Introduction

Emerging Kinship in a Changing Middle East

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Abstract: The introduction to this issue has two strands. First, it contextualises the articles, which address kinship from varied perspectives, and situates them in their broader cultural context. Second, it adopts a comparative perspective by differentiating between the present articles with those published a decade earlier on the same themes in this journal, to examine whether, how and to what extent kinship has changed in the face of modernity, globalisation, wars, migrations and political change. It concludes that, compared with a decade ago, kinship has not only not weakened, but it has revived further and penetrated other institutions beyond family, or called upon to ensure and protect the continuity of cultural norms and values, from the threats posed by modernity and by the global, cultural and political invasions.

Keywords: change, kinship, Middle East, modernity

This issue is the outcome of a panel organised on 'Emerging Kinship in Changing Middle East', at a conference held by the Commission on the Anthropology of the Middle East in Krakow in 2016. But, this is also an opportunity to reflect on the marker, which we laid down, 10 years ago, on the impact of modernity on 'Kinship in the Middle East', in this journal (Shahshahani and Tremayne 2007). Revisiting that special issue of *Anthropology of the Middle East* has proved critical in providing a comparative base on whether and how kinship has changed during the past decade. So, the question remains how and to what extent kinship, as a key organising and guiding principle in society, has responded to change brought about by modernity. This is bearing in mind that – added to the transformations in areas such as the family; marriage; gender and intergenerational relations; the pervasive intrusion of the state in regulating relationships between individuals and, in the process, weakening

the traditional hierarchy of power among the kin group; and the considerable penetration of global technologies – the past decade has also witnessed a relentless and dramatic increase in conflicts, wars, revolutions, uprisings, migrations and displacements in the Middle East, which are bound to have lasting consequences for kinship.

In contemplating the 2007 issue, we concluded:

Just as we begin to ask ourselves whether kinship as we know it is disappearing under pressures of modern life, we are informed that many of these changes are more a question of form than indicators of complete transformations. How long the values which determine the institution of kinship will be sustained and serve a purpose or resist change remain open to question. (Shahshahani and Tremayne 2007: vi)

Ongoing research on the emerging kinship in the Middle East confirms that, regardless of the extent of change, the Middle East remains structurally bound and driven by kinship ties at all levels of society (Lindholm 2009; Yount and Rashad 2008) and that kinship continues to define social relations by permeating a broad range of institutions, from interpersonal relationships, to economic enterprises, to political alliances, and to judicial systems. Other studies beyond the Middle East also confirm the defining role of kinship in allowing and shaping change. Susan McKinnon and Fenella Cannell, in their compelling book *Vital Relations: Modernity and the Persistence Life of Kinship*, challenge the assumption that change, brought about by modernity, means that kinship and family ties are no longer important or even exist. The authors argue that the way change is introduced into a society, the form it takes and the extent of its impact are themselves determined by the institutions, which pre-existed modernity (2013:10). As one of the contributors to the same book points out, lines between where the traditional practices stop and modernity starts are blurred, and this may be a misleading way of exploring the issue. In his words, ‘too much has been made of the division between the place of kinship in “traditional” and “modern” anyway’ (Lambek 2013: 13).

In 2007, some of the contributors to the ‘Kinship’ issue argued that, while the introduction of scientific and global biotechnologies could have been a potential threat to the foundation of kinship and family, it was kinship that took the lead in defining how these technologies could be adapted to fit into its specific cultural mould. For example, with the introduction of assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs), offering treatment for infertility, to the Middle East, these were received with open arms, where reproduction remains paramount. However, in the cases of countries where the use of third-party gamete donation was approved, in choosing a donor of gamete, the infertile parties invariably asked their close relatives, preferably their same-sex siblings, for gamete donation as, in their view, donation by a relative would ensure the purity of their lineage and keep their kinship intact. In his article in *Social Anthropology* in 2007, Morgan Clarke explored the potential impact of these

technologies on the emergence of new patterns of kinship and ideologies of relatedness. Ten years on, not only Clarke's analysis of the emerging forms of kinship remain valid; the ongoing studies of the outcome of gamete donation by relatives confirm the emergence of a complex and multilayered web of relatedness in all its legal, ethical and emotional implications, especially for the resulting children (Tremayne 2015).

Another emerging form of kinship, which is a revival of one of the oldest Islamic kinship practices, is that of milk kinship. According to Islamic law, when a woman breastfeeds a child other than her own, they become biologically related and the same kinship rules as between biological relatives apply to both the woman and the child she breastfeeds (Al-Torki 1983; Clarke 2007, 2009; Khatib-Chahidi 1992; Tremayne 2009; also Isidoros, this issue). As Clarke explains, in the context of the use of milk kinship in relation to ART: 'In Islamic law, breastfeeding institutes a type of kinship relation (*ridāʿ*, "milk kinship"), historically a medium for complex social and political networks in the Middle East, although of diminished frequency in modern times.' And 'for Muslim religious specialists, milk kinship provides a way of thinking through and resolving the ethical dilemmas of the use of donor eggs and surrogacy arrangements. Rather than disappearing under modernity, then, milk kinship endures as a resource for the mediation of social relations and intellectual challenges' (2007: 301).

Milk kinship, in its historical and varied contexts, has also been used to create relations for different purposes, such as forging political alliances (Parkes 2001), or to cement social cohesion, and, in some instances, to ensure the continuity of economic life in modern times. Konstantina Isidoros, in this issue, discusses the case of the Sahrāwī pastoral nomads in the refugee camps in the western Sahara Desert, whose kinship structure has faced increasing threat of disruption, and points out that the Sahrāwī women, faced with the possibility of losing their kin men, who are traders and on the move, have created new milk kin bonds out of strangers to allow the free circulation of these strangers among the women's tents. Isidoros argues that although this form of relatedness is under threat of vanishing through the modernist and interventionist policies of outside agencies, and seems to have gone into hiding and be practised discreetly, the Sahrāwī still attach immense idiomatic significance to milk, even if they have apparently stopped practising it. McKinnon and Cannell also refer to the persistence of kinship throughout their introduction and reiterate that even when the kinship itself has disappeared, those countries where kinship seems to have given way to 'modernity', it has revived itself in other forms and even when it appears to have disintegrated, is no longer real due to its apparent disintegration, it survives in the imagination of its adherents (2013: 3–35).

The striking power of kinship also comes into play in this issue through Sachiko Hosoya's study of Thalassaemia sufferers in Iran. Hosoya maintains that, as part of the advanced medical programmes for the control of Thalassaemia,

sufferers are fully informed of the risks involved in marrying other sufferers and having children. However, many choose to ignore the advice and get married and undergo abortion in cases of affected fetuses rather than give up marriage. Even in the more severe cases, some Thalassaemia patients relinquish having children so that they can marry and form a partnership. For these individuals, the desire to form a family, even without children, overcomes the life-saving solutions biomedicine offers.

Kinship has also been revived in its mediating capacity in some of the tribal areas in the Middle East. Krzysztof Lalik's study, in this issue, argues that in the fast-developing and modernising Kurdistan Region of Iraq, when the official court rulings fail to resolve local disputes among the inhabitants, the old tribal mechanisms are activated and given the responsibility of mediating to solve local cases of feuds and conflicts. The involvement of the elderly, who often have some kinship links with the rest of the community, has proved highly successful and regarded by the local as equitable and fair.

Soheila Shahshahani's report on the reconciliation courts formed in Iran concurs with the above by emphasising the effectiveness of the courts, which were formed in 2006 in Iran to decentralise the work of the courts. She explains:

The courts were formed in 2006 with the aim of reducing the workload of courts in their centralised form, giving place to local problems to be solved by *rish sefid* [literally meaning 'white beard', the elder wise men] of every area. The *rish sefid* were not paid for the consulting role they played, and their effort was towards bringing peace and solving the problems raised in a friendly manner. Each *Showra* (council) had a judge who finally gave a verdict after consultation with the *rish sefid*. People had easy access to the *rish sefid*, they did not have to pay them as they would a lawyer, the *rish sefid* were generally aware of the problem which was brought to the *Showra*. (personal communication, May 2017)

The unequivocal persistence of kinship has not necessarily proved an obstacle to adapting what modernity has to offer, and young people, in many parts of the Middle East, especially in urban settings, seem to have freed themselves from the grip of relatives and the constant supervision of their close kin group. Many have formed an open relationship and cohabit with their partners – a practice which, by and large, is still frowned upon in the Middle East. However, in most cases, this freedom has proved short-lived and the relentless pressure from the family and kin group has forced them to choose between conforming or living a life of isolation.

Irene Maffi's study of family life in Tunisia after the revolution of 2011, in this issue, shows that the substantial changes in legal and socioeconomic structures have done little to diminish the importance of the family and kinship. Tunisia, despite being one of the most advanced and reformed countries of the Middle East, remains strongly a family- and kin-oriented culture, and Maffi's ethnography of young Tunisians clearly concurs with Hosoya's findings on the importance of marriage as a major contributory factor to the formation of

one's personhood and in strengthening the ties between couples and families. A similar situation has taken place for instance in Iran, where young couples cohabit. But, in all these case, the gender imbalance has become more prominent in that the familial and societal expectations to conform weigh more heavily on girls than boys.

The enduring existence of kinship is also shown in Azim Malikov's study, in this issue, of the post-Soviet era in Central Asia, in which he challenges the suggestion that long-term ruptures imposed by the dominant ideology of a political regime, or based on the long-term geographical distance and separation, necessarily lead to a complete disintegration of kinship ties. Malikov shows how, in the Turkistan region of Kazakhstan, after the end of the Soviet rule, the Kazakh society in its wish to establish closer links with the Muslim world is claiming to be the descendants of an elite religious group, the Xoja, who had been undermined under the Soviet regime. The Xoja are the descendants of the Prophet and the Sufi saints. In their drive to revive their identity, the Kazakhs have crossed ethnic, linguistic and other cultural boundaries and formed alliances with the Uzbeks, who also claim to belong to the Xoja.

Finally, any study of kinship in the Middle East without an acknowledgement of the vital role played by children in ensuring the cohesion of the kin group and society by implication will leave a deep gap in the understanding of the way kinship can be made and unmade. While childhood studies in the Middle East are becoming more prolific, they remain under-researched on the variety of existing kinship models, where the role of children remains essential for the survival of the group, especially among minority groups and in hostile environments (see also the special issue of *Anthropology of the Middle East* 12, no. 1, 2017). The notion of 'child-centred' research became valid in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as Heather Montgomery, in her study of child prostitution in Thailand (2001), explains:

This [the notion of 'child-centred' research] entailed bringing children back from the margins of anthropological and sociological literature, where references to them had previously been found, and placing them at the centre of research projects. This did not mean focusing only on children, or constructing a sub-culture of society where children existed separated from their families and their communities. Rather, it meant that research on children attempted to understand their perspective, their links to their families, and to examine the importance of the relationships, as they saw them. (2001: 16)

Childhood studies continue to throw light on and challenge the assumption that modern families are nuclear and that children live a passive life with their parents until they become adults. These studies show that children are viewed as active agents, shaping their society and being instrumental in cementing relationships between their family and the kin group, contributing to the economy and beyond. Mitra Asfari's contribution, in this issue, of a less-studied group of Gypsies, known as the Ġorbat or Kowli in Iran, is a

case in point. As Asfari's ethnography shows, the Ġorabt child plays a crucial role in protecting the structure of the kinship in the community, in the face of the changes brought about by modernisation. The social division of tasks; the childcare practices; the status of children in the group; the social division of labour; the relationship with the adults; and, more importantly, the fluidity of the way in which children are circulated among the kin group and passed round between siblings and relatives, all culminate in revealing the specific models of kinship and the logic of child labour in upholding the structure of kinship among the Ġorbat.

Elham Etemadi's article, which is not on kinship, takes a fresh look at a topic which has long been studied in the anthropology of women of the Middle East and offers a new analysis of the domain of art by finding clues as to how the painter illustrates, through his painting and through handwriting and captions, certain social disparities he wants to illustrate. The author's well-placed curiosity and her discovery of various aspects of the very important manuscript *The Thousand and One Nights* by a very well-known painter, Sani' ol-Molk, puts into question various standpoints which were readily taken up by art critics towards the paintings of his period, and she points at the painter's dexterity to illustrate the disparity within the society on ethical topics.

The studies presented in this issue show that the impact of modernity on kinship has led to the revival of old kinship practices rather than resulting in the emergence of new forms or as a deviation from them. Faced with modernity and change, communities have sought and found solutions in kinship, which has acted as a compass to show them the right path. In their diverse examples, the contributors have also shown how kinship permeates into almost every institution in society and, in doing so, defines social relations.

Finally, in comparing the contributions of this issue with those of the 2007 issue, it becomes clear that now, as then, kinship's presence remains strong in every aspect of life in the Middle East. The noticeable difference between the two issues is that contributions to the present issue go even further in arguing that kinship has not only not given way to modernity and change, but has become more defiant in facing the challenges brought about by them and that it is kinship that frequently takes the lead in accepting, rejecting, selecting or shaping what modernity has to offer, to make it fit into its own specific cultural mould. Evidence from these contributions also indicates that, in the face of the relentless permeation of globalisation and the turmoil in the Middle East, kinship remains one of the most constant institutions and pivotal to the stability of the society, and that it will prevail for the foreseeable future, regardless of the form in which it appears.

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