Adoption, Blood and Culture in the Middle East

Lindholm, Charles

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Boston University
In this short, speculative and very preliminary paper I want to consider some aspects and correlates of adoption in the Middle East. Traditionally, adoption there has been, and continues to be, held in low esteem. Not one single Middle Eastern country has ratified the Hague convention on intercountry adoption, which is aimed at rationalizing procedures for foreigners who wish to adopt local children when no adopting parents can be found locally. The reluctance of Middle Eastern states to endorse this measure reflects the belief of Muslim clerics that it would be sacrilege for orphaned children to be raised outside of the Islamic community — though it is perfectly permissible to adopt infidel children into a Muslim household.

Paradoxically, the reluctance of Muslims to permit interfaith adoption is a reflection of the fact that Islam itself a community of fictive siblings, united under the spiritual parenthood of the Prophet Muhammad. As Hamid Dabashi notes, from its beginnings in the Arabian desert, "Muhammad’s charismatic authority established a new order of social solidarity. It substituted brotherhood-in-faith for brotherhood-in-blood, which went against traditional Arab practices". According to the Quran, "You will not find a people believing in God and the Last Day/ who love those who oppose God and his messenger,/ even though they were their fathers, sons, brothers
or clan” ii. In the early days of Islam, hostility between believers and non-believers was so great that one could not pray for a non-Muslim member of one's own family, and one convert offered to kill his own father because he was a leader of Muhammad’s opponents. Severance of blood ties in favor of ties to the faith is symbolized today in the crucial event of the pilgrimage to Medina, the hijra, which literally means "leaving the `protection' of one group and entering that of another" iii.

Although the Muslim community set itself against the community of the patrilineage, it did so by replicating and expanding many of the functions of the Middle Eastern patriclan. For instance, within the clan shedding of blood was forbidden and co-responsibility was enjoined; property also could not be alienated from the clan. Similarly, Muslims were strictly prohibited from exploiting, injuring or enslaving one another; they were obliged to share their resources through charitable contributions that would be redistributed to the community at large. And, just as tribal unity in the Middle Eastern context was traditionally activated primarily in contests with other patrilineages, so too in Islam the opposition between the realm of faith and the realm of unbelief implied a continuous battle. In the holy war Muslims must aid Muslims, just as patrikin must help patrikin - an extension of kinship that helped solidify Bedouin warriors into a world-conquering army.

The new sacred community in which Muslims found protection and empowerment was called the umma, the assembly of believers - a term that also has associations with motherhood, since mother
in Arabic is `umm' - as opposed to the paternal clan (`nasab' or `qawm'), which is the source of secular power. Unlike clan membership, joining the Muslim umma was a voluntary matter; as Muhammad said, "there is no compulsion in religion". Islam is the easiest of religions to join; one merely has to recite the profession of faith. But once this has been done then a Muslim was forever committed, and could not repudiate membership on pain of death as an apostate. Lacking the potent ideology of paternal blood to bind believers together, the umma relied on such sanctions to maintain its unity. Like kinship, the bond between believers was perceived to be a tie that was unbreakable - to deny it was to deny one's own identity; the most heinous of offenses, punishable by death.

In a real sense, the Islamic emphasis on the solidarity of the religious community mirrored the experience of Muhammad himself. He was the posthumous son of his father, whose mother died when he was young. Alone in the world, impoverished and endangered, Muhammad was raised by his father's brother, and relied on his protection for his survival. At the death of his uncle, he was obliged to flee from Mecca, fearing the hatred of his more distant paternal uncles, who remained his major rivals in the early years of prophecy. Muhammad therefore had seen for himself the cruelty of a patrilineal society toward those who are without family, and a major emphasis in his teaching was on the obligation of Muslims to protect the weak, and especially to care for orphans. He himself brought into his family a number of outsiders, including the Persian Salman Farisi, the Syrian
slave Zayid al'Harithi, and the African slave Bilal. The new family of Islam, Muhammad said, would be more generous than the old family of blood. The only rub is that one cannot leave the umma, but must be succored within it.

In the Islamic fictive family, Muhammad took the place of the patriarch, presiding as the spiritual guide for his people, conveying God's messages to them, inspiring their obedience, serving as judge, counsel, mediator and guide. Yet he claimed no family relationship with God for himself; he was, he said, not `the son of God' – that would be blasphemy. He was only the warner, the vehicle for God's word. But his followers naturally took him to be an extraordinary being, graced with charisma and `close to God'. After his death, the problem of succession loomed large, especially as Muhammad had no sons, so that the usual tribal mode of patrilineal inheritance could not be followed.

Different factions of the umma, representing various clans, sought to reassert the old genealogical charter, claiming their leaders should take Muhammad's place, but others rightly argued that this would destroy the spiritual unity of the congregation; the compromise was the selection of Abu Bakr, whose main qualification for leadership was not blood descent, but his friendship with the Prophet, plus the fact that he had led communal prayers when Muhammad was absent. Rejecting this solution, some erstwhile believers ceased to pay their tribute to the center, and were only subdued with difficulty. In the next generations, questions of spiritual succession continued to
plague Islam. Jealousy over the third Caliph's tendency to favor his own noble lineage led to his assassination, and the whole umma was finally torn apart in warfare over the succession of the Prophet's son-in-law and paternal first cousin, Ali, ending in the defeat of his family.

Henceforth, Islam would be riven by many battles over who had the right to speak for the community. The mainstream Sunnis accepted the fact of secular ruler, but the supporters of Ali, later known Shi'ites, continued to argue that their leaders, descended from Ali and his wife Fatima, possessed a special spiritual superiority and therefore had the intrinsic prerogative to rule. They thus combined a genealogical charter with a notion of the transmission of esoteric knowledge. However, these two legitimizing factors could be separated, and sometimes were. For instance, some Shi'ite extremists, notably the Qarmathians, proclaimed that Salman Farisi, a Persian incorporated into the Prophet's family by adoption, was actually the proper successor to Muhammad. According to the Qarmathians, Muhammad was the bearer of outward truth, Ali the bearer of inner truth, but Salman was the gateway to knowledge, raised above them both in sanctity. In principle, then, anyone similarly enlightened could become the spiritual guide of Muslims, thereby obliterating all principles of blood in favor of the rule of supernatural succession. Salman remains an important figure in mystical Islam, especially among non-Arabs.

Yet, despite Muhammad's warnings against genealogical loyalties, despite his own history as an orphan and the quasi-
family status he offered to Salman, Zayid and Bilal, and despite the emphasis later placed on the spiritual bond between master and disciple, in fact adoption of children from outside the immediate extended family continues to be extremely rare throughout the Middle East. In Islamic law, such children, if they are taken in, have no automatic rights of inheritance, in contrast to the children of slave women, who have a full legal share in the patrimony. The antipathy toward adopted children is a consequence of the powerful patrilineal blood ideology of Middle Eastern peoples, which was challenged but never superseded by the communal message of Islam. This ideology insists that those descended from a common forefather have a shared substance, an equivalence made explicit in feuds, wherein the blood of any member can serve as payment for injuries done by any other. In this belief system, the shame or glory of any clansman or woman reveals the character of all his or her fellows.

Even Muhammad's own lineage, the Quraysh, were not immune from pride in blood; the Caliph Umar argued that since Muhammad was the most noble of human beings, his people, the Quraysh, must be the most noble clan, and "for the rest, it follows proximity. The Arabs were ennobled by the Apostle of God"⁵. Such proud reference to one's pedigree is an ancient part of Middle Eastern culture, where noble tribes made their major art form the recitation of poetry praising their paternal ancestors, and where marriage was as 'close to the bone' as possible in order to maintain the purity of their blood line. Elite
lineages traditionally bragged that kinship connections were sought with them, while they, as the most noble clans, did not initiate ties with others. The old entrenched faith in aristocratic blood lines, intrinsically contradictory to the egalitarian ideology of the embracing umma, continued as tribes became Muslims en masse, following their leading men, and persisted in making claims for their own clan's noble blood, refusing to intermarry with others.

Ibn Khaldun, the great medieval theorist of Middle Eastern society, described this belief system in a way that most Middle Easterner's would understand. "Everybody's affection for his family and his group is more important (than anything else). Compassion and affection for one's blood relations and relatives exist in human nature as something God put into the hearts of men. It makes for natural support and aid, and increases the fear of the enemy. Those who have no one of their own lineage rarely feel affection for their fellows."

Of course, as many anthropologists have demonstrated at great length, this is an ideal model of relationship - one that is manipulated, avoided, or suborned in an infinite number of ways by social actors seeking their own advantages. But malleability does not mean that cultural forms and the affections they generate are non-existent. Instead, such forms serve, according the Max Weber's famous metaphor, as switchmen, orienting the direction of interest. Ibn Khaldun himself knew that blood ties do not create solidarity in themselves. To be activated they require "social intercourse, friendly
association, long familiarity, and the companionship that results from growing up together, having the same wet nurses, and sharing in other circumstances of death and life" viii.

Outsiders, who were clients, slaves or allies of the tribe, could be included within these friendly associations, and treated as quasi-kinsmen, just as Muhammad brought Salman into his own intimate family. Eventually, this relationship of fosterage might be cemented by marriage, and the slave-client's children and grandchildren could become accepted as members of the lineage. Yet, in times of stress, the absence of an ancient patrilineal blood link might well be cited as a reason for exclusion, or as the source of the moral weakness of a particular group. The interplay between equalizing blood ties and the ties of dependency serves as a continuous theme in Middle Eastern history, especially when tribal groups conquered state systems.

As Ibn Khaldun documented, the conquering tribal leader originally relied upon his co-equal patrilineal blood kinsmen for support, but the conqueror's descendent "seeks the help of clients and followers against the men of his own people" ix. The gradual disenfranchisement of kinsmen occurs because the ruler fears that they, as his co-equals and tribal brothers, born of the same lineage, can and will make claims on his sovereignty. In response, he replaces them with slaves, clients and hired employees who are directly reliant on him for their positions. The ruler's aim is to increase his authority by exchanging his potential rivals for a covey of dependents. These dependents,
or mawali, were often conceptualized as the `children,' `milk brothers' or even `foster fathers' of the ruler - inferior in terms of blood, but bound to him by ties of dependency, loyalty and affection. Where blood relatives made inconvenient claims for equal rights due to their shared blood, clients could easily be set aside. This aspect of clientship was well described by the Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur: "When I sit in public audience, I may call a mawla and raise him and seat him by my side, so that his knee will rub my knee. As soon, however, as the audience is over, I may order him to groom my riding animal and he will be content with this and will not take offence".

The incorporation of dependents as inferior quasi-family follows ancient Arab and Israeli custom. Among them, slaves and clients could be made second-class members of the lineage, retaining the name of their master's tribe even after gaining freedom. This relationship was often cemented by ties of milk, which explicitly served as an alternative to the bond of blood, as boys who had suckled at the same breast were believed to have a special bond between them. Milk relationships have a long history in the Middle East. Traditionally, urban infants were sent to a tribal wetnurse, establishing strong ties with her and her clan; as adults these `milk brothers' were morally obliged to aid one another. Muhammad himself had fictive kinship with a clan of the Hawazin Bedouin, who had nursed him as an infant. This clan refused to make war on Muhammad until pressed hard, and when the foster-sister of his wetnurse was captured, Muhammad released her with gifts, thus overturning the rules of
booty \textsuperscript{xii}. This `milk relationship' can be found in contemporary societies as well. Alois Musil noted that Rwala Bedouin chiefs entered into a connection with the family of his wet nurse that was almost as strong as his ties with his own patriline, and much warmer emotionally \textsuperscript{xiii}. I found the same phenomenon among the Swat Pukhtun, where elite men had close relationships with the clients whose wives had suckled them as children. While one's own father was held in respect and feared as a rival, one's `foster father' was treated with affection as a loyal supporter and adviser \textsuperscript{xiv}.

Such ties of trust and shared nurturance could then be extended to political office. This pattern is most striking in the institution of the vizier, who traditionally served as the Middle Eastern king's closest and most influential counselor. According to Goitein, viziers were originally brought into the king's family as personal servants and teachers of the princes, whom they later advised. As he writes: "The bonds between the slave or freedman and his lord - often strengthened by `milk relationship' - are regarded as the truest safeguards for the well-being of the latter" \textsuperscript{xiv}. Among the Seljuks, the vizier was even referred to as `father' by the King. However, this did not keep Sultan's from killing viziers when they became too powerful, or when their advice was inconvenient - an act leading to none of the repercussions that would follow from killing one's own brother or father.

Despite its advantages for the ruler, Ibn Khaldun argued for the negative effect of favoring dependent clients tied by
bonds of milk and affection over one's own patriline. The ruler
does gain more leeway for exercising his own autocratic
authority by this practice; but, according to Ibn Khaldun,
without kinsmen and allies of his own people to support him, he
is instead surrounded by flatterers and sycophants, and can be
easily ousted by more aggressive and unified tribal opponents
invading his realm from the periphery. This is because clients,
slaves and hangers-on lack the essential ingredient that
promotes social solidarity and self-sacrifice: shared blood.

The ideology of shared paternal blood also has great impact
in terms of personal and familial relationships. When purity of
paternal blood is a central cultural value, then veiling, female
seclusion, and enforced chastity follow. Although often thought
to be Muslim in origin, these customs actually far predate the
Islamic advent, and all derive from continuous efforts to
control the sexuality and independence of women, in order to
ensure an unsullied patrilineal blood line. It is for this
reason in particular that adoption has remained almost
inconceivable in the Middle East, despite the example of
Muhammad.

Historians and cultural anthropologists usually argue that
the steady subordination of women in the Middle East derived
from a complex nexus of influences, including the increased
division of labor and concomitant status hierarchies that fueled
the growth of the local polities from parochial city-states to
cosmopolitan empires. It is often argued that this process
necessarily entails greater male dominance, as patrilineal
inheritance is initiated to control rights to ever-more valuable permanent property, while patriarchal power is used to retain legal authority over women who could potentially disrupt the solidarity of the group by their marriages and independence.

This transformation is often seen as the culmination of earlier civilizational changes, dating from the substitution of plow agriculture for hunting and gathering, which led in turn to more surplus accumulation, greater distinction between male and female labor, the rise of male elites, and the development of female seclusion as a way of asserting masculine status distinctions. In all cases, subordination of women is tied to the rise of patrilineal and patrilocal social organization, which binds women to their fathers and husbands.

However, I want to argue here that things are not quite so clear-cut. Certainly, the mode of production does make a difference when women's outdoor work is absolutely necessary for survival, as is the case among Middle Eastern nomads, where the necessities of production require women to work unveiled and to enjoy quite substantial freedom in decision-making, since they have to take responsibility for the household during the frequent absences of their husbands. But female freedom does not alter the strongly patriarchal morality of the tribesmen. Nomadic women are actually much less likely than urban women to be granted any inheritance whatsoever, and they are more likely to suffer corporal punishment for adultery or other offenses, despite the protection offered by Islamic law. Nor can they adopt children from outside the patrilineal community. A simple
and co-operative mode of production alters the parameters of patriarchy, but does not necessarily preclude it.

It is also not evident that the combination of social complexity, patrilineality and status differentiation necessarily implies an ideology of female inferiority. In the Middle East itself we find a powerful counterexample: Egypt during the New Kingdom was a supremely hierarchical complex society, yet women could own property, inherit, act as legal individuals, make provisions in marriage contracts, initiate divorce, and so on. Marriage, save for that of the Pharaoh, was monogamous. There was no veiling or female seclusion, and women were treated with respect and dignity, despite male dominance in the political, professional and religious spheres. Most importantly, except for royalty xv, there was no great concern in Egypt for insuring the paternity of a child, and families without sons commonly adopted an heir xvi.

The common presence of adoption reveals that the ordinary people in the New Kingdom were unconcerned with blood purity - which sets them off decisively from people in the rest of the Middle East. I believe the reasons for this anomaly derive from some of the other unique characteristics of ancient Egypt, and offer an instructive insight into some of the social factors that favor an ideology of blood. Where the rest of the Middle East was characterized by strong notions of personal freedom and self-aggrandizement within an unstable and sparse environment that favored continual internal struggles for ephemeral positions of power among co-equal rivals, in the fertile,
isolated and relatively secure environment of ancient Egypt ordinary men and women were encapsulated in a stable and hierarchical social order ruled by a sacred Pharaoh and his priesthood. In this universe ordinary Egyptians required no notions of `natural' differences of blood or sex to ratify the taken-for-granted hierarchies of the kingdom; nor did ordinary Egyptians have any interest in the preservation of their bloodlines or in controlling reproduction by enforcing female isolation.

The Egyptian case shows that there is no absolute and necessary connection between social complexity, patrilineality, anxiety over female purity, and an ideology of female inferiority. That connection requires faith in an idiom of blood inheritance as the crucial factor in determining identity within an otherwise fluid social world. This belief is so deeply ingrained that it is regarded as `natural' by Middle Easterners, but in fact it is perfectly possible for a patrilineal society to designate children as legitimate by virtue of adoption - as occurred in Egypt - or simply because they were born to one's wife, regardless of actual paternity.

As we have already seen, imagining a `natural' solidary kin-based community of shared paternal blood lent a putative physical substance to the group feeling that Ibn Khaldun wrote about. This `cultural imaginary' provided a stabilizing and constructive model for aligning and motivating social actors in a shifting and perilous environment where any order at all was hard to achieve. The codification of patrilineal blood rights
in Muslim law (which stamped out all traces of earlier confusing
cognatic or matrilineal cross-cutting rights, eliminated
inheritance for adopted children, and required equal shares for
the sons of slave women) was simply the logical final step in a
long-term process of historical evolution toward a blood-based
ideology of patrilineality.

The hypothesis of a causal correlation between status
instability, a cultural ethic of competitive egalitarianism, a
cultural idiom of natural difference located in blood
inheritance, rejection of adoption, and the evolution of
patrilineality and patriarchy is, of course, a tentative one,
but whatever the causal nexus, it is clear that once paternal
blood is accepted as the dominant metaphor for natural linkages
between human beings and as an ultimate foundation for an
individual's identity a number of consequences follow - none of
them conducive to a congenial and egalitarian relationship
between men and women.

Nonetheless, the ideology of the centrality of inherited
male virtue rests upon an obvious and disturbing contradiction:
i.e., even though genealogies and the official organizational
model of the society take account only of men, the
incontrovertible fact is that the patriline springs from the
womb, and that women - outsiders to the patrilineage and men's
supposed natural inferiors - are the real centers of the
segmentary, masculine social structure in their role as child-
bearers and mothers. As Abdella Hammoudi writes, this
paradoxical fact of life is "scandalous according to patriarchal
norms and yet impossible to avoid"; its tensions force men to struggle continually "to transcend the structural contradiction between a patriarchal system and the physical reproduction of lineages" xvii. In part, as I described above, these tensions are worked out in notions of 'milk' relationships that bind together men outside of the lineage framework, providing emotionally powerful links between nobles and dependents through the mediation of women. They are also implicit in the Muslim claims for the umma, the womb within which all believers are bound in a fictive siblingship that - ideally at least - transcends patrilineality, and in the esoteric notions of the mystical transference of knowledge.

 Yet, when all is said and done, blood ties within the patrilineage have remained the central model for unity and for social action in the Middle East. That this is so, in spite of the many challenges raised, testifies to the extraordinary logical, organizational, and psychological power of conceptualizing the most crucial human relations as a matter of blood.

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ii Quran 58.22.


iv Though significantly, orphans could not inherit unless they were also blood kin.
This was so even in Medina where, despite the Muslim ideal of religious communalism, marriages with the ansar, the people of Medina, were rare indeed among the early Meccan migrants, who preferred to avoid contaminating their noble qawm (clan) with inferior blood. See M. Watt 1956. *Muhammad at Medina*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; H. M. T. Nagel 1982. *Some Considerations Concerning the Pre-Islamic and the Islamic Foundations of the Authority of the Caliphate*. In: G. H. A. Juynboll (Ed.), *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. Patricial Crone (1987. *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press) argues that it is possible the Quraysh were not so elite as they later claimed, noting that merchants have traditionally not been held in great esteem by the Bedouin.


Quoted in David Ayalon 1975. *Preliminary Remarks on the Mamluk Military Institution*. In: V. Parry and M. Yapp (Eds.), *War, Technology and*


xv Among royalty the concern for blood purity led to incestuous marriages between brothers and sisters. Yet even here adoption sometimes occurred, as is attested in the story of Moses.
