



The Arab Families Working Group

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Anthropological research has shown that rituals reveal both the vitality of human creativity and agency as well as the dominance of structural constraints. Although the application of ritual analysis to Asian, African, American, and European cultures has promoted appreciation of the complexity of social structure and particularly identity development, very little research has been conducted on ritual behavior in the Arab world and in particular in Lebanon. As a result, contemporary Arab culture is often deemed incapable of generating meaning indigenously and coping with changes in social systems effectively. Bearing on this long-standing gap in the anthropological and Middle East Area Studies knowledge base, this paper offers preliminary findings from research on birthday parties as rites of passage in Lebanon. These findings suggest that the study of birthday rituals among Lebanese elite may have important implications for the fields of anthropology and Middle Eastern studies because they engage two largely overlooked realms to deal with some of the most puzzling features of contemporary Arab cultural action.

More pointedly, studying birthday parties in Lebanon allows us to grasp the construction of taste and identity in culturally specific but structurally *ambiguous* settings (Wedeen, 1999; Scheid, 2005). As collective social processes where meaning is interpreted and generated (Turner, 1969; Bauman, 1977; Handelman, 1998; Parkin, 1996; Schechner, 2003), rituals of birthday celebration are important sites for understanding how people come to perceive themselves and their society. Therefore, it is worthy of note that in the course of the post-war years (1993 to the present), the common model for birthday parties has changed radically. These changes should be understood in relation to shifting economic, social, and cultural systems, and particularly in relation to the development of new understandings of community membership and individual responsibilities (Birnbaum-Carmeli, 2001; Shamgar-Handelman & Handelman, 1991). Indeed, studying birthday parties offers a uniquely accessible means for tracking the cultivation of subjectivity and taste as both socially distinctive (Bourdieu, 1984) and connective (Joseph, 1993 & 1994).

Students of birthday parties in other cultures have noted that age is discovered by party-goers as a meaningful category that informs future action and, in particular, relation to the state (Birnbaum-Carmeli, 2004; Klein, 1978). Based on the preliminary fieldwork conducted for this proposed project, I would expand that argument to say that for prepubescents in Beirut today, several of other categories are discovered, in addition, as having inescapable but unclear meaning: gender, socio-economic status, educational skill, bravery, conformity, and spatio-temporal orientation. These are properly thought of, following participants' own experiences and expressions of them, not as "categories" but as "virtues," or the manifestation of ethics in specific practices and stances. It is through mastering and manifesting certain virtues that social actors become the people they believe they should. Findings from the participant-observation fieldwork already conducted suggest that the social messages generated in birthday party contexts are paradoxical in forming party-goers as both local and global: they are affirmed as creatures who act in networks of friends and Beiruti institutions but are also heading rapidly for a consumerist, West-based lifestyle (to use emic terms). One can find features of multiple identity-negotiation in the invitations sent out, the sorts of guests invited, the

site selected, the ambience (music and décor) created, gifts presented, food (and especially cake) served, activities organized, attendants summoned, language used, recording undertaken, and behavior enacted. All these elements may be assumed to disclose the dynamism inherent to a set of children being raised to have a childhood in Beirut but an adulthood who knows where.