

# Around Boundaries: Everyday Interaction in a Lebanese Town<sup>1</sup>

Akimitsu IKEDA

Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

## I. Introduction

In Lebanon three major religions (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) are believed and they are subdivided into eighteen confessional groups<sup>2</sup>. This fact gives us impression that the country has a wide variety of social boundaries. Interestingly, inhabitants of the study town in Lebanon avoided the situation in which such boundaries are manifested in verbal or embodied sense. This paper argues based on ethnographic account that when they avoid collective, confessional boundaries they behave as if they behave “natural”. Also I will point out that such persistence in “naturalness” can be observed more mundane aspect of life other than confessional identity. In other words, even though the phenomenon discussed below partially appears as if it is highly “confessional”, the paper points out that it is actually only part of wider realm of everyday interaction. Vernacular way of doing can take “confessional” form in one way or “non-confessional” form in another. This changeability is the theme of this paper.

## II. Situational Identity in the Middle East

When situationally changeable boundaries in Middle Eastern Societies has been focused, operational changeability was emphasised (Eickelman 2002, 148-150).

Yuzo Itagaki, one of such researcher, tried to propose an ideal type of situational boundaries of Middle Eastern societies by the term “dynamics of identity complex”. He puts more emphasis on individual rather than social categories such as tribes, ethnic groups, and religions. Rather than each individual belongs to these categories, he tried to delineate individual’s “identity choice in a given situation as regards multiple affiliations to gender, family, religious, sectarian, linguistic, cultural, ethnic and national groupings” (Itagaki 2001, 10). For example, Arabic-speaking people in Iran can affiliate themselves to be Iranian or Arab. Also they can regard themselves to be Muslim or Shi`ite. Itagaki uses a metaphor of name cards in explaining the situation. “ ‘I’ have different ‘selves’ to various potential horizons. It can be understood as choice of multiple name cards that can be handed out to each different person” (Itagaki 1992, 222).

In the next section I will explore ethnographically how this framework can be supported.

The image that Itagaki provides is individuals who smoothly change their identities. But the following sections will show that rather tension or strained mood is manifested when they try to change socio-cultural affiliations.

### III. Three Cases

The study town, Kab Elias, is situated in the Central Bekaa region. The number of the total population of the town is unclear, but local residents often say 50, 000 inhabitants are living. It is also difficult to extract exact confessional proportion, but people understand that half the population are Sunni Muslim, and the rest of them consists of a few Christian groups (Maronites, Greek Orthodoxes, Greek Catholics, and Protestants).

This region is characteristic because of its confessional complexity in one site. Such complexity can of course be observed in large cities, such as Beirut, but rural site which consists of five groups (and consists of both Muslims and Christians) are not common.

In Kab Elias loose segregation can be observed. Along with the steep of the hill where residential quarters are extended, Maronites live in the upper part, Muslims live in the lower part, and other Christian groups live in-between them.

At primary stage of research I was intending to study about inhabitants' confessional consciousness and identity. However, as the following [case 1] and [case 2] show, I came across a kind of "negative" response from inhabitants.

[case 1]

I was watching television with a Sunni married couple and their two sons. The husband was changing channels by a remote control. When a Mass (seemingly a Mass of Greek Orthodox) was on the monitor, one of their sons (4 years old) pointed the scene, and told me "This is Christian." When his mother heard it, she took his hand strongly, and separated him from the television. She looked at me, and said "Muslims and Christians are similar each other (*mitul ba`da*)!" (Ikeda 2014, 6; 2016, 60-61)

[case 2]

I was talking to a Greek Orthodox old woman. She was telling me about the difference of Maronite Christians from her point of view. Her topics were: that Maronites pray many times in a day just like Muslims whereas they, Greek Orthodoxes, practice only on Sunday; that Maronites used to be very poor in the town, and so on. Because she was talking rather directly on confessional difference, I was inclined to ask rather directly. So I asked her what the difference was between Greek Orthodox and Maronites. She just answered, "Everything is from the God (*kell min allāh*)." Our conversation was being done in relaxed atmosphere, but suddenly she stopped talking and kept silence. (Ikeda 2014, 6-7; 2016, 62)

[case 3]

I visited George (pseudonym), a Greek Orthodox old man. He was smoking outside of the entrance of his house. His wife invited me to the kitchen where she and her two daughters were eating small meal. I joined in them, and had some conversation. After a while, George came into the kitchen, and asked me if he could borrow my mobile. He said that he wanted to buy yoghurt from Paul (pseudonym), a Maronite old man who produces dairy products and was also my neighbour. Though I had my mobile on me, I told George that I did not have it, and offered him that I would tell Paul about yoghurt on my way home. So I asked George how much he needed it. But, George raised his voice, and said “No, I don’t want yoghurt! There is something, and I want to talk about it.” He left the kitchen to outside.

One of his daughter tried to draw my attention, or she showed me her attitude as if she knew everything, and said “When my father talks about yoghurt, Paul will know what he is talking about. My father has his business.”

I expected that she could elaborate her comment on his behaviour if she took for granted that everyone else in the town behaves, or should behave like her father. So I asked her “Why did he behave like that?” Suddenly she withdrew her gaze from me, saying “I don’t know. I just thought like that”, and never tried to elaborate her comment further.

What happened a few days later is that George sold his old refrigerator to Paul.

#### **IV. Pretence of Naturalness**

The point is not that they live their lives without consciousness about social boundaries. In fact they are highly conscious about the existing boundaries. [Case 1] shows this. Therefore when they see others from different confessional groups, they distinguish themselves from the others with clear embodied movement (i.e. pointing by finger). But there is another dimension, I would call it as “acting as if the act is natural”, “pretence of naturalness”. When the mother of the son took his hand and separated him from the television, she said that there was no clear distinction between Christians and Muslims. She was clearly strained in doing this. As an observer I could see it from her voice and quick and strong movement. She tried to extinct the difference of these two confessional groups, and tried to make her imagination “natural”, as if we have no need mentioning and pointing the difference of the two groups.

We can see similar attitude of inhabitants in [case 2] as [case 1]. In this case she voluntarily and willingly talked about the topic of confessional difference between Maronites and Greek Orthodox. But when I took turn of the conversation and asked her what the difference between those two groups were, she stopped talking. Her way of saying “everything is from the God”, instead of more direct expression, such as “there is not much difference”, seems to suggest that she did not deny difference, but tried to let them look “natural” with vague term “everything”.

We might be tempted to understand attitude of these two women towards confessional groups from Lebanese political and historical point of view. In fact it is pointed out that after the Civil War and also during 2000s sectarian identity has been strong, and there are cleavages among Lebanese society (Knudsen and Kerr 2013).

But, in this paper, I would like to shift our attention to another point. “Acting as if the act is natural” can be observed in different social realm other than confessional identity. [Case 3] shows this. Here, more mundane action ( i.e. transaction of secondhand refrigerator) is accomplished with similar attitudes as [case 1] and [case 2]. George wanted to sell his refrigerator to Paul, but he tried to make himself appear as if he will buy yoghurt from Paul. I think that he chose “purchase of yoghurt” purposefully, because in George’s family context the most everyday interaction between their family members and Paul is purchase of yoghurt. George embedded special occasion (i.e. transaction of refrigerator) into more everyday action (i.e. transaction of yoghurt).

If we look back at the framework of Itagaki that I mentioned above, “choice from several possibility” or “alteration of socio-cultural and political affiliations” is partly observed in [case 1] and [case 2]. They tried to shift confessional difference into more ambiguous similarity. According to the framework by Itagaki about Middle Eastern individuals, they smoothly change each property or category, but in examples described above, people are more awkward in changing such dimensions. Slightly raised voice, rapid movement, and sudden stop of talking, all of these suggests strained mood of people.

There is different aspect in [case 3], because categorical change or operation by actor is not clearly observed here. Rather, “pretence of naturalness” is more evident in this case, and it can be said that [case 3] has the same cultural logic as [case 1] and [case 2] in this sense. Again, both George and his daughter show similar strained mood. If these observations are valid, we might be able to argue that categorical or operational change that Itagaki suggested is part of “pretence of naturalness”, and the latter is what we should explore further. In other words, Itagaki’s argument makes more importance on discontinuity rather than continuity. Therefore he puts the word “dynamics” to express such behaviour. But people might accomplish their everyday life more towards continuity or “naturalness” with a portion of tension. It might be also “dynamic”, but in subtler sense.

## **V. Concluding Remarks**

In a paper titled “The Religion of the ‘Other’ as Bond”, Aïda Kanafani-Zahar argues that the construction of bonds between Maronite Christians and Shi`ite Muslims in a village through visiting and co-eating on festival occasions. It is often said that confessional identity became sharper after the Civil War (1975-1990), and therefore there are cleavages among confessional groups. But her argument is against such viewpoint. She points out that the existence of

different confessional groups does not bring dismantlement of social order.

According to this paper, inhabitants of both Maronites and Shi'ites express such coexistence: "We have always got along"; "We live peacefully together"; "We never made a difference" (Kanafani-Zahar 2002, 403). Her research explores how such attitudes and consciousness are constructed through social and cultural practice. On the other hand, she admits there is contradictory discourse among inhabitants: "We have always hated one another" (Kanafani-Zahar 2002, 404). She expresses that such discourse represents "fragile coexistence" or "clear rupture in coexistence" (Kanafani-Zahar 2002, 404).

Though there are two kinds of discourses, Kanafani-Zahar focuses only one side, which is coexistence discourse. Contradictory dimension is not fully treated.

Similar tendency can be recognised in other anthropological studies on Lebanon. For example, Lara Deeb's book *An Enchanted Modernity* argues that modernity of Shi'ite is conceptualised and accomplished through religious point of view. Again, she also admits that their identity is situational (Deeb 2006, 11). But she eventually focuses just Shi'ite confessional identity formation. Situational dimension is mentioned but not treated fully in both cases.

In order to supplement such gap of research, this paper suggests that "pretence of naturalness" can delineate on the ground level the way in which boundaries either appear or disappear situationally

## References

- Deeb, Lara. 2006. *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Eickelman, Dale F. 2002. *The Middle East and Central Asia*. Fourth edition. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Ikeda, Akimitsu. 2014. Nagare ni kansuru shiron: Lebanon karano shiten. *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 87: 5-19.
- Ikeda, Akimitsu. 2016. *Nagare to kao: Lebanon ni okeru minzokushiteki kenkyū*. Ph. D. thesis. Shuto Daigaku Tokyo.
- Itagaki, Yuzo. 1992. *Rekishi no genzai to chiikigaku: Gendai chūtō eno shikaku*. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten.
- Itagaki, Yuzo. 2001. Middle Eastern Dynamics of Identity Complex: A Teaching Scheme with Illustrational Materials. *Annals of Japan Association for Middle East Studies* 16:1-26.
- Kanafani-Zahar, Aida. 2002. The Religion of the 'Other' as Bond: The Interreligious in Lebanon. In *Religion between Violence and Reconciliation*, ed. Thomas Scheffler, 401-418. Beirut: Orient-Institut.
- Knudsen, Are and Michael Kerr. 2013. *Lebanon: After the Cedar Revolution*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

**Notes**

1. This is a revised version of the paper presented on the 24th of September in 2016 at the 11th International Conference of Asian Federation of Middle East Studies Associations “World New Trends in the 21st Century and Middle East” at Ulaanbaatar Hotel in Mongolia.
2. In the following sections I use the term “confessional” rather than “religious” so that social aspect can be conveyed,