

REVIEW OF SUCKLING: KINSHIP MORE FLUID BY FADWA EL GUINDI

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Widely in the Middle East and neighboring areas, such as southeast Europe, suckling makes kinship. If a woman suckles a child, that child becomes in some sense her child. Distant nephews and nieces are perhaps especially prone to this creation of filiation, but it can serve as a general way of creating relationship. It has a long history, going back to Mesopotamia. By contrast, adoption, so common in much of the world, is rare and discouraged in traditional Middle Eastern societies. Wet-nursing and other suckling-for-hire is different and does not create such close relationships; the words for these two social constructions of suckling are different, though from the same root, in Arabic.

These principles form the core of Fadwa El Guindi's latest research into kinship and into Muslim societies. She moves from suckling to a discussion of Middle Eastern cultural constructions of birth, lineality, filiation, and physical instantiation of some symbols in "groin," "womb," "nerve." This work follows a lifetime of research and residence in Egypt, Qatar, and other Middle Eastern countries.

El Guindi differentiates several forms of filiation-by-suckling, and compares it to other ways of making kin. Her research in Mexico allows her to compare the institution of *compadrazgo*, corresponding to godparenthood in the English-speaking world but usually taken more seriously. *Compadrazgo* also exists in a myriad of forms, even within the same community. The Chinese have a similar system known as *jiye*, "contracted parenthood," often with gods as the adopted parents. Formal adoption is yet another form of creating kinship. El Guindi disparages the use of terms like "fictive kinship" and (worse) "pseudo-kinship" for such institutions, since they are not by any means always taken as any less real or important than biological kin. For instance, adoption in modern America typically creates kinship as phenomenologically and legally real as biological descent.

This means that kinship is not well understood as being about biological descent or about marriage. It is about having particular types of close relationships. These can have nothing to do with biological kin, though they usually do, and are presumably grounded in extensions of rec-

ognized biological links. Kinship can thus wander off into channels of informal adoption, to say nothing of church fathers, bands of brothers, the sisterhood of all women, marriage to trees and ghosts and gods, and other phenomena that are acknowledged by most as extensions of the terms rather than literal deploying thereof. I have worked in communities where the local trees, mountains, and animals were part of the community. Sometimes animals were specific known kin: recently deceased individuals recognizable in reincarnated form animals. Often, in these communities, other human communities far away were seen as much less kin than local nonhumans.

Thus, kinship cannot be reduced to biological relationship or evolved sensitivity to that. It cannot be reduced to functionalism or emotion or social rules. They are not the whole story. I would argue that all those approaches are useful and have much to teach us, but we need phenomenological, practice-oriented, psychological, and other forms of analysis too.

The deeper enquiry in the book concerns the study of kinship, and its fate in modern anthropology. El Guindi defends the four field approach, traditional in anthropology since the days of Boas. Kinship is primarily a cultural matter, so largely the domain of cultural anthropology, but has also been a major research area for linguistic anthropologists, since kinship terminological systems are universal linguistic phenomena. Archaeology can explore the *longue durée* of descent, filiation, and marriage. Biology can investigate grounding in whatever innate brain systems may contribute to recognition and creation of kin.

El Guindi opposes simplistic biologizing of human kinship, and relationships in general. Higher primates recognize close kin, possibly by smell, and behave toward them in particular ways. This does *not* mean that kinship is simply and directly continuous with primate recognition of blood relatives. El Guindi draws a sharp line here. Kinship is a linguistic phenomenon, among other things, and nonhumans lack true language. More to the point, they lack the whole basis of language: the ability to form nested systems of cognition—plans, schemas, cultural models, sentences, kinship systems—that move from the concrete to the highly abstract. A monkey knows that so-and-so is his uncle, but has no concept of a kinship *system* in the sense addressed by anthropologists. Or, as Karl Marx said of the superiority of bee nest construction to all too much human house construction, “what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality” (Capital, vol. 1, chp. 7).

This book begins with a pair of letters: Claude Lévi-Strauss writing to David Schneider to protest, mildly, Schneider’s claim that kinship does not exist, and Schneider’s slightly less mild answer. Lévi-Strauss says: “I would define it as a way of classifying people and defining their rights and duties...,” and defends his view that it is based on marriage. Schneider persists in seeing kinship as “a figment of our analytic apparatus” (El Guindi 2020:x-xi).

I am sure Schneider has never spent many hours listening to Chinese debate endlessly over the proper term for a mother’s brother’s younger son and the proper ritual duties owed him as such. Nothing in human cognition is more real than kinship, and people all over the world spend a great deal of time worrying about it. The only “figment of our analytic apparatus” is the anthropological field of kinship studies.

A trade secret of anthropology is that many anthropologists go out to study Thing X, say aardvark hunting or transcendental ecstasy, but wind up studying instead whatever the people want to talk about. On top of that, though anthropologists may never have tried the whaling,

swidden farming, tool making, or banditry that they study, all anthropologists have participant observer experience in being kin; we all have parents, most have siblings, many have spouses and children.

This explains why so much of anthropology is about kinship: people talk all the time about their kin, their expectations of their kin, their rituals and exchanges and intermarriages with their kin, and the problems they are having with the whole system. We try to analyze, specify, and bring order to kinship practices and knowledge. Above all, we compare kinship systems around the world, trying to find commonalities and differences. The reality on the ground is a complex pattern of performances and practices. Kinship rituals, expectations, and other aspects of practice have concerned anthropologists as much as the terminological systems.

Such matters have been discussed as long as humanity has existed. El Guindi cites the great Tunisian thinker Ibn Khaldun for major contributions to kinship and lineage theory in the 14th century; in this as in much else, Ibn Khaldun was a thoroughly modern thinker, centuries ahead of his time.

Within anthropology, this line of work was developed especially by Lewis Henry Morgan. In 1871, after enormous effort to assemble accounts of kinship terminological systems from all over the world, he published his great work *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity*. Significantly, this was the year that Darwin brought forth *The Descent of Man*, and E. B. Tylor produced *Primitive Culture* (the book that introduced “culture” in its modern sense). Thomas Trautman said Morgan invented kinship (Trautman 1987), but what Morgan really did was invent the scientific study of kinship, no mean achievement. (Morgan also invented modern ethnography, complete with major input by Native American coworkers, and even invented in-depth study of animal behavior with his book on beavers [1868]. He also fought hard for Iroquois land rights, thus being among the first “action anthropologists.” Not a bad career.)

Morgan’s conclusions about the evolution of kin and marriage are largely disproved, but his classification of kinship systems into types has stood the test of time, with surprisingly few modifications. He made a basic distinction between systems that lump lineal and collateral kin under the same terms, vs. those (like English) that meticulously separate lineal from collateral. Most interesting are systems that lump only a few terms across lineality, because their patterns of lumping and splitting reveals much about their ways of thinking about descent. Morgan was the first to see this.

Kinship remained a major focus of anthropology, for a very good reason: as Morgan pointed out, it is the one domain of culture that exists as a highly and consciously cognized realm of classification and discourse in every society on earth. Some societies are far more conscious of kinship classification than others—I happen to have studied one such, the Chinese, who name every category of relatives out to second cousins and have elaborate and specific behaviors appropriate to each. (This owes much to Confucianism, but Confucius did not invent it; he merely enshrined existing practice.) At the other extreme are certain small hunting-gathering groups that simply use the terms and concepts without much discussion of the matter. Even they, however, structure much interpersonal behavior along kin lines.

An important observation is that every known society known has or had an extremely complex, sophisticated, brilliantly worked-out system for maintaining, creating, classifying, and above all performing relationships. Nothing could more totally refute the nonsense about some

“races” being “inferior” in mentality. An anthropological account of it may be a quite different thing: overly formal, overly abstract, overly specified, and prone to ignore the sorts of extensions that El Guindi describes in this book.

Serious study of kinship terminologies and systems fell on lean times in the last 30 years, largely because of the rise of “postmodernism,” with its skepticism or downright avoidance of formal analysis and wide-flung scientific comparison. Today, kinship is having a small but significant renaissance. The new journal *Kinship* comes at the right time to revive them.

Suckling is a unique and important book. Looking at kinship from a Middle Eastern cultural viewpoint rather than a west European one is part of its value. Discussing the importance on non-biological kin relations is another. Supporting kinship studies within a four-field anthropological framework is a major further message. This book should be widely studied.

References

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