Introduction:
The Middle Eastern Family Revisited 2

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This issue of Hawwa continues the theme of family as started in Hawwa 6: 1. This time the papers expand the scope outside the Middle East to the wider Islamic world and to new, unconventional approaches to this institution of intimate relations. How do changes in family dynamics come to the fore when the family is explored in long durée? What does the coming of an outsider to family, a domestic servant, tell about the family? Does a multitude in marital relationships make a family that provides protection to a woman? Whose family is it then? And how does a search for identity affect family choices and whose choices are they anyway? These are some of the questions that papers in this issue of Hawwa address.

Anthropologist Annika Rabo contrasts family ideals and family practice in her long durée ethnography of two families in a Northern Syrian regional town. Having followed the two sisters and their families during three decades (from 1978 to 2007), Rabo builds a different image of family dynamics from the conventional anthropological kinship studies, based on lineage ideology and with a patrifocal approach. In her account, the ahl (Rabo defines ahl as ‘larger family’) the family of the close ones and those of concrete support is based on links through women rather than the patri-lineage. Still kinship is not the only social category that matters in looking at nativeness in this town. As Rabo points out, outsiders i.e. people without kinship relationships form part of the unrelated ‘clans’ (‘isha’ir) who trace their origin to the ancestor that mythically settled in the town in the beginning. These clans form also part of the locally relevant argument why women are so strong here: while men had to go to work long distances, women entertained guests and took a major role in performing hospitality, the central ritual of recognition among people in this corner of the world.
Rabo brings an interesting institution to discussion: the family book. This is part of Syrian population politics, the family identity card of a sort that at times has served also in the role of allocating state subsidies. For women whose spouses are deceased, the family book provides an official certificate to demonstrate that she is the head of the household. The family book is the written document of the family, containing also names of those who have already passed away. As Rabo asserts, to be part of a family book in Syria is to exist. In this way the state provides a means of recognition; the family book is also about the group of people for whom the unwritten rules of mutual solidarity prevail.

In her chapter on domestic workers in urban northern Yemen, anthropologist Marina de Regt brings an unusual perspective to looking at the family: what are the socio-economic and intimate consequences of an outsider with a pre-ordered socially lower position entering the domestic sphere? Traditionally in the sophisticated hierarchical Yemen, social origin or ‘roots’ have played the major role in foreseeing the person’s future life course. Marriage rules that follow the ancient kafala (equality) principle with local variations have sealed the person’s limits in moving socially up or down. Different professions have traditionally been classified accordingly: work with dirty substances such as clay, meat or human sexuality or performing service work have been reserved for the socially lowest categories whose degrading position has been mythically reinforced. Thus domestic work has never been a work option for the socially middle or upper strata Yemeni woman.

While the history of domestic work in the Arabian Peninsula goes back to colonial Aden (1839–1967) where young Yemeni boys were employed to perform domestic services also migrant women formed a category to hire. Like today, these women often came across the sea from the Horn of Africa. In de Regt’s case study, hiring a domestic helper has now emerged as a viable option to northern Yemeni urban middle and upper strata families, too. While the system of clientelism increasingly characterises state-citizen relationship in Yemen, elite formation has gained new aspects: as de Regt reminds in her chapter, people without traditional cultural capital (‘roots’) but with right contacts can now enter to the position of hiring a domestic worker and thus manifesting social distinction. As a consequence, new social inequalities have emerged to Yemen that expose the vulnerable bodies of migrant domestic workers to the publicly unprotected sphere of domestic life.