

Introduction

Human–Animal Relationships in the Middle East

Marjan Mashkour and Anahita Grisoni

‘There is no religion without animals’¹ (Poplin 1989, 2008), and ‘there is no human society without animals’² (Vigne 2005: 7). These two important thoughts are the cornerstones of the present issue as a contribution to the understanding of human–animal past and present relationships. From pre-historic times and the earliest evidences delivered by archaeology, animals have occupied a central and structuring role in human societies. This entangled relationship, built up first through a two-way prey/predator competition, has evolved during the history of human mankind, beyond economy and service into more complex and sophisticated spheres, particularly the realm of mental representation and symbolism. Some disciplinary fields like anthropozoology (Poplin 2012) are dedicated to the deciphering of human–animal relationships based on direct or indirect evidences found either in bio-archaeological finds such as animals remains or those elaborated through artistic productions, for example, in literature.

The project of this special issue stems out of interrogations between an archaeozoologist working in the Middle East and a sociologist/anthropologist working on social relationships in environment and political ecology. The central idea was to explore the broad field of human–animal relationships, considering depth of time as well as cultural and civilisational variations and how animals affect Middle Eastern societies.

A considerable amount of work has been produced on animals in the past few decades as a result of what Éric Baratay and Jean-Luc Mayaud (1997) detected as a new field of research in history. The ‘intensification of man–animal relationship’ (Baratay 2010; Despret 2009) combined with ecological issues and the transformation of Western societies’ sensitivities have placed the debate of animals as a central theoretical theme in philosophical (Derrida 2006; De Fontenay 1998; Lévi-Strauss 2001), sociological (York and Mancus 2013), anthropological and political discussions (Giesbert et al. 2014; Szűcs



et al. 2012). For the French historian Damien Baldin (2014), we are currently attending an ‘animalist turn’ in the epistemological debate that redefines the study and role of man–animal relationships. In this perspective, the gradual disappearance of violence against animals in urban Western contexts would constitute a way to create a new social order and protect societies from generating or witnessing forms of violence. For Jocelyne Porcher (2011), this social change in considering man–animal relationships could conduce to a new utopia for the twenty-first century that would lead human societies to ‘live with animals.’

Yet, in ancient and contemporary societies of the Middle East, we observe that those interactions also interrogate political structures. As a matter of fact, relationships to animals can be considered a modern form of social construction of the ‘Other’ (Michalon et al. 2016), not only a non-human ‘Other’, that differs according to the species and the role it has been assigned in a given period and a given society. Those relations are also markers of human otherness, as far as the human–animal relationship crystallises a wide range of human relationships, sometimes based on pure and impure division systems (Douglas [1946] 2005).

This special issue’s perspective is first part of the political ecology theoretical framework deeply rooted in the necessity to politicise ‘natural’ human relationships to animals. Second, it aims to be part of the postcolonial framework that tends to deconstruct eventual finger-pointing or condescending looks on human–animal relationships in the Middle East. This requires using more than Western categories and dichotomies in order to think and relate those relationships: instinct vs. reason, physiology vs. psychology, suffering vs. welfare, and so on.

We have attempted here to detect dynamic elements of social changes within ancient and contemporary Middle East societies. Such questioning first induces understanding how ethical considerations of animal rights are addressed in this area, which is made homogenous by modern Islamic cultural hegemony and which at the same time differs according to many socio-economic and cultural factors. Second, it implies to relieve the diversity of local ‘material cultures’ (Warnier 1999), regarding details in domestication, breeding, training or exploitation practices. Those ‘material cultures’ and representations can be considered part of a specific Middle Eastern ‘nature ontology’ (Descola 2005), without being reduced to a static typology. Several articles here focus on the evolving dimension we can observe, for example, within acculturation process or controversies. This induces observation of the multiplicity of legal animal rights within human communities and variable social status according to animal species. Actually, each animal species crystallises a form of relationship with a human group at a given moment in history. This issue will also address in a broader sense the relationship between living (such as pet keeping and breeding) and dead animals (such as slaughtering and hunting practices).

Then, there is the question of cross-cultural circulations and permanencies. On the one hand, what reception do Middle Eastern societies have for reference works like *Animal Liberation*, written by Australian philosopher Peter Singer (1975)? What diffusion for contemporary Western forms of social actions, like NGOs? What impact do animal protection movements and food practices like veganism have on this area? On the other hand, what place is there for so-called traditional animal uses, like camels and donkeys in evolving societies? In the modern Middle East, we can witness the development of both dynamics that give birth to specific phenomena.

By retracing the diversities of those human–animal relationships in the long run, the aim of this special issue is to highlight the variety of norms and deviance systems, pure and impure divisions, relevant laws and social permanencies through social evolutions. Here, the matter is to report and document the diversity through asymmetries of life situations in ancient and contemporary societies. This implies a multidisciplinary approach that explains the wide range of articles, from archaeology and ethnology to the history of law and cultural anthropology interrogating ancient circulation forms or hyper-modern phenomena. This approach also implies to forget caricatured and/or distorted divisions between past and modern societies and between natural and social sciences, in order to re-establish continuities of complex processes that involve climatic, cultural, social and economic phenomena, as production patterns and units, ownership regimes, gendered animal property and so on.

Nine articles approach the following geographical areas in this special issue: Turkey, Iran, ancient Persia, ancient Middle East and Northern Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan and Burkina Faso. Those areas are discussed according to very different methodologies, such as monographs, comparative approach and so on. The contributions also differ by the temporalities they are based on. On the one hand, some advocate for the long run and sometimes seem atemporal when they deal with, for example, social representations of camels in Arabian communities, as well as their still growing interest in breeding, addressed by Bernard Faye, or with the Qur’ân’s Surahs that avoid hunting and consuming wild animals near the Ka’ba, analysed by Hocine Benkheira. Others must be considered within a short period of time, as sheep sacrifices in Istanbul and Khartoum, due to the peculiarity of modern urban contexts, as addressed by Alice Franck, Jean Gardin and Olivier Givre. On the other hand, a non-linear conception of time and evolution allows other contributions to focus on certain periods and contexts, addressing the animal question in terms of holiness, like in ancient Persia, as highlighted by Samra Azarnouche and Mahnaz Moazami who explore two facets of canids in Zoroastrian beliefs where the animal in its wild and domestic status will meet an antagonist destiny. Didier Gazagnadou’s contribution explores one of the trendiest debates regarding animal treatment and animal suffering based on philosophical and theological discussions during early Islamic period.

Extracted from fieldwork or from archives, all contributions meet up in the will of understanding the particular links of one or two species with a specific human group. Jill Goulder, for example, describes donkeys in ancient Ethiopian and Burkinabe societies that could not be possessed by men but only by women. In this way, they could be liberated from a part of their work. In one way or another, all of the contributors highlight categorisation and difference systems, according not only to the multiplicity of species but also to animals' age, sex and physical features, as shown in the case of pet dogs in Iran selected according to race and appearance (Anahita Grisoni and Marjan Mashkour). Within this context, where their status, representations and uses differ in such a variety of ways, is it still possible to consider animals a homogeneous group? By analysing the gender division of work, Jill Goulder's article shows that women work to make their condition more similar to animals than to men. On the contrary, the role of donkeys in Kurdish families, described by Gülcan Kolay, makes them part of the human group. By opposing every Orientalism pattern, this special issue nourishes the ambition to make readers think about the relativity of categories like animal treatment, animal welfare or even 'animals' and about the asymmetric anthropocentrism generated by each society.

Theoretical work in the Middle East is still in its infancy while the geographic area is in constant turnover due to political upheavals, which inevitably hinders the work of investigation and reflection on such fields of humanities. With this theoretical background in Western countries, this issue aims to identify current fields of reflection in the Middle East and to stimulate interest for those topics within this area. Two more articles will follow this special issue in *Anthropology of the Middle East*, addressing traditional bird trapping systems in ancient Egypt (Nicole Hansen) and in modern Iran (Ellen Vuasola-Tavakoli et al.).

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Notes

1. Translated from French, 'il n'y pas de religion sans animal.'
2. Translated from French, 'il n'y pas de société humaine sans animaux.'

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