Selection of the Spouse and the Network of Matrimonial Alliances Among the Maronites in Mount Lebanon Between 1830 and 1914:

A Study of Three Cases

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In the prevailing social, economic, political and religious conditions prior to the First World War, the choice of spouses among the Maronite community in Mount Lebanon was strictly a family matter. As such, it occurred within a vast network comprising the cousins on the father's side as a first choice, but also cousins on the mother's side and members of the village's families or of neighboring villages – the network was thus both socially and geographically limited. The configuration of these socially and geographically-confined groups reveals that endogamy was certainly a priority, but that exogamy was not excluded; indeed, the preferential choices of parallel cousins on the father's side[1] as spouses that characterize Arab societies in general does form an archetype but without confining it to the family realm exclusively. Although great importance was given to the offspring or lineage and to the social class of the marriageable individuals, this did not exclude the consideration of other lineages' "belongings, knowledge and power".[2]

This article highlights the choice modalities in the selection of spouses among the Maronite community in 19th century Mount Lebanon. It also reviews three families' network of matrimonial alliances in this region during the same period. The reconstitution of this network is based on archives such as church registers, family trees, biographies drawn by family members as well as oral history.

I. Selection of Spouses Among the 19th Century Maronite Community

When a boy reached the age of fourteen or fifteen, a family assembly was formed to choose a suitable wife for him. This assembly grouped his father, his father's father, his uncles and cousins on his father's side. The young female "candidate" had to belong to the circle of marriageable women, majawiz, traditionally defined by the family. Most often, she had to be 12 to 13 years old, having just reached the marriageable age.

A. The Family Assembly

In the socio-economic and political context of 19th century Mount Lebanon, marriage was a family matter, especially given the fact that the main protagonists were too young to take such an important decision on their own. The male members of the son's family chose the future wife or gave their approval in case of a request, and negotiated the amount of allowances. This assembly assessed the advantages that the family could draw from such an alliance; indeed, the selection criteria were mainly based on family interests, which varied from one social class to another.

Although endogamy was preferred, it was not applied as a general rule.[3] Sometimes the choice did not go beyond the parallel cousins on the father's side. In this case, the father of the girl, present at the family assembly, would give his approval right away. When the girl belonged to a wider circle of relatives, a trustee would be sent to consult with the parents.[4] In case of an agreement, a more official series of procedures would be initiated, and in the opposite case, the case would be closed. Negotiations were conducted in the utmost confidentiality so that none of the two parties would be prejudiced. Indeed, the slightest misunderstanding revealed in the family could harm the reputation of the party that is refused, and as a result could jeopardize its future.[5]

It so happened that sometimes the assembly would choose a young woman belonging to another family. When that happened, the young man's family had to

officially ask the girl's father for her hand. The latter would then discuss the matter with his own family members, who had nubile sons. If one of them expressed the wish to marry one of his sons to the girl, he enjoyed the priority. It was only if no one wanted the girl in the family that she was given to a stranger.

B. Places to Socialize or to Meet
Young Maronites of rural origin respected the marriage model as defined by their parents. The distribution by sexes of the social space reinforced the codification of behaviors, reducing thereby any chances of encounter. Indeed, the rural sociability developed in spheres that were differentiated according to sexes, so that young marriageable men and women had very little chances of meeting. A strict separation of both sexes in both public and private spaces prevented them from meeting. At church, women sat on the back benches, while the men withdrew towards the end of the mass from the back door. The women never participated in the village festivities, and did not even go to them. Dancing with men was strictly forbidden, and at home, they were not allowed to appear before a foreign visitor. They could not talk to a stranger even when they went to fetch water from the fountain.[6]

C. What About Love?
In most Arab and Mediterranean societies, girls had to remain virgin until their wedding day. The society of Mount Lebanon was no exception to this rule: emotions and sexual relations were a sacrosanct taboo, especially for young women.

Hence, prearranged marriages, totally devoid of feelings, were a common habit. The young fiancés barely knew each other: "During the Chehabi reign, parents were still the ones to choose their children's fiancés. They were naturally driven by their children's and their own interests; but in most cases the fiancé did not know his wife-to-be or had any liking for her. Children who had great respect for their parents were compelled to abide by their desires."[7] The ignorance in which the fiancés were left prevented any nascent love feelings. A nuptial song from the second half of the 19th century expresses this:

"Oh dear: oh my betrothed, roses are melting in your chest.
Oh dear: it has been one or two years since I got engaged to you (and)
I still do not know your name
Oh dear: Your name is the golden chain in the jewelry box
Oh dear: Win the one who buys you and lose the one who sells you lou, lou, lou..."[8]

Similarly, some extracts of poems written in the spoken dialect (zajal) reveal a great modesty when it comes to love feelings. The halo of caution surrounding passion proves that it was not tolerated by society: "Oh Sannine Mountain! There you stand unmoved in your place!
No feeling, no cry of the heart moves you;
Move out of my way as I have a loved one behind me,
May God move you, or I will do so myself"[9]

If the above poem, ascribed to Emir Bechir II, expresses more war deeds than feelings, it brings to light the importance of the obstacles separating lovers.

In this society where family interests held the overriding priority and where young people hardly saw one another, there was barely any place for love. One had to be bold to express love, especially when it came against family plans. "There is a story in Deir El Qamar, which recounts the story of a young man of the Boustany family who loved a girl of the Kik family. When he told his parents about his marriage plans, they opposed him, along with all their relatives, as they had already chosen for him one of their own members. When he insisted, they shut him up in a cave designed to imprison family members who stood up against the common will. One night, he forced the prison's door lock and ran away with his beloved and they were never seen again...".[10] Young people had to comply with their families' demands. Disobedience of family will or demands to choose freely one's spouse were severely repressed, and those obstinate ones faced isolation and expulsion.

IV. Three Case Studies of the Choice of Spouses and Networks of Matrimonial Alliances
The three families selected for this study come from two villages located at the same altitude from either side of the Nahr el Kalb river: Shailé and Cornet el Hamra. The river's deep valley separated the cazas of Kesrouan and Qteh (Metn). The abolition of the feudal system in Mount Lebanon in 1845 did not have the same impact on both villages, despite their geographical proximity. In Shailé, the power of the machayekh Khazen family, important landowners, over the farmers (Kaï and Chemali) did not weaken. The network of matrimonial alliances between these families did not mix different social classes together, even though they were inscribed in the same territory. In Cornet el Hamra on the other hand, several branches of the Tohme family, who were silk traders, achieved an astounding social progress and were freed from the authority of the Abillama emirs who no longer had any direct control over them. Consequently, the network of matrimonial alliances went beyond its traditional limits to reach social strata that had been out of reach until then. The configuration of networks of matrimonial alliances changed at the end of the First World War, as Mount Lebanon's economic, social and political pattern was turned upside down. The social, economic and political conditions of these three

families were different. They determined the choice of the spouse, and thereby the shape of the matrimonial alliance networks.

The social position of the Khazen family, the territorial distribution of its offshoots and of its kin, as well as its geographic mobility, are all factors that shaped its networks of matrimonial alliances. Indeed, the machayekh in the 19th century only married people of the same social status, and were heavily bent on endogamy. Exogamy was in fact quite exceptional. Thus, a Khazen would marry another Khazen, or in lesser degree, other members of machayekh families from Kesrouan, such as Dahdah or Hobeish. They avoided any marriages with farmers. Any unions between individuals of different social classes could jeopardize the authority of the machayekh and broach their heritage. In fact, their geographical isolation, the separation of sociability spaces as well as their frequent moves between their winter and summer houses narrowed the chances of encounters between young people of two different classes.

Medium and small landowners, the Chemali family married according to a network of matrimonial alliances that only slightly varied from one generation to another. The stability of their choices was maintained by a regular economic situation. The Chemali family chose their spouses from within the family. But they mostly chose people belonging to other peasant families in the region, as access to the Khazen family's marriageable members was strictly prohibited. A review of the marriages that took place within the Chemali family, taken from the men's side, reveals a strong tendency among each lineage to keep women within the family. It seems that the Chemali family resented giving away their daughters to "strangers", whether from the village or the neighborhood. When they did not marry each other, the Chemali family chose spouses from the meridian Kesrouan first. Proximity and geographic mobility represent decisive factors in this respect. But a set of rules seems to have governed the choice of spouses from a different family. Matrimonial exchanges between different families adhered to the respective social dynamic of these families. Artisans, farmers and small farmers chose spouses from the same status as their own. But the social progress of an individual or a group of the Chemali family would lead them to choose spouses belonging to peasant families who had experienced a similar socio-economic path.

The Tohme family was formed of six branches in the 19th century. The social evolution of four of them allowed these to reach the ranks of the new bourgeoisie of Mount Lebanon. This social promotion altered their traditional network of matrimonial alliances, which was similar to those of small or medium landowners. The selection of spouses became therefore more selective. In the first place, these four branches retracted from the two other branches, so that marriages with the latter became increasingly rare, expressing a will to jealously preserve a harshly acquired social status. However, social reproduction was not the only cause governing this family's endogamy. Those families that had recently gotten richer or that were seeking social promotion sought to take advantage of the social acquisitions of those families that had already achieved a social ascension. The network of exogamic weddings also widened. The social progress of the Tohme family altered the circle of marriageable people (majawiz). The Tohme family went on choosing spouses from within the village, but their choice became more selective. It became confined to members of families who had already achieved social promotion. But any man recently promoted socially sought to contract for himself or for his relatives alliances that offered social benefits. Some aimed at the region's notables. Others broke down the barrier to the Abillama emirs, which had remained securely closed until then. The family's network of matrimonial alliances moved beyond the traditional geographical setting, to comprise families from the Kesrouan and Baabda regions, that had followed a similar path or that had gotten richer due to emigration. This change of matrimonial alliances network imposed new selection criteria. Consequently, any marriage that harmed the reputation of the Tohme family was severely punished; a case in point is that of a girl, who ran away with a small farmer (mrabi') around 1800, and her family responded by forbidding all their family members to have any contact with her.

The selection of spouses among the Maronite families in Mount Lebanon in the 19th century adhered to the family's will. It was confined to a logic dictated by social, economic and political interests that mapped out the network of matrimonial alliances within a determined social and geographical perimeter. Therefore, the Khazen, Chemali and Tohme families married a parallel cousin on the father's side, whenever the totality of family heritage was threatened. They married preferably with a cousin on the father's side, and at a lesser degree, with a cousin on the mother's side, or with someone who lived in the nearby region. Moreover, homogamy was a dominant feature among the Khazen and Chemali families. If the first only married machayekh like themselves, the Chemalis often chose spouses from families who experienced similar conditions. The ascending social mobility allowed the Tohme family to choose spouses from higher social classes.

**Translated by
Lynn Maalouf**

EndNotes

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2. Jean Cuisenier, Logique et symbolique des approaches, in *Le prix de l'alliance en Méditerranée*, under the supervision of John PERISTIANY, CNRS ed., Marseilles, 1989, p.40.
3. AOUAD Ibrahim, *Le droit privé des maronites au temps des Emirs Chihab (1697-1841)*, Geuthner, Paris, 1933, p. 153.
4. MichelFeghali, *La famille maronite au Liban*, Maisoneuve, Paris, 1936, p.10.
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7. Ibrahim Aouad, op.cit, pp. 153-154.
8. Anis Freiha, *al qariyat al loubnaniya hadara fi sabil as zawal*, Beirut, Dar An Nahar, 1980, p. 172.
9. Jabbour Abdelnour, *Etude sur la poésie dialectale au Liban*, Beirut, Lebanese University, 1982, p.27.
10. Chekri Boustany, *Deir el Qamar vers la fin du XIXème siècle*, Beirut, Lebanese University, 1969, p.117-118.