Social Anthropology of the Middle East

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Introduction: Social Anthropology in the Middle East; Reproducing Patterns of Family and Kinship.

Introductory material for general reference.

Introducing Soc. Anthro (optional background reading):

ME Anthro:

Anthro of Islam:

Mediterranean:

General Anthro:
Annual Review of Anthropology ("State of the art" bibliographic articles on issues in anthropology.

Fieldwork/ethnography:
1. Method/Theory I: The Field, Fieldwork, Participant Observation

Ethnographies (read one or more at your discretion):

The Field and Fieldwork (excerpts and chapters); required:


Further Readings on the Field and Fieldwork (not required):


Salamandra, Christa. 2006. “Chastity Capital: Display, Distinction and Hierarchy in Damascus”. In Samir Khalaf and John Gagnon, eds., Sexuality in the Arab World. Saqi Books. (Usefully read with Salamandra’s A New Old Damascus: Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria)


**Supplementary Readings on the Field and Fieldwork:**
http://users.ox.ac.uk/%7Esant1114/MPhilField.pdf

**Essay:** Evaluate one or more ethnographies in terms of the author’s approach to fieldwork. How is the content of the book (or books) facilitated or limited by the author’s approach to fieldwork?

**2. Men, Women, and Family**

**Readings:**


**Further Reading:**

**Essay:** One scene in the film version of the novel *Palace Walk* depicts dinner. Everybody stands around the table nervously waiting for the father. Nobody sits until he has sat. Nobody will eat a bite until he has begun eating. The women don't even get to sit until the men are finished. Can we conclude from this scene that "the Arab family" is based on fear of the patriarch?

**Alternative Essay:** One must acknowledge that to typify the "Arab family" as one single structure applicable everywhere in the Arab world would be essentialist. But if one were to look at the issue the other way round, would acknowledging a diversity of forms for families in the Arab world mean that we should remove
"family" altogether from the analytical repertory used to understand social phenomena in the Arab world?

Second Alternative Essay: Patrilineal endogamy (marriage of the father's brother's daughter) reinforces ties between men. Suad Joseph suggests that anthropological emphasis on patrilineal endogamy in the literature on the Middle East has caused neglect of an even more fundamental relationship: that between brothers and sisters. Are there common principles within the various Middle Eastern societies depicted in the readings that account for both types of relation?

3. Moral Rhetorics of Honor, Shame, and Modesty

Readings:

Films (optional):
- Love is Forbidden. 1942. Muhammad Karim.

Further Reading:
Moors, Annelies and Emma Tarlo eds. 2007. Muslim Fashions, special double issue of the journal Fashion Theory, vol. 11, issue 2/3 (June-September).

Essay: Eighty to ninety percent of all Egyptian women now wear the "Islamic headscarf." And yet one could also argue that large numbers of Egyptian women have quietly stopped wearing the hijab. How can this be? Discuss the social and political dynamics of veiling in Egypt.
4. What's Love Got to Do with It? Case Studies in the Practice of Patriarchy

Readings:


Films:

I Want a Solution. 1975. Directed by Sa'id Marzuq.


Literature (any or all):


Further Reading:


Essay: "Neopatriarchal society, as 'modernized,' is essentially schizophrenic, for beneath the immediately encountered modern appearance there exists another latent reality. Between these two there is opposition, tension, contradiction ... Patriarchal societies, regardless of their variety on the manifest level, all share in the same deep structures" (Hisham Sharabi, Neopatriarchy p. 23). Are Sharabi's claims of "latent realities" and "deep structures" too sweeping? Argue for or against "neopatriarchy" on the basis of one or more case studies (ethnographic and/or artistic) that analyze women and marriage in the contemporary urban Middle East.

5. Method/Theory II: Culture as a Concept

Readings:

Fox, Richard and Barbara J. King eds. 2002. Anthropology Beyond Culture. Oxford: Berg. (introduction and part 1, plus whatever additional chapters are of interest)

Ethnography:


Further Reading:


Essay: “The major concern of the skeptical discourse on culture is that the concept suggests boundedness, homogeneity, coherence, stability, and
structure, whereas social reality is characterized by variability, inconsistencies, conflict, change, and individual agency” (Christoph Bruman, “Writing for Culture,” p. 1).

How successful is Writing Women’s Worlds in addressing the skeptical discourse on the culture concept?

6. Islam and Modernity

Readings:


One or more of the following:


Further Reading:


Comparative Studies in Society and History 52 (3; July 2010). Entire issue addresses secularism in the Middle East.
Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 29 (3; 2009). Special section on “secular Muslims,” with special attention to Turkey.


"Whether from East or West, modernization poses the same basic challenge—the infusion of 'a rationalist and positivist spirit' against which, scholars seem agreed, 'Islam is absolutely defenseless.'"

Would scholars still seem to agree that Islam is absolutely defenseless against the onslaught of modernization?

7. "Islamism"

Readings:


**Further Reading:**
Marty, Martin et. al. eds. 2004. *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements (The Fundamentalism Project)* (v. 4)

"The tremendous appeal which the [Muslim Brotherhood] movement exercised served to show the extent to which Islam could still move the masses of the people. But it came too late to stem the tide of secularism, and its fate was sealed with the triumph of Abdul Nasser's secular revolution. The Muslim Brothers may well be the last serious effort of traditional Islam to regain its position in Arab society" (Hisham Sharabi, "Islam and Modernization in the Arab World." In *Modernization of the Arab World*, ed. Jack H. Thompson and Robert D. Reischauer, Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., 1966, p. 31).

One almost feels compelled to ask what Hisham Sharabi might have been smoking when he wrote the above quote. On the other hand, while it may be painfully obvious that Sharabi’s prediction of the demise of political Islam was dead wrong, we might still have many questions about how Islamist ideology attracts a following. What insights do anthropologists offer on the mechanics of Islamist indoctrination, particularly in a world where the eventual replacement of religion by secularism once seemed a foregone conclusion?

8. **Language and Agendas of Standardization**
Arabic:


One of the following for Arabic:


For Turkish:


Further Reading:


Fishman, Joshua. 2003 [1972]. "The Impact of Nationalism on Language Planning." In Roxy Harris and Ben Rampton eds, The

Essay: Modern nations put a high premium on creating standardized languages that are to be adopted by their citizens through various means (i.e. through some combination of “the carrot and the stick”). What was at stake culturally and politically in standardizing languages in the Middle East? Discuss with reference to the Arabic-speaking world and/or Turkey.

9. National Identity
Read at least the Anderson and Chatterjee chapters plus as much of the other general readings (i.e. the rest of Anderson and Chatterjee plus Smith) as you wish:


Films (optional):


Further Reading:


**Essay:** Discuss national identity as a cultural phenomenon in one or more ethnographies. Are these national communities "imagined" in ways that are distinctive from their counterparts elsewhere?

**10. Ethnicity, and the Nation-State**

**Readings:**


**One of the following:**


**11. "Globalization," the State and Neo-Liberalism**


**Books (one or more):**


*Useful Background or Extra Reading:*


(Carlson, chapter 1)


*Essay:* “Neoliberalism” is a term increasingly employed by anthropologists who seek to understand the various ways in which Middle Eastern societies have been transformed in recent decades. These anthropologists are attentive to both externally imposed economic conditions (e.g. “structural adjustment” programs that aim to open Middle Eastern economies and cultures to globalization; or transnational media that cannot be contained by the boundaries of nation-states), and to local practices of consumption that both respond to and shape these larger economic and social forces.

“Neoliberalism” is also a term that academics often employ critically—as shorthand for a set of destructive forces that they wish to oppose.
Discuss the pros and cons of using “neoliberalism” as a principle for organizing ethnographic analysis of Middle Eastern societies.


**Essay:** Write a proposal for an ethnographic research project in the Middle East. Identify a field site and provide an intellectual justification for your research that positions your project within or against existing work in the field.