Ties of Kinship and Islamicate Societies: Introduction

Cecilia Palombo | ORCID: 0000-0003-4856-0595
Assistant Professor of Early Islamic History, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA
Corresponding author
cpalombo@uchicago.edu

Birte Kristiansen | ORCID: 0009-0002-8880-7767
Research assistant, Leiden Institute for Area Studies (LIAS), Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands
b.kristiansen@hum.leidenuniv.nl

1 Introduction

The current special issue of Medieval Encounters on “ties of kinship” is born out of collaborative research about the language and practices of social dependency in premodern Islamicate societies.1 It aims at studying narratives related to kinship in literary and documentary texts to reconstruct specific social practices and to understand how kinship relations were evoked in writing. This issue, accordingly, focuses on the representation and the expression of kinship ties.

1 The research presented here grew out of a broader discussion on social dependency in the project “Embedding Conquest: Naturalising Muslim Rule in the Early Islamic Empire (600–1000),” conducted at Leiden University from 2017 to 2022 by Petra Sijpesteijn (PI), Alon Dar, Edmund Hayes, Reza Huseini, Birte Kristiansen, Fokelien Kootstra, Cecilia Palombo, and Eline Scheerlinck (supported by the European Research Council under Grant number 683194). For a full description of the project see: Cecilia Palombo, “Embedding Conquest: Naturalising Muslim Rule in the Early Islamic Empire (Project Report),” Medieval Worlds 17 (2022): 198–216. The editors are thankful to the participants of the conference “Ties of Kinship in the Early Islamic Empire” (Leiden University, online conference, 6–8 December 2021): Ana Echevarría Arsuaga, Sobhi Bouderbal, Matthew Gordon, Shounak Ghosh, Ahmad Khan, Hugh Kennedy, Marie Legendre, Pia Maria Malik, Karen Moukheiber, Shirin Naeef, Leone Pecorini-Goodall, Ekaterina Pukhovaia, Janina Safran, Josef Ženka, Eline Scheerlinck, and Petra Sijpesteijn.
The articles that follow below identify various ways in which kinship appeared in Islamicate literature and discuss strategies used by writers and document producers as they articulated relationships claimed upon kinship. On the other hand, in this special issue we do not try to define premodern Islamicate kinship, and the readers might find that alternative definitions emerge from the articles collected here. By not confining historical experiences of kinship to descent, lineage, or consanguinity, nor by limiting kinship to certain juridical discussions, rules, or rites, we leave room for unexpected patterns and claims in texts produced in quite different cultural milieus. In this context, we give preference to Hodgson’s term “Islamicate” over “Islamic” to reflect the coexistence of linguistically, religiously, and ethnically diverse populations in Muslim-ruled territories and the development of different literary cultures over a millennium of Islamicate history (seventh–eighteenth centuries). In pointing to that enormous variety of cultural practices and products, the concept of Islamicate helps us depart from an outdated view of Muslim societies as internally static – in particular, for our purposes, pushing against the assumption that there would be one Islamic kinship and taking into consideration various cultural factors in addition to the better-studied perspective of classical Islamic law. At the same time, as we discuss below, there are common threads linking different representations of kinship in Islamicate sources. We start from the premise that, in disparate periods and places, kinship was considered socially important and that it was important to show one's connections to others – hence the frequent mentions of, allusions to, and claims of kinship in the sources. Affiliation through kinship was one of the key elements binding the members of Islamicate societies together. Nonetheless, how its importance was communicated took a variety of forms.

2 Kinship and Historians

How were kinship ties portrayed in sources such as poetry, biographies, or letters? How did appealing to kinship help secure one’s role in society? How was the language of kinship exploited to achieve practical goals? What patterns

---

2 For a critical discussion, see Shirin Naef, *Kinship, Law and Religion: An Anthropological Study of Assisted Reproductive Technologies in Iran* (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2017); Asad Q. Ahmed, *The Religious Elite of the Early Islamic Hijāz: Five Prosopographical Case Studies* (Oxford: Occasional Publications of the Oxford Unit for Posopographical Research, 2011). As Naef noticed, most ethnographic research on Islamic kinship has focused on Arabic-speaking Sunni people in the Middle East, drawing conclusions that were then applied to a variety of countries and groups within Muslim societies.
can we discern in the use of kinship in politics or to define dynastic rule? When and how did people claim and create ties of kinship? While all the articles collected here tackle these questions from within the framework of historical methods and philology, we have encouraged our authors to look beyond the traditional toolbox and to engage with methodologies from literary studies and the social sciences, especially anthropology. Historians do not always engage explicitly with anthropologists, but they have been deeply influenced by classical ethnographic studies on kinship and they have been receptive to new approaches in anthropology and gender studies. Since the 1980s, a most influential development, which the readers may find reflected in the articles below, has been to study kinship as a system of relations, structured yet flexible, including a broad range of relationships expressing affiliation, loyalty, and dependency. Influenced by the thesis, first developed in anthropology, that kinship is a cultural phenomenon, recent historical studies look at kinship without assuming that it may be reproduced only through lineage or biological means. Instead, a variety of relations may be associated with the formation of families, households, and groups of kins. The culturalist turn in the study of kinship, while limited in some ways, opened the space for historical studies of kinship as part of cultural and intellectual histories. In the case of premodern Islamicate societies, it stands in contrast to those classical orientalist and structuralist studies that defined kinship in Islam as centred on male lineage and descent.

As Shirin Naef noted in her book *Kinship, Law and Religion*, in the twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries one group of studies attempted to define specific “Islamic notions” or “the Islamic way” of constructing kinship. The “Islamic way” has often been explained, historically, with the events of the early Islamic period and notions from classical Islamic law and, anthropologically, through the structuralist theories of “alliance and descent” inspired by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss’s thesis that kinship is an elementary structure shared by all human societies provided the basis for analysing distinct ways in which it would manifest itself when combined with Islam. The structuralist approach has been especially influential for social historians.

---

3 See Janet Carsten, *After Kinship: New Departures in Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). The culturalist turn in kinship theory has already been addressed and revised in anthropology but it had a slower effect on historians, as it often happens when the two fields crosspollinate. For an overview of recent developments in the study of kinship specifically in the Middle East, see Soraya Tremayne, “Introduction: Emerging Kinship in a Changing Middle East,” *Anthropology of the Middle East* 12, no. 2 (December 1, 2017): 1–7.


An example of the overlap between ethnography and history and of the role of historical examples in this context may be found in Pierre Guichard’s studies of al-Andalus. The French historian proposed that the Arab and Berber Muslims of medieval al-Andalus manifested specific “oriental social structures” in the way that they organized kinship. For example, paraphrasing Jessica Coopé’s overview, Guichard concluded that in al-Andalus kin groups were patrilineal, that marriage within the patriline was favoured in order to preserve honour, and that women were unable to inherit.6 Guichard’s observations – which, according to Coopé’s study, partly confirm and partly contradict the sources in the Andalusian case – influenced further work on kinship in other regions and were attributed broader heuristic value. As discussed by Eve Krakowski, ground-breaking studies about marriages and households in early modern Europe imagined either Muslim, Mediterranean, or Middle Eastern marriages and households as counterparts to the European case.7

Since the mid-twentieth century, other historians of Islamicate societies used kinship relations and especially tribal ties rather as an explanation for political events such as dynastic struggles or factionalism. Famously, Patricia Crone discussed tribal organization as a factor determining state formation and the political fortunes of various Islamic states, especially the Arabian tribes and the development of the early caliphate.8 Genealogy was an important genre in Islamic literature, with books centred on the concepts of nasab, translatable as “descent,” ṭabaqāt, translatable as “generations,” and sharaf, translatable as “nobility.” Genealogy was also clearly an important matter for the Arabic-speaking elites of the early caliphates.9 Because of this literary and historical phenomena, later institutions and practices related to kinship have been often connected to the history of tribes and tribal alliances in pre-Islamic Arabia, during the life of Muhammad, and in the period of the early Muslim

conquests. An early and classic example of this approach is Robertson Smith’s *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* from the late nineteenth century.

More recently, early Islamic texts on genealogy have been recontextualized within Arabic literature and as cultural products, specifically in relation to historiography, poetry, and biographical dictionaries. Moreover, they have been approached through the method of prosopography, notably in recent studies by Asad Ahmed and Majied Robinson, and even as sources to be mined for data about marriage patterns and the formation of households.

If, in the past, the focus was mostly on patrilineages, descent, and tribal alliances, as mentioned, recent scholarship looks for broader definitions of kinship that might match the diversity and contradictions of the historical sources. This shift has led to a re-evaluation of women’s roles and histories. A trend that started in Ottoman studies is now well represented in scholarship on early Islamicate societies, as well, and women have entered more forcefully the study of early Islamicate dynasties and households as historical actors. For a long time, the role of enslaved women in Islamic political history was largely disregarded and even the rulers’ mothers (who were often unfree and “foreign”) were treated as the anonymous women of the household. However, in recent

---

10 On the Arabian tribes based on early Islamic literature, see the studies collected in Michael Lecker, *People, Tribes, and Society in Arabia around the Time of Muḥammad* (New York: Routledge, 2022).


years scholars have come to emphasize the role of both free and unfree women living at court or in the harem, a group so diverse for origin, language, and religion. It might still be held that in Islamicate societies “a person’s lineage and affiliation was determined through the male line of descent,” as Naef put it; but recent studies pay closer attention to matrilines and to mothers, more generally, and they highlight that matrilineage played an important role in genealogy. Nadia El Cheikh’s work on women in Abbasid texts and at the Abbasid court should be mentioned here for its importance.

Besides women at court and as part of ruling families, the understanding of what the household encompassed has become increasingly larger, and efforts have been made to study the role and condition of children, replacement kins, caretakers, servants, and others who are underrepresented in the traditional literary sources. Various hierarchical and uneven relations are now studied together with kinship, and vice-versa. Family ties are compared to other “dyadic” relations “in a patronage culture,” as Eve Krakowski writes in her brilliant study of female adolescence in medieval Egypt. Among recent studies reflecting these changes we should like to mention Elizabeth Urban’s work on the mawālī and on the sons of an enslaved mother (umm walad) in the Umayyad period, Kecia Ali’s work on sexual ethics in early Islam, Karen Moukheiber’s studies on concubines and female musicians in Abbasid literature, and Lev Weitz’s study of marriage in Christian canon law in the Abbasid caliphate.

17 Krakowski, *Coming of Age in Medieval Egypt*, 12–15.
Finally, to incorporate religion into kinship theory some scholars have adopted the concept of “spiritual kinship,” which points to relations built either on spiritual descent or on intellectual and moral affinities. In Islamicate history, the former might be reflected, for instance, in theories of the imamate, while the latter evoke affiliations formed between students and teachers, in circles of scholars, inside monasteries, and in Sufi ṭariqas. Concerning religion and kinship, a recent project led by Uriel Simonsohn and Oded Zinger at the University of Haifa suggested studying how loyalties based on kinship might either align or conflict with loyalties based on confessional identity.19 Simonsohn's recent book *Female Power and Religious Change* focuses on the agency of women in driving developments such as religious conversion in the early Islamic period.20 Again, anthropologists have helped to pave the way, both by promoting the paradigm of “spiritual kinship” (as an alternative to kinship built on consanguinity or lineage) and by criticizing that same paradigm in order to make it more adaptable to cases from non-European histories.21

3 Themes

The articles that follow illustrate well these overlapping trends in recent scholarship on kinship. The authors treat kinship as a fundamental societal structure and kinship ties as a key organizing principle of Islamicate societies, thus revealing the debt owed by historians to structuralist anthropology. At the same time, inspired by the culturalist turn, they take kinship to be a varied system of relations and expressions of affiliation inside and beyond the household. Moreover, they pay attention to spiritual and intellectual affinities, going beyond the analysis of lineage and descent. The volume's scope, however, is delimited by a few common themes. Through those themes, the articles are in dialogue with each other in a distinct way.

First, the articles raise historical questions about language and rhetoric. They explore how writers and scribes evoked kinship to communicate effectively or

---

19 See the project's description at: https://usimonsohn.wixsite.com/mysite/kinship-and-community-in-early-isl.
to achieve specific goals. This shifts the focus from attempting to define what Islamic or Islamicate kinship was, as mentioned above, towards asking how kinship might function within the context of each source. The authors discuss how kinship terms were used in different bodies of literature (Arabic and Persian), registers (for example, the classical Arabic of biographical dictionaries in the article by Safran and Andalusian colloquial Arabic in the article by Ženk), genres (for example, poetry in the article by Pecorini Goodall and biographies in the articles by Pukhovaia and Malik) as well as types of sources (for example, a decree in the article by Ghosh and administrative papyri in the article by Legendre). As a result, they bring attention to texts evoking the language of kinship rhetorically and strategically.

Yet, it is worth stressing that the rhetoric of kinship refers to real situations and problems, such as tense relationships between brothers in the Umayyad family (Legendre) and at the Mughal court (Ghosh). It reflects strong affiliations, which were not any less real for being shaped through literary means, emphasized through poetic language, or sometimes even forged in writing. Literary devices are key, for example, in tracing a family of scholars in Qāḍī ʿĪyād’s Ghunya (Safran) and in building the spiritual genealogy of the Sufi master, Muḥammad Ḥusaynī Gesūdarāz (Malik). Moreover, kinship might be instrumentalized to achieve concrete goals, such as manipulating property transfers among the families of the Nasrid elite (Ženk). In the Mughal documents studied by Ghosh, the emperor Akbar and his brother, Mirzā ʿAzīz Koka, strategically insert and omit references to their foster brotherhood to express political rivalry.

A second common theme may be called “constructed genealogies,” that is, genealogies that were moulded through purposeful plans and actively sought. For example, the genealogies of both the Zaydi imam, Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn (Pukhovaia), and the Sufi master, Muḥammad Ḥusaynī Gesūdarāz (Malik), were represented in writing to claim their legitimacy as sayyids (descendants of Muhammad). This appears to be closely connected to a third theme, the role of women in the construction of new genealogies. The articles reveal that, in literary and documentary texts alike, the writers often strategically mentioned women's relations or position in a family to affirm their own authority. Thus, the importance of maternal lines emerges from naming practices in the Umayyad household and in Umayyad poetry (Pecorini Goodall). Pecorini Goodall's contribution points out that historians have often had a blind spot in reading early Islamic Arabic sources on genealogy and that many more references to women are contained in poetry and historical works than traditionally recognised. In addition, many more family members than the ones usually recognised were involved in weaving intergenerational ties between families.
(Legendre). By marrying and divorcing strategically, individuals and families transformed their lineages and created ties which also affected future generations, whether by gaining a desired connection to a particular family or by arranging financial and inheritance matters in the long run (Zenka). Besides marriage patterns, other strategies required creativity and time. Interestingly, it was by associating himself to his second wife’s extended family that the imam Yahyā Sharaf al-Dīn shaped his own genealogy and claimed authority in Zaydi Yemen (Pukhovaia). In Zenka’s study of notarial documents from Nasrid Granada, the manipulation of property sales and inheritances took the actions of three generations of women to yield results.

Finally, this special issue offers a comparative approach. Our selection of studies spans various regions and periods: Granada in the late Nasrid period; Ceuta in the Almoravid period; Egypt and Syria under the Umayyads; Zaydi Yemen in the sixteenth century; Gujarat in Mughal India; and the Deccan of the Bahmani sultanate. Some comparable features are observable in all these different contexts: for instance, the mention of kinship ties as a means of expressing political rivalry between brothers in royal households (Legendre and Ghosh), shaping communities of scholars (Malik and Safran), and elevating the authority of holy men (Pukhovaia and Malik). Many of the sources analysed below strategically appeal to mothers and wives and to their social capital (Pukhovaia, Pecorini Goodall, Legendre, and Zenka). Moreover, these collected articles offer the opportunity for comparison across sources. In the past, research on documentary and literary sources was often carried out separately and ended up enclosed in different academic domains. We follow and encourage growing attempts at challenging disciplinary and methodological divides by bringing together in this volume different fields of expertise. Collectively, the articles display different approaches to literary and documentary texts, and to sources in Persian and in Arabic.

4 Beyond the Scope of this Volume

Some important topics were left out from this volume. One subject that does not feature very prominently here, but that certainly deserves further attention, is the entanglement of kinship and slavery. Indeed, in the same historical contexts that are discussed in this special issue we find many venues in which institutions and practices of slavery overlapped with kinship. Examples of this overlap are systems of adoption, foster parenthood, and patronage within military hierarchies since the Abbasid period and in the ruling elites of various sultanates and amirates in the Middle Period. We also know that
unfree and enslaved people were integrated into extended households in various ways and, in some cases, were able to climb up to high social ranks. The case of the mawālī (loosely translatable as “clients”) in the early Islamic period shows well how difficult it is for historians to precisely describe categories of unfreedom and dependency inside the family. These are complex entanglements that are increasingly attracting the attention of historians of Islamicate societies and that we hope will be studied further.22 While unfreedom appears in this volume, as the sources analysed below mention servants, concubines, foster mothers, and mawālī, it is a topic that remains at the margins. In addition, we hope that the research on the language of kinship presented here may inspire further explorations on the history of emotions.23 Several examples of texts evoking emotions may be found in the articles collected here. The writers might express interest in their ancestors, pride in their genealogies, willingness to favour their kins over others, to protect or threaten their clients, servants, and foster kins; and they might appeal to specific sons, brothers, mothers, or wives. Emotions are evoked in the writings of Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ (Safran) and the letters of Mirzā ʿAzīz Koka (Ghosh). On the other hand, we did not attempt to assess what emotional weight the writers might have given to kinship as a concept or a value and to what extent the language of emotions in the texts they wrote was related to personal feelings or rather to genres and formularies. The scope here is limited to examples showing how kinship ties were evoked to express affinities, loyalties, rivalries, and power differentials, whereas it does not answer the question of how those ties were perceived. We hope our observations will encourage further research into these areas of research that we have left unexplored.
