

Editorial

Rural Anthropology of the Middle East

When proposing the theme 'Rural Anthropology of the Middle East', we never would have thought that such a variety of topics would be included in the issue. Despite the fact that a continuously decreasing proportion of people dwell in rural areas around the world, including the Middle East, rural people are proving to be resourceful in facing modernity. For this reason, a diversity of subjects can be studied in rural areas, as each village is unique and quite different from the others.

Criticisms voiced by Loeffler, who contends that villages are described as inert or romantic, and raised by the film reviewer Mohammadi, who shows how a rural musician was told by a photographer to pose in a certain way in order to appear typical, find definite support in these articles. Tozzi Di Marco portrays the resourcefulness of a destitute population in an article on rural people who have occupied a cemetery for three centuries and hold all of their life rituals there. Had the communal lifestyle of these people not been malleable enough to allow them to live in a cemetery, they would have been categorised as urban poor. In Tarawneh and Hakim Al Husban's field study about Jordan, poverty is rightly criticised as a symbol of the rural population, making context a necessity for evaluating poverty. Images, feelings and perceived symbols should be added to the criteria for defining poverty, in addition to the presence of global markets and earned income of one or two dollars a day. Bochi shows how the Dom (gypsies) move between Syria and Lebanon, engaging in agriculture from April to August, offering additional and different services, and, through adaptive strategies, finding creative ways to reconstitute their social life.

All this does not mean that change has not taken place in rural areas. On the contrary, two excellent studies (Hegland and Loeffler) detail changes that have occurred over a 30-year span of time. Very often it is observed that as a result of modifications to the infrastructure of a village and the initiation of development measures, such as providing tap water, electricity, gas and an asphalt road leading to a village, the village population chooses to leave rather than



live in these new conditions. Villages being emptied of their population is one potential outcome. The other is a growth in population, with villages becoming identified as suburbs or cities – a transformation that involves changes in all aspects of lifestyle. Turning agricultural land into housing lots or returning to a village in order to build a second home has become a common practice as well. In her article, Hegland shows how Aliabad has changed to become a suburb of Shiraz. In specific areas and for various sectors of the population, such as the elderly, she demonstrates what this change can mean. Loeffler's study of Sisakht, a prosperous village in the heart of the Zagros Mountains, depicts an 'enlightened' leader who, through the use of specific development measures fit to the area, has achieved independence from pastoral nomadic chieftainship, the education of the inhabitants, the possibility of new jobs and the lack of penetration of large-scale governmental development measures. This is a true success story for the community.

Another form of change, one that has been observed in Europe as well, is the subject of Fliche's article on Anatolian villages: the inhabitants of these villages, who have been leaving them for decades, are coming back to them. Once abandoned, the villages have now become attractive locations (*objets de désir*). Here the inhabitants not only have access to fresh, healthy agricultural products but also are able to exercise more freely their religious and cult beliefs. Such practices would be much more difficult in rigorist urban settings. These places are also valued for their 'aesthetic atmosphere' (local architecture, sceneries, etc.).

So far we have been focusing on rural areas according to their location in an ecological niche and their architectural form as a way of categorising them and typifying them. Now we can see that responses to modernisation are yet another way of finding different archetypes for rural areas.

What remains a constant in studies of rural areas is the kinship relationship, which has proved to be a context that has supplied rural people with a platform for thoughts and actions. Has individualism been penetrating rural areas? Or does a rural person think from the perspective of a person within a kin group – with all the responsibilities that one holds towards one's kin and all the honour and respect that one expects to gain from them – which makes life meaningful? Almost every issue of *Anthropology of the Middle East* includes an article relating to kinship, and in this issue we have that of Kressel and Abu-Rabi'a. Their contribution considers an aspect of kinship practice that holds families together: the Bedouin practice of exchange marriages (*badal*), whereby men swap their daughters and nieces in the process of obtaining wives or daughters-in-law.

Rural topics are far from exhausted, and we will certainly find them echoed in future issues. We definitely need to have a clearer picture of the challenges that rural areas face, including global agricultural trade, desertification, salination, climate change, the destruction of rudimentary forests and the effect of the economy of oil on rural life. All sectors of social life, the ways in which

modern political and judicial systems are received and practised, and ambiguous periods of testing new lifestyles and forms of adaptation will need closer attention in the future. The continuity of rural life within urban settings is a topic that has been on various agendas, and we hope to be able to present to our readers results of research by younger scholars who will be eager to attend to such topics in their future studies.

– *Soheila Shahshahani and Christian Bromberger, co-editors*