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You Have Your Lebanon and I Have Mine

Abstract

This study seeks to demonstrate that Kahlil Gibran (Ġubrān Ḥalīl Ġubrān), one of modern Lebanon's most celebrated cultural figures of the past 100 years, was not only a man-of-letters, but also an inspired national poet who incarnated and inaugurated the modern Lebanese national idea. Indeed, widely accepted wisdom in modern-day Lebanon holds that the prevalent narrative of Lebanese history – the one that claims Lebanon to be the progeny of some Phoenician ancestor, not the direct descendant of a purported Arab progenitor – was the brainchild of young francophone Lebanese poets and artists who burst onto the intellectual and political scene in the early 1920s. To some extent, those young intellectuals – among whom the most renowned were Charles Corm (Šārl al-Qurm) and Michel Chiha (Mišīl Šīhā) – were instrumental in normalizing and intellectualizing the Phoenicianist myth of origin and of the non-Arab pedigree of the modern Lebanese. But, as this study will attempt to show, it was in fact Kahlil Gibran who provided the early impulses and the intellectual moorings to this Lebanonist national narrative. However, given that the bulk of his work was in English – a language well-nigh incomprehensible to the majority of the Lebanese of his generation – and given that his other works, in the Arabic language, were claimed to the “genius” of modern Arabic literature, the Phoenicianist references, similes, imageries and metaphors with which Gibran infused his literary output were misplaced or lost to the Arabist narrative. A careful reconsideration and vetting of Gibran's work, both in Arabic and in English, reveals a Phoenicianist *par excellence*, and an exceptional exponent of the *Phoenician* Lebanese national narrative.

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*You have your Lebanon and I have mine.
 You have your Lebanon with her problems,
 And I have my Lebanon with her beauty.
 You have your Lebanon with all her prejudices and struggles,
 And I have my Lebanon with all her dreams and securities.
 Your Lebanon is a political knot, a national dilemma, a place of conflict
 and deception. My Lebanon, is a place of beauty and dreams of enchanting
 valleys and splendid mountains.
 Your Lebanon is inhabited by functionaries, officers, politicians,
 committees, and factions.
 My Lebanon is for peasants, shepherds, young boys and girls, parents
 and poets.
 Your Lebanon is empty and fleeting,
 whereas My Lebanon will endure forever.*

With these celebrated memorable words, Kahlil Gibran (back in 1920) inaugurated perhaps, not merely the birth of the Lebanese Nation – for Lebanon was in his view eternal – but rather, the birth of the Lebanese national idea. This was an idea that held modern Lebanon to be a reincarnation of its Phoenician precursor and progenitor; a sanctuary for freedom, a homeland for the truth, and a meeting-place for peoples, ethnicities, languages, religions, and ideas, in an area of the world mired in oppression, bigotry, injustice, and persecution. At any rate, if Kahlil Gibran was not indeed the progenitor of the modern Lebanese national idea – one that viewed Lebanon as a syncretic sanctuary and meeting-place for cultures and ideas – he was appointed to that position and unanimously elevated to the level of a national symbol in the collective memory and the collective imagination of his modern compatriots.

Even before modern Lebanon came into being, and before it became an officially sanctioned state, Gibran, back in the early 1900s was already referring to it as such and normalizing the appellation “Lebanon.”

The Birth of a National Icon

Kahlil Gibran was born in 1883 in Bsharri (Bišarrī), a Maronite village of northern Mount-Lebanon perched at a 7,000 ft altitude astride the edge of the famed Biblical Cedar forests and the mouth of the Maronites’ celebrated Valley of the Sainted; Wādī Qadīša.

He grew up poor, but rich in the love of his mother and siblings and the spirituality and imagination that his rugged surroundings, perched at the brink of an abyss, inspired in the heart of his impressionable youth. Gibran often marvelled at the mystical beauty

of his native Bsharri and mused on how, often on clear starry nights, it was difficult to make out the lines that separated Mount-Lebanon from the heavens.

These were the kinds of awesome natural settings that were to feed Gibran's imagination and nourish his national pride. And it was against this backdrop, a uniquely Lebanese one, Aramaean-Maronite in its spirituality and Phoenician in its legends and mythologies, that Gibran was to set his literary narratives in the years to come.

He received his initial education in the shadow of the majestic Cedars, racing with singing brooks and running among the terraced orchards of Bsharri by summer. And by winter, seeking physical shelter and spiritual solace, Gibran often hid in Bsharri's secluded churches and monasteries, carved out deep into Mount-Lebanon's impregnable rock. Until the age of 12, Gibran was also instructed in the rudiments of Syriac, French, and Arabic, by local priests, in the same churches and monasteries that were his winter retreats and sanctuaries against Bsharri's brutal cold and heavy snows.

In 1895, due to a family dispute – and partly because of his own father's run in with the Ottoman authorities – Gibran, his mother, and his siblings, in the fashion of many Maronites of their time, had to flee the tenuous safety of Mount-Lebanon and settle in the obscurity and isolation of Boston, USA. But Boston and the United States in general were not as unkind to the young Gibran as one might have thought.

It was in America, isolated from the splendor of his native Bsharri, that Gibran's national consciousness began blossoming. His stay in Boston, his encounter with the Boston Public School System, and the long hours he spent in the reading rooms of the Boston Public Library, was a period of contemplation and a gestation for Gibran's "national" themes to come. The bucolic Maronite surroundings that had fed his youthful imagination back in Bsharri, and the Phoenician legends and similes that were introduced to him by his teachers of Syriac and Arabic back in Lebanon – as well as the ones whispered to him by Bsharri's winds, snows, stones, Cedars, and Phoenician tombs – were finally being refined into a coherent "Lebanese National" narrative fed by distance nostalgia, and longing for the ancestral homeland.

A Precursor of Phoenicianism?

Although the "Phoenicianist" conception of Lebanese identity – which saw Lebanon as the progeny of Phoenician, *not* Arab lineage – were to become more articulate and assertive during the 1920s and 1930s in Lebanon (with the likes of Charles Corm and Saïd Akl (Sa'îd 'Aql)), Gibran was the first Lebanese intellectual to have, by 1906, begun diffusing a Phoenician narrative and Phoenician references in his works in English and Arabic. Indeed, references to Phoenician gods, temples, and beliefs, woven into the distinct landscape of Mount-Lebanon and the Mediterranean, populated Gibran's literary narratives in English and Arabic. Furthermore, references to a compassionate monotheism and to a "Lebanese" Jesus – or at least to a Jesus who made frequent visits to Lebanon, and in some instances sat at the doorsteps of Phoenician temples and spoke

in a tongue comprehensible to the poet – and the link between compassionate Phoenician pantheism and modern Lebanese Christianity, were a key feature of G i b r a n’s writings, many decades before Saïd A k l – who is considered by many the spiritual father of Phoenicianism as expressed in Arabic and Lebanese vernacular.

One can note such proclivities in G i b r a n’s 1919 *Al-Mawākib* (The Processions). Lyrical passages from this work have been immortalized and popularized by the Lebanese singer Fayrūz, thus becoming, not only part of Lebanese folklore, but also morphing into cultural references that were meaningful to both the Christian and Muslim components of Lebanese society.

One such poem, sung by Fayrūz and taught to school pupils to recite from memory, is *A’ṭinī an-nāy* (Give me the Flute.) Here G i b r a n paints a bucolic universe, reminiscent of the landscape of his native Mount-Lebanon, which has become a national criterion of sorts, where perceptions of Lebanon as a unique nation with a distinct cultural and geographic personality are derived. What’s more, this poem, as was often the case in G i b r a n’s Arabic writings, blurred the syntactic and semantic lines between Lebanese vernacular and Modern Standard Arabic. This rendered G i b r a n’s imageries and references not only accessible and comprehensible to those who were not proficient in Arabic, but also created a brand new literary medium that was to become Lebanon’s property and particularism. This innovation and the rebellion against hackneyed literary traditionalism were perhaps G i b r a n’s most enduring legacy; the creation of a “literary Arabic” language that was specific to Lebanon (just as the spoken vernacular of Lebanon was specific to Lebanon.)

G i b r a n also normalized the vector of continuity between the ancient Lebanese (presumably the Phoenicians) and the modern inhabitants of the Republic of Lebanon. In his 1912 *Al-Ağniḥa al-mutakassara* (Broken Wings), in a chapter entitled “Between Christ and Ishtar”, the novel’s heroine (Salmā Karamī) is compared to the Phoenician goddess Ashtarut (Ishtar), thus contributing to the creation of a Phoenician dimension to modern Lebanon. In one of that poem’s chapters, the main protagonist, the likeness of Ashtarut, is seen entering an abandoned Phoenician lovers’ shrine alongside her own lover. Inside the temple, before a painting of a Byzantine Jesus and the Phoenician Ishtar, the two lovers are abandoned for hours on end, entranced in reveries before sarabands of Phoenician lovers from the distant past, walking in processions, offering themselves in oblations to the goddess of love and fertility.

In his 1928 English work *Jesus the Son of Man*, as well as his 1908 Arabic work *‘Arā’is al-murūḡ* (The Nymphs of the Valleys) G i b r a n clearly infuses Christian spiritualism with Phoenician influences, often mingling Churches and Saints linked to the Lebanese and Mount-Lebanon’s landscape, to imageries, metaphors, and myths redempt with Phoenician references. Maronite churches, Phoenician temples, millennarian cedars, endless horizons, and impavid mountains were all part of G i b r a n’s Lebanese universe – themes to be elaborated in later times, during the 1930s and 1940s, by the likes of Charles C o r m and Saïd A k l. This splendid Pagan-Maronite framework, and in particular the grotto of Faqra, the traditional birthplace of the god Tammuz/Adonis, home to the

Phoenician cult of Bacchus, was also the inspiration of the Biblical *Song of Songs*. Such references added another dimension to the legitimization of Gibran's millenarian Lebanon.

Mary Haskell, the Boston socialite who took Gibran under her wing and invested her own time and money to mentor him and nurture his talent, claimed that the poet often confided in her that "it was [in] Lebanon, as it always [had been] that [he saw Jesus]." ¹ In one dream, Haskell relates, Gibran met Jesus at the entrance of a Phoenician tomb in Bsharri; there, he lied down in the sun, alongside the Lord, and engaged him in a most mundane chat. ² According to Haskell, Gibran is said to have asked Jesus if the staff He was holding was made out of fig? "No!" Jesus replied, "it is *ṣaḥīb*", a hardwood native to Mount-Lebanon and Bsharri. ³

This almost banal conflation Christianity and Phoenician Paganism, modern Lebanon and ancient Phoenicia, and Lebanon and God, was not a unique feature of Gibran's writings. Such imagery and motifs were common to all "Lebanonist" currents of Gibran's generation, as were they characteristic of the syncretic inclusive nationalism that the Lebanese were constructing at the turn of the 20th century. What was unique about Gibran emitting such themes and similes was the fact that he did so in both Arabic and English (beginning in 1906), at a time when most Phoenicianist motifs and narratives were being delivered in French. What's more, Gibran had traditionally been claimed to the repertoire of Arab Nationalist and Syrian Nationalist literature, when in fact there was barely a specific reference to Arabism or Arabness in his work. (This Arab Nationalist impulse stems perhaps from the faulty assumption of Arabists that whoever uttered a word of Arabic, or used the Arabic language as a medium of literary creativity, was performing an Arab.)

But, was Gibran an Arabist or an Arab Nationalist?

A Syrian or Arab Nationalist?

In a letter published in New York in 1913, addressed "to the Muslims from a Christian Poet", Kahlil Gibran had the following to say:

*I am Lebanese and I'm proud of it,
And I'm not an Ottoman, and I'm also proud of it.
I have a beautiful homeland, of which I'm also proud,
And I have a nation with a past
[...] I shall remain an Easterner – Easterner in my conduct,
Syrian in my desires,*

¹ Elise Salem, *Constructing Lebanon: a Century of Literary Narratives*, University Press of Florida, 2003, p. 19.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

*Lebanese in my feelings—
Regardless of how much I admire Western progress.*⁴

As poet and a thinker, G i b r a n had carved out a niche for himself in the repertoire of modern Lebanese literature as a social and political insurgent, and a searing critic of the misogyny, the sectarianism, the parochialism, and the social inequalities that had plagued his native land. But in that passage above, G i b r a n appeared seemingly incapable of casting off his own primitive provincialism and his religious identity. The Middle East's primordial religious loyalties, against which G i b r a n had written his most devastating critiques in the early half of the 20th century, seem to have been tightly woven into his perceptual fabric. Indeed, if the title of his letter were any indication, G i b r a n appeared to have clearly thrown his lot in with that of his Lebanese Christian compatriots, identifying himself first and foremost as "a Christian poet". Furthermore, from that same excerpt, G i b r a n seemed to be using the designation "Lebanese" tautologically with "Christian", and "Ottoman" interchangeably with "Muslim". In so doing, he appeared to be laying down the foundations of the hyper-patriotism/Lebanonism that was to gush out of the Lebanon of the 1920s, and which, to this day, continues to be described as, above all, a "Christian" movement.

The conflation in G i b r a n's use of the terms "Lebanese" and "Syrian" notwithstanding, and although Lebanon as political entity was never mentioned explicitly in G i b r a n's letter, the poet seemed unambiguous in:

- his admiration for the beauty and historical pedigree of his "homeland" –which he called "a nation with a past";
- his pride in being "Lebanese";
- and his aversion towards the "Ottoman."

Still, the ambivalence in the use of "Lebanese [...] feelings" and "Syrian [...] desires" would have revealed dubiousness, uncertainty, and a cognitive dissonance with regards to the poet's identity. But this would be an evaluation based on today's understanding of the Syrian and Lebanese identities for, in G i b r a n's days Syria was considered a Lebanese concept and a form of local patriotism (of which Lebanon was but a microcosm), but a patriotism, anyway, which extolled Syrian particularism and rejected the slightest allusion to a putative Arabness. Indeed if G i b r a n were alive today, it is doubtful he would have recognized in today's "Syrians" the ones he had conceived of, spoken about, and identified with back in 1913.

During the early years of the 20th century, when it became evident that a predominantly Muslim Syria would once more submerge the distinct character of Middle Eastern Christians, the idea of a Lebanese refuge began to resurface, culminating in the 1920 emergence of *Grand Liban*. The eminent Lebanese historian Albert H o u r a n i alluded to the fact that G i b r a n, not unlike many of his contemporary Lebanese immigrants,

⁴ Ġubrān Ḥalīl Ġubrān, *Al-Mağmū'a al-kāmila li-mu'allafat Ġubrān Ḥalīl Ġubrān*, Vol. 4, Al-Ġīl, Beirut 1994, p. 208.

“may well have imbibed [...] the kind of Syrian patriotism which had been common among the educated classes of Lebanon in the late 19th century, and which was preserved in the fossil communities of the Lebanese dispersion when it was tending to die out in the mother country itself.”⁵ In other words, Gibran’s understanding of Syrianism in 1913 was symptomatic of the times, and it resembled in many ways Pharaonism (in Egypt) and Phoenicianism (in Lebanon) and it offered much symmetry with the variegated currents of Lebanese nationalism being propagated during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Neo-Phoenicianist Mediterraneanism for instance, an offshoot of Phoenicianism which was elaborated in the late 1930s by Saïd Akl, utterly denied Lebanon’s Arab character and saw Lebanon as an integral part of the Mediterranean world, and as culturally, linguistically, and ethnically separate from the “Arab” world. This is precisely the “Syria” that Gibran spoke of. Indeed, as a student of Beirut’s *Collège de La Sagesse*, Gibran must have been well aware of Father Youssef Debs’ (Yūsuf Dibs) conception of Syria. Father Debs was a founding principal of the *Collège de La Sagesse*, and author of a monumental history of “Syria”, which depicted it as a geographical extension of Lebanon and a diachronic outgrowth of ancient Phoenicia.

During the 1930s, when the majority of Lebanese, including Gibran (d. 1931), had completely abandoned Syrianism – which was by then being slowly expropriated and co-opted by Arab Nationalists – Antun Saadeh (Anṭūn Sa’ada) was to continue advocating it as a repudiation of Arabism. Indeed, the inherently Lebanese instincts of the Syrian “national idea” are plainly evidenced in the following excerpts from a speech delivered by Antun Saadeh in 1939. Saadeh argued that:

*In the [PPS] [Parti Populaire Syrien] we have completely done away with the myth that we are easterners and that our destiny is linked to that of the eastern peoples. We the Syrians are not easterners. On the contrary we are the fountainhead of Mediterranean culture and the custodians of the civilization of that sea which we transformed into a Syrian sea whose roads were traversed by our ships and to whose distant shores we carried our culture, our inventions and our discoveries.*⁶

In this passage, Saadeh is merely replacing the “Phoenicians” of his Lebanonist and Mediterraneanist precursors by “Syrians”. Charles Corm – who was quite familiar with Gibran’s works and ideas, and who like Gibran was at one time affiliated with Checri Ganem’s (Šukrī Ġānim) Parisian *Comité Central Syrien* – elaborated the idea of Phoenicianism, quoted below in the introduction of his address before the *Congrès de l’Humanisme* at Monaco in 1935:

⁵ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1789–1939*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 317.

⁶ Labib Zuwiya Yamak, *The Syrian Social Nationalist Party*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1966, p. 89.

Les Libanais ont créé, conservé, défendu, affermi et développé, depuis la plus haute antiquité, quand ils n'étaient connus que sous le nom de Chananéens et puis de Phéniciens, une civilisation expansive et libérale, à tendances universelles, et tellement accessible aux autres peuples que certains d'entre eux, et même les plus grands, l'ont assimilée au point de l'identifier à leur propre génie.⁷

But it is perhaps Saïd Akl's *Cadmus* (*Qadmūs*) that constituted the culmination of the blending of Syrianism and Phoenicianism, and their fusion into a single coherent non-Arab Lebanese identity.

By 1937 Saïd Akl had already completed *Cadmus* and signed its closing chapter from Ḍuhūr aš-Šuwayr, Antun Saadeh's native village in Mount-Lebanon. In its forward, and with words reminiscent of Saadeh's Syrianism, Corm's Phoenicianism, and yes the Syrianism briefly emitted by Kahlil Gibran in the early 20th century, Akl's *Cadmus* would make the following declaration:

Out of a vital, enlightened, and generous heritage, we have raised in these parts of the world, on these doorsteps of Asia, which penetrate deeply into the heritage of Europe, a fatherland for the truth. And we, its sons, have declared to the West, that admixture of light and war, that we possess a mission to it, a mission to calm some of its recklessness and folly, to enrich its activity, and to set its eyes beyond immediate gain. Six thousand years of patience, thought, contempt for the material, self-denial, aspiration and careful examination of each point before accepting the whole have led us to become custodians of this mission, this unique mission which entrusts us to Lebanonize the world.⁸

Can we deduce from the preceding that Gibran, like Saadeh, was in fact a Lebanese, and not a Syrian nationalist? Indeed, Gibran was quite clear and explicit in his understanding of Syria and in his depiction of the Syrians as non-Arab heirs to an ancient civilization and propagators of a Phoenicianist humanist universalism (in the same manner in which Phoenico-Lebanonist par excellence, Saïd Akl, depicted his Lebanese universalistic mission). These doctrinal affinities appear to be too intimately intertwined to be dismissed as mere expressions of clashing ideologies: they were simply different names to one and the same concept.

⁷ From the remotest antiquity, when they were simply known by the names of Canaanites and then Phoenicians, the Lebanese have created, conserved, defended, affirmed and developed an vast and liberal civilization with universal tendencies, so accessible to other peoples to the point that some from among those, including some of the greatest, assimilated the Lebanese bequest to the point of coming to identify it with their own genius. Charles Corm, *6000 Ans de Genie Pacifique au Service de l'Humanite*, Editions de la Revue Phenicienne, Beyrouth 1988, p. 7.

⁸ Saïd Akl, *Cadmus*, Beirut, 1944, p. 22.

In fact, G i b r a n's identification with Lebanon *per se*, in 1913 and before, many years before Lebanon had even become a political reality and many years before his contemporaries began even contemplating the idea of the formation of a modern Lebanese state, is indeed quite telling. In fact, the Lebanese national idea, which G i b r a n played a leading role in intellectualizing and normalizing, was one very dearly held by Lebanon's Christian communities of the time. This was so precisely because, the very conception of a Lebanese identity (as one separate and distinct from a Syrian or Arab one), if it did not complement and elaborate the Christian-Lebanese self-perception in secular terms, at least did not contradict or challenge it.

Lebanon, and indeed the Lebanese national idea, were clearly an extension of the Maronite identity (and the inherently Christian character of Lebanon), and arguably a repudiation (or at best a marginalization) of Lebanon's Arabic accretions. As a member of the *Comité Central Syrien*, and a founding leader of its North American Chapter, G i b r a n could not have been unaware of these realities. After all, the *Comité Central Syrien*, in spite of its name, was a rabidly Lebanese nationalistic society, with very intimate ties to the Lebanese intelligentsia of Cairo and Paris during the late 19th and early 20th centuries; the formative decades that led to the establishment of *Grand Liban* in 1920.

Conclusion

Multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies, naturally, have multiple national narratives. Lebanon is no exception. G i b r a n seems to have understood this dilemma. That is why his was an attempt at illustrating the *sui generis* nature of Lebanon, by advocating a syncretic, non-denominational, multi-dimensional Lebanon, even though his similes were redolent with Christian – namely Maronite – symbolisms.

In his noble attempt to make unity out of the multiplicity of Lebanon's faces, G i b r a n himself, inadvertently, was morphed into a potent national symbol. He spent his entire lifetime trying to influence his countrymen into espousing a "Lebanonness" based on the mystical beauty of the Land; a unique geographical and cultural phenomenon in the Middle East. In the end, it was he who became the integrator of the motley of people we call today "the Lebanese". For Lebanon today remains torn by the multiplicity of its faces and historical narratives. But G i b r a n's natural, topographical "Lebanonness" remains a powerful symbol with which the speckled, and often divergent, Lebanese identities can still identify.

In a letter written from New York to a friend visiting Lebanon, G i b r a n had the following to say:

When you are in a beautiful spot [...], or by the side of old ruins, or on top of a high mountain, whisper my name so that my soul will go to Lebanon and hover around you and share with you the pleasure of "life and all life" meanings and secrets. Remember me when you see the

sun rising from behind Mount-Sannine. Think of me when you see the sun coming down towards its setting, spreading its red garment upon the mountains and the valleys as if shedding blood instead of tears as it bids Lebanon farewell. Recall my name when you see the shepherds sitting in the shadow of the trees and blowing their reeds and filling the silent fields with soothing music as did Apollo when he was exiled to this world. Think of me when you see the damsels carrying their earthenware jars filled with water upon their shoulders. Remember me when you see the Lebanese villager plowing the earth before the face of the sun, with beads of sweat adorning his forehead while his back is bent under the heavy duty of labor [...] Remember me when you hear the songs and hymns that Nature has woven from the sinews of moonlight, mingled with the aromatic scent of the valleys, mixed with the frolicsome breeze of the Holy Cedars, and poured into the hearts of the Lebanese.

Ecce Libano! This is Lebanon according to Gibran.