Suckling, adoption and the incest taboo: Significance of studying kinship for social science and for Qatar

Fadwa El-Guindi

Qatar University, Doha, QATAR

fg77@anthro.ucla.edu

BACKGROUND & OBJECTIVES:
Kinship, the cross-cultural subject of this project-based paper, is dynamic in Qatari life and has specialized conceptual/methodological tools. Within it, 'incest taboo' ("tahrim" in Arabic), a human universal, generated numerous explanations: 'horror instinct', 'genetic degeneration', 'natural sexual desire among close kin', 'natural sexual aversion to close kin', and 'prevents in-marrying to create exchange and alliance'. Studying kinship, through systematic field research was made possible by two Undergraduate Research Experience Program Grants (6th and 9th cycles), generated data challenging these views. The data show Qatari culture providing solutions to societal paradoxes, whereby non-fertile women desiring children cannot simply 'adopt' them, they instead use distinctively Qatari kinship transformational mechanisms - suckling practices. This is demonstrated by live cases, revealing formal and practical features characterizing Qatari culture, with implications for theory and Qatar’s future vision.

METHODS:
To understand human phenomena and sociocultural life, social science methodology combines multiple data collection techniques. This project used qualitative methods in a process of inquiry seeking in-depth information situating behavior in social/cultural setting, using various procedures: observation (participant/non-participant), interviewing (structured/open-ended), visual methods (still/moving pictures). To elicit kin terms of consanguinity, affinity and suckling, the team used open-ended interviews, chart-elicitation questionnaires, discussed in weekly educational seminars. Seventy consanguineal kinship charts, sixty-five affinal kin charts were used as elicitation 'models', whereas gathering suckling data was by in-depth interviews - 36 primary cases with derivative sub-cases.

RESULTS:
This project generated original data and theoretical insights. It improved learning outcomes in sociology by mentored junior colleagues, and led to Qatarization, training a QU female sociology student, subsequently admitted (as a first in Qatar) into a doctorate program in the US for sociological methods.

CONCLUSIONS:
* Suckling is kinship, like consanguinity and affinity, religiously sanctioned, socially approved mechanism for kin incorporation
* Adoption does not legitimately turn strangers into kin
* Suckling creates incest taboo, removing the need for avoidance ritual and behavior.
* Suckling has transformational qualities, restructuring kinship.
* Incest taboo and alliance theories are challenged
* Presumed cousin marriages may not be biological