Editorial

Kinship in the Middle East

The study of kinship remains central to anthropology and to understanding the social world in which we live. Although key debates on kinship have stayed embedded in anthropological studies, the impact of global changes affecting marriage, divorce, family structure, and the inevitable consequences of the interaction between biotechnologies and social and cultural practices have all served to bring back kinship into anthropological discourse in a forceful way. As a result, there is a tendency to move away from the distinction between the biological and social aspects of kinship and to focus on emerging forms of relatedness and their broader implications. In such an approach, relatedness is viewed as a process that is fluid and mutable, and that is constructed through active human agency. It expands to include changing gender relations, new family forms and the outcome of assisted reproductive technologies.

Following from such considerations and concerning the current issue of *Anthropology of the Middle East*, perspective remains of prime importance for the study of kinship in the Middle East. In selecting the articles presented in this issue of the journal, we have aimed at including first-hand recent research, which addresses various aspects of kinship as it is practised today, rather than going over the well-trodden ground of classical-style anthropological studies. The encounter of social and legal reforms in the areas of gender, identity, personhood, human agency, fertility and reproduction are examined in the context of changes in marriage patterns, divorce, migration and assisted reproductive technologies. At the same time, the articles reflect the persistence of underlying deeply rooted values and practices, albeit disguised to varying degrees. Although urbanisation may appear to have shattered the support of the kin group, or the elderly are assumed to have lost their influence on major decisions, such as divorce cases, the web of relatives and kin group are shown to remain the prime bearers and decision-makers in supporting and preserving the family and its values. Or, as we may assume that migrations have dismantled family networks, we find instead expanded and considerably strengthened networks on a global scale through movement across the world. Likewise, in choosing one's marriage partner in a flourishing economy, the assumption might be made that marriage within one's own ethnic and social group will be the desirable form. But the persistence of

values for which women have been married for centuries can in fact be a deterrent, and drive a considerable number of the younger generation of men to seek marriage partners among the migrant community. The degree to which kinship values persist, even in the face of the most modern scientific innovations, is shown through studies of assisted reproductive technologies, whereby the understanding of what constitutes kinship, lineage, public reputation and propriety ultimately dictate their use. Finally, in spite of the social and legal reforms which are affecting patterns of marriage, we find out that the preference remains for consanguine partners.

In conclusion, 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 a complete transformation. How long the values which determine the institution of kinship will be sustained and serve a purpose or resist change remains open to question.

— *Soheila Shahshahani and Soraya Tremayne*