ABSTRACT

Based on 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork, this dissertation is a comparative ethnography of one Muslim (Al-Jalil) and one Christian Palestinian refugee camp (Dbayeh) in Lebanon.

It utilizes a ritual approach for understanding two contrasting processes of belonging—encompassing differences in social organization and identity that emerge from the comparison between the two camps. The dissertation is composed of three parts.

The first part describes a ritualized economy of trust embedded in most interpersonal interactions. Such economies of trust work as a boundary maintenance mechanism influencing the making, maintenance, and transformation of groups’ constituencies and alliances. While economies of trust may be universal, cultural elements define particular local dynamics. The inclination towards suspicion associated with the refugee condition illustrates the importance of such economies of trust in the two cases.

In the Muslim camp, Al-Jalil, social life is heavily militarized, revolves around Palestinian political parties and social movements, and is characterized by a “ritual tempo” consisting of discourses and social practices marking the quotidian. The Christian camp, Dbayeh,
in contrast, is completely demilitarized and the local ritual tempo mingles both Palestinian and Lebanese themes.

-Part II argues that the two local economies of trust express broader socio/cultural/historical contexts, and that divergent ritual tempi are privileged sites for understanding the camps’ social dynamics of belonging.

Part III explores the two groups’ boundary maintenance in each camp. It focuses on relations between individuals at multiple levels of sociality and the layered relationships between individuals and the broader ritual tempi.

Lebanese and Palestinians from other refugee camps tend to attribute the camps’ differences solely to religion. But my study points toward a more complex set of influences. Although religion is *de facto* a very important source of reference for the groups’ beliefs and behavior and for explaining the camps’ distinct profiles, it is only one among other important “social referents” that influence the camps’ daily discourses and practices—and constructing the multi-faceted identities and alliances that characterize the lives of people in these contrasting settings.