

Introduction

Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Children in the Middle East

Erika Friedl and Abderrahmane Moussaoui

Abstract: For several reasons there exist only relatively few ethnographic studies of children in the Middle East or in the diaspora. Accordingly, the articles in this issue of *Anthropology of the Middle East* represent thematically and theoretically highly divergent projects, all based on ethnographic topics and methodologies. Geographically they encompass different locations, and thematically they range from the history of childhood in Iran to matters of socio-cultural integration in Austria; from legal matters concerning youths in Algeria to socio-psychological problems of schoolchildren in Lebanon and to parent-child dynamics in Morocco. The short research, book and conference reports in this issue emphasize approaches and topics in critical anthropology as applied to the Middle East.

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Quite generally in the anthropological literature, documentation and analysis of life-cycle stages are relatively rare, save those that have to do with sex and gender issues and with topics of interest to the peer group of researchers, as the editor of a major anthropological journal explained; children and old people are not, as he said, 'sexy'. For the contemporary Middle East, the political upheavals and crises and their sociocultural ramifications occupy social scientists and dominate research and publications more than any other topic. Although the age group of children and teens constitutes nearly half of the population of most Middle Eastern countries and features large in the visual reports and images we get of war, poverty and dislocations, it is rarely studied. One can argue that children are victims of war and violence as well as being exploited for illustrating the violence and injustices in the area. We know little



about them, and where they are not literally in an image illustrating misery, they are overlooked. They have small voices, and these are filtered and blocked by parents and caretakers. It is a sensitive topic.

The lack of active interest in children's affairs as measured by the low number of ethnographic studies especially for the Middle East is noteworthy and easy to substantiate but hard to justify or even to understand, given children's overall emotional and demographic importance. It might be that children, in law and everyday life, belong to adults. They have no political weight, do not vote, have few rights, cannot defend themselves, do not contribute directly to the economy and can only be reached via their adult guardians. Academically, their issues are mostly placed in the sphere of scholars of education and health. Cultural as well as legal circumstances in the age of consent in a research situation with minors make it difficult to research children's cultural activities and ideas, and motivate anthropologists to focus on inter-family relations rather than on the young in particular. This is a pity, especially so for the Middle East where, for several generations, the high birth rate was taxing the resources of family, social institutions and modernist progress; where, within a generation or two, the high birth rate fell and keeps falling dramatically, changing family size, family structure and adults' attitudes toward children; where literacy is expanding and schools modify the very concept of childhood; where changing work patterns alter intra-family dynamics; where wealth and poverty diverge, fostering radically different experiences for children of different classes; where spiralling lifestyle aspirations change children's expectations and experiences; where play and games are standardised and globalised through modern sports and Internet games; where parental authority is dwindling yet a developing teen culture is prolonging dependencies of teens on parents; and where, at the other end of life, the care of the elderly is becoming a burden on the young generation in the new, small families. Childlessness and social support in later life become relevant for how today's children assess adults and their own future.

This long list of challenges and opportunities for research represents only a short list of the conditions that actually influence childhood and the children's worlds in the Middle East today. It leaves out questions into deep structure such as authoritarian, paternalistic ideologies that influence psychological, social and economic constellations of children's experiences of life, and it leaves out the children's astounding coping abilities and their successes in creating meaningful children's cultures in the dramatic conditions of ethnic strife, war, migration and dislocations. For none of these topics do we have studies that would allow us to assess, generalize, compare and quantify children's circumstances of growing up, of participating in the life possibilities of their respective cultures.

Against this backdrop of missed opportunities, of ignorance and neglect, *Anthropology of the Middle East's* devotion of an entire issue to the theme of children and youth is all the more important. It is, indeed, brave social science. Not surprisingly, the articles in this issue are on a great variety of unrelated

topics regarding children. The seemingly haphazard conglomerate is a function of academic circumstances. There are not enough studies done for a systematic presentation of a particular topic or a particular region. The eclectic array thus is a reflection of the paucity of childhood research in the area and constitutes a critical statement in itself.

Erika Friedl's article on the history of childhood in a rapidly changing tribal region in southwest Iran traces the 'child' topic over the past century, using some indicators of childhood developments and hitching these changes to three stages of economic and political developments in the region. It ranges from the hierarchical, androcentric and conflict-oriented tribal structures to the late capitalist structures with internal contradictions of meritocratic, plutocratic and ideologically egalitarian conditions in a globally connected, consumer-oriented world. For anybody who knows the social history of Iran and the tribal history in the Zagros Mountains, this holds no surprises: autocratic/paternalistic relations and modernisation in the form of 'progress' are a powerful and emotionally loaded ideology in Iran generally. However, this article is the only work that deals with the children's side of this development. Other than biographies – mostly of women – popular in Iran, it also tries to convey what children themselves made and make of their circumstances.

Abderrahmane Moussaoui examines the thorny issue of children born to the *maquis* during the decade of violence Algeria experienced in the 1990s. Born and raised in the *maquis*, children went down to town with their parents, in favour of the reconciliation act. However, despite the remarkable progress made by the policy of reconciliation, the case of these 'children without legal existence' or 'children of unknown identity' seems to have been neglected, so the record of these children is a kind of blind spot. Their case therefore poses a number of problems concerning their identification and the establishment of their filiations. Their difficult reintegration into a society ill prepared to integrate them constitutes, according to the author, a sort of time bomb.

Farid Hafez uses his position as an insider in a successful youth organisation of Middle East Muslim immigrants in Austria to show how dual identity can work in a host society that had learned from generations of dealing with immigrants how to avoid what in other Western societies is a social and political problem. (The openness lasted until the sudden enormous influx of foreigners strained integrative and welcome structures to a breaking point.) A second-generation immigrant himself, by describing how the organisation developed out of frustration of youngsters mostly born and raised as Muslim Austrians with the main Muslim organisations in Austria whose members hold onto political and cultural traditions of their countries of origin, he traces how these youngsters' social activities shaped their identity and status as citizens in a foreign-yet-home country. Eliminating borders elsewhere set by language, sectarian differences and gender (the organization is run by young women and has male and female members), the case study is relevant to any country that hosts large numbers of refugees and migrants from the Middle East.

Erik van Ommering, in a longitudinal ethnographic study of school children in Lebanon, provides insight into how these children evaluate their situation in a country that is modernizing yet deeply troubled by discontent, poverty, sectarian strife and war. By exploring discontent with their own culture that goes so far as to wish to leave it behind altogether, he addresses a theme that is familiar to even the most casual observers or travellers in the whole region, yet is neglected and gravely understudied (if not wilfully overlooked) in social science literature. For local children, the threat comes not only from the enemies' destructions and unsettling intimidations – the shocks of war people must come to terms with. The effects of these crises, it turns out, can be mitigated by parental reassurances and guidance. A more insidious threat to their well-being comes from the government's inability to change the everyday irritants and dangers of depressing civic failures that impair social cohesion and *joie de vivre*. Schools are no help either because most teachers subscribe to an authoritarian mode of teaching that does not allow pupils to find strength in their common experiences. This, too, is a theme woefully neglected in the ethnographic literature on children.

Disquiets about the psychological and psychiatric problems of children in Morocco serve as the basis for Julie Pluies to examine parent-child relationships and to carry out ethnographic observations that support some hypotheses concerning medical processes and devices for young patients and their parents. The political and institutional responses developed to address the unrest of adults are briefly recalled. However, the author considers mainly the interactions in the clinic to be revealing a negative way of thinking about childhood and the relationship to children. Adopting a reflexive posture, Pluies is part of a certain conception of the anthropology of childhood which defines children as actors of their own socialization.

In an exquisite and fresh report on Iran, Paola Rivetti daringly has chosen a topic of great interest, social movement, which ordinarily researchers avoid. In total honesty, she franchises many borders to discover similarities with the persons she interviewed, and she puts into question ordinary methods of research and findings. This article can encourage new research in the area, showing how one can work on important topics, instead of choosing what would seem not dangerous in the circumstances, and produce a 'richer and more nuanced scholarship'. This is done through what she calls 'letting respondents guide one in the process of knowledge production'. Political, scientific, ethical and emotional topics are unravelled in this report, as she discovers how and why 'every aspect of their [Iranians] life is a political space'.

We see harsh reality, not only on the destiny of people of the region, but even on the films of the area, as portrayed vigorously by Rona Sala's report in 'Notes from the Field' which speaks of the confiscation of films on Palestine in great detail.

Book reviews usually summarize in a compact way the content of a book. However, the two book reviews included in this issue are different in that they

are written by people who take a very engaged position vis-à-vis the works they are introducing. Roxanne Varzi uses in very sublime language in writing about the Syrian filmmaker's book *The Dream*, and we see how she describes it as 'an ethnography [. . .] of a psychic landscape [. . .] somewhere between the visual and the concrete.' Varzi relates to this book personally and professionally as she recounts her own experience doing fieldwork, and she says she 'was looking to see how she could get at the deep and emotional impact that the everyday life of living in an Islamic Republic was having on people.' She was advised to 'listen to their [people's] dreams,' because in dreams one would see 'the past [. . .] the dreams being the imprint of the emotional residue of trauma.'

The book review by Fadi A. Bardawil shows that critical anthropology seeks to 'open up new futures' by asserting the continuous haunting of our present. He emphasizes the importance of existence in 'multiple realities' and that it is not sociology but critical anthropology which can record and write and document this very difficult process that exile has brought to those who have fled the atrocities in the Middle East and North African region.

Trauma also finds its way in our conference report where we see a critical look at the 'hegemonic discourses on Arab manhood'. The final theme of the conference focuses on the transit period 'Arab masculinities are shaped [. . .] in liminal places [. . .] in new refugee and resettlement communities in Europe and beyond.' Our writers do not lose time in showing the horrors of everyday life, 'the pain of lost love, broken relationships and shattered aspirations'. Rather, they search 'new theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches' to enable them to put on paper the realities in front of them.

These highly critical short pieces reflect deep engagement on the part of the authors, at a critical period in the life of the Middle East.

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