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# BEYOND FITNESS AND NURTURE

## THE KINSHIP PARADOX

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*This paper builds on earlier analyses of primary data on kinship in Qatar. Its conceptualization centers kinship as a highly structured universal human phenomenon in the study of humankind. As lived practices, kinship forms a bounded, identifiable domain that is distinguishable from other societal relations. Going beyond reducing kinship to fitness (biology) or nurture (culture study), analysis of primary ethnographic data gathered as part of a grant-funded field research project on kinship practices in Qatar, including suckling practices along with kinship by birth and by marriage, is presented to demonstrate how complex anomalies emerging at the level of kinship experience reveal in analysis properties of kinship as a transformational triadic structure, here proposed as a universal feature of kinship and a dynamic aspect of its structure.*

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### **Conceptual Beginnings**

This paper<sup>1</sup> takes kinship study beyond the attempts from biology to explain societal institutions as adaptive fitness or claims from culture studies of new directions that reduce kinship to nurture, which I contend leave out the significant core in kinship ethnography and theory. The fitness formula from biology has been shown to be of limited value in sociocultural contexts (El Guindi and Read 2012; Read and El Guindi 2013). One size does not ‘fit’ all. And kinship, contrary to views by some biological anthropologists, is not genetic relatedness. Whether genes are selfish or selfless, the focus of biological studies is the biological organism. Shifting from organisms to humans (whether as individuals or groups) does not automatically extend applicability of theoretical formulas. Humans organize themselves in society and live by culture, both generated by a uniquely human cognitive capacity.

Opposing the now polarized debate, Agustin Fuentes calls for “[a]n integrative anthropology” which goes past dichotomous perspectives methodologically and theoretically toward understanding the human (Fuentes 2016). This call is not new. Pierre Bourdieu captured the intent of the founding ancestors of anthropology when he wished to

“see the unity of the sciences of man asserted under the banner of ... Anthropology” (2003: 212), which is epistemologically and methodologically positioned to pull together all aspects of the study of humankind. Paths whether from biology or culture studies which dilute or reduce the meaningful whole to manageable pieces are strongly challenged empirically and theoretically.

Reflecting on developments in anthropology, the integrative approach has been its core ideal. This was reflected when scientists from the humanities, social and natural sciences clustered around the Macy Conferences led by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson precisely because of their prevalent integrative approach. Granville Stanley Hall, American psychologist known for studies on adolescence (Hall 1904), was influenced by Margaret Mead’s cross-cultural observations on growing up, and physicists such as Capra adopted Bateson’s notion of patterns to develop a new scientific understanding of living systems as a web of life (Bateson 1958; 1963; 1972; Capra 1996). An integrative approach that brings together scientific finds from cross-cultural data to understand humankind is the path strived here. Neither the fitness formula nor the nurture claim can take anthropology along this path.

Kinship study has been central to the polarized nature-culture debate. Claude Lévi-Strauss’ (1958; 1963) would not accept the reduction of kinship to its natural beginnings. He reminded us of its cultural character when he stated that “what confers upon kinship its sociocultural character is *not what it retains from nature*, but, rather, the essential way in which it *diverges from nature*” (1963:: 50, emphasis added). Marcel Hénaff puts the emphasis differently: “We know that ... biological reproduction supposes the union of two partners of opposite sex. *Nature demands nothing else*” (1998: 44, emphasis added).

Without denying biology, these comments stress the qualitative difference of becoming human. It is the position taken here that kinship is founded on the natural and the cultural, and integratively entails the biological, the societal, and the cognitive. The demise of cultural studies is in subsuming kinship under gender, nurture, and relatedness (Carsten 2000; Stone 2001), with claims denying the universal logic built into kinship as borne out in cross-cultural ethnography and anthropological theory. A highly structured universal human phenomenon is overlooked along with social organizational features such as universal classification of relatives, shared corporateness of reputation, estate and responsibility, extended relations and kin terms vertically and horizontally beyond dyads, special kin terminology, rules of avoidance and prohibitions

Neither does reality bear out assumptions of a kinship absence in people’s lives. Lived kinship is validated in ethnography as a vital human sphere, which, if overlooked in the study of society, would mean that a good deal of what, as Robert Parkin put it, “any society explicitly recognizes” (Parkin 1997: ix) is disregarded. Denying kinship as an analytical construct undermines fundamentals of anthropological theory. Kinship study cannot be dismissed, nor is it viable to submerge kinship relations by other relations of sociality. A central character of systematics in the kinship sphere demonstrates the universality of its logic as a human domain.

The history of anthropology has shown that kinship knowledge is integral to the cultural knowledge humans acquire and generate about what constitutes ‘social universe’ and what it means to be a relative. A complex notion of society and culture is unique to humans and is irreducible to a simplistic transmission of traits or an assumed overarching tradition of nurture. The quote from Gregory Bateson rhetorically asks a question that ought to be directed at those who reduce kinship to a few behaviors devoid of meaning or context. “What pattern”, asks Bateson, “connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all the four of them to me” (1979: 8) ? The challenge is to uncover underlying patterns and properties of structure.

In human societies, biological birth is by itself insufficient to generate kin who have to be integrated into the social universe and the cultural world. What this involves is qualitatively different from behaviors by even the closest of species, the non-human primates. Evidence shows that non-human primates hold and groom newly born members, an act interpreted in primate studies as ‘recognition’. This interpretation, recognition, remains to be sufficiently validated. I ask recognition of what? In either case recognition by grooming is quantitatively and qualitatively far from the complex process of incorporation by which humans admit newcomers by birth (also by marriage) as they invoke elaborate ritual activities containing complex symbolism yielding culturally meaningful messages. One vivid example, by no means unique, of how one group incorporates newcomers is found in the ethnography of Egyptian birth ritual (see El Guindi’s visual ethnography (1986). Isn’t it remarkable that humans put so much effort in incorporating new members, even though entry is into already existing kin groups?

The approach in this paper considers kinship a construct of universal analytical value and an experientially bounded, culturally identifiable, sphere of sociocultural relations unique to humans and distinguishable from other societal relations. Primary ethnographic data, as will be demonstrated in this paper, support a uniqueness characteristic to the domain of kinship, through universal social organizational features, and by logical properties of an analytic category. Insights from this approach would build on the vast existing body of conceptual and ethnographic knowledge and classical theoretical debates.

### **Living Kinship**

No doubt kinship knowledge is about patterns, rules, premises and laws. In the field, however, we face the extraordinary reality of a viscerally, intensely lived phenomenon. This is most apparent in the modern affluent Arabian and Gulf societies<sup>2</sup>, after having lived and conducted research among Qataris (2006-2014), an experience which re-awakened my awareness about the intensity of living kinship, which I had earlier observed during my field experience in Nubia (Callender 1962; El Guindi 1963-1965).

Carrying out research in Qatar attests to the remarkable quality of vigorously practiced and cognized kinship among people who demonstrate a heightened ability for calculating deep (vertical) and wide (lateral) genealogical relations of kin. This mastery of kinship knowledge is certainly not unique to Arabians, although my recent first-hand

experience and research in Qatar underscores how underestimated this phenomenon is in academe.

I was struck by the ability of Arab students in kinship classes in Qatar to orally produce complex and genealogically deep kin relations with ease and speed. In one class encounter a student casually, yet with full mastery, related that “X would be the son (*ibn*, Arabic) of the paternal uncle (*‘amm*, Arabic) of my mother’s maternal aunt (*khalit ummi*, Arabic).” To unpack this condensed set of relations prompted a kinship charting session on the white board for the whole class. Discussion among students over who is recognized as a relative and who is not was visceral, their enthusiasm overwhelming. Such observable capacity for calculating kin relations and for kinship intelligibility is fascinating and is worthy of future systematic inter-disciplinary exploration into a possibly underlying cognitive capacity.

Living kinship almost every moment of one’s life and experiencing its indispensable influence in most aspects of ordinary life can be exhausting and demanding, while being mentally and emotionally invigorating. Immersed in this environment of intense ‘kinshipping’ brings out what seems to be an incredible capacity for kinship knowledge. Aspects of such capacity will be revealed in this analysis

### **What Is Suckling?**

Suckling, a label I gave to a form of kinship that is revealed to be integrated with procreative and marital kinship, refers to a practice by which lactating women breastfeed babies who are not their own by birth engendering new kin relations and networks, and generating new transformations which shift kin status among birth and marital kin (El Guindi 2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2013; El Guindi and al-Othman 2013).

I distinguish the practice of *suckling kinship* from the complex of practices commonly labeled ‘milk kinship’ (Altorki 1980; Clarke 2007d; Conte 1987; Giladi 1998; 1999; Héritier-Augé and Copet-Rougier 1995; Héritier 1994; Khatib-Chahidi 1992; Lacoste-Dujardin 2000; Long 1996; 2004; 2005). The latter is reported as historically common in the wider region covering the Balkans, the Mediterranean, the Arab and the Islamic East, among Christians and both Shi’a and Sunni Muslims (Parkes 2001; 2003; 2004b). Analysis of primary data establishes that the substance of milk alone or the act of breastfeeding, even with resulting dyadic relations in which the incest taboo applies, are insufficient to characterize the practices as kinship.

In Arabic etymology, *rida’a* stands for nursing or suckling, but not fostering or wet-nursing. There are two close derivatives from the same linguistic root for nursing *r-d-’* (nursing): *istirda’* (wet-nursing) and *rida’a* (suckling), which refer to two identifiably different practices, wet-nursing for the former and suckling for the latter. I introduced the English term *suckling*, in lieu of breastfeeding or nursing, to distinguish the phenomenon of my research focus from nursing one’s own babies and from practices often confused with it such as wet-nursing, breastfeeding or fostering.

An ethnographic field project was carried out in Qatar over a period of seven years between 2006 and 2013. A number of publications analyzing certain aspects of the phenomenon appeared in different scholarly venues (El Guindi 2011; 2012a; 2012b;

2013; El Guindi in press; El Guindi and al-Othman 2013). Culturally, suckling is acknowledged in the Qur'an and is established in ethnography alongside the other two forms of kinship: procreative and marital. The three kinship practices (by birth, by marriage, and by suckling) are recognized among the population of Qatar (and elsewhere among Arab and Muslim groups) according to primary field data and conclusions from various sources on local knowledge and cultural tradition, including original Islamic sources.

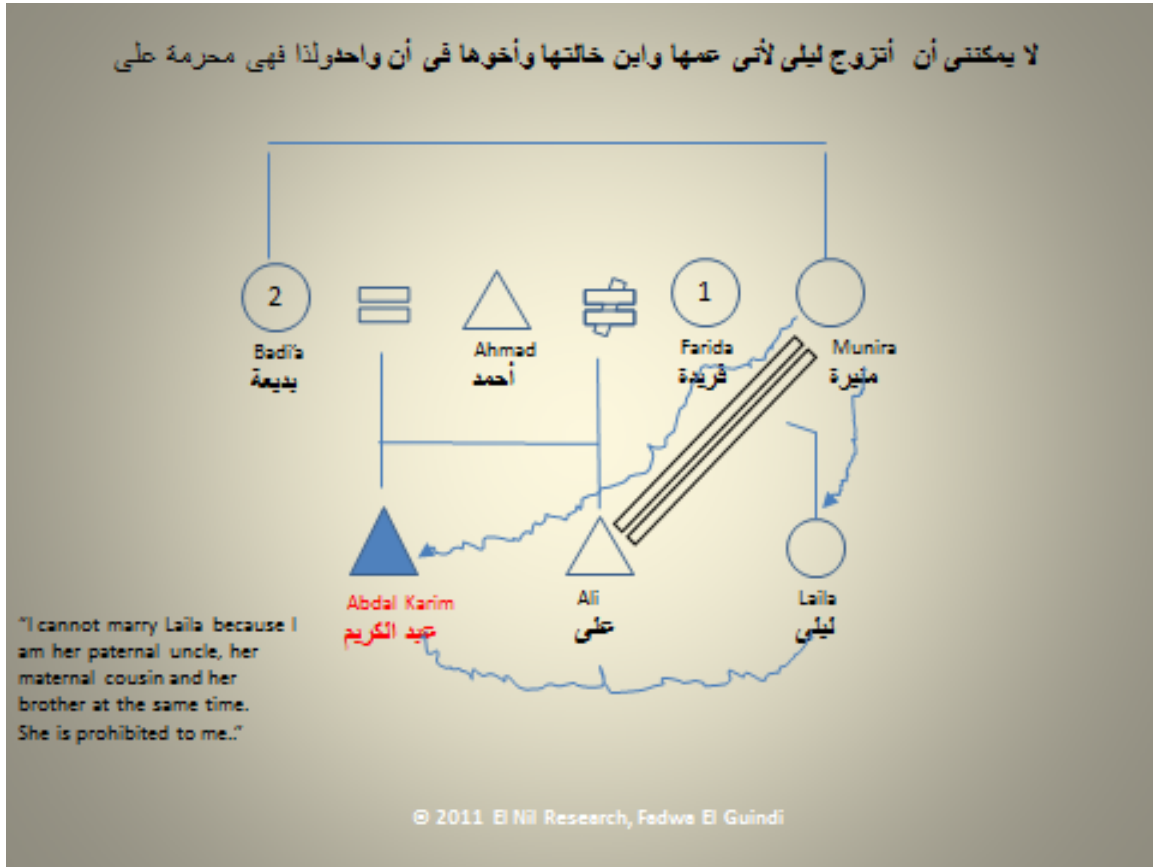
Sufficient analytic evidence supports the cultural view that the kind of suckling (Ar. *rida'a*) explored in the research project is considered kinship, alongside procreative (Ar. *nasab*<sup>3</sup>) and marital kinship (Ar. *musahara*). Ethnography and the Hadith recognize the attribute of lineal and lateral extensions in suckling kinship beyond the suckling dyad. This claim of kinship status is not only culture-derived but is also based on analytic criteria shared by kinship specialists. These criteria include classification in terminology (from preliminary analysis), observations of behavioral reciprocity, and the feature of lineality and laterality of recursions in marital prohibitions. It is observed that suckling extends links and prohibitions lineally and laterally beyond the original suckling dyad, and lifts avoidance and constructs new taboos which enable and disable marriage possibilities.

### **Ethnographic Case: The Narrative**

At the center of this analysis is one particular ethnographic case which brings out an apparent anomaly in kinship relations. To resolve the anomaly we discover new insights about kinship theory. The case surrounds the story of Karim and Laila, which I first recount in narrative form then I convert the narrative into systematic kinship analysis. A colleague peeked into my office on his way to teach his class as I was charting kinship relations in the midst of an animated discussion with a Qatari colleague on kinship issues. He blurted out, then rushed away to his class, that he could not marry Laila "because I am her paternal uncle, her maternal cousin, and her brother at the same time." He left us to figure it out.

Undoubtedly, this apparent puzzle aroused my curiosity and appeared to be in need of decoding. My colleague suggested that the story may have contained *suckling kinship* (El Guindi 2012a), a phenomenon and a practice that had begun to attract my attention during my observations of social and ritual life in Qatar. I was familiar with the phenomenon prior to this through expressive traditions of Arab culture and live practices. But I was struck by its pervasive presence in Gulf culture and its implication for understanding kinship overall.

My colleague's observation that Karim's story has to entail suckling was a valuable lead. My attention was already turning toward systematically studying suckling practices. Suckling alone could not however account for or resolve the puzzle of Karim and Laila. An anomaly is discovered once Karim's statement is broken down into constituent relations and links. Exploring the apparent anomaly uncovers complexities of prohibitions and voidances, a path that ultimately reveals a fundamental logical property of kinship -- dynamic transformationality.



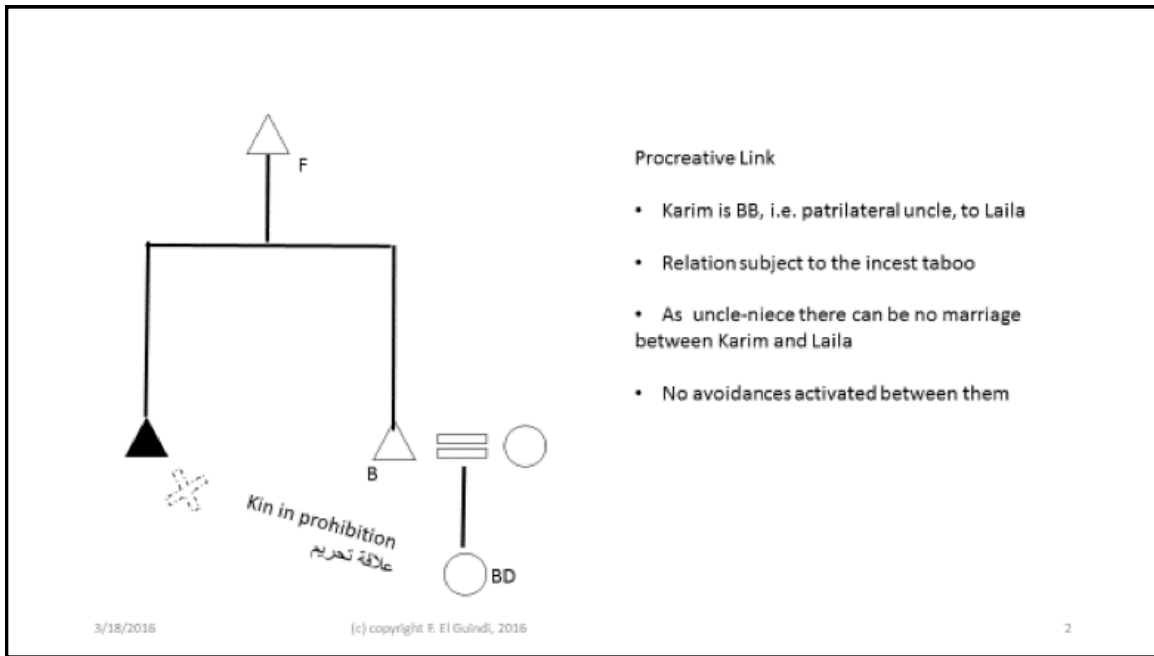
**Figure 1:** Graphic representation of the set of links and relations relevant to the Karim-Laila case. © 2016 Fadwa El Guindi (developed out of earlier graph in previous publication, 2012).

Figure 1 graphically presents the set of entwined links and relations in the Karim-Laila case. This is followed by breaking down these relations into processual steps,

Next the incident of Karim and Laila is converted from a story to an ethnographic case. I follow the sequence of analytic steps leading to the discovery of the anomaly, then discuss the solution culture provides, which leads to identifying what turns out in analysis to be a crucial property of kinship structure. Utilizing the tools in Figure 1, a methodical step-by-step unravels the puzzle and reveals new patterns of kinship.

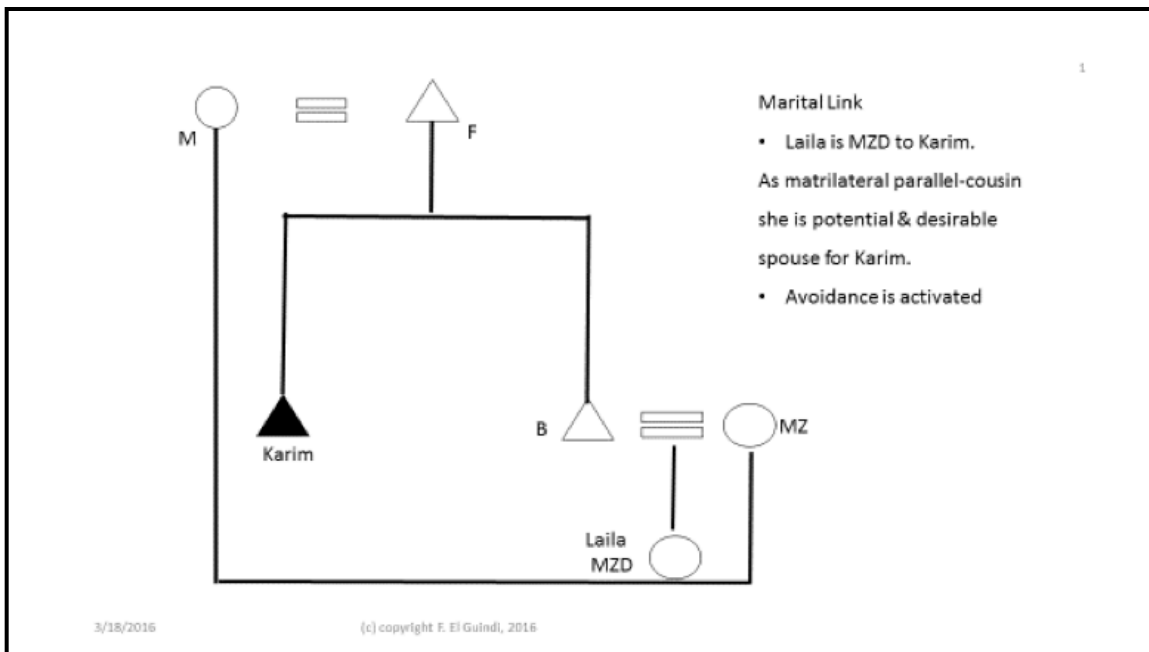
### The Analysis

The analysis is performed by breaking up the narrative into segments, relations, and links. Three ties link Karim and Laila. First, the procreative tie. There is a procreative link between Karim and Laila. A relation by birth exists since Karim and his brother are siblings who share the birth father. Laila is daughter of Karim's brother. Karim is therefore patrilineal parallel uncle to Laila. The procreative link between Karim and Laila is marked in accordance with cultural rules to the incest taboo. That is, as uncle-niece they are prohibited from getting married to each other. Since there is a prohibition in place avoidance are de-activated and lifted. Figure 2 charts these relations graphically for clarity.



**Figure 2:** Original graphic representation of the procreative link between Karim and Laila. © 2016 Fadwa El Guindi.

Second, there is the marital tie. Karim's mother has a sister who married Karim's brother. Karim's matrilineal parallel aunt is married to Karim's brother and from this marriage Laila is born. This makes Laila Karim's mother's sister's daughter, or a matri-



**Figure 3:** Original graphic representation of the marital link between Karim and Laila. © 2016 Fadwa El Guindi.



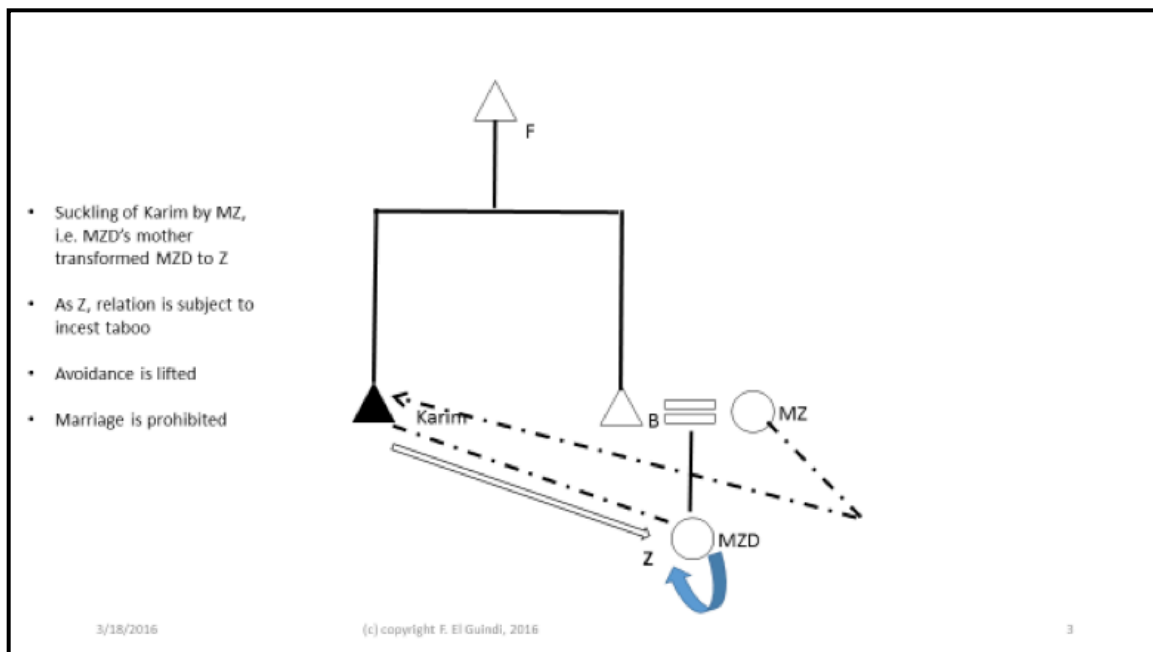
lateral parallel cousin. As such she is a desirable spouse for Karim. The factor of marriageability between Karim and Laila through this link imposes culturally defined avoidances in interaction, dress and relationship. In other words, given the absence of the prohibition, through this link, activates avoidance between them. Figure 3 shows a graphic representation charting relation of the marital link between Karim and Laila.

The third tie (see Figure 4) derived from the narrative is suckling . Laila was nursed by her mother. Laila’s mother who is Karim’s matrilateral parallel aunt suckled Karim, although he was five year old. Suckling created transformations in the relations. Karim’s procreative aunt became his suckling mother and Laila his cousin became his sister. This suckling link, considered kinship, created an incest taboo preventing marriage between Karim and Laila and lifted avoidance.

### The Anomaly

Putting this in equation vocabulary, *Karim is paternal uncle, maternal cousin and brother of Laila who therefore had become prohibited to him in marriage*. Without conceptual tools for the appropriate analysis such a pronouncement hangs as an anomaly, and is relegated to being simply an entertaining story. Underlying the statement, however, are patterns and rules of marriage, incest and kinship that can unfold in analysis pointing to inherent logic to a system of kinship that is meaningful culturally and which is not unique.

We have discussed how Karim & Laila are patrilateral uncle [BB] and niece [BZ] to each other. They are, therefore, prohibited in marriage and follow no avoidance rules. This is a procreative\_link that cannot be undone in procreative terms. At the same time, Karim & Laila are matrilateral parallel cousins, Laila is Karim’s mother’s sister’s daughter. As cousins they are desirable and preferred spouses, and are subject to avoidance



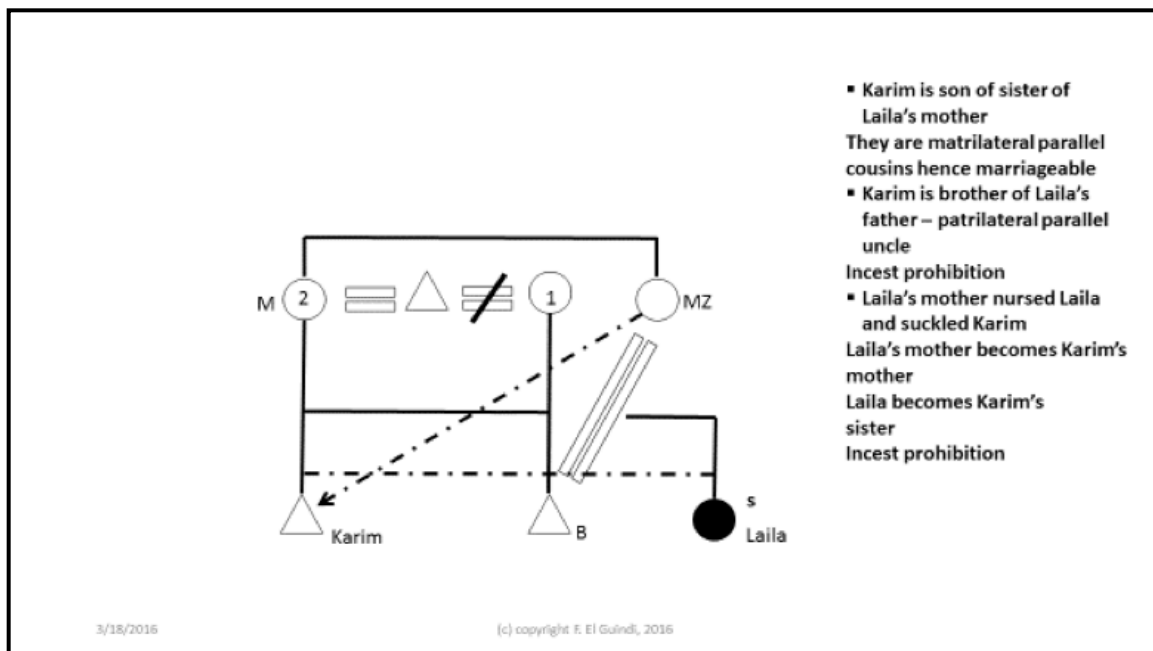
**Figure 4:** Original graphic representation of the suckling tie linking Karim and Laila. © 2016 Fadwa El Guindi.

rules, but not to marriage prohibition. This is a marital / procreative link that cannot be undone in marital/procreative terms. In other words, we have same individuals having sets of contradictory links. This poses an anomaly regarding classification, prohibition, avoidance, and marital choice.

From a unitary biology perspective which views kinship as genetic relatedness, to the anthropological conventional binary view of kinship being forged primarily by procreation and marriage, we find that neither view can resolve the anomaly in our ethnographic case, since contradictions exist at the ethnographic level, in both procreative and marital links, by which one set of links says two individuals should marry and the other set of links says that the same two individuals are prohibited from marrying each other. Cultural tradition provides three paths to forge and incorporate kin: procreative, marital and suckling. So, a third form of kinship, suckling, is activated, and as we demonstrate, provides a resolution to the anomaly. This is represented graphically in Figure 5.

As graphically represented in Figure 5, the incest prohibition created when Laila's mother suckled Karim, turned Laila into Karim's sister, a relation of mahram. So prohibition was established both procreatively and by suckling. Laila was emphatically prohibited from marrying Karim. This resolved the anomaly by re-affirming the prohibition against marriage.

But there is more.

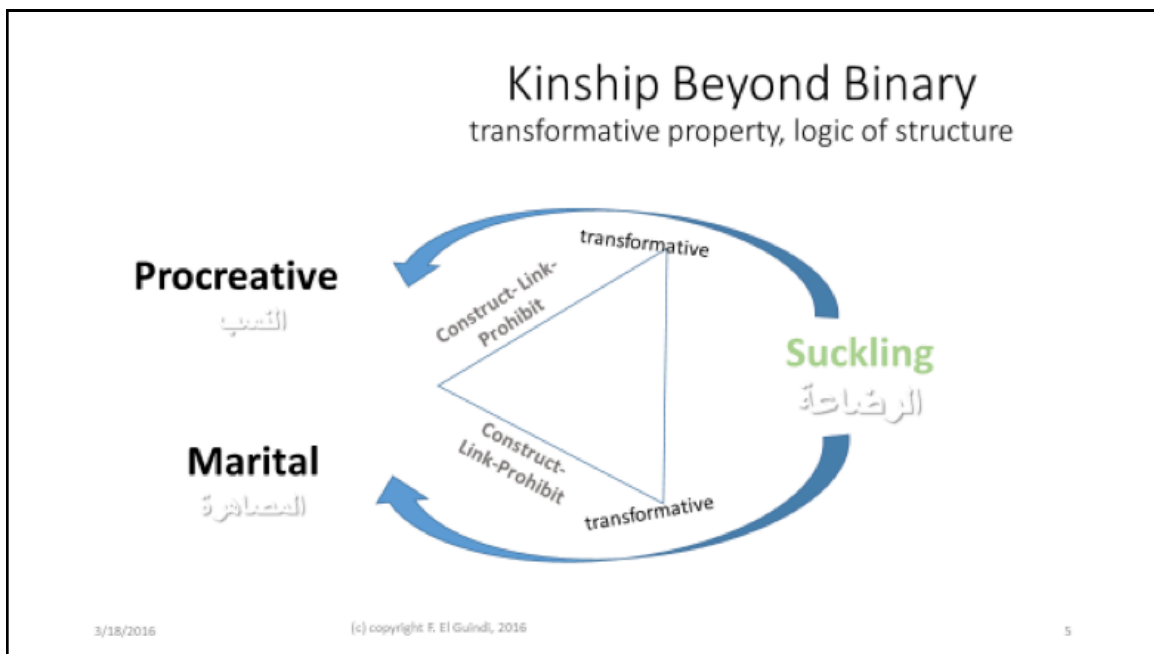


**Figure 5:** Original graphic representation of the anomaly from having two sets of ties by birth and marriage linking Karim and Laila. © 2016 Fadwa El Guindi.

## Discussion

The complexity of the domain of kinship is demonstrated through analysis of ethnographic data. Kinship is how humans organize themselves through entwined ties and links which they classify in categories and attach structured terms to them. They also attach rules for marriage permissibility and prohibition, and transmit the knowledge of these rules and patterns for generations. What distinctively marks the domain of kinship is a corporateness of rules, binding obligations and rights, and regulated transmission of shared tangible and intangible assets ranging from name to reputation to estate to debt and collective responsibility, covering economic and political relations and links of alliance and power. Incest is associated with kinship. It is universally defined by cross-culturally established prohibitions against marriage among certain kin types. While some prohibitions are near-universal, such as mother-son, there are some ethnographic and historical variations as to other prohibitions. Cousins are not only allowed to marry among Arabs they are preferred spouses.

Structures of kinship are built with interdependent elements (see Figure 6). Anthropology identifies these elements and empirically demonstrates the character of their interrelationship. For example, it has been assumed that prohibition and avoidance are linked in marital contexts. Ethnography of Arab culture has shown that these two must be delinked as they stand in opposition to each other. Activated prohibition of marriage lifts avoidance between potential spouses. Prohibition prevents marriage, avoidance (which applies only in cross-sex contexts) allows marriageability. Avoidance is culturally expressed through spatial distance, veiling and dress code, verbal formality, etc. Suckling is



**Figure 6:** Original graphic representation of the logical structure of kinship, with suckling kinship having a transformative role in the structure. © 2016 Fadwa El Guindi.

a pathway to create relatives and a structural means to convert from one kind of relative to another, and to transform links and resolve anomalies posed by real life practices.

The empirically-derived results concern unifying properties of kinship which confirm its validity as a core analytical construct for anthropological exploration as has been established for centuries by kinship knowledge-building in the anthropology of kinship. Kinship, both as analytic construct and as a human domain (in all its constituent elements—principles, practices, terminology etc.) has been the focus of much ethnography and intense theorizing in anthropology throughout its disciplinary history.

By integrating insights from the analysis of primary data about that kinship practices, with a focus on suckling kinship and prohibitions of incest in Qatar, I propose to establish kinship as a universal domain of lived practices and an analytical construct for analysis of cross-cultural practices to reveal general properties of kinship structure. Kinship is a dynamic aspect of human life. Humans cross-culturally classify people as relatives in a distinctly human way. It is not sufficient to be born in order to be incorporated as kin. One is admitted ritually into a social group. Kinship is also a highly structured analytical category that yields conceptual insights about kinship structure. Analysis presented in this paper of original primary ethnographic data systematically gathered using conventional anthropological tools suggest that suckling practices vigorously manifested in Qatari society are patterned. Relatives forged by being suckled by lactating women who are not their biological mothers are classified by a specialized terminology and extend prohibitions and avoidances vertically and laterally across generations similar to relatives by birth and marriage.

## **Method**

The method of data gathering and analysis comprises the conventional anthropological methodology. It consists of both systematic observations made, in this case, by the author, and elicited data by in-depth and structured interviewing obtained by a research team, under the supervision of the author on all forms of kinship and kinship terminology over a period of three years. Ethnographic cases were gathered and discussed in a seminar setting by the UREP Grant research team. Ethnographic “case” interviews used “idealized model templates” devised primarily by the author but in the context of collective discussion, specifically for this purpose: nine were with a male ego and nine with a female ego. Templates were made after analysis of data from an exploratory phase of the research project involving in-depth interviews of ten persons. There were a total of 28 interviews. It is interesting that the method of eliciting primary data on procreative and marital kinship had to be modified in the case of suckling kinship due to its different properties. Immersed interviewing that is both open-ended and structured along with the use of templates devised specifically by the team for this project comprised the ethnographic anthropological method most suitable. Observation of real-life activity was also significant. QNRF UREP grants are intended to incorporate research by undergraduates with teaching, but takes place without academic university credit. This team met once weekly over a period of three years. In this particular case, the team had never received any training in kinship study or in primary field research of this kind.

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<sup>2</sup> I have always expressed with humor in my public lectures that one needed a vacation following a vacation visit to family and relatives. “Kinship”, I always said, “is very hard work. It is exhausting”. In previous publications I described the same genealogical capacity among Nubians of Egypt during my intensive field research in old Nubia prior to relocation.

<sup>3</sup> The Arabic term *nasab* is multivocal, sometimes referring to used genealogical affiliation, other times to kin by marriage versus kin by birth. Formally, and as used in this account, it refers to procreative kin marital or suckling.