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Assessing Druze identity and strategies for preserving Druze heritage in North America

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Assessing Druze Identity and Strategies for Preserving Druze Heritage in North America

by

Chad Kassem Radwan

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Anthropology
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Chad Radwan

ABSTRACT

This research study focuses on promoting historical, religious, and cultural knowledge among transnational Druze. The Druze are a relatively small, tightly knit religious community from the Middle East who practice endogamy and accept no converts. In the diaspora, Druze have often established their own communities based on their collective ancestral and familial ties and through the establishment of groups such as the American Druze Society. This study works to allow individuals to discuss their Druze identity, identify the community's social problems, and recommend possible approaches or solutions. My research experience as an insider doing ethnography among fellow Druze has in many cases worked to my favor while studying a group whose religious tenets have been considered secret since their inception a thousand years ago.

The extensive participant observation, combined with a thorough review of Druze history and literature, works to illustrate the unique position of North American Druze and how they have evolved from a small fraternity of immigrants into a growing and close-knit and well organized community. As well, survey responses and semi-structured interviews have given voice to individuals allowing them to explain how they perceive the community and its circumstances. Triangulating these methods I have found that many Druze identify a number of problems that include concerns about the community's future as well as a general dissatisfaction with their own lack of religious knowledge.

Chapter One: Introduction

The goal of this study has been to discover how Druze in the diaspora can better work to preserve their collective heritage. In particular, I sought to give voice to the community by asking individuals to describe their Druze identity, assess the community's social problems, and identify possible approaches or solutions towards improvement. To do this, I collected and evaluated the opinions and ideas of Druze living in both the United States and Canada. My primary research tools included participant observation, a survey, and semi-structured interviews. Possible participants were approached during a number of Druze social occasions which included events sponsored by the American Druze Society, or ADS. Such events have provided the ideal opportunity to encounter a representative sample of individuals from across the spectrum of Druze society. As it exists, the ADS is the symbolic foundation of the greater Druze community throughout the United States, and while some of the organizations activities require substantial funds to participate, all Druze are in some way affiliated. As a Druze person born in the United States who has participated in many aspects of Druze social life, I have always been interested in working to ameliorate some of the community's shared problems.

Research Goals

From an applied perspective I seek to promote change. Throughout North America the Druze community is comprised of a diverse group of individuals who share

a common cultural, religious, and ethnic identity. However, these ties are not always firmly defined as the idea of what it means to be Druze varies among individual members of the community. By means of a long history of religious secrecy, referred to in practice as *at-taqiyya*, it has been custom that the tenets of the Druze religion are not actively disseminated. Therefore, the majority of Druze have little knowledge about their religion and the important history through which it has endured. Even if an individual is interested in learning more, reliable resources and informed individuals are not always available. For example, the Druze holy book, the *Kitab al-Hikma*, has yet to be translated from Arabic, while the esoteric elements or inner-meanings of the text are often restricted to the *sheikhs* and *sheikhas* (the devout or religious class) as well as their pupils. This lack of historic and religious familiarity often makes Druze identity irrelevant to daily life and is resulting in a collective knowledge gap (e.g. misunderstood values, empty religious symbols, weak social bonds, liminal ethnic identity).

My research has worked as a needs assessment for the Druze community in North America by identifying key aspects of their social problems and approaches that may help make knowledge of the heritage more accessible. I have evaluated how members of the community explain or describe their Druze identity and have gathered community input regarding the problems the Druze face in diaspora. These difficulties are not uncommon in North America where collective cultural identity is trumped by the emphasis of individuality and where the national community is expected to embrace the image of the great melting pot, an apparent oxymoron. Using the functionalist perspective of the well-known social theorist Emile Durkheim, a community is held together by its collective values, symbols, social bonds, and identity, each of which

reinforces the other (Scupin 2000:24-26). Through this research it is my intention to facilitate the identification of perceived knowledge gaps, explore how the Druze community defines their collective identity, and assess community suggestions and approaches towards the promotion of greater personal knowledge.

Prior to beginning this study, I was able to take part in a two month internship which involved active participation in the Michigan chapter of the American Druze Society. The ADS is a well established non-profit organization which works to strengthen the Druze community in the United States. Their goals are best explained in their charter statement: “to perpetuate the universal teachings of the Druze faith, the enhancement of fellowship among Druze descendents, the advancement of Druze religious, literary, and cultural knowledge through education and research, and the betterment of all Druze people through charitable work” (<http://www.druze.com/#>). While only a portion of the overall United States Druze community are paid or active members of the ADS, the majority participate on some level. Overall, the ADS is a resource to which the entire community has access and even inactive Druze will be familiar with many of the society’s activities and events.

Having conducted much of my research during ADS social events, I have had the opportunity to speak with a large number of Druze from both the United States and Canada. Foremost, this study required that I establish a free and open rapport with all members of the community including both those involved with the ADS and those not. In general my inquiry has focused on community problems which have included a lack of religious knowledge and a limited understanding of the faith which can produce a kind of conflicted Druze identity. More specifically, I have sought to understand if members of

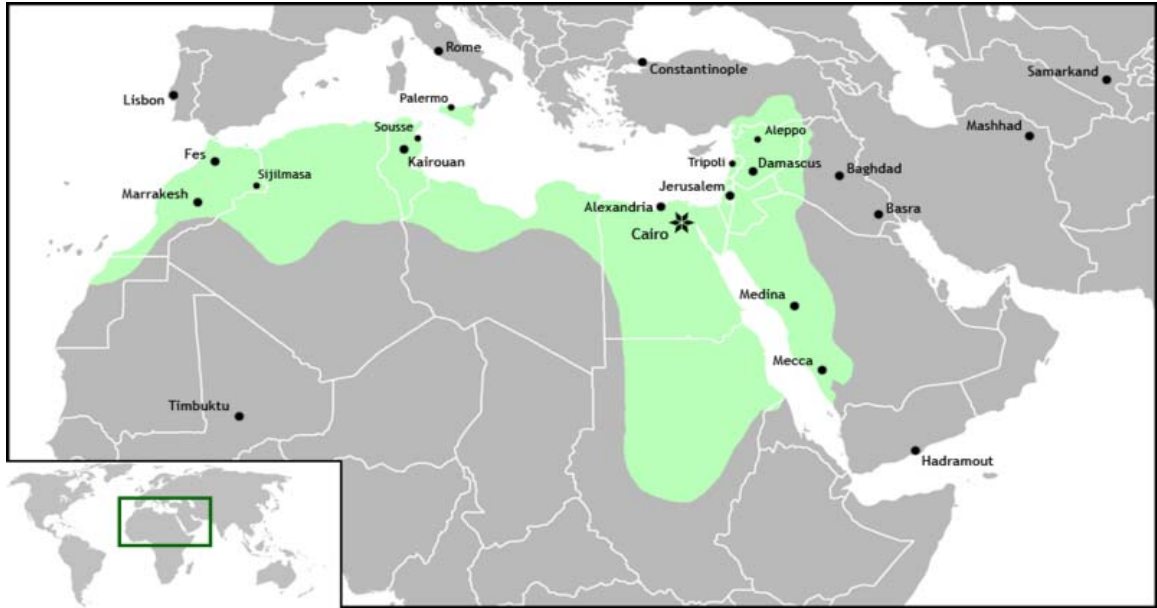
the community perceive such overarching problems and how they believe they can be overcome. Therefore I asked, what aspects of Druze collective symbols, social bonds, values, and identity does the community need to know more about? This investigation has worked to shed light on how Druze identity can be perpetuated beyond the larger and more densely populated communities found in the Middle East. The applied aspect of this study has allowed me to go beyond a casual critique and has facilitated the arrangement of a relevant and effective set of proposals that may be used in future ADS endeavors.

In addition to the previously mentioned functionalist perspective, I have elected to apply a discursive approach which has allowed me to focus on discourse and dialogue. My research design involves a number of methods which work well with the discursive approach in assessing how the Druze community identifies their collective social needs. In specific, semi-structured interviews have allowed individuals to discuss, describe, and define how they perceive their Druze identity and the community's social problems. The survey tool has worked in tandem with the interviews, both informing and substantiating them, and will ensure that my sample is representative of the broader North American Druze community. I have also made use of participant observation by attending various Druze social occasions including the activities of the ADS Michigan chapter, where I took part in a two month internship, the ADS north Florida chapter, and the American Druze Society's national convention. Combined, these methods produce an excellent approach to understanding just how salient Druze identity is in the lives of individuals and how the needs of the community can be met.

Early History

Historically, the Druze faith emerged in Egypt during the Fatimid dynasty. At its height in the late tenth century, the Shiite ruled empire stretched from the Atlantic in the west to modern day Jordan in the east and north into Turkey (figure 1:6). During this time the sixth caliph of the ruling dynasty, named Al-Hakim bi-Amrillah, believed that he was given a revelation from God to develop the new faith, which in many ways stood in stark contrast to Islam. For example, the faith abolished open slavery and allowed only for monogamy while supporting a woman's rights to initiate divorce and own property (Azzam 2007:20 & 37). While the Druze accept the revelations of earlier Abrahamic religions, they practice a distinct kind of monotheism and believe in the transmigration of the soul, or reincarnation. The Druze faith also includes a distinct belief in five cosmic entities, or luminaries, which emanated from God before creation. Collectively, they are represented by the Druze star (figure 2:7) and are fundamental to knowledge about the faith. By name they are: *Al-Aql* (the mind), *An-Nafs* (the soul), *Al-Kalima* (the word), *As-Sabiq* (the precedent), and *At-Tali* (the antecedent) (Sayegh 1983:10). Those who accepted the call to *Tawhid*, also known as Unitarianism, became Druze by signing a figurative and eternal contract called *mithaq*.

Figure 1-The Fatimid dynasty in the late tenth century (Manske 2007)



Soon after founding the new faith, Al-Hakim bi-Amrillah disappeared and his followers were subsequently exterminated. However, far from the Caliph's seat of power in Cairo, the Druze religion endured in the mountainous regions of the Levant (Makarem 1974:44). By means of geographical isolation, tight knit communities, and religious dissimulation, Druze people have survived and flourished passing down their knowledge, values, and traditions over the past thousand years. Currently, Druze inhabit portions of northern Israel and Jordan, with the majority in southern Syria and throughout Lebanon (figure 3:8). Since the late nineteenth century many Druze have immigrated to the United States and have since established their own community by means of familial ties and through organizations such as the American Druze Society.

Figure 2-The principal symbol of the Druze faith representing the five luminaries
(Silversmith 2006)



In the diaspora, the Druze are no longer isolated from the influence of other religious communities. Rather, they are scattered and have often adopted the dominant culture's values and norms. Yet Druze identity has proven resilient as a number of transnational Druze societies have been established in countries such as the United States, Australia, Canada, England, Brazil, and Venezuela. Thus we are left with the question: how can a community, whose religious tenets remain clandestine even to its adherents, remain distinct in the diaspora? In order to answer this question it is important to understand the distinction between assimilation and dissimulation. Since the inception of the faith, the Druze have practiced religious dissimulation, called *at-taqiyya* in Arabic. While this practice has been employed since the beginning of Druze history, it does not necessarily call for the entirety of the Druze community to fully adopt another religion's beliefs in times of repression. However, *At-taqiyya* does allow the individual to guard and preserve their faith by openly denying it to outsiders (Betts 1988:20). Conversely, assimilation would require completely absorbing another set of beliefs in place of Druze religious tenets, community values, and ideology. While the popular question among

those who have studied the Druze has been that of change or continuity, the community's complex history of dissimulation and adaptation has shown that the two paths are not mutually exclusive.

Figure 3-Geographical spread of the Druze community in the Middle East (Institute of Druze Studies 2006)



Chapter Two: Evaluating the Literature

The literature I chose to review covers a range of issues concerning the Druze community's history, culture, and religion. More specifically, the topics explored range from accounts of the faith's enigmatic founder to a philosophical discussion of the core religious principal, *Tawhid* or Unitarianism. Collectively, this set of literature works to provide a foundation made up of the key aspects of Druze faith and the cultural identity which it has come to produce. While some texts discuss the community's efforts to preserve their heritage, there has been no research which addresses their social problems or allows individuals, either in the Middle East or transnationally, to make personal suggestions. My research seeks to fill this neglected area of study by discovering what the Druze themselves have to say. Moreover, my work will expand the applied anthropological literature regarding cultural heritage and the means of preserving it in a globalized world.

The structure of the following literature review groups the reviewed books, articles, and dissertations into four related sets. The first of these includes the works of Sami Nasib Makarem (1974) and Robert Brenton Betts (1988), which discuss history and identity by integrating their social contexts and laying the historical foundation fundamental to any discussion pertaining to the Druze. The second set of works by authors Anis Obeid (2006), Fuad Khuri (2004) and Ruth Westheimer with Gil Sedan (2003) go on to discuss the central components of contemporary Druze identity including

social cohesion, understanding Unitarianism, modernity vs. traditionalism, and the emigration that established the community in the United States. The third set of works includes a number of anthropological and sociological studies conducted by Intisar Azzam (1995, 1997), Samy Swead Shavit (1993), Marjorie Anne Bennet (1999), and Saskia Witteborn (2005). These investigations explore Druze issues such as strategies for preserving their heritage, how endogamy and esoterism work to further distinguish the group, and how the community creates identity using labels. The fourth set of articles includes works by Susan Greenbaum (1991) and Yvonne Yazbeck Hadad (1991) and deal with the role of mutual aid societies in ethnic communities. Finally, I look at Columbo and Senatore's (2005) discussion of the discursive approach utilized in my collaborative methodology to facilitate the Druze community in identifying possible solutions to address their collective problems.

Foundation of the Faith

I begin with an article by anthropologist Kevin Yelvington, "History, Memory and Identity: A Programmatic Prolegomenon" (2002), which introduces similarly themed works in an issue of *Critique of Anthropology*. Yelvington begins by cautioning against historicism, which characterizes history as a sort of absolute commodity while diminishing the importance of unique human experiences. Historicism can also be potentially used to advance political interests as well as subjugate and disenfranchise modern groups of people and ways of thinking. Instead, the author supports a historical materialist approach, which avoids universalizing history and recognizes the importance

of, “the integration of an individual into a larger social context” (Yelvington 2002:228). He states that the field of anthropology is well positioned to analyze how people conceive and discuss history, memory and the past (Yelvington 2002:229). However, he also warns that anthropologists should avoid distinguishing between objective and subjective history. Rather: “It is best to see [historical] phenomena classifiable as the ‘invention of tradition’ as fundamentally depictions, or, better, discursive representations” (Yelvington 2002:231). This position is in agreement with this project’s theoretical approach as I consider the Druze experience through discourse and individual accounts.

As Yelvington states, considering historical events and phenomena as representations or ideology, shifts anthropological research away from the analysis of shared meaning, or in the case of this research, group identity. In this way: “what is actually social and cultural appears to be natural and self-evident” (Yelvington 2002:232). The author suggests that researchers should pay attention to perception while trying to identify the ways in which identity is self constituted, “and subject to social forces and cultural forms” (Yelvington 2002:242). He explains that anthropologist Richard Handler sees identity as limited, “by a sense of boundedness, internal homogeneity, naturalness, uniqueness, immutability and wholeness” (Yelvington 2002:240). While the concept of identity might assume these characteristics, the problem of overgeneralization may be mitigated by focusing on individual experience rather than a universalized historicism. Consequently, if the researcher chooses to explore shared identity, they should begin by orienting the group within a historical context that is both conscientious and critical.

Next is a work considered a classic, Sami Nasib Makarem's *The Druze Faith* (1974), which covers a wide range of Druze religious beliefs and history. Although a slightly older book, the author's thorough account of the beginnings of the Druze movement has yet to be matched and is considered essential reading for anyone hoping to learn more about the faith. His review of the important historical figures in the faith's early history is presented from the viewpoint of an insider, similar to my own. This serves to provide the reader with an understanding of how people in the Druze community see such vital figures, which often differs from the more perfunctory historical illustrations. Although I am relatively unfamiliar with the faith's religious scriptures, Makarem's expertise with the Druze holy book is apparent throughout the text. This makes his perspective unique as he simultaneously adopts two contrasting viewpoints, a member of the community and a scholar striving for objectivity. Furthermore, his discussion of the religion's influence on the community's laws and social philosophy works to illustrate his knowledge about all aspects of Druze society.

To recognize the differences between two important perspectives, and to perhaps shed some light on my own, I compare Sami Nasib Makarem's discussion of Al-Hakim bi-Amrillah, the sixth caliph of the Fatimid dynasty and the religion's founder, to that of Robert Brenton Betts. While the former author reflects the values of a work commissioned by Lebanon's *sheikh al-Aql* (the community's religious leader), the latter author's work is the most widely circulated text on the Druze. In his book, *The Druze* (1988), Betts focuses on the historical account of Al-Hakim, which shows him to have been strange, impious, and cruel. Betts also emphasizes his belief that Al-Hakim was likely the victim of murder, despite the fact that historical evidence is lacking: "At length

he became intolerable even to his friends, and was assassinated by order of his sister, as he walked alone at night” (Betts 1988:10). Conversely, Makarem focuses on an almost folkloric account of Al-Hakim, describing his ascension to the caliphate with vivid images: “His eyes were piercing and his steps were full of confidence. When he reached his golden throne, he sat down and was hailed by all the people who were present” (Makarem 1974:15). Important details are provided by both author’s accounts of Al-Hakim’s life, although the latter doesn’t describe the sometimes tyrannical nature of his rule depicted in mainstream historical accounts, while the former neglects to mention that the caliph inherited the throne at the young age of eleven. In this, both versions are relegated to providing accounts from authors whose positions seem to come from polar opposites of the insider/outsider range of perspective. Examples of such cases work to caution my approach so that I avoided diverging into any extreme.

Aside from the previous points of contention, both authors explain that Al-Hakim was a fascinating figure and is responsible for co-founding Al-Azhar Mosque, the world’s first university which still operates in Cairo today. Betts goes on to provide a sensible account of the Druze with focus on the community’s political history. He pays particular attention to reports that date back to the early 16th century, marking the consolidation of the group’s power into a recognizable territory. This particular timeframe is additionally relevant as the Ottoman sultan first recognized a Druze prince, or emir, who was given official rule of the Lebanon region under the auspices of the central authority. Betts explains that: “years of Ottoman domination, however, saw several clashes between the local authority and the central” (Betts 1988:72). Most prominent in the line of subsequent emirs, was Fakhr al-Din II, ruling from 1590-1633.

As a vital figure in the history of the Middle East he is often regarded as, “the greatest of the Druze leaders of Mount Lebanon and is traditionally accepted as the founder of the first autonomous Lebanese state” (Betts 1988:72). With a history of strong-willed leaders, Druze collective identity is shaped to instill pride among all members of the community, even the most uninformed.

The customary practice of religious dissimulation, or *at-taqiyya*, may seem out of place when one considers that the Druze have a history of resisting rather than hiding from oppressive authorities. While this practice has been employed since the beginning of Druze history, it does not necessarily call for the entirety of the Druze community to fully adopt another religion’s beliefs in times of repression. *At-taqiyya* does however allow the individual to guard and preserve their faith by openly denying it to outsiders. Betts explains that: “The duty of truthfulness in matters of religion applies only to the relation of Druze with each other” (Betts 1988:20). In contrast to some of his admirable descriptions of the Druze, Betts provides, if not accentuates, a number of unsavory accounts given by outsiders who have visited the Druze communities over the centuries. Time and again, such stories are offered by foreign travelers and range from tales describing the worship of golden calf idols to accounts of incest and open promiscuity (Betts 1988:16-17, 30-32). Aside from discussing these malicious accounts, Betts presents the demographics of the Druze community in great detail. Admittedly however, his population estimates are often based on dated Lebanese census data and are without adequate reference to transnational communities, making them of little use to my research. While Druze population estimates are often based on conjecture, it seems more and more likely that the commonly used figure of one-million Druze worldwide may be a

conservative approximation. As well, the popular estimate of twenty thousand Druze living in the United States may also be a modest figure. Given my experience in the community during this research project, it is apparent that for every individual attending Druze social events (annual conventions attract at least one thousand), there are likely to be a large number of absent relatives.

Contemporary Identity

Anis Obeid's *The Druze and Their Faith in Tawhid* (2006) provides an excellent look at how important elements of the faith are explained by an insider to his fellow Druze and lends itself to a thorough review of the religion's philosophical tenets. This particular text works to promote active inquiry and encourages dialogue among those who wish to know more about their faith. With these goals in mind, Obeid's work is engaging and succeeds in elucidating some of the faith's most esoteric elements, such as reincarnation. He is able to illustrate basic religious concepts without oversimplification and avoids detracting from the overall power of his statements. For example, in defining the essential aspects of the faith he explains: "The Druze faith is a path (*maslak madhab*) to the understanding of Tawhid, a unist concept that combines the absolute oneness of God and the unity of all creatures in the oneness of the Creator" (Obeid 2006:postscript).

Anis Obeid's work is considered progressive and presents ideas that are not commonly discussed in the community. For example, he explores the core concept of *Tawhid* outside of the Druze faith: "The history of the Druze constitutes one chapter in the history of the *Tawhid*, certainly not the first and in all likelihood not the last" (Obeid

2006:11). As well, Obeid discusses the idea of reopening the *dawa*, or religious call, and argues that *Tawhid* was never meant to be a closed system inaccessible to others. In relation to my own research goals, this text helps to explain why the few initiated *mushayekh* are considered the guardians of the faith, “protecting the core principles from the uninitiated” (Obeid 2006:194). He explains that before attempting to delve into these core religious principles, the believer should, “take the necessary time to become firmly connected to Tawhid, not only in the domain of the intellect but also in heart and soul” (Obeid 2006:194). With regards to the strict regulation of religious information, the author states: “Such questions are not merely an exercise in rhetorical or theoretical speculation; they are central to the dilemma that the Druze communities face in the modern era, and especially in the West” (Obeid 2006:195).

Differing largely from the previous work is Fuad I. Khuri’s *Being a Druze* (2004). As Obeid’s text focuses heavily on theosophical matters, it poses an interesting if not stark contrast to Fuad Khuri’s work, which avoids such topics from the outset. Interestingly enough, this British social anthropologist manages to provide a detailed picture of Druze life without getting into the religion and politics central to any ethnoreligious identity. While Khuri avoids the subjective nature of Druze political affairs he shows the reader that what remains is a culture able to move beyond its religious roots. While his approach does not rely heavily on historical support, he illustrates core concepts of Druze identity in detail. Examples of this can be seen in the subjects of his chapters which include reincarnation, population dynamics and work ethics, the role of sheikhs, endogamy, cultural privacy, and the essentials of the moral code (Khuri 2004).

Khuri's discussion further focuses on the contemporary conflict between Druze traditional culture and a modernizing world. He provides a detailed account of the early diaspora which gave rise to transnational communities, including the tradesmen who laid the foundation for the American Druze Society. Like many other Europeans and Middle Easterners of the late 19th century, the Druze were attracted to the economic opportunities created as an after-effect of western colonialism. In particular, nations such as the United States, Argentina, Australia, Venezuela, Canada, and England, received the majority of Druze immigrants who subsequently settled their respective "ethnoreligious frontiers". While many individuals assimilated to their new surroundings, consequently discarding much of their Druze identity, many remained faithful to their heritage (e.g. taking Druze mates) and were active in pursuing their own traditions in new communities. Similar to Khuri, the Druze, "should neither lose the identity of their religious faith for the sake of modernity nor lose modernity for the sake of traditional religion" (Makarem 2006:ix).

The Olive and the Tree: The Hidden Strength of the Druze (2007) by Dr. Ruth K. Westheimer and Gil Sedan is an exceptional book which asks how the Druze community of Israel maintains cohesion despite being a relatively small minority surrounded by modern Israeli society and separated from their brethren in neighboring Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. Dr. Ruth writes: "The temptations are there, and they make the challenge so much more difficult. And the challenge is great---to get full exposure to the Israeli society while maintaining the tribe and its customs; to live side by side with Jewish and Arab neighbors and share their values, and yet preserve one's Druze identity" (Westheimer & Sedan 2007:54). Over the past few decades, the Israeli Druze community's disconnection from the larger populations across national borders has

actually been an asset to their relatively conservative villages. The authors explain that the Druze of Israel are perhaps the most cohesive group of people and recognize Druze traditions uniformly: “Intermarriages are banned as a means of avoiding assimilation. However, although the ban on intermarriage is absolute, whether with Jews or with other Arabs, it appears to be more effective in Israel than in the neighboring Arab countries” (Westheimer & Sedan 2007:74). This may be due to the fact that the Druze population in Israel is substantially smaller than those in Lebanon and Syria: “the smaller the community, the stronger its communal bonds” (Westheimer & Sedan 2007:74).

As a whole, *The Olive and the Tree* offers personal accounts which allow individuals to reflect on and voice their beliefs about the community through open dialogue. The authors take into account opinions from all corners of Druze society including sheikhs, parents, the elderly, and the youth. Speaking to Mr. Fuad Hiar about raising his young kids in Israel outside of the Druze villages in which he was raised, the authors elicited a very interesting response: “A boy raised in the village is not expected to identify with being a Druze; being Druze is obvious. My son, on the other hand, needs to tell himself every day anew that he is Druze. Thus, in a way, he is a much more conscientious Druze than his cousin in the village” (Westheimer & Sedan 2007:106). I believe the same can be said for young Druze in the United States where personal identity is a conscientious choice and where being a minority may encourage one to actively search for cultural forms to identify with. However, as Dr. Ruth explains, distance can be an difficult challenge: “Unlike life in America, a Druze does not need to catch a plane to visit a brother during the holidays. Unlike the Jews in Israel, one does not need to hit the

highway. The Druze will usually meet their kin within walking distance from home” (Westheimer & Sedan 2007:19).

Anthropological and Sociological Studies

Intisar J. Azzam’s *Change for Continuity* (1997) is a publication based on her dissertation in anthropology at the University of California at Irvine. The author opens with a discussion of Emile Durkheim’s classical functionalist theory and states that: “culture is viewed as operating to allow for social order and to maintain the system in equilibrium” (Azzam 1997:2). The text discusses the formation and structure of Druze ethnic identity with particular focus on the maintenance of dispersed populations. Azzam’s ability to illustrate the methods of her study was especially pertinent to my own research and allowed me to see the questions she used when interviewing her fellow Druze. She states that as anthropologists we cannot deny that one who is on familiar terrain will more readily achieve an open rapport with those they wish to understand. Indeed, the author makes it apparent that her endeavors were met with a high level of cooperation shortly after moving to southern California where she developed an honest reputation among her peers. Moreover, Azzam’s common ancestry combined with her fluent Arabic permitted her access to the religious scriptures, helping to frame the community in its religious, historical, and cultural context.

Following a review of the Druze image in scholarly literature, Intisar Azzam looks at the ascriptive qualities of endogamy and esoterism. She explains that the Druze use their religion to support their practice of endogamy, which serves to define the community and promote solidarity. She explains that: “In all reliable literature on the

Druze, it is asserted that they have held and transmitted their beliefs secretly through the organization of tightly knit, cohesive, and geopolitically distinct communities, and protected the secrecy of their Faith through the practice of endogamy” (Azzam 1997:41). While the faith originally sought universal proselytization through an open call, or *da’wa*, the creed was quickly closed to converts in 1044 AD, a mere 23 years after it was begun by Al-Hakim. Azzam also shows us that the community’s belief in reincarnation works in similar fashion to define the group as a cohesive and interconnected unit. Thus, Druze are obligated to marry within the group to beget Druze children who in turn are born again to Druze parents. While beliefs and practices such as these have allowed the community to preserve their distinctive identity, others are beginning to have repercussions on the community’s social bonds. While secrecy, as explained through the practice of *at-taqiyya*, has been part of the Druze adaptive process throughout history, religious knowledge often relegated to the few is becoming more and more crucial to North American Druze who wish to understand the tenets of their faith similar to their Jewish, Christian, and Muslim peers.

Moving on to her earlier dissertation, *Persistence and Malleability of Ethnic Boundaries* (1995), Azzam includes a review of her methodology and expands upon ‘Druze’ as ethnic category. After discussing Druze experience in the United States, the author identifies some of shortcomings of the symbolic perspective in constructing identity. She explains that this mode is insufficient in that it classifies community as an ‘objectified morphology’ while overlooking the dynamics between change and persistence. With a different perspective regarding the social power of symbols, her own study, “proved Druzeness to be a shared system of symbols whose meanings were open

to interpretation and redefinition” (Azzam 1995:153). Furthermore, she also advocates Peter Stromberg’s view that, “consensus is the accomplishment of the community; community is not the accomplishment of consensus” (Azzam 1995:153). For me, this statement illustrates that individual interpretation should be emphasized in recognizing how a society understands and uses their social symbols.

Given the title of Intisar Azzam’s book, one can see how her research was partly in response to the earlier work by Samy Swead Shavit, entitled *Lebanese Druze Identity: Change or Continuity?* (1993). This comprehensive text addresses five key elements that form the basis of any given society, these being identity, history, ideology, culture, and politics. Focusing on the first of these, Shavit operationalizes identity into three categories, ideological beliefs, cultural attributes, and political attitudes. The first of these groups may or may not be religious in origin, the second includes scriptural and circumstantial attributes, and the third is a result of the approval or disapproval of the group’s interests. One of the ideological beliefs Shavit examines is reincarnation, which as he explains shapes social and political behavior. With the certainty of being reborn, the Druze have been noted to have a casual disregard for danger, as well as immense patience during trying times (Shavit 1993:183). These qualities are apparent in many aspects of Druze life and can be heard in an old battle cry, “who wants to sleep in their mother’s bellies tonight?”, or in the common expression, “we are born in each other’s houses” (both references to the faith’s belief in instantaneous reincarnation to new parents).

Druze sense of identity is connected strongly to religion, as is common amongst all communities in the Middle East. Shavit notes that: “whenever an antagonistic effort is

organized against Druzes, Druze sense of identity may increase and their distinctiveness rise” (Shavit 1993:181). It is this distinctiveness which forms the core of the inquiry, both the author’s as well as my own. Given that the Druze are a distinct group whose basic set of beliefs are unlike that of other religions, the author asks how members recognize these differences and whether or not they identify similarities with other religions. Shavit explains that the group’s sense of identity has largely remained the same, both ideologically and culturally, while change can be seen in common forms of hospitality and austerity. In his conclusion, Shavit discovered that the most notable change took place in the community’s politics, which differs from that of earlier generations. This includes beliefs that are more tolerant of outsiders as well as the transformation of values concerning group separation, indifference, and secrecy. Such results show that the politics of a community are often positioned on the periphery and are more malleable in contrast to core ideology and the strong foundation of a culture’s central components (Shavit 1993:54).

Similar to Shavit in her approach, Marjorie Anne Bennet discusses reincarnation, marriage, and memory to understand, “a religious minority’s strategies for preserving their sense of separateness and uniqueness while at the same time claiming pan-Arab and patriotic Syrian affiliations” (Bennet 1999:9). Her work, titled, *Reincarnation, Marriage, and Memory: Negotiating Sectarian Identity among the Druze of Syria* (1999), discusses specific aspects of Druze life without over objectifying their experiences. Bennet focuses on community identity by looking at marriage, reincarnation, and memory and the roles they play in promoting group solidarity. For example, in comparing the Druze communities of Syria to those in the United States, the author explains: “the notion that

marriage is a duty or an explicit union of families, is unlikely to resonate for the average U.S. citizen, steeped as U.S. liberal ideology is in notions about the pursuit of individual happiness” (Bennet 1999:159). Moreover, her focus on the religious aspects of these components helps to illustrate that the Druze are a distinct minority whose cultural models are atypical when compared to the rest of Middle Eastern society.

Saskia Witteborn’s *Collective Identities of People of Arab Descent: An Analysis of the Situated Expression of Ethnic, Panethnic, National, and Religious Identifications* (2005), looks at the expression of identity through discourse, in Seattle’s Druze, Christian, and Muslim communities. In comparison to Monica Columbo and Azzurra Senatore’s definition of collective identity Witteborn explains that this category does not exist within itself, but as a, “question of identification on the part of the participating individuals” (Witteborn 2005:14). Participants in the study recognized their own identities within a particular set of ethnic, panethnic, national, and religious categories, the overarching and shared category being Arab. Additionally, the author’s focus on expressed identity labels allows her to identify the notion of category as: “words that interlocutors use to align themselves in this case with particular cultural values and norms, imagined communities, religions, or regions” (Witteborn 2005:18).

Witteborn further explores the Druze label by looking at who uses it and under what circumstances. It is shown that while many Druze do not talk openly about their religion, the practice of identifying with this label automatically makes them members of the community, even if they are less likely to adopt the Druze label in public settings. As the author points out, many Druze may openly refer to themselves as either Muslim or Christian, “in order to adapt to the perceived knowledge level of the audience and to

avoid any questions about their religion” (Witteborn 2005:91). This simple piece of qualitative data illustrates how *at-taqiyya*, or religious dissimulation, is often implemented in the daily lives of North American Druze. Furthermore, an example of the malleability of Druze identity is further evinced in a narrative provided by the author. As one Druze man explains, his reputation changed after marrying a Christian woman against his family’s wishes. This shows us that labels can be ascribed, despite what choices we make, allowing others to impose them on us whether or not we are willing to accept them.

Society and Discourse

Yvonne Yazbeck Hadad’s “The Druze in North America” (1991) is an excellent article addressing the history of the American Druze Society, or ADS. The author coins the term “selective *taqiyya*”, to explain how the Druze faith allows its followers to adopt the religious practices of the majority. More specifically, transnational Druze are likely to publicly profess the most common religion in their surroundings, although they may find it difficult to claim a faith they see as fundamentally different from their own (e.g. with polytheistic beliefs). In this same way: “the Druze doctrine is highly complex and incorporates elements of a number of different kinds of philosophy and theology. On the other hand its Unitarianism is straightforward and direct” (Hadad 1991:114). With the establishment of the ADS in 1947, the society sought to direct its agenda by formulating a sense of Druze identity. They asked: “Who are the Druze? What are our beliefs? What is our role in the American society?” (Hadad 1991:122). As well, the ADS emphasizes

its concern with cultivating religious interest among community members both young and old.

In agreement with my own research goals, Hadad states: “the Druze over the last several decades have sought to understand the faith both for their own sense of identity and to be able to inculcate it in their young people. This straightforwardness has been emphasized over the more esoteric doctrines” (Hadad 1991:114). While personal interest might motivate inquiry into the Druze faith, an understanding of the religious scriptures requires great skill in the Arabic language which is becoming the exception among younger generations. However, the majority agrees that change is necessary for the community’s survival in the United States while opinions as to how this should come about vary (Hadad 1991:130-131). Even if the community identified the same set of problems and agreed upon a definite set of actions, the question still remains as to how any group of people can remain distinct in a country such as the United States. Given the inexorable march of globalization, I believe that the question of change and continuity will be one that all communities will inevitably have to address.

In conjunction with Hadad’s article is Susan Greenbaum’s “A Comparison of African American and Euro-American Mutual Aid Societies in 19th Century America” (1991), which looks at the establishment of ethnic organizations across cultures. Oftentimes, transnational mutual aid societies were formed with similar goals in mind yet their approaches varied in order to meet the needs of different members. In addition to monetary assistance these societies, “sponsored social, educational, and cultural activities which reinforced ethnic networks and group identity, while providing for the common welfare” (Greenbaum 1991:95). Understanding the history of mutual aid societies in the

United States is imperative to identifying the social functions of groups such as the American Druze Society. In fact, the ADS developed as a result of an earlier Druze mutual aid society named *El-Bakaurat Ed-Dirziyat*, which was established by immigrants in Seattle Washington towards the end of the 19th century (Makarem 1996:17-67). Most significantly, Greenbaum notes: “Organizations formed by immigrants frequently had nationalist as well as economic goals, which constrained individuals from unduly benefiting and elevated the importance of cultural activities symbolizing shared identity” (Greenbaum 1991:106).

Lastly, I consider the efficacy of Monica Columbo and Azzurra Senatore’s article “The Discursive Construction of Community Identity” (2005) to provide a relevant theoretical approach to my own research problem. In studying community identity, the authors advocate a discourse oriented approach over other more mechanized and objective methodologies. The discursive approach, “refers to the way in which language use works to construct or constitute social relations” (Columbo & Senatore 2005:60). In contrast, the methodology of the functionalist perspective can be problematic in that community identity is looked at through a narrowed scope relegating it to the domain delineated by the selected variables. In contrast, “a discourse-oriented perspective would help to clarify these processes focusing on how the notion of community is actually used by members in everyday discourse in order to accomplish particular versions of the collectivities which constitute the social world” (Columbo & Senatore 2005:50). While my theoretical approach is influenced by Emile Durkheim, a figure at the forefront of the functionalist perspective, my research also focuses on identifying Druze social problems through a comprehensive dialogue with individual members of the community.

While the realm of community identity is often difficult to distinguish from other forms of group identity, it is frequently presented as a unique or specific concept. Oftentimes, these concrete models are uncharacteristic of communities. Whether they are based in social networks or grounded in physical territories, communities often share an amorphous quality exemplifying their subjective nature. The authors point to the advantages of qualitative inquiry and stress the importance of, “how community identity is actively constructed in discourse to accomplish particular goals” (Columbo & Senatore 2005:51). Their conclusion states that as studied, subject’s discourse identifies community identity as encompassing the local community, ethnic categories, and ingroup/outgroup relations (Columbo & Senatore 2005:58). However, my own approach recognizes that public dialogue has the broader ability to identify the key aspects of community’s identity and produces a rich dialogue more valuable and authentic than any theoretical discourse.

In conclusion, the selection of texts discussed in this review provide a variety of information and work together to promote an advanced understanding of the dynamics of collective identity through a detailed understanding of Druze history, culture, and emigration. Likewise, focusing on the Druze condition has enabled me to contextualize my research problem providing a strong foundation for my discursive approach through a thorough review of the community’s values and basic ideology. In carrying out my study, I am optimistic that, “As members of the community in the West today respond to the developments in the Middle East and in America, they are recognizing the importance of understanding who they are, where they come from, and what it means to be Druze” (Hadad 1991:111).

Chapter Three: Perspective & Approach

My personal investment in this research is twofold given that I am part of the Druze community in the United States and believe that applied anthropology presents the best means for determining significant solutions to social issues. The field of anthropology defines my research with the term inside ethnography, which can often insinuate a conflict of interests. While my position as a researcher striving for objectivity is perhaps even more tenuous, anthropologists do not disagree with the fact that being familiar and accepted among the research population is an essential asset to developing an open dialogue. Whether or not this position is perceived as an asset or a drawback, it has added a unique quality to my investigation which has differed from that of other researchers in several ways. While many Druze academics have discussed the importance of preserving our heritage transnationally, they have yet to survey how people define the issues. Likewise, non-Druze scholars have researched a number of facets that make up Druze identity, but have avoided many substantial topics as well as tangible application.

Despite my familiarity with the Druze, my position as an insider has not always been advantageous. When discussing my research I was often well received by my peers while senior generations were sometimes more hesitant. Asking older Druze to participate in my survey was fairly daunting, given the underlying skepticism which usually accompanied such encounters. While being an insider allowed me to express that

my concern for the community was genuine, the intentions of my research were not always favorably perceived. In my approach I hastily presumed that people would feel obligated to assist a young scholar warranting their opinions in order to advance the community's knowledge. However, some individuals were prone to either brush me off or turn the tables, in which case I was the one being interviewed. No matter how I met their inquiries or how well my intentions were perceived, my credentials meant little until I verified my own Druze heritage. When first being introduced, Druze often state their last name along with the names of their parents so that familial bonds can be established. At Druze social gatherings it is not uncommon to meet distant relatives whose family history can be traced back to the same village as one's own. Being familiar with this practice, I learned to use my last name as a conversation opener in order to gain a measure of recognition among older individuals. Nevertheless, despite participating in the common social customs and overtly establishing my shared heritage with fellow Druze from the United States, I was by no means guaranteed an amenable audience.

Theoretical Approach

In his most prominent work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim states that religion and society are inextricably linked. Having looked at the religious beliefs of certain Aboriginal tribes, Durkheim posits: "if the totem is both the symbol of god and of society, are these not one and the same?" (Durkheim 2001:154). For most researchers who have studied the Druze, it is believed that advancing knowledge of the faith, or God in Durkheim's example, will intrinsically have a positive

effect on the health of the community. Similarly, we can be certain that as religious comprehension becomes less prominent among members, the community itself loses purpose and participation in the society wanes. Yet I believe that such knowledge cannot become salient to the lives of transnational Druze unless we are able to identify and address our social problems. This is a critical issue that all communities face in the United States and Canada where ethnic heritage has always taken a back seat to a popular policy of integration. Furthermore, Durkheim explains that culture consists of collective values, symbols, social bonds, and identity (Scupin 2000:24-26). Keeping this in mind, my interview and survey questions were developed to warrant responses that allow participants to define these core components. Coupling this framework with the discursive approach, my research questions focused on the qualities individuals ascribe to the community through discourse. This theoretical approach has shown that Druze identity is a cultural construction which is mediated through language and can be understood by means of comprehending the collective interpretation of its constituent parts (e.g. symbols, bonds, etc).

Working with a discourse oriented approach, the qualitative questions in my survey invite extensive responses and open discussions. Additionally, many questions required individuals to define relatively general phrases by creating the context for themselves. For example, the question which asks respondents to identify the challenges the Druze community faces in the United States generated responses that allowed me to see how participants defined “challenges”. This approach allowed respondents to discuss their opinions in their own terms while mitigating the influence of my personal beliefs. While the qualities ascribed to terms like “challenges” differed among respondents,

similar interpretations have worked together to create a dynamic portrait helping to define the characteristics of the Druze community throughout North America.

Methodology

My research is essentially a needs assessment. As defined by the applied anthropologist Alexander Ervin, a needs assessment is: “a process of identifying and seeking solutions to the problems of particular peoples or institutions, regardless of whether programs or solutions have already been designed to ameliorate them” (Ervin 2005:76). My methods include extensive participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and a survey consisting of ten preliminary questions and a mixed set of twenty six qualitative and quantitative questions. In designing this research I selected methods that reflect the qualitative nature of my discourse centered inquiry. While simple numerical analysis has been used to evaluate some of the quantifiable responses (e.g. yes/no questions), complex statistical analysis has not been essential to my study. In general, my research methods have included semi-structured interviews, a survey available both online or in hard copy, and participant observation, which took place at a number of Druze social events.

Since my initial proposal my research has changed in many ways. I had originally planned to take a critical look at the American Druze Society’s approach in promoting fellowship and shared heritage. My early methods included organizing focus groups and distributing hard copies of my survey exclusively. Unfortunately, given the nature of large gatherings, ADS social events are not ideal opportunities to gather groups

of willing participants for an earnest discussion or to ask people to write out responses to a relatively extensive survey. Rather, I decided to concentrate on individual semi-structured interviews and distributing my survey online while the few individuals who preferred the option of submitting a hard copy were provided with one. The survey tool (figure 29:82) begins with ten preliminary questions, such as marital status and national origin, which provided useful variables used to group respondents and to discern similarities and differences in the responses. For example, it was interesting to note that the participants who were unable to name the five luminaries (religious figures symbolizing the core of the Druze faith) represented all age groups. The body of the survey consisted of twenty six questions, half of which required one word or short answers while the other half required longer and more detailed responses.

In conducting semi-structured interviews, I was careful to make sure that my sample represented an even cross-section of the community in the United States. However, Canadian respondents were not easily accessible for interviews due to time and resource constraints. A total of fourteen interviews were conducted and included a set of eight base questions (figure 30:87) that permitted the dialogue to develop naturally. While I asked individuals whether or not they participated in ADS and other Druze social activities, this was not a very important factor in selecting or distinguishing participants. Since I wished to involve all types of Druze throughout the community, I purposefully engaged both very active members as well as the comparatively uninvolved. Throughout the interviews, it became apparent that individuals were quick to label themselves in terms of their involvement with the Druze community (e.g. member of the ADS, volunteer, infrequent attendee). Rather, my interviews and surveys have approached

North American Druze as a single yet dynamic community unit with shared needs and interests based on a common religious, cultural, and ethnic identity.

Over the course of the last year I have had the opportunity to attend a number of Druze social events including the national convention, Florida chapter picnics, and Michigan chapter parties and seminars. During this time, I utilized participant observation to look at interaction and common social themes. More specifically, while there were a number of discussions and events at the national convention addressing the need for educational reform, instructive seminars were few. In contrast, the Michigan chapter was proactive about providing educational and religious seminars although attendance varied. I also observed that a common lack of communication amongst the different groups in the society (e.g. youth, parents, sheikhs, ADS volunteers), may be translating into conflict, division, and weaker social bonds. By taking part in these activities, I was able to immerse myself in the community's social life on a level I had not previously experienced.

The selected methods worked collectively to illustrate a vibrant image of Druze identity throughout North America, but also limited inclusion. For example, research participants included Druze who attended the same social events I had and who were willing to provide me with personal contact information. Moreover, I was somewhat selective in approaching possible respondents and avoided some clusters of busy convention attendees and party-goers. Essentially, those who participated were a self-selected group whose generous contributions were swayed only by an interest in the survey questions and the greater research they worked to inform.

While participant observation was an essential method in this project, I gradually became aware of the personal issues presented by my role in the research. While attending social events I was careful not to present myself as a historical or religious expert regarding Druze heritage so that I did not overtly influence the thoughts or opinions of informants. It is also undeniable that as an insider, my investment in the community is tremendously personal and has at times transcended the relationship between an academic and his or her research. I was also very conscious of my own assumptions, particularly those concerning the community's problems, and maintained an unbiased attention to unexpected ideas and responses.

Most importantly, the Druze have always guarded their religious beliefs by relegating a great amount of religious knowledge to the faith's sheikhs. While my inquiry worked to understand the specific aspects of a perceived community-wide knowledge gap, I maintained a common respect for some of the enigmatic and esoteric interpretations of the religious scriptures. Although I did not work to divulge the entirety of the Druze religion, it should be understood that knowledge of the faith will inevitably emerge and may be conducive to the education of the youth and to the group's greater prosperity. I believe that complete neglect of the community's educational needs will inevitably result in a general departure from Druze values and the deterioration of this distinct community both transnationally and in the countries of origin.

Research Setting

Before beginning research, I completed a two month internship in May and June of 2008 assisting the president of the American Druze Society's Michigan chapter while attending events held at the ADS community hall. In the following July of 2008, I attended the American Druze Society's annual convention in Fort Lauderdale which was sponsored by the organization's South Florida chapter. This event offered an ideal forum and provided the chance to talk to a number of Druze from across the United States and Canada. Along with participating in the North Florida chapter's events, I have been able to initiate a productive rapport with the ADS president-elect and other power holders. These occasions have been instrumental in establishing my research findings as valuable data that might prove beneficial to the ADS, whose work throughout the United States Druze community is difficult yet vital.

Figure 4-Locations of the American Druze Society's state chapters and community houses (American Druze Society 2009)



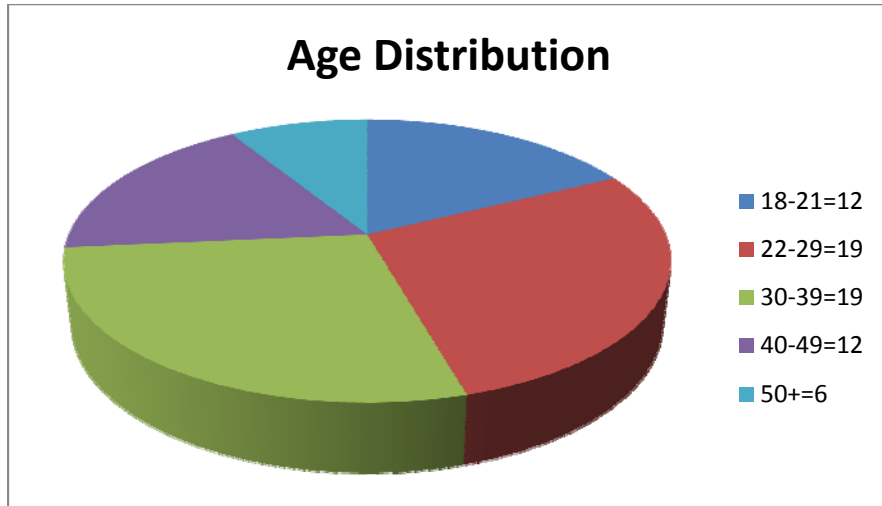
While my research has been independent from the ADS, it is the foremost purpose of this organization to unite Druze families across the United States. The American Druze Society was founded in 1947 by a growing number of Druze immigrants alongside first and second generation Druze born in the United States. Many of the original members had previously been a part of *El-Bakaurat Ed-Dirziyat*, an earlier Druze foundation established in Seattle in 1918 (Makarem 1996:17-67). Due to the organization's traditional practice to hold all group meetings in Arabic rather than English, participation in the group dissolved and it was eventually replaced by the more accommodating American Druze Society. The ADS held its first annual convention in 1947 (figures 22-28:81-84), adopted a constitution and bylaws in 1962 and gained incorporated status as a tax-free organization in 1978. Currently it recognizes fifteen state chapters, three of which have purchased congregational halls that serve the community for a variety of social occasions (figure 4:35). The location of these centers includes Eagle Rock, California, Dearborn Heights, Michigan, and Richmond, Virginia. The society is run by a president (elected biannually by paid members) who is backed by a vice-president, treasurer, secretary, and national board members.

Chapter Four: Research Results

The survey and interview questions focused on three main issues, how the Druze community describes their cultural identity, whether or not individuals perceive a collective knowledge gap and how it is defined, and what possible solutions or approaches they might suggest in dealing with such issues. Beginning with the surveys, a total of seventy responses were submitted between June 2008 and April 2009. The vast majority of respondents chose to submit surveys electronically while only nine were completed in hard copy. The sample size for the results of the quantifiable questions varies slightly as a number of respondents left some questions unanswered or in a few cases supplied nonsensical comments. Individuals were asked to participate only if they live in the United States or Canada and if at least one of their parents is of Druze descent. All respondents claimed Druze descent from both parents with the exception of two individuals whose mothers are not Druze. The ratio of male and female respondents was evenly split with thirty five apiece. The ratio of native United States or Canadian respondents to those born abroad was also relatively close with thirty two in the former group and thirty six in the latter.

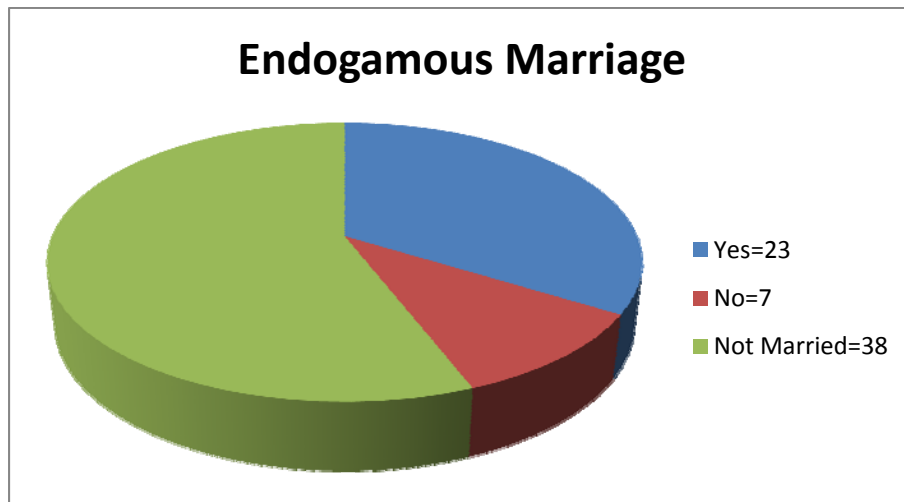
Survey respondents ranged in age from eighteen to seventy one with the average age being slightly over thirty three.

Figure 5-Age Distribution Pie Chart



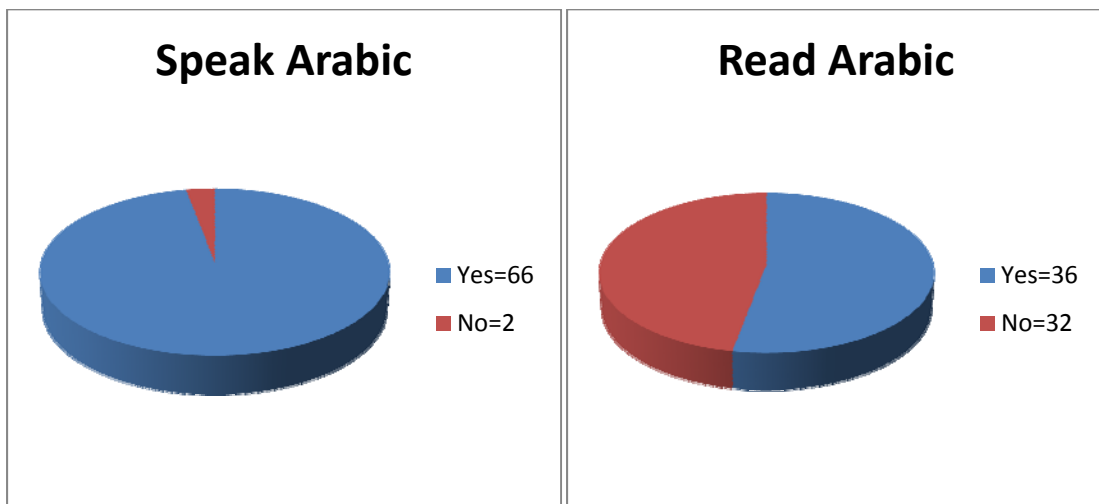
Although less than half of respondents were married, marriage outside of the group was significant given my sample size. It is also interesting to note that five out of the seven exogamous marriages were those of female respondents whose rate of marrying outside of the community is typically lower than their male counterparts.

Figure 6-Endogamous Marriage Pie Chart



While nearly all respondents could speak Arabic to some degree, nearly half are unable to read Arabic. It is interesting to note that the ratio of individuals able to read Arabic matches the ratio of native born respondents compared to those born abroad. However the results were somewhat mixed, as a number of United States and Canada born respondents were proficient in both speaking and reading, while Venezuelan born Druze comprised the remainder of individuals unable to read Arabic.

Figures 7 & 8-Speak Arabic Pie Chart (left), Read Arabic Pie Chart (right)

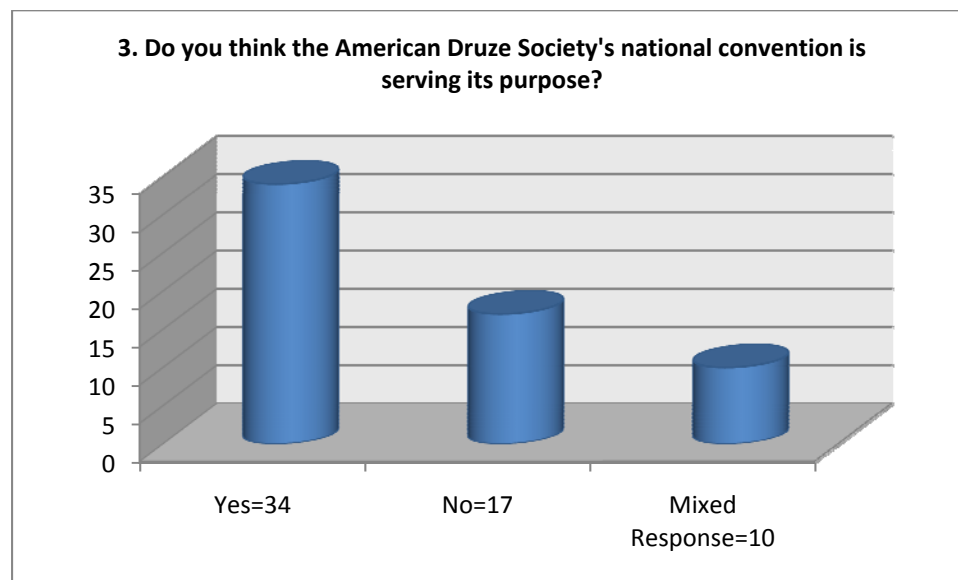


Quantitative Survey Results

Thirteen of the twenty six survey questions involved short answer responses which have been reduced to quantifiable categories (e.g. yes, no, or mixed response). The first of these questions asked respondents whether or not they thought the American Druze Society's national convention was serving its purpose. Here the word "purpose" is intentionally left undefined so that respondents were unrestrained in ascribing it personal meaning. Overall, slightly over half of the participants believed that the national

convention was serving its purpose, while about one-third did not. Participants with both positive and negative responses described the national convention as an event meant to bring people together for friendship and as an opportunity to meet a potential spouse. Some believed that while the convention serves this particular purpose, room for improvement remains: “the convention is a great means for Druze people to meet and get to know one another. However, I think that it tends to be more targeted towards having a good time rather than educating the young generation about their religion and beliefs.” Another respondent replied: “The Druze conventions, for me, help a lot because you get to spend time with people that completely understand you and grew up almost the same way you did. The bond between Druze people when making friends can’t be found with just any people.”

Figure 9-Survey Question 3 Bar Graph

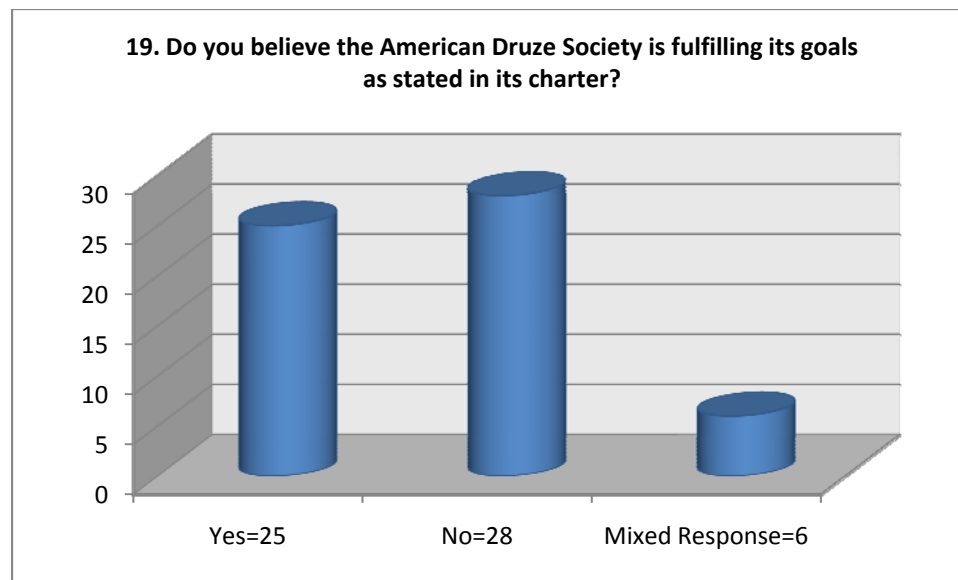


Participants were further solicited to give their opinions about the success of the ADS when asked whether or not they thought the American Druze Society is fulfilling its

goals as stated in its charter: “to perpetuate the universal teachings of the Druze faith, the enhancement of fellowship among Druze descendants, the advancement of Druze religious, literary, and cultural knowledge through education and research, and the betterment of all Druze people through charitable work” (<http://www.druze.com/#>).

Responses of yes and no were almost evenly split, but thorough discussion was typically found among the more critical opinions. Some explained that the ADS was neglecting its educational duties and that the society had become too commercialized. Overall, many agreed that the mission statement is intentionally broad and that fulfilling it would be an unrealistic goal for any group.

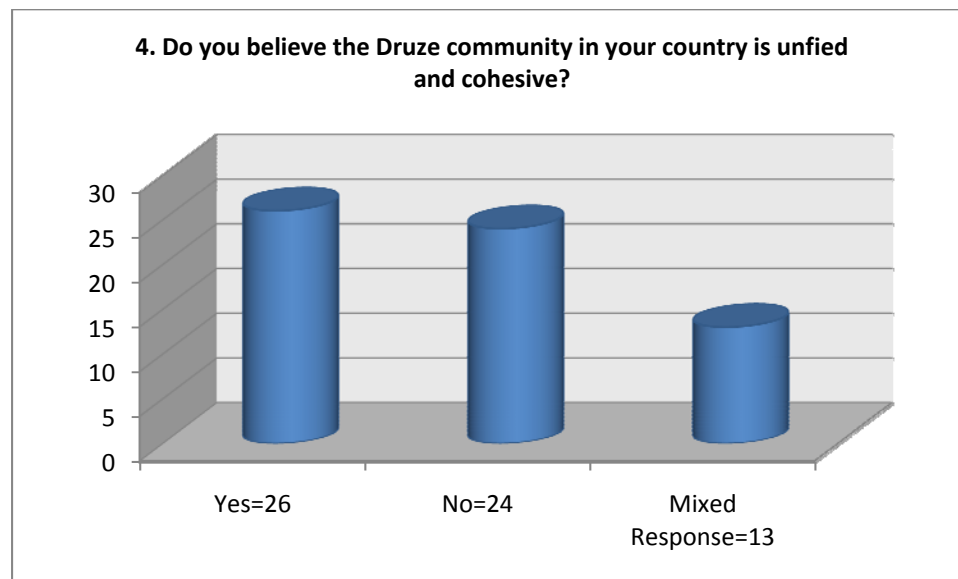
Figure 10-Survey Question 19 Bar Graph



When asked whether or not they believed the Druze community in North America is unified and cohesive, respondents were evenly split with a large number of undecided responses. Respondents who disagreed frequently cited ideological differences, competition among the American Druze Society’s state chapters and feuds among

Lebanese Druze immigrants from different towns or villages. The most common reason attributed to a lack of cohesion in the Druze community was political differences. Despite the fact that nearly 90 percent of North American Druze share a common Lebanese heritage, political solidarity remains elusive (Azzam 1997:56). On the other hand, the large number of respondents who believe the community is unified explained that, “when there is a community crisis, yes, the Druze are one.”

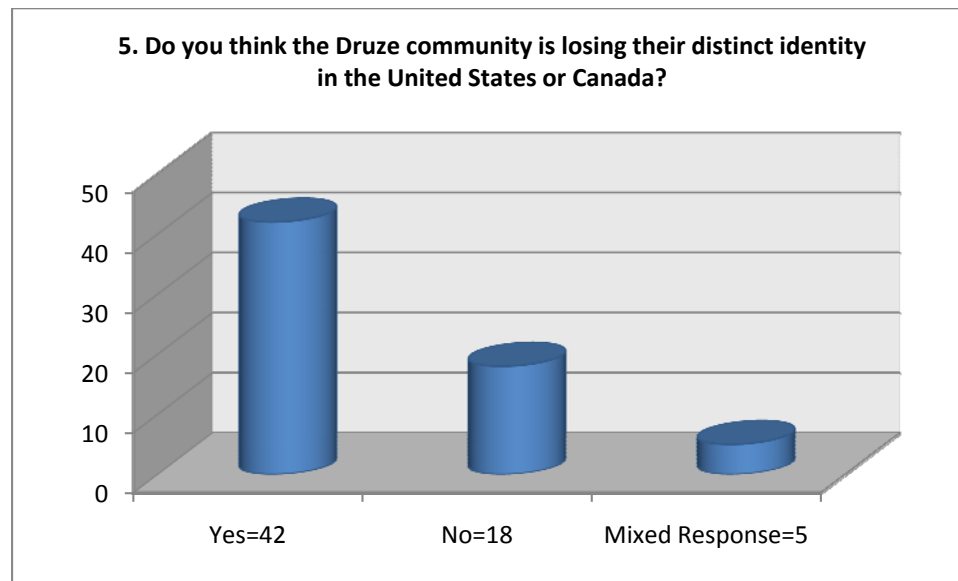
Figure 11-Survey Question 4 Bar Graph



Respondents were asked whether or not they thought the Druze community in the United States or Canada is losing its distinct identity. Over two thirds responded yes and defined the loss of identity as being threatened by exogamous marriages and a lack of cultural and religious knowledge. With a critical eye on his peers, one young respondent explains: “YES. Ask anyone under 30 who was not born in Lebanon what they know about Druze beliefs and you will get a perspective on why I say that.” In contrast, another respondent explains: “I think that we are forming our own identity. Change is

inevitable, whether or not you are in your ‘mother country.’ We keep adding to our distinct culture and forming a new identity because that’s life. If anything we are adding to it, not losing it.” While the perspective of these two individuals differs largely, both perceive an inevitable and imminent change within the community.

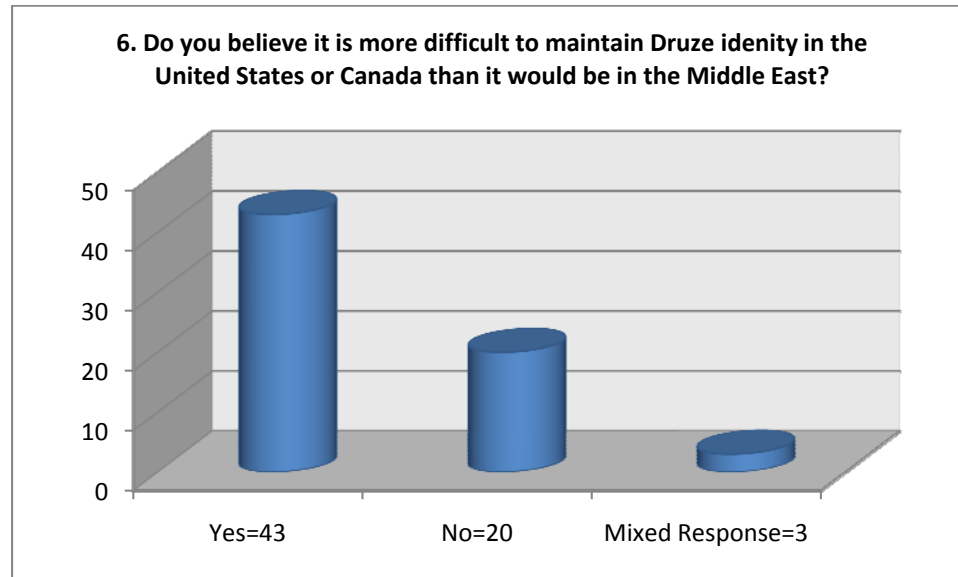
Figure 12-Survey Question 5 Bar Graph



Respondents were asked whether or not maintaining Druze identity in the United States or Canada would be more difficult than in the Middle East. Comparatively similar to the ratio of responses in the last question, slightly over two thirds believed that it is more difficult. Respondents explained that over seas the Druze live in tightly knit communities while the population is spread thin here. It was also explained that assimilation should be expected in North America where it is custom to move away from relatives to attend college or to start a family of one’s own. Participants who believed that preserving Druze identity in the United States was not more challenging, explained that: “At least in the US there is a professed freedom of religion. In parts of the Middle

East, the Druze have suffered centuries of religious persecution,” and: “I think it would be harder in the Middle East because at least in Canada you can question things without fear of someone looking down on you for what you say.”

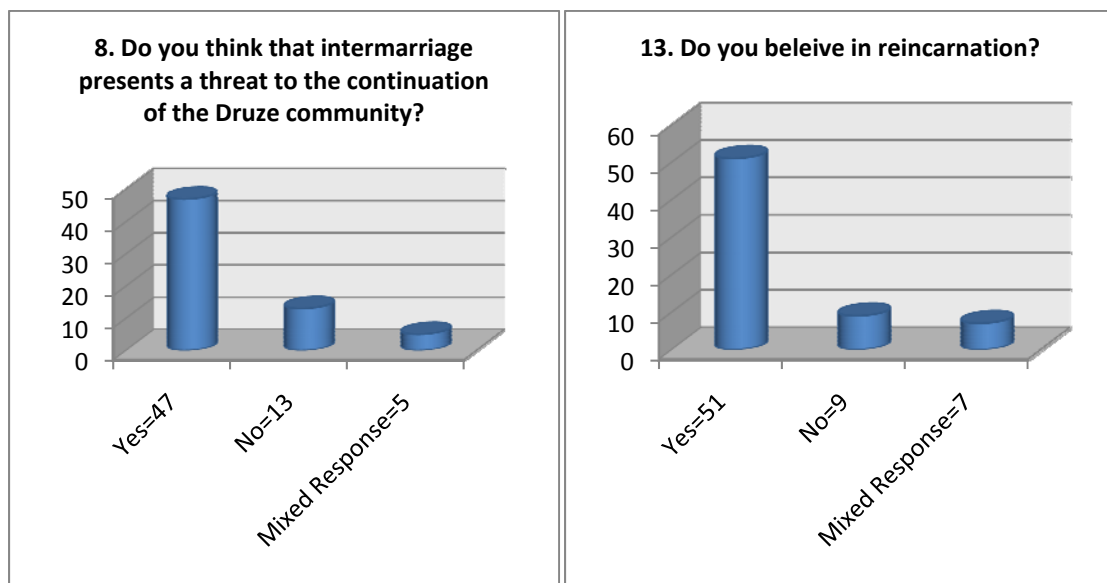
Figure 13-Survey Question 6 Bar Graph



The next question asked participants whether or not marriage outside of the group posed a threat to the continuation of the Druze community. Whether or not they believed endogamy to be a demand imposed by the religion, nearly eighty percent of respondents agreed that exogamous marriages present a problem to the community. Some believe that the tradition of restricting marriage to fellow Druze is a secular custom which has been imposed by the community’s leadership over time, while some maintain that the tenets of the religion forbid it. The answer to this question remains elusive to the majority of Druze worldwide since knowledge of the faith is not actively disseminated. As one female respondent who married outside of the community states: “Our problem today is that we do not have any form of guidance. We even keep our own books which

supposedly explain it all away from each other.” Comparing these responses to those of question thirteen, illustrates that the community’s views towards endogamy run parallel with its strong belief in reincarnation. These findings are in agreement with anthropologist Intisar Azzam, as she explains in her dissertation that these traditions are fundamental and work together to reinforce the group’s social bonds.

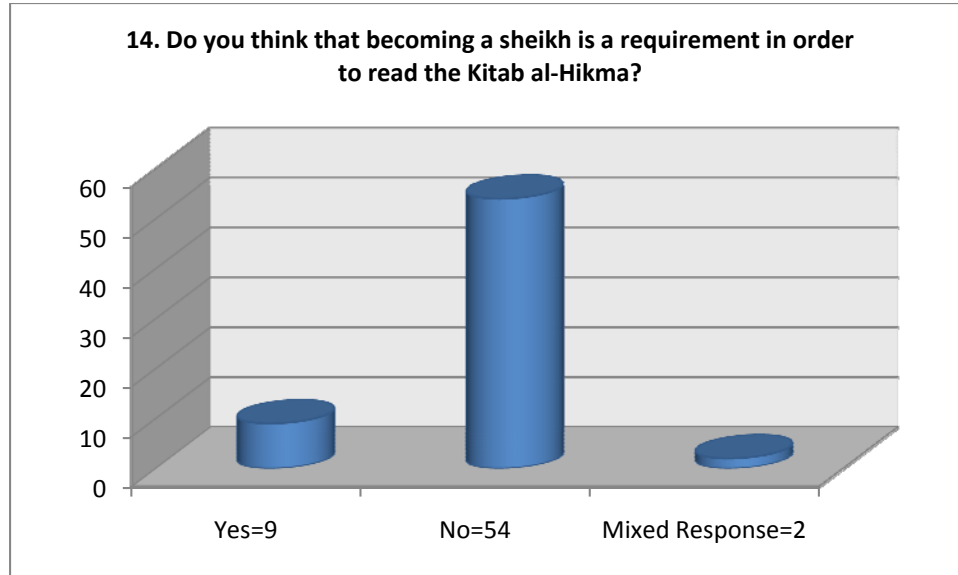
Figures 14 & 15-Survey Question 8 Bar Graph (left), Survey Question 13 Bar Graph (right)



When asked whether or not reading the *Kitab al-Hikma* required one to become a religious sheikh, slightly over eighty percent answered no. While acquiring and reading the Druze holy book is not taboo, it has been a long standing custom that the sheikhs and *sheikhas* remain privy to the formal instruction and private discussions which lead to the faith’s inner meaning. Although the vast majority of Druze disagree, it has become a popular belief that the *Kitab al-Hikma* is reserved for the religious class: “My understanding is that it is a requirement, however I have yet to hear a ‘reasonable’

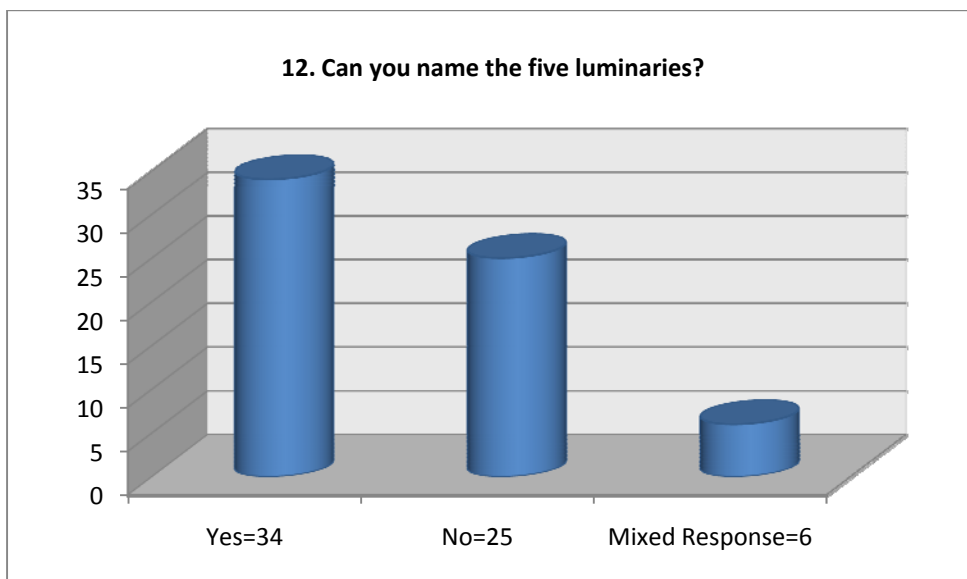
explanation as to why a college educated person (or anyone for that matter) is not entitled to read it.”

Figure 16-Survey Question 14 Bar Graph



The next question asked whether or not individuals were able to name the five luminary figures of the Druze faith. It should be understood that being able to identify the five luminaries is perhaps the most elementary level of religious knowledge. This particular question was designed to evaluate participants’ familiarity with the most important Druze symbol, the five pointed star representing the luminaries and their corresponding colors (figure 2:7). While slightly over half were able to do so, those included in the “no” category were not able to name any; while those included in the “mixed response” were given partial credit for identifying at least one luminary by name.

Figure 17-Survey Question 12 Bar Graph

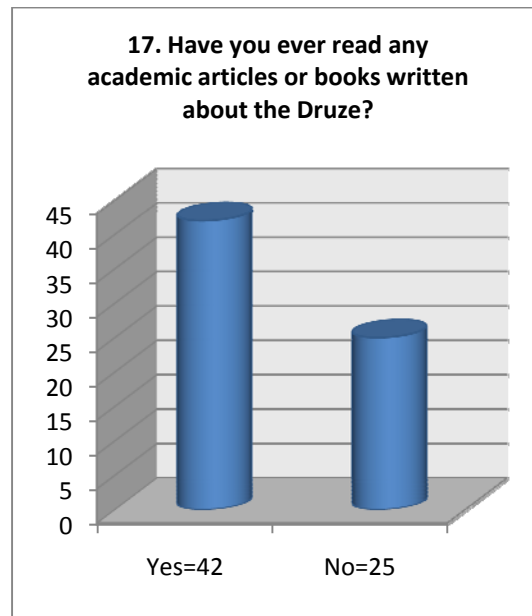
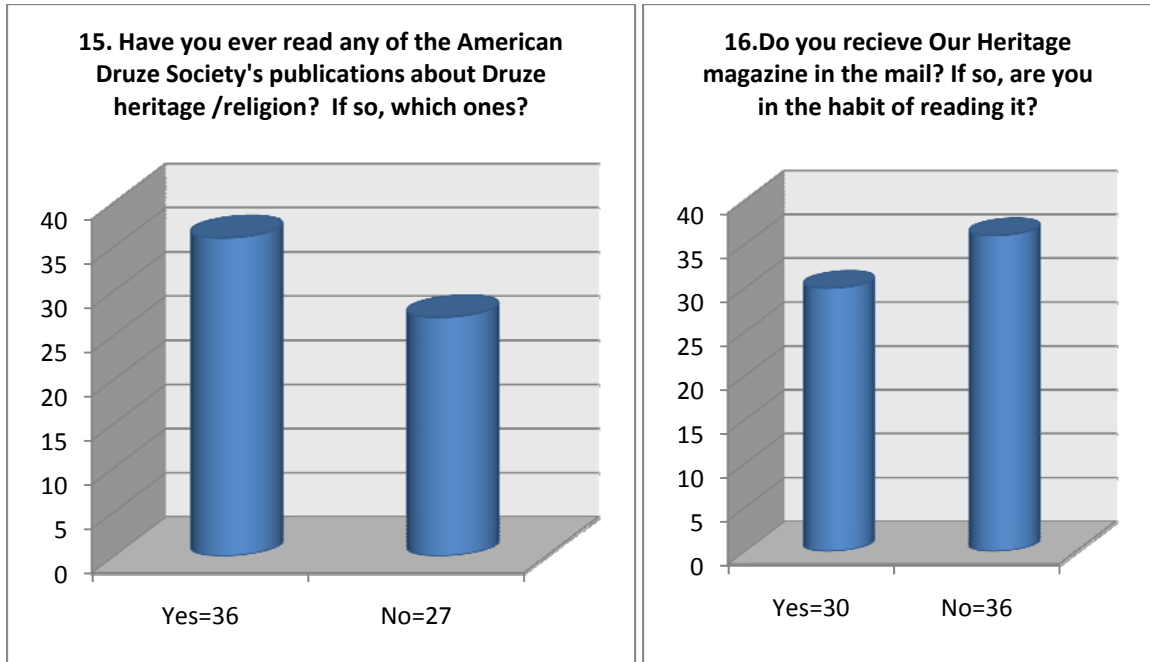


The next three questions worked together to assess whether or not participants were engaged in reading about their community through academic and ADS publications. The first of these questions asked if individuals had read any books published by the American Druze Society and its committee on religious affairs, also known as CORA. While more than half replied that they had, many respondents described having partially read such publications and included the ADS periodical, *Our Heritage*, among their answers (although I intended for the question to be restricted to published books). In specific, many respondents cited *The Tawhid Faith*, a widely circulated series of five books commissioned by CORA to provide a foundation of religious and historical knowledge in English to Druze unable to read Arabic (Sayegh 1983). Next, participants were asked if they received *Our Heritage* magazine and if they were in the habit of reading it. This particular publication, originally intended to be a quarterly, is sent out approximately twice a year to all the Druze households on the ADS mailing list,

regardless of whether or not membership dues have been paid. Since beginning in 1983, *Our Heritage* has served as the United States Druze community's main method of keeping up to speed with news about the society and one another. It is important to mention that while more than half of respondents replied no, this number was slightly inflated due to the relatively marginal number of responses from Canadian residents.

The last question in this set asks participants whether or not they had read any academic articles or books written about the Druze aside from the aforementioned ADS publications. Although nearly two-thirds of respondents replied that they had read an academic article or publication about the Druze, many answers referenced internet research which might have included amateur work from questionable sources. While the internet does have a number of credible resources that should not be disqualified, respondents themselves disagreed in defining them as academic articles or books: "Yes, I have read some information online," or: "No, just the internet." Examples of published works that respondents had read included the books by Betts, Obeid, Makarem, and Westheimer, discussed in the literature review above, as well as *The Origins of the Druze People and Religion* (2008) by Phillip Hitti.

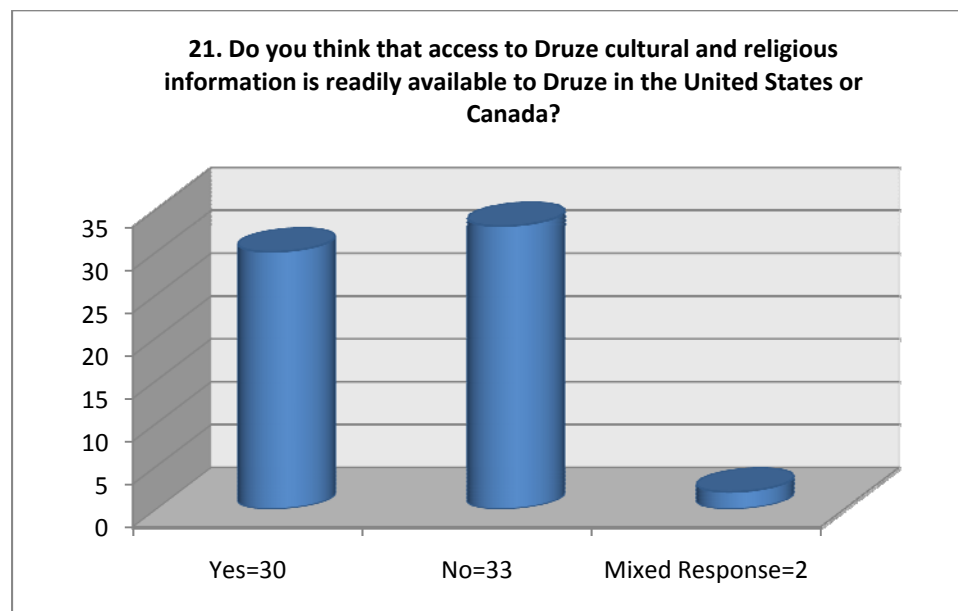
Figures 18, 19 & 20-Survey Question 15 Bar Graph (left), Survey Question 16 Bar Graph (right), Survey Question 17 Bar Graph (bottom)



The final quantifiable survey question asked whether or not Druze cultural and religious information is readily available in the United States and Canada. Once more, participants were split and provided conflicting ideas on what they considered to be

readily available information. Citing the internet once more, one respondent replied: “Absolutely not. I think that what we read on the internet is full of speculation and different viewpoints as well as incorrect history,” while another said: “Yes, I do feel that there is a lot of information available via internet.” In contrast an underlying theme amongst both positive and negative responses discussed taking personal responsibility to search for religious and cultural information: “although I am loathe to admit it, my lack of education about my faith is my own fault.” Referring to the esoteric aspects of the faith’s inner meaning, a young female respondent wrote: “I think the only information accessible is the kind of information anyone can read, from Druze to non-Druze. But for one who wants a deeper look, a deeper lesson into our faith, then no I don’t believe we do have it available to use.”

Figure 21-Survey Question 21 Bar Graph



Qualitative Survey Results

Alongside the survey's short answer questions were those that required more detailed responses which could not be reduced into quantifiable factors. The first of these questions asked participants to discuss how they might explain the Druze faith to an outsider, or non-Druze in this case. Given the lack of religious knowledge that many participants have described, it was surprising to see so many accurate and articulate responses. Many explained the faith in terms of its beliefs and practices, such as reincarnation, having no method of conversion, and lacking specialized places of prayer, such as churches and mosques. By far, the most popular response explained that the Druze are Unitarians who believe in unity with the one God, or *Tawhid*. Despite identifying an abundance of religious sentiments, many respondents also explained the Druze faith as a philosophy or ideology: "I would say its more of a community than a religion." A point of contention among a few respondents involves the faith's relationship to Islam: "I am the follower of a faith that worships the one true god, Allah. My faith is an Islamic sect," as compared to: "We are not Muslims, nor part of Islam." In order to identify with the beliefs of non-Druze, many explained the faith as a combination between Christianity and Islam.

The following question asked participants what kinds of Druze social activities they have participated in. While it was up to respondents to explain the form and frequency of their social habits, many described attending ADS or CDS (Canadian Druze Society) events on an irregular basis. However, with the exception of four respondents, each individual said that they have attended at least a few conventions, picnics, ADS

holiday parties and chapter events. More detailed responses included family occasions such as weddings, birthdays and reunions. It is also interesting to note that five respondents reported being directly involved in the ADS or CDS as a chapter vice-president, a convention planner and as various board members.

Participants were asked what challenges they believed the Druze community faces in the diaspora. The most common response explained that a lack of an appropriate educational method was a detriment to the youth and to the continuation of the community as a whole. One adult male replied: “The Druze religion is a challenge. There are no places of worship, it is a closed religion and the majority of people are left in the dark.” Other responses described these challenges as being an unavoidable result of living in the United States amidst its diversity, temptations and the pressure of everyday life. A few individuals explained that the community’s minority status was itself problematic, since the population is comparatively small and widely dispersed. While there was a variety of challenges identified, responses suggested that the community views cultural assimilation as an imminent threat.

As a follow up, the next question asked what kinds of challenges individuals have faced in maintaining their own Druze heritage. Identifying the same problem in different terms, younger respondents discussed the difficulty of mounting peer pressure as older respondents criticized the abundance of freedom in the west. Problems such as pre-marital sex, alcohol and drugs were repeatedly identified as challenges to the community but were never discussed in terms of personal trouble. The most frequent challenge was undoubtedly the taboo on dating: “As a teenager it’s hard to explain to your friends in a small farming community that you don’t date because you have to marry someone from

your religion. It makes you feel like an outsider.” Since these restrictions are oftentimes enforced more strictly on young girls than their male counterparts, this double-standard was prominent in their responses. Also, seven respondents claimed that they faced no challenges in maintaining their heritage. Four individuals from this group are married and have Druze spouses, which might be an indication of the popular belief that people who marry within the faith are successful products of being raised in the Druze tradition. As an example, one man replied: “I believe I have maintained my Druze heritage and faced no challenges. I am married to a Druze girl whom I met in Lebanon.”

The next two questions asked participants to describe how familiar they are with the Druze faith and how they were exposed to such knowledge. In general most respondents explained that they were somewhat familiar with the faith but, more often than not, described restrictions on knowledge and a desire to learn more. Those who declared a level of proficiency often stated that they were educated by very religious relatives, including some who were not sheikhs. A majority of respondents said that both immediate and extended family played an integral role in at least exposing them to some information about the faith. A small number of responses cited personal research as well as being raised in or taking trips to Lebanon. A few individuals recognized the ADS as an asset, with specific credit due to the religious sessions at the Michigan chapter’s house, the seminars at the national convention, the North Carolina chapter’s Arabic school and the books series commissioned by the ADS, *The Tawhid Faith* (1983), by Dr. Wahbah Sayegh.

Participants were asked how they define the role of the American Druze Society and the needs it fulfills in the greater North American Druze community. Typical

answers characterized the ADS as an organization that brings families together and allows individuals to meet beyond the customary setting of the Druze home. Predictably, respondents explained that the role of the ADS is to promote the community's values and provide educational resources about Druze heritage. One response summed this up best affirming: "It keeps people in touch, helps give extended families an excuse to see each other and spend time together, it provides a potential environment for people to learn about their faith if they are interested and it allows for a sense of community and belonging that also has potential for professional networking." While more than half of the responses were positive, a few were critical of the society's ability to accomplish its goals: "I feel the ADS fulfills very little, outside of mingling with other Druze in hopes of getting hitched." Additionally, respondents were also critical of the community itself, stating that: "Though the ADS provides a forum for connecting with other Druze, I feel like the Druze community does not make an effort or care."

Subsequently, participants were asked to make a prediction regarding the future of the Druze community in the United States or Canada. Although a few responses were positive, the general outlook was decidedly grim. Many believe that an inevitable increase in exogamous marriages will diminish the population and that further Americanization will be detrimental to the transmission of the community's values. Overall, the Druze community views its existence as fragile and believes that life in the diaspora is filled with real threats of cultural assimilation. One United States born respondent warns: "If things stay the way they are then we will keep going backwards and lose our faith, language, customs, traditions, etc. There is an extreme lack of knowledge." On the other hand, about ten respondents saw things differently. Speaking

from personal experience, one man answered: “I have been in the USA since 1979, I have seen a lot of growth in our community, I hope it will increase always as we stay united.”

The next two survey questions worked together to recognize and assess potential knowledge gaps among both individuals and the community. With regards to Druze heritage and religion, participants were first asked to identify which areas they believed United States and Canadian Druze lacked knowledge the most. Respondents often replied that their fellow Druze do not have a deeper understanding of the faith while some added that many in the community also lacked familiarity with customs and traditions. More specifically, one respondent stated that there is a lack of, “Translation of religious text and answers to big questions like why aren’t they translating, why aren’t we changing with the times, why aren’t we open to all people. . .” Following this, participants were then asked to discuss the areas in which they personally lacked knowledge. Responses to this second question were more detailed and allowed individuals to identify unfamiliar topics such as traditional ceremonies, marital practices, the role of saints or religious figures, and the contents of the Druze holy book, the *Kitab al-Hikma*. However, history was by far the least understood subject of interest. This may be due to different interpretation of certain historical accounts as well as long standing holes in the record. As one person states: “those in charge maintain a tight lid on accurate knowledge about the religion. As a result, there is a lot of misinformation out there, both verbal and written. So when I read or hear something, I do so with a ‘filter’.”

The final three questions in the survey required participants to think critically by recommending possible approaches or solutions to some of the community’s social problems. The first question asked what might an American or Canadian Druze do if

they were interested in learning more about their heritage or religion. Aside from obvious resources like family and sheiks, many respondents suggested online research as a practical way to start. A number of people also suggested participating in ADS religious activities or reading the society's publications. It was promising to see that nearly every respondent had contributed some practical means of finding ways to learn about the faith. Even if the advice was as simple as, 'ask other Druze', every participant implied that there is somewhere to start and that informative resources are available.

The second question in the final set asked participants how parents might encourage their children's interest in the Druze community. Suggestions included, attending social events with children from a young age, interacting with other Druze families regularly, and learning about their heritage together. A reoccurring point among many of the responses warned parents not to be too pushy or controlling and to be, "realistic, not telling fantasy type stories, and not using fear as a tactic, but just honest communication that we have a culture that is rich and there really is no good reason not to hold onto it and perpetuate it."

The final survey question asked participants to suggest new activities, approaches or techniques that the American Druze Society might implement to better promote interest in Druze heritage. Although a few respondents said that the ADS was doing a perfectly fine job, the majority of the answers were straightforward in their suggestions. These included, having a sheikh visit each ADS state chapter to educate the community, creating a Druze family educational retreat, beginning a Sunday school where children can learn Arabic and young people can have religious discussions and getting the youth involved as ADS community leaders.

While some responses were less constructive their criticisms remain relevant. As one respondent put it, the ADS should teach more and focus on parties less. On the other hand, another respondent says that they should, “Make it fun, kids don’t want to go to meetings and just sit there.” The variety of opinions, some of which contradict each other, illustrate the complexities of the American Druze Society’s role in the community. Between accommodating the traditions of older generations and evolving towards a new image to attract the younger generations, those involved in the ADS may often find themselves in a tenuous position. While the tasks of informing, educating and uniting the Druze community seems exceedingly difficult, it is not impossible. With regards to the role of the American Druze Society, one person stated: “It is really the only thing we have.”

Interview Results

The semi-structured interviews included some preliminary information (identical to the ten questions on the first page of the survey) and a set of eight base questions which worked to open the discussion to further detail. These questions were formulated with the research’s main goals in mind, allowing individuals to describe their Druze identity, identify the community’s possible social problems and recommend approaches or solutions towards improvement. Of the fourteen individuals who participated, there were nine females and five males ranging in age from twenty-two to seventy-two with an average age of thirty-seven. All participants claimed Druze ancestry from both mother and father while the six who were married had Druze spouses. Half of the participants currently reside in Florida, between the greater Tampa and Orlando area, and were people

I have known from participating in local Druze social events. Many of the other participants were interviewed via telephone and resided in Albany, Georgia, Los Angeles, Phoenix and Detroit. While all individuals spoke Arabic to some degree, only half were able to read or write Arabic.

I began my interviews by asking participants to define their heritage and describe what being Druze meant to them. Beginning with the response of my most experienced participant, the seventy-two-year-old male explained: “Our philosophies and view of the world are not comparable to any other religion and our value for tradition and unity surpass the typical. Although I have not studied the Druze religion broadly enough to describe all of our beliefs, I could easily specify our unique qualities. These qualities are what separate us from the rest of the world.” This particular response summarized a common theme among many people I encountered. Similar to many ethnic and religious minorities in the United States, the Druze often identify their community as distinct, if not fundamentally different from all other groups. When asked to explain some of the qualities that separate the Druze from ‘the rest of the world’, the participant cited the group’s belief in reincarnation and the restrictions towards endogamous marriages. While these two beliefs and practices can be found among many communities throughout the world, many believe that the community is unique with their emphasis on monotheism, inability to accept converts and a lack of religious rituals. The last of these qualities was also cited by a thirty one year old female participant: “We do not attend any church or sermons because we pray inwardly and are private.”

While many Druze view their community as a relatively homogenous group, criticisms from some survey responses mentioned stubbornness as a problem among

older generations. In reference to their strict standards, one interview participant said: “You are expected to conform to the ways of life, social behavior mostly.” As a follow-up to this question, I asked whether or not their definition would change if they were talking to a non-Druze. Interestingly enough, respondents often said that it would not, which seems accurate given the similarity of responses to those of the first question in the survey; “If you were asked to explain your religion to a non-Druze what might you say.” Others continued to mention the religious aspects of the community rather than the common social practices and traditions that are part of Druze life in the Middle East (e.g. endogamy).

When participants were asked whether or not they participate in Druze social activities, all but two answered that they do. Respondents went on to describe their degree of participation in terms of having attended the activities and formal functions of the American Druze Society. Upon further inquiry, those who answered that they have not participated in Druze social activities, both made clear that they had in fact attended ADS picnics and infrequently socialized with other Druze throughout Central Florida. As a follow up, I prompted respondents to consider social activities outside of the American Druze Society. They described attending the weddings, holidays and even funerals of Druze in their local communities. Interacting with fellow Druze ensures that individuals remain part of the larger Druze family and obligates one to maintain respectful relations by accepting and returning comparable invitations. Thus, a “successful” member of the community can call on all Druze within their given city to fill their homes for both celebrations and somber occasions.

With the exception of the two participants previously discussed each person claimed to have attended at least one ADS national convention. Also, two forty-eight-year-old-females explained that they have volunteered to help with their local chapters in both California and Michigan. In particular, one of these respondents is very involved with her local chapter and has developed a number of events including holiday get-togethers and educational activities. She explained that where she lives, anyone willing to put forth a new idea and the effort to see it through, could work to get a lot done in the community. Many Florida residents have attended events held by their local chapter, including the annual *Eid Al-Adha* and New Year's Eve parties and holiday and summer picnics. One young Floridian attended his first convention two years ago and was disappointed by the event. He went on to explain that he believed the convention was, "superficial and expensive," but insisted that he was glad he gave it a second chance and that last year's convention turned out to be a much more sociable experience. Two other males, ages twenty-four and thirty-seven, said that they have given up on large ADS events explaining that they didn't think they were beneficial to eligible Druze looking to meet other singles.

Alongside participating in the larger Druze community, participants were asked to explain how familiar they are with the faith and how they learned what they know. A twenty-eight-year-old-female born in Lebanon described learning about the religion, "by visiting our religious holy places in Lebanon and visiting with the *mushayekh* [sheikhs]. You get this amazing feeling being around them, it's hard to describe." Many participants claimed to have some knowledge about the Druze faith but explained that they only understood the basics: "I am familiar enough to know that I am proud to be

Druze, but I still have a lot to learn. I feel I know only a little more than just the basic beliefs and that my parents could have prepared me more as a child”. Similarly, one young male said: “Since I cannot read Arabic, my knowledge is limited to the little information I have gathered from those who can read the religious texts and my interaction with the people of faith.”

Two particularly interesting responses were provided by a pair of siblings, who gave similar stories but believed their knowledge levels were different. The thirty-two-year-old woman stated: “I am familiar with the faith, thanks to my mother.” Meanwhile, her older brother explained: “I am not very familiar at all. Therefore, I have my own personal faith with what I believe God is and represents,” he went on to say: “I know what I know from my mother, but I was limited by her ability, or inability, to teach.” Regardless of whether or not individuals perceived themselves as being familiar with the faith, everyone cited learning what they know from their family. It is apparent that religious knowledge, as well as the desire to learn, is directly transmitted from parents to children, even though many adults are also very likely to be uninformed and are often at a loss in deciding where to begin.

Next participants were asked whether or not they have experienced challenges while maintaining their Druze heritage in United States society. While one participant asked what I meant by “maintain,” others were quick to ascribe the term personal meaning. Rather than discussing the challenge of outside influences, a few respondents talked about a lack of Druze educational resources in North America: “I know very little about the religion, and although I could do my own research, only general information is available. Most faith is passed on by family, but our parents are not even fully educated

about the religion. I don't practice anything to do with the religion and it is almost impossible to meet other Druze people unless you attend functions." Similar to some of the previous survey responses, a few people discussed the challenge of finding a Druze spouse. Other respondents mentioned the difficulties of maintaining traditional values when faced with modern life in the United States. For example, one young female stated: "Growing up one wants to define themselves with a certain group since the Druze community is so scattered across the states and in Canada and since we only interact during community events. It is hard to maintain the heritage. At times, one can find themselves searching for alternative groups or friends to interact with. This can cause assimilation and is one of the biggest threats and challenges." As individuals explained their personal experiences, the community's social problems became more apparent. As one young respondent born in the United States, puts it: "It is difficult to want to belong to something that is little more than an idea."

When asked to describe the role of the American Druze Society, participants often discussed what the society's role should be, thus providing a more critical view. For example, one thirty-six-year-old woman explained: "I'd have to say it should be responsible for establishing financial support to less fortunate Druze and uniting Druze in the U.S. through less glamorous venues so that all can participate and focus can be on our faith and not what outfit someone is wearing." While conventions may be glamorous and ostentatious events, the ADS uses its significant financial power to provide support to a number of worthwhile causes. Illustrating a bigger picture of the society's role in the community, another respondent suggests: "It is a network, it provides a way to join together every year for a convention and with its publications you can see what's going

on even if you are not near, it allows us to stay connected in a large world where we're easily lost.”

Given the variety of opinions regarding the role of the ADS in the Druze community, it is difficult to gauge whether or not the society is generally perceived as being successful in fulfilling its goals. In either case, many participants agree that the American Druze Society is essential to forming a sense of Druze community in the United States: “I believe the ADS’s role should be to provide access, opportunities and encouragement to every one in the community to learn about the Druze faith. For the most part the ADS is maintaining its role and objectives in reaching the community. It is up to us individually to fulfill our role as *Muwahadin* [Unitarians].”

When asked whether or not the Druze community is losing their distinct identity in the United States, respondents provided similar responses, equating a loss of identity to exogamy and a decline in religious knowledge. As well, some explained that adapting to a United States or Canadian way of life caused a loss of identity, adding to the popular belief that an individual embracing one ethnic or national identity subsequently turns their back on the other. For example, one fifty-eight year old man born in Lebanon states: “I kind of contradict myself with this because even with all the success of the ADS conventions, I still feel a majority of the youth are very much Americanized and are having a hard time prioritizing between living as Americans and learning and being true to their faith.” Interestingly enough, such responses were not relegated to older respondents as two young participants agree: “Somehow our religion is a bit closed and secretive, so to adapt, most young people don’t talk about being Druze or practice it,” also: “Yes I do believe they are losing their identity and history in the United States. The

youth of the community is fading away and we are losing a lot of young people to the American ways and there is no more of that unified love and respect for the culture and religion. Most of the young people don't even know what we stand for and I think it's up to the parents to incorporate learning and culture into life.” While these responses appear pessimistic, they provide detail about the community's shared concerns and help to direct efforts to develop proper approaches and solutions to the community's overarching problems.

Participants were asked to recommend the steps North American Druze should take to learn more about their heritage and religion. Many suggested starting with internet research, which should be no surprise given that the current generation begins the majority of their inquiries through the net. Nearly every respondent referenced the internet and when prompted, explained that it was the most feasible and accessible starting point for personal research. One female respondent involved in the ADS suggested that individuals should: “Become pro-active in their quest, take initiatives to seek knowledge from other Druze scholars in North America or log onto the internet to access links for religious education.” Another common recommendation advised young Druze to travel to Lebanon and culturally immerse themselves: “If given the opportunity, they should go back home to Lebanon, or wherever their parents come from, and ask those who are able to answer their questions.” Opinions such as this are to be expected, as many first-generation North American Druze have preserved close connections with their parents' and grandparents' countries of origin.

Similar to the final survey question, I solicited research participants to suggest ways in which the American Druze Society can improve their efforts. Before the

announcement of the summer educational retreat in Lebanon, one respondent proposed: “We need a Druze family retreat or family camping closer to nature and outdoor youth activities instead of lavish style conventions. We need to promote activities without formalities and evening banquets without alcohol use. We would also benefit from representation and leadership within the younger generation.” Another female respondent, who is a mother of two children in California, suggested that her chapter, “get more activities for children of all ages and really get them involved. Parents should organize rotating get-togethers at their homes every two weeks or so and really keep up with it so that the children learn to identify with it.” Other participants were also very forthcoming with their suggestions and offered a number of new methods and activities: “I would say, continue to focus on the bigger picture of the community. Have more publications, more networking for the youth and adult groups and more civic activities. Also, they could have weekly blogs and chat sessions from members of the community that are familiar with the teachings and future goals of the society.”

In summary, the responses suggest that the majority of participants perceive both a personal and community-wide knowledge gap and that the need to improve educational resources is important. The essential goal of this research project has been to implement the ideas and suggestions of those who took part in this study, as will be discussed in the following chapter. I have assessed the collective opinions and ideas of the larger Druze community and have worked to apply them through a productive discourse with the leadership of the American Druze Society.

Chapter Five: Discussion & Application

My investigation has focused on how the Druze describe their cultural identity, whether or not they perceive a collective knowledge gap, what specific topics they identify as misunderstood or problematic and what possible solutions or approaches they suggest in dealing with these issues. With regards to the first of these questions, research participants explained that Druze identity is founded on a common belief in the oneness of God. In relating to other Abrahamic religions, Druze often describe their faith as similar to Christianity or Islam but differing with the belief in reincarnation and lacking a method of conversion. Aside from attending family functions, nearly all Druze have taken part in some of the community's social events (e.g. picnics, holiday parties, conventions). A majority of the Druze have researched their heritage through the internet and other sources, but less have engaged the educational works of the American Druze Society. While many have expressed at least some familiarity with the tenets of the faith, the desire to learn more and to experience the teachings of the *Kitab al-Hikma* was apparent. This desire for knowledge translates into a practical need as many individuals are unable to identify the meaning of the faith's foremost symbol, the five pointed star representing the five cosmic luminaries.

Like all communities, the Druze are aware of their social problems, although they can be difficult to define. In addressing the difficult work of the ADS, many believe that the society's social events should be geared more towards its educational goals.

However, no one disagrees that the American Druze Society is instrumental in bringing the community together. The larger North American Druze community isn't always united since political differences and inherited familial disputes can remain significant. The community is also at a disadvantage due to their lack of educational resources and their small numbers spread thin across the United States and Canada. Maintaining one's traditional values in a westernized society can be an arduous exercise. Including the common taboos on dating, which relate directly to the obligation of marrying endogamously, many young Druze experience a type of identity crisis caught between modern culture and the traditional values of the Middle East.

Many believe that the inevitability of change will lead to a loss of what is seen as the community's distinct identity. Although exogamy for the Druze is taboo, its practice is becoming more common both transnationally and in the countries of origin. Predictions concerning the community's future were decidedly grim. These included depictions of unavoidable assimilation and a decline in the population within a few generations. However, given a pessimistic attitude towards assimilation in both the United States and the Middle East, apocalyptic scenarios and doomsday predictions should be expected. The challenges lie in making educational and religious information accessible as well as inspiring motivation towards active inquiry. The common theme among respondent has shown that Druze history is widely unknown and that religious interpretation of the faith remains obscure.

Several individuals suggested practical approaches and methods to ameliorate the community's perceived problems. Conversely, some of the recommendations insisted that individuals should be more inquisitive and that seeking knowledge from family,

elders, and sheikhs should be an uncomplicated approach. As well, some respondents pointed out that parents are primarily responsible for encouraging their children's interest in Druze heritage and society. Perhaps speaking from their personal experiences, a number of individuals warned adults not to set unrealistic expectations or be too pushy with their beliefs. Many advocated interacting with other Druze families and involving the youth in social functions from an early age. Improving the work of the ADS has also been an important theme. Some of the suggestions worked to develop new ideas including: having a sheikh from the community visit ADS state chapters as a religious resource, beginning an educational blog moderated by knowledgeable individuals, planning an annual camping retreat that the youth can attend to become educated in their heritage and involving more young people in operating the ADS.

In discussing the work of the American Druze Society, it is important to understand that the society is essentially a conglomerate of volunteers who devote their time to create a sense of Druze community in the United States. Their contributions have been recognized as an irreplaceable asset by many Druze throughout North America and they have my profound gratitude for their efforts. While this organization began as a mutual aid society to assist early immigrants and to fulfill the religious duty to "gather with the brethren," it has evolved to meet the complex needs of the modern Druze community. For those living in the United States or Canada, being involved in the Druze community has always required substantial effort and may or may not produce meaningful results (such as finding a potential spouse or making friends within the community). Furthermore, active participation in the ADS necessitates living near a state chapter or being able to finance trips in order to take part in the society's conventions,

which can serve as a means of finding a Druze mate. It should be understood that the relationship between the American Druze Society and the larger Druze community is indeed complicated. Having assessed the educational needs of individual Druze, I am working to develop this research into a valuable tool to address the problems identified by participants using the methods which they have suggested.

Plan for Application

The applied phase of my research involves three specific projects meant to advance the community's interest in Druze heritage through new educational seminars and to promote an increased awareness of the educational resources available. Currently, these projects include creating a suggested reading list, increasing the number of instructive seminars at the American Druze Society's conventions, and hosting next summer's educational summer camp in Michigan. As well, I have had the opportunity to share my thesis with the president of the ADS, Dr. Hatem Sleem, and have asked him to consider some of the opinions and recommendations of the respondents who took part in this study. I also plan to share a final copy of my thesis with the larger North American Druze community since many individuals I met during the duration of this research have shown a genuine interest in the outcome.

Currently, I am compiling a suggested reading list that will include academic works discussing Druze history, religion and culture. I have asked individuals from the community to submit a brief review or synopsis, approximately one hundred to three hundred words, about a particular published work that may serve as an instructive

resource for those wanting to learn more. Anyone submitting a review has been asked to focus on what the work teaches the reader and how it facilitates a deeper understanding of Druze heritage. As each synopsis is submitted, I will provide other relevant information (e.g. author, number of pages, publisher) to assist interested readers. Once a significant number of reviews have been gathered, an electronic copy of the reading list will be sent out through the ADS e-mail directory and may be made available in hard copy during the society's upcoming events. It is my hope that this list will continue to grow and will serve as a tool in the first step for deeper personal inquiry by encouraging others to begin researching and reading about their heritage using the resources available.

In the summer of 2009, the American Druze Society planned to host its first educational summer camp. It was to be held at the Shouf National College in the town of Baakleen, Lebanon, and was offered to young men and women ages eighteen to twenty-five. The cost was set at \$600 for paid ADS members, and \$700 for nonmembers, and included transportation, meals, scheduled trips, lectures and one week of dormitory style lodging at the college. The price did not include airfare to Lebanon, which can range between \$1,200 and \$2,000, and spending money for activities not on the agenda. Unfortunately, with the exception of a few activities, the event was canceled prior to its mid-July start due to late enrollment and cancellation issues with the planned facility.

Despite the disappointing outcome of what might have been an excellent educational opportunity, I have also been working on a proposal for a very similar retreat to be held at a campsite in Michigan for a comparatively lower cost. With the help of Labiba Harfouche, a very involved member of the ADS experienced in organizing events, we plan to propose hosting an educational retreat in the summer of 2010 stateside which

may serve to cut travel costs for those unable to afford travel to Lebanon. However, the change of location would deprive the summer camp of the benefits of cultural immersion and the important historical and religious sites that Lebanon has to offer. On the other hand, a retreat closer to home might allow the ADS to permit younger (e.g. ages fourteen to seventeen) Druze to take part during their summer vacations. Similar to the form and function of the planned ADS camp, this retreat would offer lessons in reading and writing Arabic, Druze history and basic religious concepts. As the original camp was scheduled to take place the week after the annual convention, next summer may provide an ideal opportunity to host this event in Michigan after the 2010 convention to be held in Detroit.

Following the suggestions of many research participants I am also working to propose a set of educational seminars for the American Druze Society's national or mini-convention (held each November at alternating locations). While these events always include lectures and presentations by various authors and academics, rarely has there been a set of educational lessons beginning with the most basic framework of Druze religion and history. Based on the lessons found in the books of Dr. Wahbeh Sayegh, *The Tawhid Faith: Stories, Lessons and Prayers* (1983), an informative set of lectures should cover at least three sessions to develop the elementary foundation necessary for further understanding. Commissioned by the American Druze Society's Committee on Religious Affairs (CORA), these books provide an ideal outline for instruction of the faith's basic history and religious principles. Combined, these projects are a starting point to make information available and to encourage inquiry and critical thinking. By supporting the efforts of the ADS in making their educational resources more accessible, I seek to foster individual contribution and increase participation in the society.

Chapter Six: Recommendations & Conclusions

While social problems such as preserving heritage and promoting cultural literacy are widespread among many transnational communities, the Druze are unique in that their heritage stems from their common ancestry, shared national origins, the belief in reincarnation and the practice of endogamy. Although it may sound contradictory, this religious group is not necessarily united by adhering to a set of shared religious values. As Westhemier and Sedan noted from one informant: “It turns out that the border between religion and tradition is quite blurred. Thus, even ‘secular’ Druze try to observe the basic principles of Druze tradition” (Westheimer & Sedan 2007:117). For example, while some of the most basic religious principles cannot be explained by immigrant Druze who raise their children in the United States and Canada, parents still encourage their offspring to marry endogamously. While those born and raised in the large Druze communities throughout the Middle East also lack religious knowledge, they are immersed in Druze culture and tradition and are united by closely knit families. Together, these factors help to maintain collective identity by constantly reinforcing the group’s values, morals, and ethics. Therefore, the perceived knowledge gap that North American Druze often face is exacerbated in the diaspora and presents a true challenge for the community as a whole.

My discursive approach, and the variety of respondents’ feedback, has allowed us to understand that personal identity and community are not exclusive categories. All

individuals define their identity in the context of their experiences within a given community. Therefore, when they ascribe specific qualities to terms (e.g. identity, community, challenges, purpose), they are classifying them in relation to both their individual identity and to the perceived collective consciousness of the community. Through this research project I hope to advance the discursive approach by understanding, evaluating, and developing thoughtful solutions to social problems through community input and suggestions. I am confident that my investigation can serve to benefit the field of anthropology by addressing the lack of research regarding the preservation of cultural, religious, and ethnic identity for minority communities in the diaspora.

Future research concerning transnational Druze communities can improve on this particular study in a number of ways. Foremost, a bigger sample size exceeding one hundred participants may serve to bolster the validity of the statistical data. As well, a larger number of semi-structured interviews may have revealed more underlying issues overlooked in this inquiry. My initial proposal also included conducting a set of three to six focus groups which would have served as brainstorming sessions to further develop some of the suggestions offered in the survey responses. Although it was not feasible for me to arrange focus groups, I believe that they are a worthwhile component to any research with a discourse oriented approach. Ideally, the principal investigator's capability to offer participants tangible incentives can encourage extensive contribution. Aside from the potential benefit of these recommendations, I believe that my simple and direct approach has facilitated an accurate needs assessment and a rich qualitative ethnography.

Research concerning Druze identity should avoid defining it within a definite context. Doing so disregards the dynamics of identity and relegates the community to a set of predetermined boundaries. For me, this problem was mitigated by relying on individuals to discuss their perceptions and to describe their personal experiences. I was careful not to limit Druze identity to specific customs or traditions, and avoided suggesting that any kind of knowledge might be more authentic than another. Insinuations such as this often work to divide a community by setting the boundaries for in-group/out-group politics. For example, individuals who lack religious knowledge might inaccurately be seen as less worthy or less engaged in the community. While some knowledge is undoubtedly kept secret from both non-Druze as well as non-sheikhs within the community, it does not seem to limit social relationships or even a thorough knowledge of Druze history and religious tenets.

This research project has been a very reflexive experience and has allowed me to see how other Druze, through their similarities and differences, perceive our shared heritage. It has become my belief that the Druze community might be able to improve active inquiry among the youth by embracing certain American and Canadian values, such as individual choice and the freedom to ask questions. Perhaps westernized culture will prove to be advantageous to the sincere interest and personal devotion required to learn more about our esoteric faith. As one author put it: “In order to maintain the community in this day and age, the Druze need to know more about themselves. The main concern emanates from the Druze diaspora whose second generation would lose their identity if more information about their faith were not openly available to them” (Shehadi 2008:13). While the challenges facing the community in the diaspora are

daunting, the rewards can be profound. The Druze have always been exceptionally resilient to outside influences and have adapted to their surroundings throughout one thousand years of history. While conducting this research, it has become evident that the majority of United States and Canadian Druze continuously experience the need to strengthen their social bonds in order to preserve their community's values and identity.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Figure 22-Members of the El-Bakaurat Ed-Dirziyat gather in Washington D.C. before the formation of the ADS convention 1946 (Makarem 1996:50)



Figure 23-3rd ADS convention in Charleston, West Virginia 1949 (Makarem 1996:52)



Appendix A: (Continued)

Figure 24-5th ADS convention in Cedar Rapids, Ohio 1951 (Makarem 1996:54)



Figure 25-8th ADS convention in Washington D.C. 1954 (Makarem 1996:56)



Appendix A: (Continued)

Figure 26-9th ADS convention in Charleston, West Virginia 1955 (Makarem 1996:58)



Figure 27-15th ADS convention in Flint, Michigan 1961 (Makarem1996:60)



Appendix A: (Continued)

Figure 28-17th ADS convention in Washington D.C. 1963 (Makarem 1996:62)



Appendix B

Figure 29-An electronic version of the hard copy of the survey tool. Identical with two exceptions, the original included a notice of informed consent and answer boxes that allowed up to five hundred characters per typed response.

Greetings fellow Druze,

My name is Shadi Radwan and I am a graduate student in applied anthropology at the University of South Florida. I am currently conducting research which focuses on how transnational Druze communities promote interest in Druze heritage. The intentions of this study include: asking Druze individuals to describe their Druze identity, facilitating the identification of the Druze community's social problems, and generating a forum to assess recommendations and approaches towards possible solutions. The broader goals of this study will work towards applying your opinions and viewpoints to promote active inquiry and interest in our Druze heritage. Feel free to take as much room as necessary to answer each question. Any information you provide is strictly confidential (as per the regulations of the University of South Florida's Institutional Review Board) and no actual names will be used in referencing your responses. Please submit your completed survey at your earliest convenience to cradwan@mail.usf.edu. Thank you in advance for taking the time to complete this survey. Your thoughtful responses are appreciated and will help make my thesis research a success.

- Name: _____
- Age/Birth Date: _____
- Sex: _____
- Is your mother of Druze descent? _____
- Is your father of Druze descent? _____
- Are you currently married? _____
- Is your spouse of Druze descent (if applicable)? _____
- Where do you currently reside (city+state/province)? _____
- Where were you born (country+city+state/province)? _____
- Do you speak Arabic? _____
- Are you able to read Arabic? _____

Appendix B: (Continued)

1-If you were asked to explain your religion to a non-Druze what might you say?

2-What kinds of Druze social activities do you participate in (for example: national conventions and chapter events)?

3-Do you think the American Druze Society's national convention is serving its purpose?

4-Do you believe the Druze community in your country is unified and cohesive?

5-Do you think the Druze community is losing their distinct identity in the United States or Canada?

6-Do you believe it is more difficult to maintain Druze identity in the United States or Canada than it would be in the Middle East?

7-What challenges do you believe the Druze community faces in the United States or Canada?

8-Do you think that intermarriage presents a threat to the continuation of the Druze community?

Appendix B: (Continued)

9-What kinds of challenges have you faced in maintaining your Druze heritage?

10-How familiar are you with the Druze faith?

11-How were you exposed to knowledge about the Druze faith?

12-Can you name the five luminaries?

13-Do you believe in reincarnation?

14-Do you think becoming a *sheikh* is a requirement in order to read the *Kitab al-Hikma*?

15-Have you read any of the American Druze Society's publications about Druze heritage/religion? If so, which ones?

16-Do you receive Our Heritage magazine through the mail? If so, are you in the habit of reading it?

Appendix B: (Continued)

17- Have you ever read any academic articles or books written about the Druze?

18- In your words, what is the role of the American Druze Society, what needs does it fulfill for the Druze community in North America?

19- Do you believe the American Druze Society is fulfilling its goals as stated in its charter: “to perpetuate the universal teachings of the Druze faith, the enhancement of fellowship among Druze descendants, the advancement of Druze religious, literary, and cultural knowledge through education and research, and the betterment of all Druze people through charitable work” (<http://www.druze.com/#>)?

20- If you were asked to make a prediction regarding the future of the Druze community in the United States or Canada, what do you believe will happen?

21- Do you think that access to Druze cultural and religious information is readily available to Druze in the United States or Canada?

22- With regards to Druze heritage and religion, in which areas do American or Canadian Druze lack knowledge the most?

23- In which areas do you lack knowledge about your Druze heritage?

Appendix B: (Continued)

24-What might an American or Canadian Druze do if they were interested in learning more about their Druze heritage or religion?

25-How might parents encourage their children's interest in the Druze community?

26-Do you have any suggestions about new activities, approaches, or techniques the American Druze Society might implement to better promote interest in Druze heritage? Please provide any ideas that you believe are relevant.

Appendix B: (Continued)

Figure 30-The set of eight base questions for the semi-structured interviews. Participants were also asked to provide answers to the same set of preliminary questions which preceded the surveys.

1-How do you define Druze heritage, what does it mean to be Druze to you?

2-What kinds of Druze social activities do you, or have you participated in?

3-How familiar are you with the Druze faith and how did you learn what you know?

4- What challenges have you experienced while trying to maintain your Druze heritage in American society?

5-In your words, what is the role of the American Druze Society and what needs does it fulfill for the Druze community?

6-Do you think the Druze community is losing their distinct identity in the United States?

7-What steps do you think an American Druze should take if they were interested in learning more about their heritage or religion?

8-Do you have any suggestions to improve the efforts of the American Druze Society?