

Consanguineous marriage in the Arab societies

Introduction

Endogamous and consanguineous marriage is estimated to comprise 20% of all marriages in the contemporary world. In Arabia, however, it is estimated to characterize approximately half of all marriages. Overall, this is thought to reflect the cultural legacy of the identity central to the Arab family, and the underlying value system associated with identity bound to one's descent group. In much social theory, urbanization is envisioned as a game-changing variable: once in the urban environment, groups practicing consanguineous marriage, produced as it is by environmental and economic factors endemic to rural regions, would assimilate to new social practices and abandon consanguineous marriage. The evidence in the Gulf is clear, however, that these practices persevere in Qatar and the other Gulf States. They remain a socially legitimate practice, and urbanization is not a significant factor in shaping this practice. In other words, preferences for endogamous marriage, for the appropriate age of marriage, as well as for the number and gender of offspring, remain in line with the traditions of the region. This suggests that urbanization is not a universal indicator of changes to practices, like marriage partner selection, that run deep in the social fabric.

Most research concerning the genetic impact of consanguinity has been conducted with peoples of European origin—in social settings where family size is characteristically small and marriage partners are typically unrelated. However, in the Eastern Mediterranean region, opposite Social conditions abound, and these demographic differences yield different patterns in the distribution of genetic disease.

In summary, the demographic patterns in European societies scatter mutations throughout the population, while in Eastern Mediterranean populations those mutations are concentrated by endogamous marriage patterns. Obviously, then, marriage customs play the key role in the distribution of genetic disease.

The numbers of genetic diseases in the Gulf region up to 350 including 200 from the disease a hereditary disease with a recessive character, which reflects proliferation. The center of genetic in Qatar detects these diseases through laboratory tests. Therefore, this center also conducts research on these kinds of diseases to be able to discover what is known of these diseases, but no result has been published yet.

Many Muslim countries in Asia and North Africa have witnessed marked demographic changes such as urbanization and improvements in socioeconomic status etc. However, cultural practices, especially those pertaining to marriage, have remained largely unchanged. The evidence from recent national DHS surveys and other small-scale studies shows that there has been little decline in the preference for consanguineous marriages.

This practice is particularly common in societies where the extended family remains the basic social unit, a social quality that is broadly observable even in the contemporary world. Together, these social forms are often associated with “traditional” societies, in contrast with “modern” societies, the latter of which is defined as those societies where the nuclear family predominates. In those societies, individuals generally have more latitude in selecting their marriage partners,¹ although it is widely recognized that familial, social, economic, religious and ethnic concerns continue to play a role in that process. For example, a study in the United States revealed

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that while social class is no longer a characteristic that significantly affects marriage selection, education level has replaced it as a primary predictor of partner selection.²

In the Arab region up to half of all marriages, conform to this pattern. Statistics show that average rates of marriage between relatives of 40-50% of all marriages in the Arab world, these numbers may be up to the level of 60% in some societies, as in the Sudan, Mauritania, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia.

Consanguineous marriage remains the choice of an estimated 10.4% of the global population, although there has been an overall decline in its popularity, especially in developed countries.³ While the most of Arabs countries are entered the modernization stage and before several decades the family structure and social relationship are controlled by the kinship system. As a result of that the consanguineous marriage remains widespread in the Arab region.

Several studies point to the spread of marriage between relatives among the Arab population in occupied Palestine, where 35% to 40% of marriages are between first degree cousins and a direct maternal uncle; moreover, the rate surpasses 50% in rural areas.⁴ Similarly, the rate of marriage between relatives is estimated at 40% in many villages in Saudi Arabia.⁵ Marriage between relatives is unusually spread widely in the United Arab Emirates, where statistics show that the rates of marriage among relatives actually increased from 39% to 50% over the last two generations. Nearly 26% of those marriages are between first-degree relatives.⁶ Although consanguineous marriage can include marriages to a somewhat diverse set of relatives, the marriage rate among first-degree relatives is the most common form in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Iraq, Bahrain and Egypt.

In Qatar as well, the official data reveal an ongoing spread of marriages between first cousins. According to the annual marriage contracts in 2007 42% of the total contracts are between couples having blood kinship, bringing the total of consanguineous marriages in that year to 881 cases, 54% of which are marriages of first cousins. In 2013, the percentage of related newlyweds remained the same at almost 41% of the overall marriages in that year while marriages between first-degree relatives increased to 59% of all consanguineous marriages.

Various studies reveal the occurrence of major changes in the Arab societies, such as the increase in urban population, the spread of education, the change in the patterns of economic life, and the change in the structure of the Arab family that resulted in a decline in the presence of the extended family to be replaced by the nuclear family.^{7,8}

However, statistics and studies show that the phenomenon of consanguineous marriage is not receding. In the Yemeni society for example, a study was conducted on this issue and it showed that more than 85% of marriages are between first-degree relatives and that 40% of Yemeni women are related by blood to their spouses.⁹

Furthermore, the Omani National Health Survey for year 2000 also revealed that consanguineous marriage is widely spread among the population, 52% of which had resorted to it, and that marriage of first cousins was the most common, where it accounted for 75% of marriages.¹⁰

Other studies also showed the spread of consanguineous marriage in occupied Palestine especially among Muslim and Druze Arabs, where it accounted for 35 to 40% of marriages, knowing that more than half these marriages are between first cousins, children of immediate uncles on both the father's and the mother's side.¹¹ Similarly, the study of Ahmed Omoush & Salim al-Qaisi¹² also showed that consanguineous marriage is spread in the Jordanian society accounting to 68.8% of respondents.

Marriages between relatives in some Saudi villages also reach 40% of the number of marriages.⁵ Another study conducted (in 1995) in the cities of Al Ain and Dubai in the UAE on 2033 Emirati married woman (study in which the degree of kinship between the wife and her husband, and between her parents have been recorded) showed that 50.5% of them were married to relatives, and that marriage between first cousins was the most common pattern accounting to 26.2% of marriages. This study also showed that the phenomenon was on the rise, with consanguineous marriage rate rising between the two generations from 39% to 50.5%.¹³ This is also the case in other Arab countries such as Egypt, Sudan, Iraq, Libya, and Algeria.

The spread of this phenomenon and its continuation raises the question of the extent to which factors of social change influenced the phenomenon of consanguineous marriage.¹⁴

In fact, there are inconsistencies in the results of studies on this issue. For example, a study on the population of the city of Riyadh confirmed the spread of consanguineous marriage while Osman study¹⁵ on consanguineous marriage in the Syrian society applied to a sample of married couples in urban and in rural areas revealed that the percentage of consanguineous marriages in urban areas reached 30.3% of marriages i.e. it was less than the percentage in rural areas, which accounted for 39.8%. On the other hand, another study on the Moroccan society showed more obvious results that consanguineous marriage widespread in rural areas and poor urban areas with rural background.¹⁶ This result also appeared in Yemen, where a correlation was found between lives in rural areas, low level of education and consanguineous marriage.

These results also agreed with the results of a study on the Kuwaiti society that showed that the percentage of consanguineous marriages rose in areas inhabited by Bedouin new to urbanization and who still cling to the customs and traditions. We can conclude from these results that the more the economic and social conditions are inappropriate the more consanguineous marriage percentage goes up, and that the more manifestations of urbanization and development see light the more this percentage drops. However, there is another study by Kalat made in 1989 on the population of the city of Beirut that revealed that

consanguineous marriage was not a phenomenon restricted only to rural life, and that the hypothesis of a contradiction between the forms of urbanization and consanguineous marriage cannot be supported. Most of the studies also showed that consanguineous marriage still widespread in Arab cities, although it was most prevalent in rural areas; this indicates that these communities are still in transition and that urbanization factors did not complete their role in bringing about the change.

Furthermore, few studies showed a change in the practice of consanguineous marriage or its preference depending on the education level or age. For example, a study on the impact of urbanization and westernization on the family system in the Kuwaiti society showed that only 20% of undergraduates are opposed to consanguineous marriage despite the fact that most of the respondents pointed out that such marriage was a widespread phenomenon among their relatives, while the study of Al-Ghanim¹⁷ upon sample of female students from Qatar University showed the prevalence of consanguineous marriage among 54.4% of married female students, 66% of them were married to a first cousin; this indicates that consanguineous marriage is prevalent among the younger generations in the Qatari society.

Ibrahim Al-Obeidi¹⁸ study in Saudi society with two samples: the parents and their sons, showed that consanguineous marriage still constituted a significant percentage of marriages in the community, and that the preference of consanguineous marriage was higher within the younger age groups and decreased the more the respondents had a higher level of education. Similarity, Tadmouri¹⁹ study showed that consanguineous marriage still widespread among recent generations in Qatar, Yemen and the United Arab Emirates.

Bener & Al-Ali²⁰ study conducted on Qatari society also showed that there was an increase in consanguineous marriage rate between generations from 41.8% in the previous generation to 54% in the current generation. However, a study on the Bahraini society showed that marriage between relatives was high, whether in the current generation or the parents' generation, but found a clear difference between the two generations and noted the emergence of signs of a downward trend with the current generation in the resort to this type of marriage.²¹ Contrary to that, a study conducted on the Palestinian community in 2010 also found that women who married early tended more to prefer consanguineous marriage than relatively older married women.¹⁵

In any case, and despite some inconsistencies in the results of the studies on consanguineous marriage in the region, we continue to witness this phenomenon among young people. This raises questions about the effectiveness of factors such as education and urbanization in changing the concepts of marriage between generations. It also emphasizes the continuation of the cultural structures that promote consanguineous marriage, and the disparity between countries in the spread of this marriage pattern and in the type of the social and economic environments in which it appears. At a time when Gulf Arab states began to witness an essential change in urban environments with the spread of education and an integration of technological developments at work and in daily life; we see the social structures that determine the ways of marriage (such as the tribe and the extended family) still present and effective, operating as a network of social protection for individuals. As for the other Arab countries that witnessed social changes in an early stage and saw traditional social structures falling back with the emergence of the middle class in the cities, they are experiencing there a decline in consanguineous marriage with it remaining prevalent though in rural areas and among low-education groups.^{22,23}

However, the high population growth rates in rural areas and poor neighbourhoods of the Arab cities, with the continuing spread of poverty and low level of education, have reduced the effects of social change at all levels. In light of this, it became difficult to monitor significant changes in the practice of this pattern of marriage because of the continuation of the conditions promoting its spread within both the educated sectors and between generations.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest to declare.

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