The Family and Celebration in Lebanon

Like everywhere else, families in Lebanon have always felt the need to celebrate particular days of the year (New Year), religious holidays (Sundays, Christmas, Easter…), historical, cultural or social events (national feast-days, bank holidays). They also celebrate personal events such as birthdays, baptisms, first holy communions, marriages and deaths and rites of passage.

a- Symbolic value of celebration

Celebration has always been associated with a time when one breaks away from the daily routine and the fatigue of work and from individualism and solitude. On the feast-day, we stop work, change our clothes, meet with our neighbours, share our meals, dance, take part or watch a show, go on an outing, and set out to enjoy ourselves, to reminisce or to gather together. Celebration is therefore experienced as a time for sharing happy or sad times.

The value and the meaning of exchanging gifts symbolically ascertain solidarity and gestures of affection. Celebration and its various expressions, joy, excess, sadness, is a quest for Happiness.

The ingredients of a celebration transform the individual and make him/her come out of himself/herself: dressing up, making up, loud music, dancing, a festive meal that sometimes leads to over-indulgence.

In brief, the family feast in Lebanon, in all its aspects, encourages solidarity, homogeneity and conviviality, a communion which tightens the family bonds and acts as a means of preservation through the heritage of beliefs and rich ethnographic and family traditions. It is characterised by ceremony and celebration. It is, in a certain sense, fanciful, not to use Harvey Cox's expression, "the feast of fools".

In the Lebanese context, it is not easy to distinguish in each feast, the sacred from the spiritual, social, political or economic aspect of celebration, or the spontaneous from the institutional. Nevertheless, the celebration at the heart of the family constitutes an anthropological structure.

Whether sacred or profane, a feast-day is an occasion for clinging to or getting rid of one's past, making wishes for the future and interpreting omens (in a cup of coffee).

If celebration is limited to bank holidays, this means that work dominates the entire individual and social existence. And so the family celebration is subjected to the demands of commerce, leaving ample room for the initiative and imagination of the hosts and guests, if they so decide, of course.

b- Cultural expression of celebration in Lebanon

(DVD – audio-visual support)

1 – In 2012, Lebanon had 21 feast days, apart from Sundays, defined by article 15215 of September 27, 2005 as: 4 civil bank holidays (Labour Day, Martyrs' Day, Liberation Day and the national feast-day); 1 inter-religious bank holiday (Feast of the Annunciation, since March 25, 2010), and 16 religious Christian and Muslim holidays). 9 Christian feast-days (New Year, Armenian Christmas, Saint Maroun, Catholic Good Friday, Catholic Easter, Orthodox Good Friday, Orthodox Easter, the Assumption and Christmas). And 7 Muslim feast-days (the birth of the Prophet, 2 days for Fitr, 2 days for Al-Adha, Muslim new year or hegira, Achoura or the martyrdom of Houssein).

2 – Let us now take a look at the expressions and manifestations of the family celebration in Lebanon.

- First of all, Sunday, or the day of the Lord. This is not a day like the others, the Sunday gathering is widely observed by both nuclear (parents-children) and extended families (grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins). In spite of growing disinterest, Sunday in Lebanon is a day dedicated to God and to the family. It is a well-deserved rest or a truce from work which gives balance back to family life. It is a time in the family's life where the reunions, convivial meals, visits to close relatives, neighbours, friends and the sick give sense to solidarity. In brief, it is experienced as a time of gentleness, serenity, and a time for leisure and recharging the family's batteries.

- A second type of family feast is birth. It is an event that is lived by the entire family as a time of joy and jubilation, a time where God's presence is strongly felt

– an extension of the family of Nazareth. Rural mentality prevails even in the cities. The family remains the most strongly cemented context despite the aggression of globalisation, the means of telecommunications and the tragic events that have hit Lebanon and the Near East. We still live well together in spite of the increasing phenomenon of migration. Special pastries are shared between relations and neighbours (such as the *Moghli*). No time is lost in baptising the newborn. Often, the baptism, like the First Holy Communion, is celebrated with great pomp and ceremony, but not without a great fervour accompanied by excitement and joy, good wishes and gifts as souvenirs of the event.

- A synonym of Easter in Lebanon and the orient is "the great *al eid al kabir* feast". The ceremony of this great feast is accompanied by the greetings delivered at the close of the Easter Mass within in the family and the community: "Christ is resurrected – *al massih kam*". The entire family, dressed to the nines, is present at the celebration. After the Mass and the veneration of the cross of the Resurrected Christ shrouded with a white strip recalling the sheet from the tomb and the swaddling clothes of the nativity, chocolate eggs are offered together with the Easter wishes. At the celebration meal, which assembles all the family and relations, a battle if fought with coloured eggs, where you try to break you neighbour's egg. At the end of the meal, special pastries called *"ma'amoul"* are served (a kind of sugar pastry filled with nuts and pistachios).

- Anniversaries, marriages, jubilees, ordination of priests and local village feasts are significant times for family celebrations. They are accompanied in the villages by festive family vigils that gather together the members of the large family circle and the neighbours and friends. Apart from the religious ceremonies, the range of festivities is highly varied: There is the Lebanese *Mezzé* or multiple appetizers served with a national alcoholic during based on aniseed – the *arak* – with which you clink your glasses many times in sign of conviviality. There are church bell-ringing competitions between young people and competitions for singers and poetry in dialect – *al zajal*, the national folkdance *dabké*, a competition for the best anecdotes and funny stories, and we must not forget card games.

- Finally, a fifth type of family celebration, apart from the grief, is the funeral, which represents a celebration of hope. The death is announced to the whole village with a bell toll. The relatives, neighbours and friends arrive offering their

services to help in such a situation: distributing the announcements of death, keeping company with the family in mourning (in black), making the funeral arrangements. A prayer vigil is held in the presence of the deceased. The following day, condolences are offered before and after the funeral service, and may continue for two or three days after the funeral, according to the size of the family, the neighbourhood, and the number of acquaintances.

The funeral meal is partaken by all the persons present. In certain places, and according to the importance of the deceased, the fanfare and funeral music are accompanied by funeral orations. At the time of the function, the volunteers arrive to lift the coffin on their shoulders and make the journey from the house of the deceased or the church hall to the church and then to the cemetery. Signs of sympathy are expressed with particular phrases: “May God have his soul” or “Christ is resurrected” and sometimes there are fireworks. The period of mourning lasts for at least forty days and is followed by a requiem mass called *quarantième* and then the annual anniversary. Under such circumstances, the united family of the deceased is surrounded and supported by a deep, sincere solidarity and brotherly communion offered by the entire social and church community. The funeral thus represents a true participation in the Paschal mystery and a prefiguration of the eschatological celebration.

- Finally, celebration, in all its expressions and forms, remains a time for the family, but also a time for a meeting with God and with man.

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