

Comment

THE CHOICES WE MAKE

Marriage among Muslims in a Global Age

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In the mid-1990s, I carried out an extensive field-work-based study of immigrant Muslims in Chicago (Schmidt 2004). As a young Ph.D. student, one of the social arenas that I visited was the local chapters of the MSA (the Muslim Student Association). One of the young women that I remember best was Noor, a charismatic young woman of upper middle-class background, who gained her authority within the group not least via an uncompromising and devoted practice of Islam. Just as some of the young Muslims in Pia Karlsson Minganti's article in this special issue, Noor saw the main purpose of *dunya* (this life) as gaining access to *jannah* (paradise) in the afterlife (*akhira*). An important tool for obtaining Allah's mercy was the intimate relationship between man and woman through marriage. Marriage was not to be based on romantic love and desire, but rather a conscious scrutiny of the religious merits of the potential partner. To Noor, building her marriage on such expectations of piety was a religious obligation – and an individual choice. Before meeting the man of her life, Noor's parents had invited a number of possible marriage candidates home for an interview, but she had declined each time. The men were either too boring, too polite, or too easy for her to control. Yet finally she was invited for an interview with a young man in a Dunkin' Donuts' restaurant. The couple was not alone but chaperoned by members of their families. Noor was not impressed to start with, but suddenly she noticed something about the young man that caught her attention: he wore white socks in his sandals. This small mark of difference opened

up a lively conversation that lasted for several hours. Since the young man lived in another state of the USA, they continued building their relationship via telephone – and email. After some time, Noor told me, the couple had to decide whether they should continue their relationship: there were limits to how close they could be as an unmarried couple. They chose to marry. Noor's husband-to-be flew to Chicago and they met at the airport. On the following day they went to the courthouse to get their marriage license. As Noor remarked, after receiving the marriage license, they shook hands: the first time ever the couple touched each other.

Transnational Connections

In the weeks and months following Noor's and her husband's initial meeting, they communicated over the phone and by email. Using emails as a means of communication was fairly new in those days (only in 1995, the year before my interview with Noor, the US Federal Networking Council passed a resolution defining the term "Internet"; see Leiner et al. 2009: 30). As several articles in this special issue show, the commodification of Internet and telecommunication has decisively affected the processes leading to romantic love and marriage. Young people now meet each other on social media and online dating sites (with or without their parents' and families' knowledge), whereas earlier generations used telephones, postal letters and face-to-face rendezvous. For young people of the twenty-first century there is not necessarily a difference between social life off- and

online, and finding partners and establishing romantic relationships take place within both spheres (Subrahmanyam et al. 2008). At the very least, such a change challenges established patterns of authority and parental and family control of young people. As noted in Anne Häkkinen's article in this issue, Muslim families have to develop strategies for coping with youngsters who find their husband or wife online, thereby challenging traditional ways of marrying. In her article, Häkkinen tells the story of Bênav, a young woman of Kurdish background living in Finland, who has an online boyfriend living in her family's hometown in Turkey. The couple plans to marry, but how should they tell their parents about their online romance? And what strategies should the couple and their families use to legitimize the liaison?

The story of Bênav and her partner – and with them an unknown number of young people across the world, regardless of their religious and cultural background – underlines aspects that are important for our understanding of marriage in a global age. For one thing, marriage markets are not necessarily framed by the nation state – a fact that on one hand is banal, on the other complicated by the rules, regulations and expectations that nation states impose on their subjects, even as a means to control their sexuality. This is an example of the state's exercise of *biopower*: “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species [become] the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power” (Foucault 2007). A number of articles in this issue and previous research underline how nation states (e.g. in Western Europe; see, e.g., Fernandez 2013) seek to restrict, shape and discipline the decisions of those who find a partner outside their everyday life realm. Yet, both people of immigrant and non-immigrant backgrounds today lead lives and build networks that are inherently transnational, not least due to the low costs and normalcy of social media interaction (not to forget the low cost of air travel). Further, the examples tell us something about the effects of migration, a theme that crosscuts several of the articles in this special issue (Outi Fingerröos, Anne Häkkinen, and Pia

Karlsson Minganti). The transnational lives of immigrants and the issue of family ties and the transnational simultaneity of transnational lives (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2003) are extensively described and analyzed in the research literature. As underlined by, for example, Nadine Fernandez in her analysis of Danish-Cuban couples (2013), and Sine Plambech in her study of Thai women marrying Danish men living in the Northern part of Jutland (Plambech 2006), transnational marriages also take place among members of the ethnic majority. However, nation state initiatives regulating transnational marriages (Denmark can serve as a prominent example) tend to build on discourses that highlight the religious, cultural, and transnational practices of ethnic minority groups as problematic (Schmidt 2011). Here, there is a clear and significant dichotomy between the expectations of nation states and those everyday practices of citizens that often crisscross national borders – in physical bodies as well as online.

Marriage markets in an age of globalization and transnational connectedness are both global and transnational. One aspect of the transnational marriages frequently highlighted in public discourses (mostly as problematic) are marriages in which a young person of immigrant background is married to a relative in the country of origin, often as a result of pressure – if not direct use of force – by the transnational family network. But marriage across borders is not necessarily a result of the expectations of family networks. Transnational marriage can be a result of the limitations of a nationally defined marriage market. As illustrated particularly by Pia Karlsson Minganti in her article of this special issue, respondents underline the importance of individual preferences when finding a partner. Preferences may be religious or cultural, they may be based on socio-economic and educational expectations, and they may be based on ideas about the good life and self-creation. The human self has become a reflexive project, and who a person shares his or her life with, including in marriage, has become a conscious part of that project (Giddens 1991; Schmidt 2008). The project of self-creation cannot always be completed within the framework of the nation state. The

“right” candidates on the national marriage market may, for example, be a limited good, regardless of “rightness” being defined according to religious observance, socio-economic status or ethnic and cultural background (see also Schmidt et al. 2009).

The Role of Islam: Gender, Power and Authority

The overall theme of this special issue is Muslim intimacies, including how conceptions of the family and self-creation of the individual subject are created in the current era. Respondents across the articles stress family life as a prerequisite for the fulfillment of their life project as Muslims. However, the special issue also shows how understandings of core elements of family life (in this case marriage) are affected by space and time. The elements constituting what respondents highlight as religious tradition are heterogeneous, and how they respond is equally so. Here, the articles emphasize the importance of context. A particularly strong example hereof is Laura Stark’s article on transactional pre-marital sex in a Tanzanian slum. While the young women – and their wider family and social networks – are well aware that pre-marital sex is perceived as sinful (and should be punished) according to Islamic tradition, they have to make a choice between abiding by a religious ideal and improving their socio-economic status. The answer to the dilemma, as noted by one young interviewee, is clear-cut: “We know that we are making sin, but we also believe there is forgiveness” (Stark 2016:76). When living in severe poverty, the practice of religious ideals may become a luxury, even when the alternative is shame.

Across the articles, (heterogeneous) interpretations of religion reflect, contest, replicate, submit to, reinterpret and modify structures of power. Some of these structures of power are clearly based on gender relations. As noted by Sarah Mahler and Patricia Pessar in their widely quoted article on gendered geographies of power, “conceptualizing gender as a process yields a praxis-oriented perspective wherein gender identities, relations and ideologies are fluid, not fixed” (Mahler & Pessar 2010: 442). The fluidity of identity, relations and ideologies is obvious across the articles. It is, for example, underlined by hetero-

geneous interpretations of what being a Muslim implies and what Islam permits, forbids and forgives. As already described, in the Tanzanian context of slums and poverty, some women refer to the forgiveness of their religion to cope with the cognitive dissonance (Festinger, Ricken & Schachter [1956]1964) between what Islam forbids (pre-marital sex) and what it permits (sex between married partners). The impact of gender relations on aspects of mobility and consumption is obvious in Laura Stark’s article, where Tanzanian women’s access to these elements clearly depend on the intervention of men. It is also obvious in Raquel Gil Carvalheira’s article, where Moroccan women are associated with the domestic sphere (and remain there, even if the household faces financial difficulties).

Interpretations of Islam can be used to strengthen the position of women. One example hereof is the accentuation of marriage contracts as a religious norm among young activist Muslims in Sweden and Italy (Pia Karlsson Minganti). Marriage contracts become a means to ensure the rights of women – as such rights are formulated in a post-modern, Western context. One frequently repeated aspect of these stated rights is that of equal access to divorce, a niche where traditional Islamic law grants men a particularly privileged position. Via a marriage contract women gain access to social mobility – at least in one area – at the same level as men: they too can leave a marriage if they find it necessary, get on with their lives and find another life companion.

Several of the articles describe how young Muslims in various parts of the world deal with the heterogeneity of worldviews that globalization has produced – and how they seek to do so in ways that are acceptable according to Islamic standards. The question is how these standards are created, maintained and how they are religiously validated. One example of the diversity of religious interpretations can be found in dating and pre-marital intimacy. Anne Häkkinen’s article in this special issue dealing with secret dating online among Kurdish youth living in Finland shows how this practice is still perceived as problematic and un-Islamic in Muslim diaspora populations. However, dating (building

romantic love relations) does take place also among religiously practicing Muslims, assisted by communication technology. Whenever a romantic liaison develops into a serious relationship, the couple as well as their immediate family have to find ways to explain the relationship in ways that appear acceptable according to religious and cultural social norms. However, as illustrated by Pia Karlsson Minganti's article, some young Muslims seek ways to make dating acceptable within (and not in spite of) a religious framework. Dating and physical contact (not including intercourse), as underlined by Karlsson Minganti, can be argued to be religiously valid, because it arguably increases the chance of a happy marriage (thus minimizing the risk of divorce), and further allows the couple to scrutinize the religious dedication of one another. The examples stress the flexibility of Islam (and other religions) as a discursive tradition (Asad 1986), including an ongoing dialectic between the ideal and actual practices (Lukens-Bull 1999).

Who has the right to decide what is an authentic and acceptable Islamic practice varies according to context. The young people that Karlsson Minganti describes in her article promote an individualistic and universalistic interpretation of Islam that they perceive as unaffected by national borders and cultures. They do not necessarily refer to religious scholars or *'ulama*, but rather to a globally dispersed "authentic" interpretation of Islam. This independent and individualistic interpretation makes sense in a part of the world where Islam is a relatively new religion, and where religious scholars and institutions have little impact on public life. In other parts of the world, where Islam is a majority religion, religious authorities play a more obvious and even bureaucratic role in the everyday life of the believer. In Morocco, for example, *'adls*, a professional with responsibilities somewhere between a cleric and a clerk, assists when inheritance is to be distributed (Gil Carvalheira 2016: 60). In other words, the overlap between authority in public spaces, institutions and bureaucracy in some parts of the world appears to underpin a slow change of religious worldviews, while the less segmented and diversified Muslim in-

stitutions in, for example, Western European countries create a backdrop for more drastic ideological changes.

Diversified Spaces

Besides the focus on religion and marriage, the articles in this volume all in one way or another relate to the notion of space. The "spatial turn" is obvious in current transnational studies, such as in the field's focus on "gendered geographies" (Mahler & Pessar 2010) or "social fields" (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004). Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller show convincingly how our idea of society is restricted by methodological nationalism or a "container" way of understanding human interaction. As an alternative, Levitt and Glick Schiller advocate for a view of society (in a broad sense) as "social fields": "a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized and transformed" (ibid.: 1009). In this special issue, the impact of social fields is prominent in various ways. Social spaces are created via migration and transnational practices. While some respondents (or their family members) dream about a homeland left behind (Anne Häkkinen), their lives are affected by the immediate context in which they live – including the norms and expectations that are dominant within that context. Pia Karlsson Minganti (2016: 41–42) refers to Homi Bhabha's concept of "third space": "two original moments from which a third emerges" (Bhabha 1990: 211). In the same vein, Levitt and Glick Schiller write about "simultaneity": "The experience of living simultaneously within and beyond the borders of a nation state" (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004: 1006).

The simultaneity of transnational social spaces could easily foster the expectation that equality exists between the participating parties. However, as also noted by Levitt and Glick Schiller, ideas, practices and resources within these fields are "unequally exchanged, organized and transformed" (ibid.: 1009). Social fields are created, upheld and transformed via power relations, regardless of whether these power relations are built on gender, family

structure, generation, politics, religion – or the continuous influence of the nation state. As illustrated by Outi Fingerroos in this special issue, nation state legislation plays a central role in the hampering of global mobility (see also Beck Gernsheim 2011). So do – as noted by Levitt and Glick Schiller – gender and class relations; race, ethnicity and religion. Power relations within transnational social spaces are, one must not forget, upheld via the notion of the family (and how the social entity is defined and practiced). What obligations and expectations from family networks left behind in the homeland do transmigrants, for example, face? How do transnational family networks affect the ways that religion is practiced and changed? Can a young migrant refuse the expectations of marrying a family member in the homeland? And how do such transnational practices of the family intersect with issues of gender, class – and not least religion?

The Family

As underlined by Outi Fingerroos, conceptions of “the family” are multiple and heterogeneous, affected by national contexts, class, history, religion and migration. Somalis, for example, may practice family in ways that – according to Western European standards – are extended or can be described as “an extended family organization” (Fingerroos 2016: 28). The complexity of the extended family is also illustrated by Raquel Gil Carvalheira’s article. The ways in which family is defined and practiced have impacts on inheritance and distribution of space – and on who is seen as having the possibility, right and responsibility to marry. What defines a marriage as exogamous or endogamous is not clear cut and may change over time. Here religious observance can have a defining role. Endogamy is not necessarily defined by who counts as biological family but also as kin within religion. The fact that it has become a standard phrase among (devout) Muslims to salute each other as “brothers” and “sisters” exemplifies how religion may create deep bonds that reproduce sentiments, conceptions and practices (ideally) associated with the notion of “family”: loyalty; the willingness (and expectation) to invest

time, money and other resources in another person; reproduction; social networks; and structures of power, authority and submissiveness.

One lesson to be learned (or relearned) is that just as notions of family and what counts as family are dynamic and changeable, so may individuals be members of several families or social structures that share the characteristics of family-ness. One question is why some types of social networks are accentuated as “families” and why others are not. Another question is what happens when different perceptions of family collide. What happens, for example, when practical expectations within the consanguineous family network collide with expectations within the religious family network? Or – in this global age – when different expectations existing in different parts of an extended, transnational family network collide? Finally, if we extend the notion of family to that of the nation, what happens when loyalties within an extended transnational family network collide with the expectations of the nation state?

This special volume of *Ethnologia Europaea* has illustrated the depth, variety and complexity of the answers that can be offered to these questions. Families and conceptions thereof (in the plural) play decisive roles in people’s lives, but what these roles involve, how powerful they are, and in what instances they must submit to or overrule competing notions of family are multiple and vary according to context. Further, individuals within specific family networks may act against the expectations that this network presents as a norm, sometimes with dire consequences (e.g. losing contact with family members when choosing a spouse that the family network does not recognize as a suitable candidate). Finally, this special issue underlines the pertinent role that religion plays in definitions and practices of family – and how religious affiliation can produce a notion of family.

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Open issue contributions

