

## الذات والكتابة في الاثنوغرافية

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في هذه المقالة أحلل التغييرات التي طرأت على أبحاثي وكتابتي منذ بدء عملي وحتى الان. كانت كتاباتي الأولى تعميمات مجردة متأثرة بالماركسية والنظريات المادية وتتوقع أحداثاً اجتماعية وسياسية. وقد تناولت أبحاثي هذه موضوعات واسعة النطاق تبدأ من القمة الى القاعدة فركزت على تأثير الاستعمار وبنى الدولة على الديناميكية المحلية في مواقع مدينية اخترتها لتلائم اهتماماتي النظرية. وأذ تحولت أبحاثي لتتناول الأسرة والنساء والجنس بقيت اهتم كثيراً بالدولة، ولكن لا على أساس تأثير القمة في القاعدة، بل على اساس تفاعل عمليات الدولة وديناميكيته مع نظم الأسرة والجنس تفاعلاً متبادلاً. وتركز أبحاثي الحالية على التكوين الثقافي للذات، مبنية على أبحاثي الاثنوغرافية في قريتي، فأفتش عن الطرق التي تثبت فيها معا عمليات وديناميكيات الدولة والأسرة والجنس والذات. وقد انتقد البعض ان تتناول أبحاثي منطقة وموضوعات خاصة بي. لكن كتابتي اصبحت ألصق بي، وملاحظاتي أدق وأعمد والنتائج التي توصلت اليها أفضل. إن هذه التغييرات التي طرأت على أبحاثي وكتابتي لم تكن بسبب انثويتي، وانما نتيجة تحولات شخصية وفكرية، وليست نتائج أبحاثي هذه أقل علمية من أعمالي السابقة.

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\* راجع المقالة بلغتها الاصلية، ص 143

## **S**ELFHOOD AND WRITING

**Suad JOSEPH**

### **I n t r o d u c t i o n**

« Pluralism - Tool of Imperialism », read the title of my first professional paper on Lebanon, which I presented at the Northeastern Anthropological Association meetings in 1969 as a graduate student in anthropology at Columbia University. Later that year, I revised and re-titled the paper, « Pluralism as a Guise for Class Interests : The Lebanese Case », for presentation at the Middle East Studies Association Meeting. Bold generalizations about political structures at the macro level characterized my early writings on Lebanon through my PhD dissertation<sup>1</sup> and my co-edited book.<sup>2</sup> With confidence I predicted the imminent collapse of the Lebanese political system, falling along ethno-sectarian fault lines which had been politicized by local and international elites for their own class interests. Schooled in materialist frameworks, I privileged economic and political causes. I saw religious and ethnic beliefs and identities reactive to class, modes of production, state, and global economic and political structures. Gender was not a variable of analysis for me in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I backgrounded psychodynamics and the agency of persons, favoring social structures and social system-wide processes. In the classroom, I taught with the urgency and passion of those who believed social revolution was at hand and the classroom was one of its sites.

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Response to my early work varied, but was generally favorable. While my cautious major professor required me to delete my predictions of civil war in Lebanon from my doctoral dissertation (completed in 1975, just before the outbreak of the war), my doctoral committee lauded my analysis. Whether scholars agreed or disagreed with my analyses, none, to my memory, challenged me on the grounds of objectivity. None said that a Lebanese immigrant would have problems studying her natal society in a scientifically valid way. With few exceptions, there was little criticism of the scientific validity of my macro-level generalizations and bold predictions. In my teaching, my students frequently responded enthusiastically to my confident assertions and grand theorizing. Some claimed my courses were life changing for them.

Yet, 25 years later, a research proposal to carry out a small scale micro analysis of cultural constructions of selfhood and the gendering of constructs of citizenship and rights in my natal village in Lebanon was rejected by one (funded by another) anthropological research foundation partly because some of the reviewers feared I would lose objectivity. A senior colleague, reviewing my file, for a personnel action, expressed concern that I could not be objective doing research in my natal village. In the classroom, I now rarely offer predictions or certainty. And while student reviews are usually enthusiastic, I less frequently receive reports of life-changing experiences in the classroom.

What is the difference ? Is it a matter of proximity - that I could be objective about an unfamiliar urban Lebanese neighborhood (the site of my earlier research), but not about my natal village ? Is it a matter of scale - that I could be objective at the macro level but not at the micro level ? Is it a change in anthropological perspectives - that anthropology is more concerned about objectivity now than it was in the 1960s and 1970s ? Is it the subject matter - that I could be objective about political dynamics but not about cultural psychodynamics ? Is it

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a bias at the level of theory - a preference for materialist as opposed to cultural constructionist approaches and a preference for masculinist political economy as opposed to feminist approaches ? Has the change in my teaching and student response come as a result of my greater uncertainty about socio-cultural dynamics or my more nuanced appreciation of their complexities ? Any of these may have been at play to some degree in the concern, among some anthropologists, for the objectivity of this new work.

The canons of research and writing in anthropology are shifting in some quarters and being jealously guarded in other quarters. As my research, writing, teaching, and personal life come closer together, my work and identity as a scientist appears to be subject to challenge in some and warmly received in other quarters. The contestations over anthropological writing are only partly gendered. Yet, I notice that the canonical questioning comes mainly from male colleagues and the welcoming reception comes more from female and feminist colleagues. Exploring the history of my own writing changes over the past 25 years reveals a continually shifting sense of self played out through an intellectualized struggle understood as theory. The contestations and transformations in notions of selfhood are inflected by gender, while class and ethnicity remain underanalyzed components of that struggle.

### **Materialism and Writing**

As an undergraduate I had been exposed to both materialist and idealist frameworks, but was relatively theoretically unformed. One year of graduate work at Pittsburgh exposed me more to idealist approaches. Anthropology at Columbia University, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, was dominated by materialist frameworks of various ilk - ecological, marxist, neoevolutionary, political economy. The Anthropology Department was among the most politically active

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at Columbia during the 1968 student strikes, with faculty, on the whole, very supportive of the students. An unusual number of anthropology graduate students were or became radicalized and politicized during that fascinating historical moment. I was influenced as much if not more by my fellow graduate students, primarily marxist, as I was by faculty. During this period, anthropologists began a critical self-reflection about the relationship of their discipline to colonialism, imperialism, and relationships of dominations.<sup>3</sup> This early reflexivity also was informed largely by materialist paradigms.

My first professional writings, influenced by the canons of materialist writing, were abstract, macro-level, and concerned with general social laws. I attributed agency to social structures like class and to political economic processes like imperialism and capitalism. I saw persons more as acted upon rather than actors in the sweep of history. Women, for me, were undifferentiated from men in their motivations, interests, and positionalities. While conspiratorial theories intrigued me for a short period, I quickly found that structural explanations did not require conspiracy. My analysis had a goal - to enable judgement of responsibility for social injustice. I tended to see inequality and racial/ethnic conflict as the result, in the first instance, of dynamics external to Lebanon such as the competition among imperial powers for control of key colonial regions. I was driven by a political purpose - a social revolution for equality of all peoples. I was inspired by the humanitarian ambition of justice. And I was committed to a secular notion of democracy.

Given a universalist vision, I did not question, in the early period, the cross-cultural applicability of the theoretical models I was learning. The theories I applied presumed fundamental similarities of persons and cultures. It did not occur to me that women might act or be acted upon differently than men or that human motivational systems differed significantly from culture to culture. A confidence empowered my writing, filling it with passionate purpose.<sup>4</sup>

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### **The personal is not scientific**

While passion found its way into my professional writing, professional passion was about social causes. I was compelled, however, to write personally as well. Personal reflection, though, I assumed was not scientific. It had to be privatized. My early personal writings were channeled into poetry and letter writing. By the mid-1970s, I began journal writing and wrote intensely in journals until the late 1980s. I saw the poetry, letters, and journals as personal. They were the places to explore uncertainties and pain. At times these writings expressed confidence, but at the personal level, focusing on loved ones, personal events, and personal history. There was little direct carry over from my personal into my professional writing.

The classroom remained an arena of permission. I explored approaches, styles, ideas with great latitude, letting the students push me across boundaries of my imagination and tempting them to transport themselves into new domains of thought and inquiry. The immediacy of the classroom allowed for a broader range and more frequent experimentation. My experiment with written lectures, which I felt compelled to use with large classes of 200 or more students, proved problematic. In large classes, I mixed modes of writing and dialogue, while in smaller classes, the dialogic format continued to evolve as my pedagogical strength.

### **Feminism, cultural constructionism, and writing**

By the mid 1990's, my writing and teaching has become focused on micro-level events, on specificities, on psychodynamic processes. I pursue questions closer to home. I am fascinated by my natal village, a site I would have never considered researching in the 1960s-70s. I find myself now compelled to understand questions of the cultural cons-

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truction of selfhood and the gendering of the self in specific families. I begin by expecting cultural differences and await to discover cross-cultural similarities. I find richness in focusing on 5 families, whereas in my doctoral research the 100 families I interviewed seemed to me to be a minimum. Qualitative data attracts me more than the massive data sets I accumulated in the 1970s and spent years analyzing statistically. In teaching, I am attracted to case studies, especially works in which particular persons are described in rich detail.

I find myself less interested in acknowledging external causes for local phenomenon, while not rejecting their validity. I am drawn toward understanding local causes. Imperialism may have set some dynamics in motion, but what, on the ground, in the site, makes dynamics happen in a particular way intrigues me. As I look more closely at ground level events, the agency of the person looms larger. While still recognizing the power of structures and institutions, I am fascinated by what persons do with what they are handed. The closer I focus on persons, the less I find myself interested in analysis for judgement. I find myself less willing to make generalizations. I find myself cautious and tentative about my conclusions.

Additionally as I look more closely at the level of the self, my own self becomes more engaged and implicated in my work. My journal writing, which had all but stopped for half a decade, was reinvigorated on my return trip to Lebanon in 1993 after the death of my father (the first trip in 13 years). So connected had my personal writing and scientific writing become that, for the first time, I wrote one article directly from my journal, linking my evolving understanding of my father with my evolving theory of the relationships among selfhood, family, property, and state in Lebanon.<sup>5</sup>

Analyses in my personal and ethnographic writing began to increasingly overlap each other as I moved into my current project about Arab families and personhood. As I wrote to myself about my own family, I found deep resonances with family dynamics I had observed

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in my various Lebanese field sites. As I reflected on issues of my own development, I came to insights that were relevant for the persons I studied in Lebanon. And as I wrote about those families and persons, I learned more about my own.

### **C o n t i n u i t i e s**

These changes in writing topics and styles mask deep continuities in interests, politics, and passions over the past 30 years of my academic anthropological life. From my first writings to the present, I have sustained a deep and on-going interest in the state, its operations and impacts. But now I see the state and its institutions as more discontinuous, more fluid, more amorphous, more in process than I did in the 1960s-70s. I see the state as more impacted by culture, by the agency of persons, by local level events and processes than I did earlier. The state is not an external, bounded entity that serves only the class interests of elites disembedded from social and cultural processes. Rather, I see the state as embedded in and less differentiated from cultural and social processes. Some family dynamics play themselves out within state institutions, state dynamics reinstitutionalize some family processes. The public and private (which I argued as early as 1975 are not separate), I see as even more crucially implicated in each other's structures and processes. And in the first instance, I see gender and the psychodynamics of personhood embedded in state institutions and processes.

I have sustained an abiding dislike for structures of inequality and domination since my early writings. But whereas my early writings saw inequality as externally imposed and focused on the structural mechanisms of its reproduction, my current interests is in the interaction between external and internal foundations of inequality and the psychodynamics of domination. How is it that persons come to dominate ? How is it that persons come to accept domination ? How does



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domination operate in relationships that also nurture and secure persons ? Domination, in my current writing, also refers to processes in the psyches of selves. Domination is not just a resignation to the power of others over the self (or the power of the self over others). Rather there is also an embracement, a taking in, a becoming, and a coming into that intrigues me.

A curiosity about the role of culture, ideology, beliefs links 30 years of my writing. But I have moved away from assuming I can readily judge certain beliefs as false consciousness, against the interests of those attached to them, or as imposed by structures of domination. Rather, what intrigues me is how persons understand the shape of their world, how their understanding conforms with their behavior, and how their behavior produces results that compell them into further actions and beliefs. I see these connections as neither linear nor unidirectional. Therefore predictions from beliefs to actions, from actions to beliefs is also neither linear nor unidirectional. Nor is the connection between cultural systems and the beliefs of specific persons self-evident. Nor is the connection between social structures and cultural systems obvious. Awareness of complexity, contradiction, changeability, situationalness (always present in my work) has become center stage in my analyses. What constitutes interest, the origins of ideas, how persons take on beliefs, and the connections between self-reports and behaviors, I now investigate at micro levels of persons, relationships, and contextualities.

Concern with explanation has driven much of my work. My early work focused on identifying specific causes and privileging political/economic processes and social structures. I am less compelled by specific causes at this point. Wanting to know “why” drives me as much as before, but I am less uncomfortable with indeterminacy. Indeed, I increasingly see determinations as open-ended. Chance, luck, the unpredictable, the ironies, the paradoxes, the uncertainties of life intrigue me as much as the patterned regularities.

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Another continuity, paradoxical as it now appears to me, is the faith I have always had in the power of human consciousness and willful action. Even while I privileged structural causes in my earlier writing, I was persuaded of the importance of the action of persons in history. I was committed to the idea that knowledge empowered, and that critical knowledge was a strategic tool for transforming history. The transformative power of education in my own life led me to believe that teaching could be a crucial force of change. It was by working with ideas, by explaining, by persuading, by enlightening, by awakening, by exposing, by introducing, by inspiring that one could bring about social change. I sustained such beliefs in the power of the person, personal belief, and personal action, through my career, despite shifting foci on determination and causality.

#### **Is the writing change feminine ? Feminist ?**

Some feminists have argued that there is a distinctly feminine style of writing, thinking, analyzing, acting that focuses on the specific, the particular, the relational, the emotional, the concrete.<sup>6</sup> The change in my writing might, by some, be termed a change from a masculinist style shaped by an earlier materialist training to a feminine style informed by a cultural constructionist framework. Alternatively, some might argue that feminism has produced a particular style of writing which led to this transformation. I suspect neither, so simply, is at play in the change of my writing, although either may have factored in. The change in my writing has not been linear, or progressive. Nor is it the result of a specific theoretical framework or a direct gendering of some systematic approach. I find that I can, and at times do, write now in styles quite close to my earlier styles. I do not fit easily into a single theoretical framework nor is my approach distinctively feminized.

The change in writing I suspect reflects, in part, a coming together in complex and contradictory ways, of professional and personal passions. As my scientific writing has come closer to the questions that

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compelled me in my personal life, the uncertainties and specificities that loomed large in my personal life have increasingly shaped my scientific writing. While scientific certainty has diminished in my writing, the earlier concerns with macro level analysis, generalizations, abstract laws have not disappeared, but transformed to an interest in linking the micro to the macro, driven by closer observations of and greater respect for the agency of the micro. That is, I do not see the personal supplanting the scientific or the “feminine” supplying the “masculine.” Rather I see constant interplay, viewed through shifting lens which observe endlessly changing phenomenon. The truth is in neither nor both, but in the transformative play.

Does this make my work less objective, less scientific ? I would argue no. My current work is no less objective or scientific than my earlier work. But I say this not by way of discussing for the absolute-ness or superiority of objectivity. As Donna Haraway<sup>7</sup> has argued, knowledge is always situated. My earlier work was as situated as my present writing, but it was differently situated. It was driven by a passion for the politics of equality and social justice. It was rationalized by an understanding that political and economic forces were the means toward equality and justice. It was energized by a belief that changes proceeded by certain laws and that persons, under certain conditions, could intervene in history to act upon those laws. My writing today is equally driven by a passion for equality and social justice. But I am more cautious about the connection between writing and social change, the power of theory to predict social change, and the privileged position of politics and economics in bringing about social change. I am more intrigued by the complexities of selfhood and the contradictions and paradoxes in the agency of selves.

**Why I write**

In the 1960s and 1970s, I wrote partly from a love of writing. The

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thrill of putting words together and the ecstatic emotionalities that writing could elicit were as much the inspiration for writing as the substantive topic. Writing was a way of evoking feeling and producing high drama. Some of that drama was propelled by anger at the social injustice and some by personal histories that wove themselves into scientific analyses. While words still excite me today and I find myself, at times, still drawn to writing feeling, the drama is diminished and words drive feelings less than feelings drive words.

In the 1960s and 1970s I was persuaded of a more direct connection between scholarship, writing, and political change. The pen was not only powerful, but revolutionary. Writing had an immediate purpose of bringing about social change. Similarly in those heady days, I was convinced that teaching was a revolutionary act and that inspired teaching would change lives. Student evaluations of my teaching in those early days often shored up my beliefs in the power of inspirational teaching. I no longer write to bring about massive social change, nor do I teach to move the masses. I was not wrong, in fundamentals, in my earlier grand predictions about Lebanon. Yet I would not now venture to predict so grandiosely. I did, students tell me, impact some students earlier. Yet I no longer expect to, however I may wish to. If there are a few whom I touch with my teaching, I am gratified. I am satisfied if my writing offers some insights to some people.

For strategic purposes, I am convinced of the importance of what Leila Abu-Lughod calls “tactical humanism,”<sup>8</sup> the search for similarities in human lives cross-culturally that allow us to see each other as human beings. And I am moved by a quote I heard Maya Angelou report in a reading of her works at the University of California, Davis, many years ago that there is nothing human alien to me. While I hold those purposes dear to my politics and teaching, I find my writing now interrogating the multiple “I’s” and “we’s” for differences. My writing now also has a less direct relationship to what I want to change in society or in others. It is centered in what I want to understand about

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them and, to some degree, what I want to understand and change in myself. The inward turning and change in expectations seems to fit as much now as the outward gaze and exuberant hopes fit an earlier period of writing.

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  2. Suad JOSEPH and Barbara L.K. PILLSBURGY, eds. *Muslim-Christian Conflicts : Economic Political and Social Origins*, Boulder, Co, Westview Press, 1978.
  3. Talal ASAD, ed., *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, London, Oxford University Press, 1973 ; Dell HYMES, ed., *Reinventing Anthropology*, New York, Pantheon, 1969.
  4. See Suad JOSEPH, "Feminization, Familism, Self and Politics : Research as a Mughtaribi," in *Studying Your Own Society : Arab Women in the Field*, Soraya AL-TORKI and Camillia F. El-SOLH, eds., Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1988, pp. 25-47, for a fuller treatment of changes in theory and subject matter in my early period of writing.
  5. Suad JOSEPH, "Searching for Baba," *Stanford Humanities Review*, IV, Fall n° 2, 1994.
  6. Nancy CHODOROW, *The Reproduction of Mothering : Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978 ; Carol GILLIGAN, *In A Different Voice : Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982 ; Evelyn Fox KELLER, "Science and Gender," *Signs*, Spring n° 3, 1982, pp. 589-602 ; Sandra HARDING, ed., *Feminism and Methodology*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987 ; Joan E. HARTMAN and Ellen MESSER-DAVIDOW, eds., *(En)Gendering Knowledge. Feminists in Academe*, Knoxville, TN, University of Tennessee Press, 1991.
  7. Donna HARAWAY, "Situated Knowledges : The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies*, 14, Fall n° 3, 1988, pp. 575-599.
  8. Leila ABU-LUGHOD, *Writing Women's Worlds. Bedouin Stories*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993, pp. 25-29.

## *LE SOI ET L'ECRIURE ETHNOLOGIQUE*

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*Au fur et à mesure des années, mes écrits et mes recherches ont changé de visage et j'ai voulu savoir pourquoi.*

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*Mes premiers écrits portaient sur des abstractions puisées aux doctrines marxistes et matérialistes. Mes thèmes se cristallisaient sur l'influence du colonialisme exercée du sommet à la base de la société, et sur le rétablissement de l'Etat dans une vision dynamique. Ces sujets correspondaient à mes préoccupations d'alors. Puis mes écrits ont changé d'orientation. Je m'intéressais toujours à l'Etat, mais dans son interaction dynamique avec la famille, la femme et le sexe, objets de mes recherches à cette époque.*

*Mes travaux actuels portent sur le développement de la culture dans le moi, dans une vision ethnologique portée sur mon village. J'y recherche les procédures grâce auxquelles l'Etat, la famille, le sexe et le moi fixent leurs principes et leurs actions.*

*Les variations et fluctuations qu'ont subies mes recherches n'ont aucunement pour raison ma féminité. Elles suivent le mouvement continu des changements de ma personnalité et de l'évolution de mes idées.*

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- Co-edited with Barbara L. K., *Muslim Christian Conflicts : Economic, Political and Social Origins*, Boudler, Colorado, Westview Press, 1978.

- "Gender and Relationality among Arab Families in Lebanon," *Feminist Studies*, 1993, XIX, Fall n° 3, pp. 465-486.

- "Problematizing Gender and Relational Rights : Experiences from Lebanon," *Social Politics*, 1994, Fall n° 3, pp. 271-285.

\* Currently editing and writing 3 books on family systems in Arab countries. Has carried out fieldwork in native Lebanon for over 25 years.