnic identity in the context of cultural assimilation.

Interviewee Mr. Murr, was elected as president of the Southern Federation of Syrian Lebanese American Clubs in 2019 and currently sits in office. In his interview, he takes a few moments to talk about his hopes for the federation in the following year. Notably, he addresses

the “secularity” of the federation and mentions that even though there are a lot of Christians in the clubs around the country, there is still room for everyone who has a love for the Levant, including the “Muslim Arab Americans” entering the United States through current immigration processes.

While Mr. Murr explicitly frames the federation as secular and hence open to “Muslim Arab Americans,” his statement seems to stand in contrast to federation’s mission statement which reads as follows,

*Most of our forefathers emigrated from the Levant prior to either Lebanon or Syria becoming nations independent of the Ottoman Empire. Still, as Lebanon is mentioned more than 70 times in the Bible and Syria has an ancient name and identity much older than the nation, most of our members identify their heritage as Lebanese or Syrian. Although nearly all Syrian and Lebanese immigrants at the time of our founding were, and the vast majority of Americans of Lebanese and Syrian heritage remain, Catholic or Orthodox, and devotion to God, along with love of family, are tenets of our culture, our clubs are social clubs that celebrate our heritage and its contributions to the United States without religious affiliation or political stance, and are open to all regardless of creed or politics.*

Given the explicitly Christian background of the federation, it is of no surprise why the majority of the interviewees identify as Christian, as religion has clearly been part of the foundation for the formation of the club from the very beginning. This emphasis on religion suggests that Christianity is still intricately entwined with ethnic identity for members of the Syrian and Lebanese community in the United States.

One such account of people grounding their ethnic identity in their religious identity involves stories about people spending Sunday dinners with their “Teta’s” or “Jedti’s” (both translating to Grandmother in Arabic) and how that became an integral part into the development of their character. In the case of interviewees Mary and her adult son Arthur, this is absolutely the case. Mary was born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi to a Lebanese mother and a white

American father. Throughout the joint interview with her son, she lovingly details her experiences with her mother on Sundays and how their relationship revolved around food.

“She made a feast on Sundays,” Mary noted. “Two meats, kibbeh, fried chicken, a roast, and all the grape leaves, hummus every Sunday.” She also described her mother was the type of person to invite anyone and everyone over for Sunday dinner: “She had every priest in town, every nun in town, all the sisters of Saint Dominic’s would come and everybody that would come through town she would have them” (Mary 2016). Arthur explained that they never really knew who might be in attendance to Sunday dinner.

As her two sons got older, Mary says that she had the pleasure of watching her mother teach her two adult children how to make all of the traditional Lebanese dishes, though interestingly, she says that her mother had no interest in teaching any of the girls. It is at this point that Arthur jumps into the interview to give his two cents. Again, he affectionately talks about his grandmother teaching him how to cook but more importantly, how her lessons have been more applicable than to just food. The interview ends with the two reminiscing on the Sunday dinners of the past and how they, Mary and Arthur, are determined to keep this tradition alive in their households for the many generations to come saying,

but I’ll never forget when one of the priests came over on the boat, it was an Irish priest and mother had him over for Sunday dinner and he wouldn’t eat raw kibbeh. And she said, “Awww its good!” and he just could not imagine raw kibbeh and she won him over!

Arthur chimes in with a smile on his face, “She won over a lot of people and we try to continue that tradition now. Mary adds,

And I cook Sunday dinner. I continue, when [my mother] started getting Alzheimer’s and daddy died, she stopped and I would have her over and my mother in-law over every Sunday and when my son moved back, I had to have him and my brother was around I



had him so, it wasn't anything like momma used to make but I continue that family tradition after having everybody over for Sunday dinner. (Mary 2016)

Like Mary and her son, Jenny is an interviewee from Jackson, Mississippi who is of Lebanese origin. In fact, she looks to be the same age as Mary and highly values religious principles.

Through her interview, Jenny reads from a carefully prewritten script that she has prepared to share on camera. When addressing what she has learned from her grandmother, she states,

Nazera (her grandmother) and Joe left a legacy of two children, four grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren and now there are four great, great grandchildren. They also left their influence. They taught their children to love the Lord, their family, and their country, and those lessons are values that are still held dear by the entire family today. (Jenny 2016)

These are a few examples throughout the archive that have given more insight into the use of ethnic identity as it intertwines with religious identity.

#### Uncertainty with Ethnic Identification

Aside from religious identities, some interviewees categorized themselves in other ways that provided a more inclusive grouping. Gerri is an interviewee with a Syrian background who is older. Her grandfather came to the United States in the early 1900s and eventually brought her father over. Even though he and Gerri's mother and father only had a 5<sup>th</sup> grade education, her father would later go on start a business. Throughout Gerri's entire interview, a sense of cohesiveness of the people from the Levant is prevalent. By this, I mean that she, like many other interviewees used the pronouns 'we' and 'our' when describing Syrian and Lebanese culture and aspects of life. As previously mentioned, she called her people "strong" and used third person pronouns when reflecting. The use of third person pronouns is particularly interesting in that it seemingly lumps together the Syrian and Lebanese community in the United States as a whole.

This lumping together is strengthened by an “us” vs “them” distinction she makes: “us” referring to people of Syro-Lebanese or Arab origin, and “them” referring to both stereotypical white Americans and Americans with other immigrant backgrounds. The characteristics she describes of Arabs and Syro-Lebanese are somehow not present in other Americans in her thought process. Gerri also makes note that Arab women have “drive” (Gerri 2019). Notably, because she fluctuates between the use of Syrian/Lebanese and Arab and uses them interchangeably, it is unclear which of these identities she prioritizes.

Another individual that highlights the complexities of identity is a man by the name of Wissam. Although his interview only lasts for about twenty-four minutes, his interview is full of information. Wissam is an individual that immigrated to the United States at the age of 17 in the 1980s in order to escape the civil war in Lebanon. The way that he so matter-of-factly speaks about his history almost makes it seem more real than any other interview I watched. He begins his interview by giving a bit of history about the Ottoman Empire and how different the Levant was, noting,

Just going back to the old country, a little bit, it’s funny because I think around the time my grandparents, meaning my paternal grandparents, were around it was not Syria, it was not Lebanon. It was the Greater Syria.

He then talks about the origin of his name, noting that his parents were given biblical names, but that he and his siblings were given more traditional Lebanese names in order to not catch the attention of the Ottomans. He states,

A lot of Arabic names have meanings... Our name, Nadra, actually in Arabic means a promise to god and it comes from the word *nidir* and the reason being is around the turn of the century with the Ottoman Empire coming into Lebanon and establishing their dynasty, so to speak. Unfortunately, people were being killed because of their religious affiliation. And our name at the time, our last name, was Andraoos, or Andrews, so that was very Christian and very prominent. Actually, three of my grandfather’s siblings died

and went to what they called *sukhira*, which is what they called exiled through the Ottoman Empire.

Wissam goes on by classifying himself as American, saying,

It's kind of bitter sweet talking about this right now because it's bringing up a lot of memories for me. They are good ones, but at the same time you know as much *as I love the United States and I'm an American definitely but, there's that Lebanese part of me that always yearns for things to be better, you know things for my countrymen or of my origins to, you know shine.*

Later, however, he says,

I've always identified with being Lebanese American, *definitely Lebanese first, then American.* And that is to no disrespect to my adoptive country. It is sometimes very difficult when you move from one place to another and you have a different sounding name.

At first, this statement appears to be contradictory to his first because he began the interview by prioritizing his American identity and then later in the interview, he seems to prioritize his Lebanese identity. In other words, within the interview, he seems to alternate between different ways of stacking his various identities: sometimes it's American first and Lebanese second, and other times it's Lebanese first and American second. By doing this, he might be making a distinction between his cultural identity and his legal status, two things that can exist independently of one another. Meaning, an individual can immigrate to another country and obtain legal rights in that country by becoming a citizen while still holding onto the cultural identity from which they came. Notably, at no point in the interview does he mention an "Arab" or "Arab American" identity.

In the final minutes of his interview, he gives an anecdote about how he understands his racial identity,

When I registered to college... I had never been asked the question about 'what is your race?'. And there was a question on race and I looked down and, I was young at the time... I went to college at the age seventeen and I was like, I went up to the registrar and

I was like, true story, and I said to her, ‘what do you mean race?’. I said, ‘there’s this white, black, hispan- it was latino at the time, other.’ I said, ‘What does that mean? We are all human.’ Again, being seventeen and not lived in this country and no understanding the racial relations, just like we have ethnic groups relations in Lebanon or have you.

Wissam further recounts, “[The registrar] said ‘Well where do you come from?’ And I said ‘my origins are from Lebanon.’ She said ‘great, you just go ahead and check ‘white’”]. Wissam finishes his interview by noting that this distinction was incredibly upsetting to him and that he would hope people of the Levant would band together to be considered as their own. He says, “It is so important for us to be one family, i.e., not to distinguish between whether you are Muslim, Christian, Druze, Jewish, etc...” Like Gerri, Wissam expresses a broad sense of Lebanese American identity that can include individuals from different backgrounds, including different religious backgrounds.

Wissam’s frustration with American racial categories, specifically the category “white,” echoes Gualtieri’s argument that ‘whiteness’ is a western concept that made no sense in Lebanon (Gualtieri 2001). Further, Wissam’s unwillingness to easily categorize himself as white also echoes Ajrouch (2007) and Naber (2012), who both suggest that newer Arab immigrants to the United States are less likely to call themselves ‘white’. This is particularly notable given that Wissam is Christian and does not articulate a strong “Arab” identity.

Interestingly enough, the aforementioned president of the Southern Federation of Syrian-Lebanese American Clubs, Mr. Murr, does explicitly address the term “Arab American” in his interview. But he does not use it to describe himself or other Syro-Lebanese Americans. Rather, he uses it to describe *other* more recent immigrants from the Middle East. Indeed, whereas other interviewees like Gerri distinguished between ‘us Arabs’ vs. ‘everyone else’, Mr. Murr distinguishes between ‘us’ Syrian and Lebanese immigrants of yesterday vs ‘Arab American’ immigrants of today, who he nonetheless positively describes as “hardworking” and

“industrious.” In other words, he puts a distinct wall between the individuals who are coming into the country today (“Arab Americans” who are mostly Muslim) versus the descendants of immigrants who came in the early 1900s (“Syrian and Lebanese Americans” who are mostly Christian).

### What to Pass Down?

Finally, something incredibly important that is addressed in nearly every interview and a key aspect to answering the main question of this project: how is culture passed from one generation to the next? This brief final section is based on what the interviewee believes they have received from the prior generation and what they believe is an integral enough part of the culture to pass onto the next generation. We have already seen in the previous passages how important religion is. But more generally speaking, most of the interviews also include desires to pass down various types of music, food, dance, art, literature, and the like. However, some individuals that partook in the oral history project went a bit further in detail about what they would like to pass on.

Charlotte is an individual that is of Lebanese descent. Like many others, her father came to the United States and started his own business. Charlotte grew up speaking the Lebanese dialect of Arabic and through her time in Ohio lost it. She recounts,

Unfortunately, becoming Americanized, you lose a lot of the interaction with the community as far as speaking and understanding. I lost a lot of my ability to speak. As time went by, I learned to cherish that more. (Charlotte)

While spoken Arabic is one element of culture that Charlotte identifies as being passed down to her, she also talks a lot about her longing to go back to her village and how not visiting it left a

hole in her heart. Luckily, a chance was waiting around the corner as she was able to participate in a sort of birthright trip that is organized through the Syrian-Lebanese American Club. During such trips, individuals are able to explore Lebanon and visit the villages of their ancestry.

Charlotte explains that she went on one of these trips to “find a missing piece of herself.” She also goes on to mention that she took a piece of a house that her grandfather helped build in her family’s village. “It’s just a stone to a lot of people,” she admits, “but to me it’s symbolic of connecting to my grandfather, my great grandfather, and to all the people that lived there and suffered and migrated to this country to give me a better life.” She concludes that she will pass down this stone to each coming generation, a material reminder of her family’s Lebanese identity.

Charlotte’s strong focus on her Lebanese identity exemplifies a trend in many of the interviews to prioritize their Lebanese (and even village level) identity over a broader and more inclusive “Arab American” identity. Somewhat curiously, this pattern of identification seems to have more similarities to the first wave of Arab American immigrants often coming from the Ottoman Empire who tended to eschew an “Arab” identity, than it does to the later wave of Arab American immigrants who came during the period of pan-Arabism (Sengstock 1974).

## **V. CONCLUSION**

The findings of my research on expressions of identity amongst Christian Syro-Lebanese Americans complements Naber’s (2012) research on expressions of identity amongst Muslim Arab Americans. Her research looks at Muslim Arab American identity through the eyes of individuals that increasingly classify themselves as Muslim, as opposed to Arab. Her work emphasizes post 9-11 sentiments and the reasons Muslim Arab Americans may choose to identify by their religion first, rather than ethnicity, due to the intensification of Islamophobia

and the desire for religious solidarity amongst Muslims. In such a context, what happens to other Americans of Middle Eastern descent that do not fit within the confines of the Islam, such as Americans of Syrian and Lebanese backgrounds who predominantly identify as Christian?

Interestingly, while Naber found that Americans of Arab descent who consider themselves to be Muslim are more likely to identify first with their religion, this project has found that Americans of Arab descent who consider themselves Christian are more likely to identify first with their specific ethnicity, i.e. Syro-Lebanese. In fact, as we saw with Charlotte, sometimes this is even narrowed, all the way down to the village level. In other words, both Muslim Arab Americans and Christian Arab Americans seem to display a slow trend of moving away from prioritizing “Arab” identity. In one case, individuals are moving towards prioritizing religious identification, in the other case individuals are moving towards prioritizing local/regional ethnic identification.

Secondly, this project has also found that for individuals in this second group, being an American of Syro-Lebanese origin is strongly connected to identifying as Christian. While most of the interviewees did not explicitly identify as Christian, their descriptions of what it means to be Syrian and Lebanese were largely infused with Christian practices, such as making kibbeh for Sunday dinners.

Understanding the identity of individuals whose families have immigrated to the United States can be a tricky task. However, once the task has been completed, a better environment can be created that is more inclusive and that chooses to embrace diversity. This project provides an interesting look into one particular community of Americans of Arab descent and gives a broader overview of the complexities embedded in the identities that make up these individuals.

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