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'Allah has spoken to us: we must keep silent.' In the folds of secrecy, the Holy Book of the Druze

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the cultural dynamics of bond and separateness created around the Book of Wisdom (*kitâb al-ḥikma*), the Druze Holy Book. The Text, unrevealable to Druze non-believers or foreigners, is shrouded in a collective pact to 'keep quiet'. I assert that this alliance aims to protect Druze intimacy rather than highlight their separateness from others. It is rooted in the Druze premise that meaning is both corporeal and feminine, that it pertains to an ineffable interiority. I thereby distance myself from anthropological analyses that consider the so-called Druze secret around the Book as static content solely related to language.

KEYWORDS

Secrecy; sacred text; body; word; Druze; Israel

Affiliated with the main monotheistic religions, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, which are based on the Revealed Books, the Druze are commonly referred to as 'peoples of the Book' (*ahl al-kitâb*). However, their relation to the Holy Book is imbued with a unique concept of the sacred Scripture and the divine that reflects the matricentric orientation of their culture. Far from Hebrew and Christian traditions where the written Text is to be read and spoken, the Book of Wisdom (*kitâb al-ḥikma*) is considered in its corporeality, it is to be wrapped and sheltered from the outsider. Present in every Druze home, the Druze believe that it addresses 'the understanding of the veiled' (*al-'aḳal al-bâṭin*): the words it contains draw from the corporeal basis of language. Understanding is therefore not based on intellectual knowledge (*ilām*) from which it is elusive, but rather on interiority and heart-knowledge (*ma'rifa*).

In a previous article (Armanet 2003), I focused on the care taken in wrapping – and the physical reverential liturgy displayed around – the Book; I described the Book as an eminently feminine, maternal object. I also perceived its Text as a genesic word addressed to one's intimate senses and which should be handled like a newborn. This article focuses on the cultural dynamics of bond and separateness created around the Book in the Druze community of Israel. It is based on empirical material collected among the Druze of Northern Galilee. Ethnographic fieldwork, conducted in Arabic¹ through participant observation, was sponsored by the Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (Flanders, Belgium). The research aimed to understand how such a centripetal group manages to relate to a secularised, individualistic, and consumerism-oriented environment without

resorting to hostility. It showed that Druze intimacy is founded on motherly practices of wrapping (*tasattor*), nurturing, veiling, and preventing intrusion, linking the body and the sacred. This outlined a novel hermeneutical approach for the anthropological study of the region, centring on the collective lived experience of a monotheism disseminated at the heart of daily life, where sacred praxis is based on contiguity and restraint (*sutra*) rather than on sacrifice.

In this article, I do not relate the contents of the Druze Scriptures as they are to be left unsaid (*kitmân as-sirr*, of *katama*, lit. to hide, to withhold) to the Druze layperson (*jâhil*) and foreigner (*shar'î*). Aside from being unnecessarily intrusive, such an approach would in any case be pointless considering the intense orality of Druze culture. Instead, and here lies the novelty of my approach, I consider the Book of the Druze [through the unsaid as regards its handling, on the one hand, and the words it arouses, on the other hand]. My analysis is rooted in the meaningful relationships I built with the Druze community as I went from being considered a foreign guest (*dêfê*), to a relative, and later on to an adoptive granddaughter (*bint*). I claim here a responsible epistemology, literally an epistemology 'in response', loyal to my adoption by the Druze.

I describe the Book of the Druze as a Text 'swallowed' by the group. Given its status as a 'source of life' (*sirr*), it inspires an alliance to maintain a 'sense of secrecy' (*kitmân as-sirr*) within the group, both from Druze laypeople (*juhâl*) and from foreigners. In this regard, I distance myself from a number of anthropological studies written on the Druze community.² Most of these focus on the so-called Druze secret, understood as static content pertaining to the category of language. Held around the Book of Wisdom, this 'secret' is, for some, the product of a 'border culture' (Oppenheimer 1977, 232) that defines the group. It is recommended as a measure taken only and systematically in the presence of the non-Druze to further distance themselves from them (Bouron 1930, 161–163; 259–260; Chabry and Chabry 1984; Layish 1985). Such positions are inherited from an Orientalist intellectual tradition, fascinated by the secret nature of the Druze religion, and motivated by the desire to make the Scriptures public (Silvestre De Sacy 1838; Guys 1863a, 1863b; Hitti 1928, 57–74; Makarem 1974; Bryer 1975a, 1975b, 1976). Both theological and historical, this tradition attempts to describe the Book of Wisdom as a canon, the first six books being the most frequently used. The 111 Epistles (*rasâ'il*) they contain were written in Egypt in the 11th century with the establishment of Druze orthodoxy: these constitute the correspondence between the main dignitaries of the Druze movement – described as the Prophets within the collective – and their missionaries (Rivoal 2000, 22).

I suggest that the meaning of the Druze sense of secrecy as developed in scholarship on the Druze is biased because of a misunderstanding of the term *sirr*, translated as 'secret', whereas the word is defined in Arabic as 'the innermost part, the origin, the principle of a thing' (Rivoal 2000, 323), the place where Allah is seated (Kamada 1983, 8). Since the word 'secret' etymologically means that which has been separated (from the Latin verb *secernere*: to separate), the sense of the ineffable generated by the Book is therefore mistakenly

²Druze religious doctrines, jurisdiction, and the political inclusion of the group in surrounding societies have been the subject of major comprehensive research. See (1) on the Druze religion, cf. Silvestre De Sacy (1838); Bryer (1975a, 1975b, 1976); Makarem (1974); Azzi (1992); Obeid (2006); Hatem (2006); Firro (2011); (2) on the Druze and their insertion within Nation States, cf. Chabry and Chabry (1984); Hazran (2014); (3) on the Druze and their relationship to Israel, cf. Ben-Dor (1973, 1979, 1982); Firro (1999); Rivoal (2000, 2001, 2002); Nisan (2010); Weiner-Levy (2009); and (4) on the Druze jurisdiction, cf. Layish (1976, 1978, 1982).

considered a secret content, whose essence would likely be profaned and jeopardised by the spoken word. To add weight to my argument, I explain that the ineffable in the Book is closely linked to the Druze concept of word and meaning, and it must therefore be considered in this light. Indeed, rather than representing a religious imperative, the injunction to ‘shelter’ the word (*sattara*, lit. to shelter, to protect) governs all daily intra-community interactions. It is rooted in the Druze premise that meaning is both corporeal and feminine, an emanation of inexpressible interiority. In this context, the sense of secrecy woven around the Book refers to a relational, procedural, and corpocentric act (Mahmud 2012; Rhine 2013). It is less concerned with protecting a content referred to as ‘secret’ than it is with signalling its lack of communicability: religious knowledge and its transmission are a matter of physical contiguous collective understanding.

We could, to some extent, relate the nature of the Druze sense of secrecy built around the Book to the practice of ponderous speech in other religious traditions, referred to as initiatory, such as the Islamic Sufi tradition (Schimmel 1987), the Christian Quaker tradition (Baumann 1998), or the Tantric tradition in India (Urban 1998). These traditions define meaning as *mysticum*, ‘the hidden’, that which cannot be put into words and whose highly valued presence and protection are only evidenced in a vow of silence, the ‘no-telling’ (Barth 1975, 221; Bolle 1987; Kohlberg 1995). This is far from most approaches to secrecy, however, whether anthropological (Zempléni 1996), sociological (Simmel 1976; Jamin 1977; Schwimmer 1980; Maffesoli 1982), or semiotic (Bellman 1984). These logocentric approaches identify the practice of secrecy with that of a so-called public or customary secrecy that prohibits an utterance, rather than access to the knowledge it represents. ‘No-telling’ is considered a discursive or communicative practice, rather than a refined act rooted in corporeality. It is understood in the social consequences of power and domination generated by its tension: the aim of solidarity founded on shared knowledge is to mark and preserve symbolic boundaries of membership, ensuring group differentiation ‘between those who know and those who are kept outside’ (Le Breton 1997, 125). As a result, secrecy lends itself to numerous transformations (Bellman 1984) and linguistic practices (Zempléni 1996, 24; De Jong 2006) which remind everyone of the price of the ‘not-known’ (Le Breton 1997, 120).

To contextualise the reverential corpocentric behaviours related to the Book, I begin this article by focusing on Druze men and women’s everyday sensual language, marked by a strong corporeal component. I then turn to the withdrawal attitudes developed around the Book and note that, within the group, ‘the ingestion of the Book’ elevates religious members (*mutadayyinîn*) to the status of living tabernacles of the Text. I further explain how revealing the intimacy of the Book outside community boundaries leads to a fear of impoverishment and disintegration of the collective. Finally, I illustrate how the desire to shelter the Book in the presence of a non-Druze provokes ‘diversionary’ speech. To begin, I provide a brief presentation of the Druze.

A brief presentation of the Druze community

With an official count of one million and a half members worldwide, the Druze community has been anchored in the Middle East for nearly 1000 years. Territorially fragmented, it is divided between Syria (350 000), Lebanon (400 000), Jordan (25 000), and Israel (118 000). In Israel, the Druze have all settled in villages in the northern part of the country.

Scholarship regarding the ethnic origins of the Druze contains innumerable speculations (Hitti 1928, 10–17; Abu-Izzeddin 1984, 1–14; Betts 1988, 35–36), the most common theory being that the Druze descend from the Crusaders. The community, however, claims pure Arab ancestry. Historically, the Druze settled in Fatimid Egypt in the 11th century, in response to religious Preaching initiated in Cairo. Developed at the end of Caliph al-Ḥâkim bi-ʿAmr Allâh reign (996–1021), they hail from a sectarian Ismaili movement. Their faith stems from the belief that al-Ḥâkim was the tenth and penultimate manifestation of Allah on earth. Their leader, Ḥamza Ibn ʿAlî, orchestrated the diffusion of the Druze religion during al-Ḥâkim’s lifetime. As the Preaching advocated universal proselytism, the movement’s principles rapidly spread throughout the Muslim world – Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Turkey, Bahrain, Iraq and Persia, Yemen, and India. Al-Ḥâkim disappeared in 1021, plunging the community into the messianic expectation of his return. When Ḥamza withdrew from public life that same year, he predicted that the Muslims would heavily persecute the newly formed Druze community to test its faith. The Druze, fleeing persecution in Egypt (1021–1026), found refuge in the Syrian-Lebanese mountains.

The Druze consider the orientalist theory that their religion (*dîn*) emerged during the 11th century as incorrect and instead hold that their faith is the basis for the three monotheisms. Ever-present, this faith was successively passed on from the Unitarian schools of Babylon and ancient Egypt, ancient Greek philosophers,³ and gnostic pre-Christian communities. Reincarnation of the soul is a core belief that the Druze literally call the ‘re-wrapping of the soul’ (*taqammoṣ ʔal-arwah*).⁴ This instantaneous process occurs at the moment of death when Allah breathes the deceased’s soul into a Druze newborn’s body and entrusts its care to its progenitors.

Orientalist literature frequently affiliates the Druze religion with the Muslim faith, although it seems as different from Islam as Islam is from Christianity or Christianity is from Judaism (Bryer 1975b, 239). The Muslim consider Druze doctrine to be heresy specifically because it extols the transmigration of the soul (*taqammoṣ ʔal-arwah*) and the repeal of religion. The issue of women in particular distinguishes the Druze collective from the Muslim collective: Druze legislation on personal status prohibits polygamy and remarriage of divorced wives, both of which are allowed under Islamic law. Further, whereas Islam excludes women from handling – and knowledge of – the Qur’anic Text, the Druze give women priority access to places of worship, the Book of Wisdom, and religious institutions. Finally, in the direct legacy of Sufism, they assume that the female body is the metonymy of the divine – it is a source of life.

Druze men are expected to enter into religion in each of their reincarnations. They enter through a solemn promise on the Book and gain full access to the Epistle of Wisdom. Women are not required to acquire religion through learning. Indeed, as they are called to bring life forth, they ‘are born with religion’ (*bikhlaqû ma ʿ ʔd-dîn*). Every Druze locality has its own *khilwé* (pl. *khilwât*), a place of worship devoid of any furniture or decoration, which serves as the basic unit of religious organisation. The *sâ’is* (from *sâsa*,

³The Druze identify Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Pythagoras, and Plotinus as five of their prophets (*anbiyâ*).

⁴From *qamis*, a shirt. The Druze thereby assert that the body (*ʔal-jisam*) is clothing for the soul (*ʔar-rûh*, lit. breath), which then lets go life after life.

lit. to guide, to rule) or *imam*, who heads the *khilwé*, is in charge of the village's religious community.

From a sociological point of view, a major principle of differentiation is at work in the Druze community: between men and women primarily, but also between elders and the young who owe them respect, between those who have access to the Scriptures and those who do not, between patrilineages, and finally between villages whose individualities are very strong. This principle is offset by faith in the transmigration of souls (*taqammos*) in the extended Druze community, which neutralises any differentiation according to clan, generation, and space since all the group members are bound by the same 'soul kinship' (*qarâbet ar-rûh*).

To contextualise the reverential corpocentric speech behaviours concerning the Book, I now turn to Druze men and women's everyday sensual language.

The Druze concept of word

'Politeness of the tongue'

The ineffable in the Book is closely linked to the Druze concept of word, which carries a significant corporeal load: frequently referred to by the anatomical term 'tongue' (*lsân*), Druze discourse is viewed as 'food' (*al-kalâm biṭ'âm*), subject to the appreciation of the receiver who incorporates and appropriates it. Villagers also talk of the 'taste of words' (*ṭa'âm al-ḥaki*), an expression that ties sense with flavour. Endowed with physical qualities, the tongue is 'long' when the speaker is talkative and 'dirty' when they are 'insulting'. It is 'warm' and 'soft' when a considerate speaker uses words gracefully and does not lie or blaspheme. Clearly, words carry an intense performative power.

Villagers say that 'the essential thing is the tongue', which explains why the religious imperative of cleanliness that governs the care of one's body, clothes, and home also extends to informal conversations. 'Everything', it is said, 'is about cleanliness'. As a result, in the same way that 'politeness of taste' (*adab aṭ-ṭa'âm*) governs commensal exchanges 'at the table of Allah', 'politeness of the tongue' (*adab al-lsân*) excludes dispersing or wasting the divine Word through the use of effusive, cluttered words:

With Nabîla, Khâltî Rashîda, Khâltî Tamîmé, and Sittî Lîna, we are busy preparing lunch. Around the long kitchen table, the atmosphere is cheerful. Words burst out, spontaneous and frequently funny. Only Nabîla's mother is silent. When her daughter asks her why she remains quiet, Sittî Lîna replies that bad hearing does not allow her to follow our conversation. She further declares: 'Allah has spoken to us. We must keep silent'. (Saturday 8 March 1997, fieldnotes)

The sense of secrecy within the community centres on the idea that speech separates while 'no-telling' protects the social link it perpetuates.⁵ To define politeness of the tongue (*adab al-lsân*), the Druze have developed a detailed terminology of all the misuses of speech and insulting language they typically prohibit. They commonly denounce 'the abundant speech', both aimless and shallow, as well as 'the impious speech' and 'the dirty [or defamatory] speech'. 'Telling tales' and 'gossiping' are also subject to severe criticism, as they

⁵For further reflection on the status of the word and meaning in the Mediterranean region, cf. Gilsenan (1976) and Jamous (1993).

cause disharmony and disunity by submitting the acts or words of others to the evaluative gaze of third parties. One had better see and hear without repeating. Words reveal an intimacy that should be left unspoken. 'One had better let the womb swallow the word'; the womb is where 'dirty words', those one must choose not to say, are stored. To justify the necessary consent to silence, I was told that 'what sullies the speaker is not what goes into the mouth, but what comes out it'.

Just like moral acts, speech is believed to be a sensitive extension of the heart, body, and mood. In its light, every individual can be evaluated by the community, which explains why great attention is paid to the harmony between people's presumed interiority and the content of their words. Lying is considered a 'double sin' of the tongue, voiced not only against peers, but also against Allah. Any impulsive or disorderly language is met with disapproval. Excessive laughter, speaking loudly, and chatter all reveal uncontrolled speech, and therefore unrestrained, deviant corporality.

What it means to remain silent

The Druze pay much attention to bodily integrity (the human body, the body of the household, and the community), which extends to a moral attitude characterised by a shared sense of secrecy. Interestingly here, the same lexical field associates the integrity of the female body with silence, just as the rape of a woman is in the same category as spilled words. Thus, the term *muḥâfaẓa* refers both to sheltering the woman's body and to speech. Similarly, *sutra* and its derivatives refer to the protective wrapping of the body and of the word. The term *kashaf* evokes both a deflowered female body and the betrayal of others' privacy by loquacious speech. To 'cover' (*ghaṭṭâ*) is 'an act of goodness'. A proverb encouraging women's physical modesty is a call to rally around an attitude of 'no-telling': 'Allah has invited us to take shelter, not to unveil ourselves' (*alḷâh nâdâ b-âs-sutra, alḷâh mâ nâdâ b-âl-faḍîḥa*). In other words, only Allah can reveal what mortals may not decently disclose, for the sake of the group and its survival. Only He may 'unveil' (*kashaf*) subjects to their peers, only He may judge. Hence, the creation of a language of intimacy with refined uses: through carefully chosen words, the principle of 'reserve' (*msattara*) aims to protect privacy – one's own, and that of others.

Having commented on the concept of speech and meaning as developed by the community, I now describe the 'sense of secrecy' around the Book. Considering the Druze ethos, so steeped in orality, these behaviours make the Book a 'swallowed', clandestine Text.

The Book, a 'swallowed' text

Entering religion means having access to the Epistles. It begins with a sworn oath on the Book, followed by its memorisation – its incorporation. The Scriptures must be sheltered, sealed, and swallowed. The term 'close the Book' (*khâtim âl-ktâb*, from *khatama*, lit. to end, to close) refers to having comprehensively learned all the Epistles. It describes complete memorisation of the sacred Text and 'keeping it inside' oneself. I suggest that this internalized learning of the Book fundamentally refers to a theophany of the divine Text that has been entrusted to the group. It must therefore be preserved alive and sheltered: that which contributes to 'understanding the veiled' (*âl-'aqâl âl-bâṭîn*) must be

swallowed. What matters is the perfect transmission of the Text in a parade of generations, this is ‘a challenge’ (*ʿamtihân*) laid down by Allah for the Druze. The legacy of the Book represents the community’s entire emotional charge, its true child:

The child and the Book are sacred. They are the continuation of life. We have a duty to preserve them unscathed.

Like children, the Book is valuable. It belongs to you personally. You need it, it needs you.

The child is like the Book. He has been entrusted to you, he is yours. You must take care of him. You cannot give him to a foreigner. (Mothers’ words)

At the heart of this ‘ethics of safekeeping’ (Corbin 1983, 94), the Book is not the property of whom it was entrusted to. An expression of ‘spiritual hospitality’ (*op. cit.*, 99), it was given to previous generations, who passed it on as a mark of their faith (*îmân*).⁶

The religious, the guardians of the Book

Absorbing the Book-child marks one’s entrance into religion. It defines the terms of a community faith experienced in a centripetal, matricial fashion. Sedentary and distant from nomadic Islam, the Druze religion is lived as close to oneself as possible. It is woven into the withdrawn villages, in the microcosm of the neighbourhoods and the *khilwé*; it is lived within the inner circle of religious peers and close relatives.

Entering into religion is experienced as the payment of a debt which can never be extinguished, the gift of life.⁷ It is therefore important to be worthy of it, with pure intentions and a fitting life path (Rivoal 2000, 184). In this community where ‘religion is conduct’ (*ʿad-dîn maslak*), collective awareness of the presence of Scriptures elicits withdrawal and contemplation.

Entering into religion requires people to be ‘humble’, ‘pure’, and ‘honourable’: premeditated murder denies access to the Text of life,⁸ as do sexual relations out of wedlock, which signal the body’s inability to perform its role of sealed container of the Text⁹ (I will come back to this further below). Measured, chosen words are a sign of deference to its intimacy, so a close relation with the Book requires the subject’s level headed speech. Following from their Gnostic tradition (Makarem 1974, 7–13), Druze men and women maintain that it distorts and alters its nature when they deliver God’s word to those who are unprepared to hear and protect it. One must therefore abstain from wordy discourse.

Outside the *khilwé*, the Text of the Book must be veiled, protected, wrapped in order to remain whole. Within the community, the fact that religious people are prohibited from reciting the Epistles to laypeople (*juhhal*) well illustrates the ‘no-telling’ as regards the Book.¹⁰ Indeed, reading the Book out loud to them is an act of sacrilege (*ḥarâm*), it reveals the Text to the uninitiated and betrays its wholeness. However, it is lawful

⁶This duty of transmission is also characteristic of the Ismaili tradition, from which the Druze movement originated. See Corbin (1983, 93–94).

⁷The etymology of the Arabic word *dîn*, commonly translated as ‘religion,’ actually refers to ‘debt’ (*dên*).

⁸On the condition that the murder is not committed to save one’s honour.

⁹However, deviants are not actually denied group membership. Indeed, they are allowed to participate in the first half hour of weekly services, dedicated to reciting prayers and reading enlightening stories.

¹⁰Contrary to what one generally finds in orientalist literature.

(*ḥalâl*) for a layperson to open and read the Scriptures themselves. Considering that they will eventually enter into religion, they may also receive religious instruction orally, based on the Book and in the form of recommendations, by the religious elders of the family. This takes place in private homes, in an informal, caring environment. The presence of non-*maḥram* and foreigners alongside the Book and its guardians is considered absolutely aberrant.¹¹ It conveys the spectre of co-mingling bodies (*ʔkhtilât*) and desecration of the completeness to which the Religious aspire. The very substance of the Book escapes upon the intruder's disruptive contact. In Israel, restraining behaviours implemented by the religious community ensure against such threats. Loose clothing, controlled words, avoidance of non-*maḥram*, and refraining from going to the 'outside' world (*barra*) are all intended to prevent the display of bodies and the corruption of the Book. They give divine Scriptures what clothing brings to intimacy: a tabernacle (*sutra*), commonly understood as the way of 'keeping religion closer to oneself' (*ʔl-wâḥid yikhallî d-dîn aqrab ishî minno*).¹²

Unsurprisingly, conforming to such sheltering behaviours requires a radical change of lifestyle for laymen. For example, renewed involvement in the village environment by those whose professional lives had taken them away may even imply a driving ban. More frequently, the first signs of complicity with the Book include wearing a dark *shirwâl* (wide crotch pants) and a *ghumbâz* (long black tunic), a tonsure and moustache, and abstaining from ingesting substances that flaw one's interiority and control over their senses (such as tobacco, alcohol, or drugs).

As women are believed to 'be born religious' (*bikhlaqû ma ʔd-dîn*) and to already have the qualities of completeness and interiority, physical transformations are minor and usually confined to the way they dress. They wear austere, dark-coloured dresses that cover their wrists and ankles and conceal their bodies as a whole. Similarly, they cover their heads with an unvaryingly sober white veil (*nqâb*, also *fûṭa*). A sign of purity, it shows the extent of the learned word in the way it is attached, and in its length and thickness. Finally, young postulants who drive must hand in their driver's license to the religious elders (*mashâyikh*) who tear it in the *khilwé*. In their dual role as women and mothers of the Book, it is as if, exposing the source of life huddled inside them risked dispersing the Text.

Sense of secrecy and wrapping habits in the presence of the non-Druze

To disperse the bloodline is to violate the Book

In their deference to the female body and to the theophanic source of life enclosed in it, Druze community members equate their religion (*dîn*) with the woman's body (*ʔard*). The group's most intimate substances are the 'blood of the collective' (*damm ʔṭ-ṭâ'ifé*) and the 'mystery of religion' (*sirriyyet ʔd-dîn*). Therefore, exposing one's body in an exogamous union and inviting foreigners to share in the 'religious mystery' (*sirriyyet ʔd-dîn*) are similar. One suggests the other, to the point that exposing the intimacy of the Book to the sight of the non-Druze qualifies as 'public adultery' (Yassyn 1985, 29).

¹¹Specific to the Arab-Muslim world, the notion of *maḥram* (from *ḥarâm*, lit. what is forbidden, sacrilegious) refers to the "nearest" (*aqrab ishî*) consanguinity with the opposite sex. It defines the boundaries of exogamy and refers to people from whom it is not necessary to avoid physical proximity.

¹²Druze religious dress and its particularities have been discussed in the literature dealing with the Druze community (*cf. i.a.* Azzam 2007, pp. 128-130). That said, little has been suggested by way of interpretation.

To disperse the Text is to disperse the bloodline. To disperse the bloodline is to disperse the Text. These actions are imbued with fear. Such threats to the integrity and separateness of the group are punished by symbolic or actual murder, by exclusion from social ties or effective death. Both are cases of interference with the 'honour of the faith' (*sharaf aṭ-ṭâ'ifé*). Thus, a man's marriage with a non-Druze woman is understood as a '[voluntary] departure from religion' where religion is considered 'unwanted'. The culprit 'betrays the community' (*khân aṭ-ṭâ'ifé*) and in doing so 'unveils' the 'dirty' nature of his identity. It is then assumed that he is the product of a hybrid sexual union in a previous life and, victim of the Druze worldview whereby the untrue must be physically kicked out, he is condemned to exile in 'the outside world' (*barra*).¹³ Tellingly, he is now denied access to the bodies of both the Druze Book and Druze women. His burial in Druze land is forbidden. Finally, the religious courts refuse to register his marriage, leaving this formality to the jurisdiction of his wife's religion (Rivoal 2000, 161).

A woman's display of her naked body to the non-Druze is viewed as an attack on religion itself: it incites the rape of 'the mystery of [Druze] religion'. 'Mingling' (*akhtilât*), or sexual relations with the non-Druze, is punishable by death for the woman who, by exposing the group's cohesive nature to the foreigner, has endangered its boundaries and corrupted its bloodline. In the Druze world where women are erected as guardians of the collective and source of its religious symbolism, such a threat to the boundaries of the group is punished by bloodshed, purged from the community arteries.¹⁴ Disclosed to the entire community and 'in the name of honour' (*la-sh-sharaf*), it tends to be widely applauded. Unlike other forms of transgression, honour killings do not result in deprivation of access to the Scriptures, and are not condemned by Druze religious courts. Nowadays, they are less tolerated by the non-religious Druze, however, as they have been extensively reported on by Israel's local media and the international press.

To withhold one's words is to contain the blood

Veiled for fear of dissolution, the Druze social bond is analogous to the Book, whose intimacy is swathed. Druze men and women rally behind a shared sense of secrecy, a constraint to keep silent; to enclose the words circulating within the community is to contain the blood flowing through the arteries of the group. Withholding words safeguards the 'honour of the religion' (*sharaf aṭ-ṭâ'ifé*) and reflects a physical understanding of meaning. It is part of the religious principle of 'protecting brothers' (*hifẓ al-ikhwân*) through controlled speech, confined blood, and proven concern.

Around dispersed blood, the principle of 'no-telling'

Like people elsewhere, we sometimes do shameful things. We are human beings like everyone else. Among us too, there are adulterers, men who beat their wives, children who beat their parents ... But *we* contain, *we* 'close' scandals. (Khâlti Rafiqa)

¹³According to villagers, Druze men who married foreign spouses left to settle in Eilat, Dimona, and Beersheba. All located in southern Israel, these cities are the furthest from the traditional Druze settlements.

¹⁴Take, for example, Ibtissam Maraana's movie *Lady kull al-'arab* (2008). The documentary portrays a young Druze girl who entered the Miss Israel pageant: the first Druze girl to try her luck in the world of Israeli fashion, *Du'à Fâres* passed the first tests successfully. But she had to give up before the finals, under threat of murder for having violated the honour of the community who was offended by her immodest outfits.

Revealing the taboo of adultery to ‘the outside world’ (*barra*) through unreserved speech is akin to spilling the blood out of the Druze community body. Words overflow. They reveal the intimacy of the group to foreigners, as regards the physical and religious transmission of life, which must instead be kept quiet. The act is centrifugal and obscene. It is pornographic.

In this light, it was foreseeable that the *Diary of a young Druze girl* (1987) would be severely censored. In a book written in Hebrew and therefore intended for an Israeli readership, Druze writer Mişbâh Ḥalabî’s fiction mentioned the existence of female adultery in the Druze community (Rivoal 2000, 272). Ostracised from his community for seven months, the author was forbidden from participating in weddings and funerals, in events related to the sense of in-group. First threatened with death, Mişbâh Ḥalabî was eventually sentenced to publicly burn all available copies of his work, and only then was he allowed to return to his community.

Around the Book, a sense of secrecy. Members of the collective repeatedly tell foreigners ‘our religion is closed and no one can enter’ (*dinna msakkar. mamnû yifût hada*). The hymen of silence that seals the Scriptures must be preserved until the Day of Judgment, when ‘the Book and the world are deflowered’ (*əd-dunyâ w-əl-ktâb bişîrû makshûfîn*). Until then, no one from the Druze community can ‘re-open the religion’ (*yiftaḥ əd-dîn min jdîd*).

I often wondered whether individuals who threaten to profane the knowledge conveyed by the Book would be punished. But my question was naïve. Indeed, how can one speak the ineffable? And the evasive responses I received were instructive, for they all revealed a radically physical conception of truth and the Text. Some respondents claimed that Allah would silence all misguided people even before their verbose speech could be dispersed: He would cause them to forget their words. Others asserted that any deviant person would be prohibited access to the body of the Book, in the same way that rapists and murderers ‘betrayed the blood’ (*khânû d-damm*). Others still claimed that losing one sense would be the appropriate punishment for disclosing the speakable parts of the Book. As such, they expressed how complicity with the Text is woven deep into the body: dumbness, blindness, and madness block access to the Scriptures. In this way, they signalled that one had, in a past life, ‘betrayed the religion’ (*kashf əd-dîn*).

The words of diversion

Has the Druze religion developed measures to ensure the integrity of a treasure it claims as its own in the presence of a potentially intrusive non-Druze? Here, it seems that the ‘swallowed Book’ opens onto another discourse. Indeed, in the presence of a non-Druze, Druze men and women express their complicity with the Book by observing *taqiyya* (lit. caution, from *waqâ*, to preserve, to save, to shelter), by using encrypted speech, and by ‘not-telling’. Based on the principle of ‘religious sheltering’ (*msattara dîniyyé*), these actions help the collective live a peaceful existence and allow it to perpetuate its difference.

Taqiyya. Prescribed by the Druze religion, though the term is not mentioned in the Book, *taqiyya* is a practice whereby one may, in times of danger and in appearance only, deny one’s religion and conform to the dominant one. Members of the community explain that foreign religions are like clothes, while the Druze faith is the body. In other words,

one's external behaviour does not alter one's inner life any more than the suit one wears alters the body itself (Yassyn 1985, 42).

In the history of the Druze movement, the practice of *taqiyya* was first motivated by the Muslim persecutions suffered after al-Ḥākim's death. By allowing affiliation to Sunni Islam, the practice enabled the community to keep its Epistles secret. Established as a principle of diplomacy, it also allowed the Druze to maintain their religious independence, and to a certain extent, their political autonomy.¹⁵ Astonishingly, this dimension has not been raised in the literature pertaining to the Druze world: understood in its political context, the notion of *taqiyya* has never been linked to the envelopment associated with either the Book or the religion. The numerous orientalist writings on the subject often use *taqiyya* to explain the intelligence and the skill deployed by the Druze in the presence of the non-Druze (Ben-Dor 1979, 73–75). *Taqiyya* is linked to the notion of concealment, while at the same time identified with everyday political opportunism (Layish 1985, 257–281).

By contrast, many Druze like to point out that the practice of *taqiyya* is not a divisive lie. Rather, it is a 'white lie' (*kidhāb abyad*) meant to preserve the community's original purity. Villagers say that 'their purpose' is to 'preserve their brothers' (*ḥifẓ al-ikhwān*) and better 'safeguard their religion' (*ḥāfaz 'a-ʿad-dīn*). More fundamentally, the practice of *taqiyya* is rooted in the postulate that revealing the truth to those unprepared to receive it exposes the faith to perversion and attracts hostility.¹⁶

Encrypted words. It may seem surprising that the Druze, concerned as they are about intimacy, have not developed their own language. Indeed, they have always spoken Arabic, a language whose ideology they hardly share: a puzzle for the ethnologist in search of group-specific idioms. Yet, isn't the mere fact of speaking a non-Druze language exactly that which allows them to retain their pure difference within a dominant society?¹⁷

Another question then arises: since they practice *taqiyya*, how do the Druze identify a brother met abroad or visiting? One question foreign visitors are repeatedly asked is whether there are any Druze people living near them in their country of origin. Since every member of the group knows about the Druze's presence all over the world, affirming the existence of Druze people in one's native country is *ipso facto* declaring one's Druze identity. Denying it, however, is identifying oneself as non-Druze.

Similarly, a foreigner's relation to 'Druze blood' (*damm durzī*) may sometimes be challenged, and they may be questioned on their religious knowledge. My informants were adamant: when seeing a brother, 'their blood begins to stir' (*dammo burshoq-lo*), 'their heart throbs' (*al-qalb bukhfoq*), and they are filled with compassion. Collusion is then

¹⁵Nevertheless, the Mamluk and Ottoman governments were not always convinced of the Muslim orthodoxy professed by the Druze. *Fatāwī* (sing. *fatwā*) denouncing the Druze position in Islam were proclaimed during most wars between the Druze and the Muslim 'ulamā' (Firro 1986, 468).

¹⁶This is the theory developed by Lebanese Druze author Sami Makarem, who refuses to define *taqiyya* as the reaction of a minority against persecution (Makarem quoted by Firro 1986, 467). Among Druze academics, the notion of *taqiyya* is strongly related to debates about the authenticity of the Druze religion: some writers claim that many of their religious norms, values, and rituals are not truly Druze, but were adopted out of *taqiyya*, while others claim that the Druze are indeed close to the Muslims, since many of their religious features are similar. What is more, as codified in Shiite Islam, the Alawis and Ismailis in Syria also practice *taqiyya*, in much the same way as the Druze (Firro 1986, 467).

¹⁷On the Internet, acculturation is at work on Druze websites whose ambition is to promote a still unknown religious minority. Far from betraying the intimacy of the group, the discourse available on the web is prolix, but ultimately says nothing or only very little. The point here seems to be the production of a loquacious discourse while preserving Druze wholeness.

measured with questions formulated in standard Arabic, based on a hermetic lexicon. Just like in the Word of the Book, linguistic diversions are used in this interrogation, at once full of imagery, encrypted, and disconcerting. In this way, brothers are assessed on elementary religious knowledge available to all Druze, and which allows them to 'reveal themselves to each other' (*bikishfû 'a-ba'd*).

Polite elusiveness. In the field, as a foreigner, I was first met with silence and modesty. Faced with questions they perceived as intrusive, my respondents were elusive and directed me to lay teachers (*juh'hâl*) who had written about their village. More often, I was referred to the guardians of community knowledge. Those who were profane directed me to religious subjects; those who were religious recommended I meet with people even more religious, that is to say, more educated, than they were. 'I do not know' – *ba'rifsh* is the recurrent and peaceful reply given to the inquisitive non-Druze.

At school, children are taught to refrain from overflowing expressivity; young boys and girls are urged to interrupt their conversations when they threaten intimacy and its boundaries. Well aware that their words may reveal and betray domestic or group interiority, children know what they are allowed to say and what they must keep silent in the presence of non-Druze.

When the Book is dispersed, the world is deflowered

Druze men and women claim that the world is a 'mystery' (*sirr*) bequeathed to humans by Allah. Nestled at the world's core, the Text is a ferment of life that must be transmitted across centuries through their own patience. Its sheltering ensures the sustainable regeneration of the communal body. Its silent sharing hastens the advent of a new world.

Failure to wrap the Book impairs the genesis of meaning. Indeed, once dispersed, the Book will undo time: disclosure of the Book's intimacy will precipitate the world towards its final End. Today, many Druze contend that 'the world is about to expire' (*ad-dunyâ b-âkhir waqat*). A minority of apostates have begun to 'deflower' (*kashaf ad-dîn*) the religion of the group by revealing it to the non-Druze. Eating habits shifting away from a uniform and purely licit (*halâl*) diet, non-compliance with the modest dress code, and neglecting the community's sense of secrecy all herald the imminent coming of Judgment Day (*yôm ad-dîn*):

There is no more love today, there is no more mystery: people are satisfied with money. No words are kept. You cannot say a word that will not be repeated and come back to you. In the past, secrets were better kept. There was more love. (Sittî Ghâda)

Finally, Druze submissiveness before the onslaught of Western influence and media signals the desecration of the community body and erases the symbolic boundaries with outside-groups. Of course, everyone will attest that such incidents have occurred in the past. Yet today, they are happening in a new light. Like the intimacy they betray, history, in its course, unveils them to the world. 'Now everyone knows everything, sees everything, everything is unveiled. Everything is exposed, nothing is hidden', Sittî Ghâda told me. Some informants explained that 'there are signs: the land is no longer closed as before. The mountains are split open by roads'. Worse, earthquakes and

floods multiply and deflower the world matrix. The planet becomes the surface that holds the centrifugal dynamics of the End of Times (*âkhir waq̄at*).

In this article, I examined the reverential corpocentric behaviours of Druze men and women surrounding their Holy Book, given its status as a 'source of life' (*sirr*). I explained that we need to move beyond external logocentric approaches to the community and its Text, focused on the so-called Druze secret. Based on in-depth ethnographic fieldwork in Israel, I argue for a more culturally sensitive approach, claiming that the ineffable of the Book is closely linked to the Druze concept of meaning, which relates to that which is veiled – and must therefore be sheltered. In this way, a new avenue for Middle East regional anthropological studies is opened, that of a monotheism experienced at the core of everyday life, of a religion which highly emphasises the body and its containment.

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