Editorial

Today, Is 'Ethnicity' the Most Important Topic in the Middle East?

It was decided by the editorial board of *AME* that some issues of the journal should be open-themed so that new topics of interest to researchers could have a place to be presented, and, in this way, perhaps new horizons of scholarship could be opened up. This issue was an open-theme issue but, amazingly, all the articles are concerned in one way or other with ethnicity. Would it be incorrect to call this the most important concern in the Middle East today? I think there is some truth to it, as our articles show: from concern with nation formation through enculturation in *mahallah*'s of Uzbekistan; to linguistic behaviour in two regions in Uzbekistan; to ethnic conflict and violence in Kyrgyzstan; the Turkish diaspora returning to Turkey and trying to set a superior example; and last but not least the emblem of a prosperous nation, Qatar, claiming not only tribal origins but also acting democratically through tribal delineation at times of voting. This is exactly what I have observed in southern Iran where people vote according to tribal lines. The same topic was evoked in 'You Have Car Insurance, We Have Tribes' (*AME* 6 no. 1, 2011).

Questions of belonging, enculturation, heritage and identity are evoked in all articles, showing the spirit of the time. But great change is overwhelming the area and it is as though the idea of nation formation, assigning frontiers and displacing people are all becoming topical. One cannot overlook the divisions which are burning certain countries of the region. Babak Rezvani, through a detailed ethno-historical and media analysis, shows one such region at two points in time, 1990 and 2010 – the Kyrgyz–Uzbek conflict. He shows how the problem of frontiers set haphazardly and the inclusion/exclusion of populations creates immense problems at another point in time. Linguistic differentiation delineates two regional inhabitants of Uzbekistan, which shows how essentialists' view of ethnicity, one of the most important signifiers of ethnicity, still holds strongly today. It is rare to see migrants return home and not meld with their own population but become a group with a new identity

trying to set themselves apart as different. This is indeed what we see with Turkish returnees from Germany, who do not only set themselves apart, but are looking at themselves and setting their behaviour up as exemplary. Susan Rottmann places the topic within the field of ethics, while we can propose an additional angle of seeing them as an emergent ethnic group. She uses the Foucaultian term 'technologies of self' to demonstrate how they differentiate themselves through behaviour, particularly with regard to housing, and a few concepts become topical as a result: modernity, order and individualism. These confirm the way Turkey had defined itself historically, but dichotomies exist between notions of tradition, homeliness, closeness, hospitality on the one hand and individualism, coldness and orderliness on the other.

In this issue, then, we see not only regional politics, which is definitely reminiscent of African ethnic frontiers or ethnic wars, violence and bloodshed, but also the making of ethnic groups, going through some examples of longstanding ways of differentiating human alignment using language, kinship and enculturation through belonging to an area of a city. So questions of adhesion and belonging, setting oneself up as different from the others, are all too human, making us reflect on ways of heading towards peace with such a comprehension of human thought and behaviour. The other side of the coin would be manipulation of such human capacities to create war and enmity. So here the question of ethics is posed for participants, those who are involved in politics and decision-making, and scholars who study such phenomena and can clarify human experience and expression towards accommodation of more tolerance. Middle Eastern cultures, old as they are, have been living together, maintaining distance or mixing with each other for centuries. Anthropology can be instrumental in showing the mechanisms these old cultures have been using, whereas the abuse of its knowledge would do great disservice to humanity in the region.

– *Soheila Shahshahani*