

# Perpetual Rebirth: The Fortification of Insular Druze Unity through Transcendent Cultural Production



Maysar Sarieedine\*

Lebanese American University, America

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\*Corresponding author: Maysar Sarieedine, Maysar Sarieedine, Lebanese American University, Beirut, Lebanon, American, Tel: + 009613 333348, Email: maysar@gmail.com

## Introduction

“To think of cycles of production as maintainers, same-makers, rather than introducers of expansion and difference seems absurd. Indeed, we tend to view ideologically insular communities, prototypically religious ones, as resistant to progression precisely insofar as their ideological representation is immutable, self-referential in its own sense of legitimacy, producing little that is new. Arab village Druze communities are a particularly unique case of this phenomenon due to the esoteric nature of their ideological knowledge. Information is undoubtedly transferred, but through secretive channels designed to exclude the bulk of community members, with said secrecy garnering public acceptance precisely as legitimate. The information is encoded, in a way, much like our DNA. And like our genetic information, it must be passed on through carrier vessels of some sort. In his study of communal ideologies in Druze village culture, Oppenheimer [1] described the process: Younger and middle-aged men are, for the most part, uninitiated and are largely unconcerned with religious questions. Their knowledge of their religion is often restricted to the vaguest notions; although they are all aware of the doctrine of reincarnation, they generally seem to pay little attention to it. If asked about religion, they customarily say that religious affairs and secret knowledge are safely in the hands of the old men and, to some extent, of the women. (p. 625)

Thus, by sequestering information along lines of gender and seniority, the Druze religious ideology allocates thoroughly enclosed, specially allocated vessels of cultural transmission. This poses some advantages to self-preservation: encoded information is immune to scrutiny, and without scrutiny, its dissection and eventual breakdown is more difficult, which is another obstacle to progression. However, the esoteric nature of Druze religious knowledge also potentially obstructs the development of internal variance comparable to the slow progression of other insular ideologies; not only due to the sacred secrecy preserving it, but to the

scarcity of gatekeepers of that information who can develop its discourse and interpretation. To extend the biological metaphor, when encoded information is not subject to variation, the inbred nature of the exchange, the same-on-same, makes it vulnerable to the proliferation of whatever interior weaknesses it holds, especially in the face of external challenges, as an inevitably shifting socioeconomic cultural scape demands; thus the presumed need for progression.

In this case, the internal weaknesses of the Druze society unfortunately only bypass men. Oppenheimer [1] wrote, Women are expected to be religious all their lives. There is an explicit feeling among Druze men, shared with others in the Middle East, that Druze religiosity is supremely appropriate to the ideals of womanhood; namely, women should be modest, chaste, and passive. (p. 627) Passivity is key, as the old men are privileged with active roles of religious maintenance, arbiters of information as they are, while the women are passive receptors of those roles. The old men initiated into religious knowledge play the roles of leaders, decision-makers, and resolvers of disputes [1].

With social roles of maintenance so unevenly split, there seems to be a marked dichotomy between the tight-knit unity of Druze communities and the skewed power differentials in place. A curious question, then, given this unique structure, would be how their power structures retain themselves with such unity, and how their religious traditions remain upheld even with geographic distance between communities and in the face of environmental change. In short, what socio cultural structures work around the quandary of strength, given rigid modes of cultural transmission? Comparable to asexual reproductive processes, the transmission of copied information in ideologically insular communities is tautological with reduced variance. Without variance, progression is staggered at best, most notably in the spaces it is needed most, namely in the furthering of socioeconomic interests, in social justice development. Public

consciousness plays the role of steering cultural transition in most religious communities, with tangible ideological teaching playing the role of nurturing religious sentiment. In Druze communities, however, we have the opposite:

It is within these categories of men-the young, the household heads, and a few politically and economically dominant old men-that we find the least outward concern with religion. They are mostly uninitiated and many wear the secular headdress, smoke tobacco, and behave in a manner stressing an ideal of aggressive virility which is quite contrary to the behavior prescribed for religious initiates. [1] Oppenheimer described the bulk of male community behaviors using terms oppositional to the language of modesty and chastity reserved for describing women, with the dichotomy described not in terms of differing roles, but in terms of obligation and lack thereof, of freedom of outward expression for men and normative expectation for women. Tannen [2] provided a useful lens for examining this further level of gender sequestering. She claimed that no woman is ever to be found in an “unmarked” role, capable of presenting herself or moving through social spheres without non-neutral tag, identifier, or role (p. 410). Everything means something; women have no neutral clothing or hairstyles that blend into the background without scrutiny like men’s suits and men’s short hair do, as it all bears value judgment, even the lack of makeup bears a value judgment. Even in linguistic reference and naming, as he and him are considered the default gender case, whereas women are referred to as Mrs. Husband names [2]. Similarly, in Druze communities, they are wife-of-so-and-so or daughter-of-so-and-so (Oppenheimer, 1980). However, Tannen [2] noted the biological nature of marking works differently.

She wrote I have never been inclined toward biological explanations of gender differences in language, but I was intrigued to see Ralph Fas old bring biological phenomena to bear on the question of linguistic marking . . . Fasold stresses that language and culture are particularly unfair in treating women as the marked case because biologically it is the male that is marked. While two X chromosomes make a female, two Y-chromosomes make nothing . . . the Y chromosome doesn’t “mean” anything unless it is attached to a root form—an X chromosome (p. 411)

The Druze system of role allocation and cultural transmission takes into account the male biological markedness that Tannen [2] believed is ironically unexpressed in social roles. Men are able to keep their freedoms precisely insofar as they are marked with value due to the roles of maintenance that women play. There is even a comparable one-to-one correlate strongly nurtured within Druze marital norms. Anderson [3] documented the Law of Personal Status initiated into the Lebanese penal code, reflecting Druze marital roles. Articles 10 and 11 state that, unlike in Islam, polygamy is forbidden, as is re-marriage of the same divorced spouse [3]. Bonded pairs must form lasting connections without intermittency to ensure lasting markedness, and if they do separate, they must behave like the separation of gametes never to recombine. Maintenance is key and with the lack of public ideological consciousness, the incorporation of women into bonds with men plays an ever-stronger role. This incorporation runs deep within Druze communities, far

deeper than fixed temporal gender roles and interpersonal bonds, as it runs as deep as the transmission of genetic information. Druze ideology has subsumed the cultural into the genetic quite literally, with a core doctrine of rebirth and transmigration reifying sentiment of unity. Individuals are important insofar as they are nodes in a giant web of cultural production, looping in and out, carrying themselves forward through transmission of cultural information as we all do, but even beyond that, with the belief that they will die to be reborn again within the community over and over again, without disengagement.

The doctrines of rebirth and transmigration in question are crucially public information, replacing the need for mass initiation into religious knowledge by granting access to the knowledge through blood, a temporally. It is permanence with the strength of transcendence, with the persistence of genetic codes. Even the requirement for genetic variance to avoid inbred weakness is covered by doctrine: we said rebirth, but we also said transmigration. As Oppenheimer [1] related, the dying are told they are on the cusp of rebirth, most likely into not only another patrilineal group, but perhaps a distant village. This knowledge requires a disengagement (a freedom to move away from their household roles) for men as they near death, so that they may free themselves for the reproduction, strengthening the Druze community altogether [1] Much like genetic weaknesses being weeded out, rifts and divisions between Druze groups cannot last when they are “born into each other’s houses” [1]. Unfortunately, this transcendent community strength relies on the entrenchment of women in powerlessness. Tannen [2] acknowledged the “root form” of the default female role, but the Druze matrilineal analogy is apt in expressing a further dimension; without the paternal contribution of the second X chromosome, the default cannot be default [2].

The women cannot be women. The social acknowledgment of girls as the daughters-of-so-and-so explicitly obscures female being in terms of matrilineal membership and they must be concerned with maintenance of lineage beyond the temporal bounds of themselves. [1] wrote: Women’s expected concern with no temporal affairs is also consistent with their lack of temporal power and autonomy and with their ambivalent status with regard to group membership.’ Women are born into one group, which is controlled by their fathers and brothers and, at a more general level, by their fathers’ fathers, fathers’ brothers, and other men of the patrilineage. In most cases, and in spite of a preference for agnatic endogamy, women are married into another group, at least at the domestic level, which is controlled by their fathers-in-law, husbands, and brothers-in-law. But while they do not remain fully integrated in their natal group and involved in its continuity, as most men do, they are also never fully and irrevocably incorporated into their husbands’ group. (p. 627)

More notable than a woman’s initial belonging to her paternal group is the permanence of that belonging. Initiation into a husband’s household is not permanent, even in death. Oppenheimer [1] noted that while Druze women shift from being called “daughter of so-and-so” to “wife of so-and-so,” upon her death a married woman will be again marked in terms of her father’s family, referred to

as “daughter-of-so-and-so” once more (p. 628). Even in rebirth, doctrine holds that women do not experience transmigration as men do: Women can never, in the course of their lives, be really liberated from some such ambiguous affiliation to prepare themselves for death and rebirth in the way that men are supposed to do . . . Since women also, in most cases, have little or no independent property, they remain bound to the temporal groups of men whom they serve and who support them . . . Her body is returned to the starting point of her current incarnation, her natal patrilineage [1].

Producer becomes product. Ego is erased, and largely with it women’s ability for self-determination beyond patrilineal bounds. With stability comes hierarchy and with hierarchy comes inescapable power differentials. These power differentials must be inescapable for the producer-product to work, for the tight-knit Druze unity to be maintained. As Oppenheimer [1] noted, “the publicly known doctrine of transmigration of souls is a powerful obstacle to apostasy-if one’s soul is fundamentally and immutably Druze, even the choice of another faith cannot alter that identity” (p. 627). The confounded beauty of a doctrine with self-proclaimed ideological transcendence is that its power is purely conceptual. The very concept of a mere choice to be not-what-you-are (that is, not Druze), is stripped from all power by making it internally inconsistent, given transcendent rebirth. As producer-product, one is part of a grand machination where individual choice becomes irrelevant and non-meaningful. This conceptual confounding is sufficient to ensure the propagation of behavior roles without choice, hence the passive, subdued roles of women. Should the conceptual binding not take hold in some minds, community members can be purged so that their transgressions out of bounds will not be contagious.

Faraj-Falah [4] described processes of excommunication: Certain people were excommunicated if they entered a house where a wedding was being held, or in a hall that held weddings. There are parents who are excommunicated because they let their girls go to mixed schools. (This was more common in the past. Today, it rarely occurs because Druze schools are attended by girls and boys.) Other parents were excommunicated if they allowed their daughters to go out of the village to study if the village did not have a school. (p. 248) Reasonable or not, rules set delineating the spaces women and girls might fill as vessels of religiosity and modest expression must be abided by for individuals to merit inclusion. Conversely, yet in parallel, the purity of unity is also preserved by keeping outsiders out. Raufman [5] presented a Druze retelling of the folktale *The Wolf and the Kids*, modified to reflect Druze cultural values. In the traditional story, the kids will not let the knocking Wolf in unless

he can identify himself as their mother by imitating her voice. In the traditional tale, the defining factor for letting this outsider in rests purely upon the mother goat’s individual qualities and her authority. In a culture far-removed from appreciating the egotism in free individual expression for woman, it is unsurprising that the tale has shifted. Mother’s belonging is erstwhile, as she goes back to her patrilineal house in divorce or in death, while her children stay in her husband’s. The Druze telling reflects true measures of belonging, meant to exclude spurious outsiders masquerading some of the Druze emblem colors.

Raufman [5] shared the Druze version of the story: One day, the Ghoulah followed the goat, and when she had gone the Ghoulah entered the goat’s backyard, knocked on the door, disguised her voice, and said to the kids: ‘I’m your mother, the goat; open the door.’ The kids peeked out and replied: ‘You are not our Mother. Our Mother is green.’ The Ghoulah went away and painted herself green. The day after, the goat went off to find food, as usual. The Ghoulah returned, disguised her voice and said to the kids: ‘I am your Mother. I am green. Please open the door.’ The kids peeked out and replied: ‘You are not our Mother. Our Mother is yellow.’ The Ghoulah went away and painted herself yellow. The next day she came to the goat’s house, disguised her voice and said to the kids: ‘I am your Mother. I am yellow. Please open the door.’ The kids peeked out and replied: ‘You are not our Mother. Our Mother is red.’ (p. 251) Will Druze women cease to be primarily green, yellow, or red? Will they instead define themselves in accordance with qualities of their own autonomous making, instead of being links in a perpetually transmitted chain? Ideological transcendence must be transcended [6,7].

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