ROADS LESS TRAVELED IN MIDDLE EAST ANTHROPOLOGY—AND NEW PATHS IN GENDER ETHNOGRAPHY

MARCIA C. INHORN

ABSTRACT

Marcia C. Inhorn is the recipient of the 2013 Middle East Distinguished Scholar Award, given by the Middle East Section (MES) of the American Anthropological Association. This biennial award was established in 2006 to recognize the efforts of “a senior scholar in Middle Eastern anthropology who is an outstanding academic in terms of scholarly publications and service to Middle Eastern anthropology.” The MES Award Committee wrote to Inhorn: “Our committee greatly values your efforts as a scholar, a mentor, and a leader who has been deeply invested in the anthropology of the Middle East. We very much value your impressive pioneering and important work on medical anthropology, science and reproductive technologies, the anthropology of gender, and religion in the Middle East. Your thick ethnographic accounts of the lives of men and women who struggle with infertility and how they appropriate different discourses and technologies in their quest for conception as well as your engagement with broader theories and concerns in anthropology have been very valuable contributions to our field. We also greatly value your service to the anthropology of the Middle East and leading role in making our discipline more visible in different institutions and organizations, including MESA as well as your committed work with the Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies. In addition, we deeply appreciate your mentoring of students and junior faculty. As was communicated by one of your students, you are renowned among graduate students and
recent PhDs 'as one of the best mentors in the field' for your 'support, enthusiasm, and warmth.' On behalf of the MES Distinguished Scholar Award Committee, I would like to offer our heartfelt congratulations and warmly invite you to give our Distinguished Lecture at the MES Business Meeting during the AAA's 2013 Annual Meetings, and we look forward to celebrating your work and contributions to our field.” Inhorn's Distinguished Lecture reflects on the state of Middle East anthropology, including ten directions for the future. New paths in Middle East gender ethnography are highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

Middle East anthropologists have an important role to play in the future of Middle East studies, especially if they venture down some “roads less traveled.” My own trajectory in Middle East anthropology has been on a relatively untraveled road. I am a medical anthropologist, trained in the University of California, Berkeley/University of California, San Francisco joint program in medical anthropology in the 1980s. At that time, there were very, very few medical anthropologists doing fieldwork in the Middle East. Thus, my dissertation project on infertility and social suffering among poor urban Egyptian women was regarded as particularly bizarre. In fact, when I went to see one of my professors at Berkeley, who shall remain nameless, I was asked: “Of all of the important problems in the Middle East, you would go over there to study that?”

But I took this as a challenge. My first fieldwork in a rural Egyptian village on a devastating form of blinding eye disease called trachoma convinced me that childlessness, too, was a profound form of gendered suffering for Egyptian women. By the time I arrived in Alexandria to start my dissertation fieldwork, in vitro fertilization (IVF) had entered Egypt, and the first Alexandrian IVF baby was born in 1991 in the same public maternity hospital where I conducted my fieldwork (Inhorn 1994, 1996).

Since then, IVF in the Middle East has flourished, making the Middle Eastern IVF industry one of the strongest in the world today (Inhorn 2003a, 2003b, 2012a). Thus, my seemingly unimportant topic of infertility and assisted reproduction has led me into numerous Middle
Eastern countries and social fields. Through infertility and IVF, I have studied Middle Eastern gender relations, including marriage, sexuality, masculinity, consanguinity, and patriarchy, the latter of which is being unseated (Inhorn 1996, 2012a). I have also learned a tremendous amount about the world of medicine and Islam in the Middle East, including the fascinating domain of "Islamic bioethics" (Brockopp and Eich 2008, Clarke 2009). My University of Oxford colleague, Soraya Tremayne, and I have recently published an edited collection on Islam and Assisted Reproductive Technologies: Sunni and Shia Perspectives (Inhorn and Tremayne 2012), which showcases this emerging work. In other words, the medical anthropology of the Middle East is now a burgeoning field. As of now, there are exactly forty-six book-length ethnographies by medical anthropologists of the Middle East, on topics ranging from family planning (Ali 2002, Kanaaneh 2002) to mental illness (Dabbagh 2005, Mostafa 2008) to organ transplantation (Hamdy 2012, Jacob 2012, Sanal 2011). The anthropology of reproduction has been a particular robust area of scholarship, with nearly half of all medical ethnographies devoted to gender and reproduction (see Table 1).

However, it has not always been this way. In her seminal essay, "Zones of Theory in the Anthropology of the Arab World," Lila Abu-Lughod (1989), the first winner of this Middle East Distinguished Scholar Award, challenged the discipline's obsession with particular ethnographic "prestige zones" (especially Morocco under the influence of Clifford Geertz), and particular "zones of theory" that were overwhelming Middle East anthropology at the time. According to Abu-Lughod, these zones of theory included tribalism and segmentary lineage theory; harem theory, or the presumed "private" space relegated to Middle Eastern women; and Islam, which she called the "theoretical metonym" for the Arab world. She lamented the relative poverty of anthropological theory on political economy and class, or the anthropology of emotions. In her provocative essay, she beseeched the Middle East anthropological discipline to "reform" itself through attention to history and power.

I argue, nearly twenty-five years later, that Middle East anthropology has yet to break out sufficiently from its theoretical and ethnographic shackles. As anthropologists, we are still operating within narrow geographical "prestige zones" and limited conceptual "zones of
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theory." I have been keeping close track of all of the ethnographies of the Middle East, written over the past sixty years. Of approximately 470 book-length, English-language ethnographies—exactly fifty of which have been published since 2012—the vast majority focus on only six Middle Eastern nations, or what I would call the ethnographic “mainstream” locations of Israel and Palestine and their interaction (85 books), Egypt (75), Morocco (69), Iran (42), and Turkey (38). A second tier of ethnographic “alternative” countries include Sudan (28), Lebanon (26), Yemen (25), Afghanistan (20), Saudi Arabia (16), Algeria (14), and Jordan (13), with at least ten books on each country, although many of them are quite old and outdated. Geopolitically crucial countries such as Syria (12) and Iraq (11), the countries of twenty-first-century conflict, as well as most of the countries involved in the so-called Arab Spring—including Libya (9), Tunisia (5), and Bahrain (2)—have been much less studied by anthropologists, creating huge gaps in our knowledge as scholars and in our ability to shed light on the contemporary situations in those countries. Furthermore, the anthropology of the Arab Gulf is still in a fairly inchoate state of development. Although Yemen has been a traditional anthropological prestige zone for mostly male anthropologists, the small petro-rich states of the Arab Gulf are only beginning to receive attention, with work focusing primarily on transnational and migrant communities in those countries (Gardner 2010, Longva 2001, Mahdavi 2011, Mantha et al. 2012, Vora 2013).

Moreover, works on the original “zones of theory” outlined by Lila Abu-Lughod—namely, gender (qua veiled women), tribalism, and Islam—continue to form a kind of “holy triumvarite,” comprising nearly half of the entire anthropological corpus. I argue that there are three other zones of heightened emphasis in Middle East anthropology: first, numerous “ethnographies of place,” namely, villages, towns, urban quarters, ethnic enclaves, migrant neighborhoods, and new cities; second, and related to this, minority studies, often of particular ethnic or religious minority groups living in particular enclave communities; and finally, a large corpus of scholarship on politics and the Middle Eastern state, including older studies of tribal politics and new, emerging scholarship on the state and nationalism. Taken together, these six broad themes—gender-qua-women, tribalism, Islam, communities, minorities, and politics—are taken up in 400 of the 470
ethnographies, or exactly 85 percent of all the books we have written!

It is time, I argue, to move elsewhere—to travel down some different roads. To that end, at the 2011 Middle East Studies Association Annual Meeting, MESA President Suad Joseph and I organized a mini-conference entitled “Anthropology of the Middle East: A New Millennium.” We invited approximately forty Middle East anthropologists to organize panels on some of the lesser studied topics, and ultimately, sixteen anthropological panels were chosen by the MESA Program Committee.

Here, I would like to reflect briefly on what I believe are some of the most important roads less traveled in Middle East anthropology. I want to highlight ten scholarly paths, hoping that younger-generation anthropologists will take up these new directions in the twenty-first century.

WAR AND REFUGEESM

Unfortunately, the Middle East is in the midst of unprecedented political violence, including a devastating war in Syria, ongoing violent conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, and sporadic episodes of political violence resulting from the 2011 uprisings in many countries across the Middle East. The United States instigated war in both Iraq and Afghanistan during this millennium, leaving a path of destruction in both countries. But Syria is currently the most war-torn nation, with an estimated 150,000 Syrians killed, 2.5 million refugees outside the country, 4.25 million internally displaced persons, a total of 9.3 million, or 42 percent of the Syrian population, who have fled their homes, and more than 6.8 million in need of urgent humanitarian aid, the majority of whom are children (Barnard 2014, United Nations High Commission for Refugees 2014). Anthropologists need to respond to this situation. We need to study the plight of Syrian and other Middle Eastern refugees, including their flight to other countries, the humanitarian efforts being directed toward them, and the many consequences of war for those left inside the country and exposed to the ongoing violence. Anthropologists of the Middle East have not been particularly brave in this regard. We have not been inside most countries during times of war, and thus we know relatively little about the immediate effects of war on Middle Eastern citizens. A small anthropological literature on the after-effects of war
and other forms of political violence has emerged (e.g., Al-Ali and Pratt 2009, Allen 2013, Fábos 2007, Hastrup 2013, Jok 2001, King 2013, Monsutti 2012, Volk 2010). However, given the current levels of new violence, we need to do much, much more. We must muster the courage, the strength of our convictions, and find acceptable anthropological ways to enter war zones and refugee camps—not as war reporters or “embedded” anthropologists, but as scholars of human suffering and adversity, who are there to examine the human toll of new states of violence in the region (Inhorn 2008).

MASCULINITY STUDIES, INCLUDING MARITAL ETHNOGRAPHY

In times of war, men are called to fight. From these military conflicts, there has emerged a small anthropological literature on “military masculinity,” especially in Israel and Palestine (Abufarha 2009, Bucaille 2004, Grassiani 2013, Kanaan 2008, Peete 1992, 2005). However, compared to other world regions, and especially Latin America, Middle East anthropology is painfully behind in a broader approach to masculinity studies. As the editor of the Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies (JMEWS), I feel this dearth of masculinity work acutely. Yet, our most accessed article on Project Muse between July 1, 2012, and June 30, 2013, was by Paul Amar (2011) on “Middle East Masculinity Studies: Discourses of ‘Men in Crisis,’ Industries of Gender in Revolution.” My newest book, The New Arab Man: Emergent Masculinities, Technologies, and Islam in the Middle East (Inhorn 2012a), represents my own attempt to move Middle East gender studies in a new direction—not away from women’s studies per se, but toward men as men in the Middle East today. Inspired by the work of Marxist scholar Raymond Williams (1978) on “emergence” and R. W. Connell (1995) on “hegemonic masculinity,” I offer the new trope of “emergent masculinities” to capture changing practices of masculinity in the contemporary Middle East. Emergent masculinities encapsulate change over the male life course as men age, change over the generations as male youth grow to adulthood, and changes in social history that involve men in transformative social processes such as the Arab uprisings. In the Middle East today, many men are engaged in a self-conscious critique of local gender norms, unseat-
ing patriarchy in the process. Part of this critique involves the desire to share companionate responsibility for reproduction and parenting with their wives, and to more broadly engage in what I have called “conjugal connectivity,” or compassionate, committed, loving marital partnerships (Inhorn 1996, 2012a).

Indeed, anthropologists are still largely engaged in “separate spheres” research, with women talking to women and men talking to men. I argue that we need to work with Middle Eastern couples in what I would characterize as a new “marital ethnography” (cf. Inhorn 2012a, forthcoming). We also need to challenge our untested assumptions about the impossibility of cross-gender ethnographic research. In fact, I note with some degree of delight that, of the handful of ethnographies explicitly dealing with Middle Eastern manhood, most are written by women scholars (Ghannam 2013, Inhorn 2012a, Kanaaneh 2008, Naguib forthcoming, Schade-Poulsen 1999).

SEXUALITY STUDIES, INCLUDING LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER STUDIES

At the 2013 MESA meeting in New Orleans, Nefissa Naguib organized a panel on the “Anthropology of Men, Family and Parenting in the Contemporary Middle East.” At that panel, I gave a paper on male masturbation and semen collection as a mandatory but anxiety-provoking aspect of the IVF process (Inhorn 2013). I can tell you with some certitude that I am the only anthropologist—in fact, the only scholar—to have written an empirical article on male masturbation (Inhorn 2007; see also Inhorn 2012a). Yet, this is an important area of sexuality, and sexuality overall has been very poorly studied by anthropologists of the Middle East (Newman and Inhorn, forthcoming). We know very little about what we might call “lived sexuality,” including between men and women as married and unmarried couples. Fortunately, some younger-generation scholars are beginning to open the path of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender studies in the Middle East, including scholarship on lesbian boyat communities in the Gulf (Al-Qasimi 2012) and on gay male communities in countries such as Egypt (Walsh-Haines 2012), Iran (Shakhsari 2012), Lebanon (Gagné 2012, McCormick 2011), Tunisia (Collins 2012), and Turkey (Gorkemli
2012). But, with the exception of Pardis Mahdavi’s (2008) unique book, *Passionate Uprisings: Iran’s Sexual Revolution*, as well as her most recent book *Gridlock: Labor, Migration, and Human Trafficking in Dubai* (Mahdavi 2011), Middle East anthropologists are far behind in scholarship on sexuality. This is especially egregious in the era of HIV/AIDS. Although countries such as Iran and Afghanistan are in the midst of their own HIV epidemics, much of it intravenous drug-related (Griffin and Khoshnood 2010, Rahbar et al. 2004, Razzaghi et al. 2006), there is not a single ethnography on HIV/AIDS or its impact in the Middle East. It is time for Middle East anthropologists to be bold and bring sexuality into focus.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY STUDIES

As with sexuality, ethnographies of science and technology in the Middle East are rare. Middle East anthropology is decidedly out of touch with the cutting-edge discipline of science and technology studies, which has produced a decade’s worth of award-winning anthropological ethnographies from other parts of the world. I argue that the Middle East is in the midst of a technological revolution (Inhorn 2003b, 2012a, forthcoming). This is apparent not only in the realm of medicine (Clarke 2009, Hamdy 2012, Loeffler 2007, Maffi 2012, Sanal 2011), but in the areas of social media, the information technology sector in the Arab Gulf, nuclear technologies in Iran, transportation and aviation technologies across the region, and all of the technologies linked to natural resources such as water, natural gas, and petroleum (Inhorn forthcoming). Yet, with a few notable exceptions (Abu El-Haj 2012, Lotfalian 2004), there is little to nothing on these important subjects in our scholarly corpus. We need, for example, an anthropology of oil, which examines the industry itself, as well as how petro-economies are affecting both workers and citizens of petro-rich states (cf. Limbert 2010, for a notable exception).

ENVIRONMENTAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Linked to the study of oil, Middle East anthropology needs to join the new millennial field of environmental anthropology. In my view, en-
vironmental anthropology is fast becoming one of the major subfields of our discipline, much as medical anthropology has become, with its 1,600-member Society for Medical Anthropology. The Middle East is ripe for environmental anthropological analysis. Issues of water capacity, desalinization, desertification, nuclear power, sustainable agriculture, urban pollution, and environmental peace activism are just some of the obvious examples of topics with anthropological research potential (Bang 2009, Braverman 2009, Knudsen 2008, McKee 2011). Furthermore, we desperately need to study the environmental impacts of war in the region, including the use of toxic chemicals, as well as the use of radioactive depleted uranium in the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, leading to radioactive half-lives and disease outcomes that are just beginning to unfold (Inhorn 2008, Inhorn and Kobeissi 2006).

LEGAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Whether Middle Eastern leaders will ever be prosecuted for war crimes is something that we cannot foresee. Yet, an engaged anthropology of human rights would be concerned with this issue. Susan Slyomovics (2005) and Kevin Dwyer (1991) have both written powerful books on human rights violations and activism. Yet, their works stand almost alone. We need Middle East anthropologists to study human rights violations and redress, especially in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings. We need to investigate humanitarian efforts across the region, including the work of external agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Atshan 2013, Rogozen-Soltar 2012, Willen 2005). Many anthropologists today are studying the work of NGOs in other parts of the world. Yet, to my knowledge, there is a single ethnography, Markets of Dispossession by Julia Elyachar (2005), which takes up the subject of NGO work in Egypt explicitly. We need more work on NGO activism, including by Islamic charitable organizations (Clark 2003, Deeb 2006, White 2003). In general, we need a vibrant legal anthropology of the Middle East, which focuses on human rights, the rule of law, various forms of legal activism and redress, and humanitarianism in the Middle East (Agrama 2012, Bisharat 1990, Fluehr-Lobban 1987, Ginat 2012, Hajjar 2005, Rosen 1989, Starr 1991, 1997).
ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Just as legal anthropology is underdeveloped, so is the economic anthropology of the Middle East. This was noted by Lila Abu-Lughod in 1989, when she asked Middle East anthropologists to engage seriously with issues of social class. Since then, many anthropologists have worked, at least indirectly, on issues of poverty and marginalization. Yet, we need studies focused explicitly on social class and human dignity. We also need a more engaged anthropology of work in the Middle East that explores economic survival at the poverty level in both urban and rural areas (Coburn 2011, Crawford 2008, Kapchan 1996, Rabbo 2005, White 1994). Rural livelihoods in the Middle East have always been important, but attention to rural areas has been somewhat lost in Middle East anthropology because of fascination with cities and all that goes on there, including revolutions. There has always been some anthropological interest in informal economies of the Middle East (Hoodfar 1996, Ilahiane 2004, McMurray 2000, Scheele 2012). However, I would like to see much more anthropological engagement with Middle East formal economies. In a new anthropology of work, we must attend to middle-class issues of professional development, wealth accumulation, and participation in the banking sector, entrepreneurship, emergent industries, and other economic venues (Barsoum 2004, Rosenfeld 2004). I recently completed a book, *Cosmopolitan Conceptions: IVF Sojourns in Global Dubai* (Inhorn forthcoming), which examines the new medical tourism sector in the Emirates, including the region’s first “medi-city,” and the emergence of a globally mobile, cosmopolitan, professional class—men and women who are making their homes and careers in places like Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha. Dubai is opening the Al Makhtoum International Airport, which will have the capacity for 160 million travelers each year and will be surrounded by its own residential community. Qatar intends to host the World Cup in 2022. Dubai has finished a luxurious new metro. These are interesting economic developments, which Middle East anthropologists should be following.

EDUCATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Linked to economic anthropology, we need a robust field of educational
anthropology that focuses on the ways in which schools are, or are not, preparing Middle Eastern youth for the jobs of the future. In some parts of the region, there has been a proliferation of international private schools for the children of elites. But what this means for the government schooling sector remains unclear. Anthropologists of the Middle East need to be studying schooling—from elementary to post-graduate higher education. In addition to the classic work of Gregory Starrett (1997) on Islamic education in Egypt, new anthropological attention to this domain is beginning to emerge (Bar Shalom 2006, Kaplan 2006, Ozgur 2012). Indeed, Fida J. Adely’s (2012) new book *Gendered Paradoxes: Educating Jordanian Women in Nation, Faith, and Progress* won the 2013 JMEWS Book Award. Adely reports on the regional trend of women’s higher entrance rates into universities across the region—a “gendered paradox” that has most interesting consequences for both women’s and men’s lives in the Middle East.

**LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY**

Tied to the anthropology of education, we need more work on the anthropology of language, including the teaching of multiple languages in contemporary Middle Eastern schools. Three of my favorite colleagues are Moroccan Berbers (El Mokhtar Ghambou of the International University of Rabat, Hsain Ihaliene of the University of Kentucky, and Fatima Sadiqi of the University of Fez). As young people, all of them had to master two forms of Arabic (*fusha* and *darija*), as well as French, English, and Amizigh, the language of the Berber home. The Berber language is now officially recognized in Morocco after years of government suppression. Katherine Hoffman’s (2008) book, *We Share Walls: Language, Land and Gender in Berber Morocco*, provides a fine exemplar of Middle East linguistic anthropology devoted to this topic. However, overall, there are relatively few anthropological studies of language in the Middle East, including ethnic struggles to retain minority languages in areas of North Africa and Kurdistan. Only a handful of scholars work in this area (Beeman 1986, 2008, Haeri 2005, Miller 2007, Terc 2011, Wagner 1994), even though linguistic anthropology is one of the four main subfields of our larger discipline. Thus, we need more young scholars to take the linguistic anthropological path, showing the
power of language in multiple sectors of social life in the Middle East.

ANTHROPOLOGY OF ART

Finally, and on a creative note, I want to turn to the anthropology of art. There is a mini-boom in Middle East ethnomusicology, with at least a dozen ethnographies devoted to the “anthropology of sound” (Goodman 2005, Jankowsky 2010, Kapchan 2007, Jones 2010, McDonald 2013, Schade-Poulsen 1999, Shannon 2006, Stokes 1993, van Nieuwkerk 1997). Several Middle East anthropologists have also taken up film and television, spurred perhaps by Lila Abu-Lughod’s (2004) important work in this area. But there is much less attention to other art forms, including visual and fine arts. Jessica Winegar’s (2006) Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt provides a rare example in this vein. We need to focus on the traditional artisanal cultures of the Middle East, some of which are being lost, for example, as a result of war in Syria (McClellan 2011). We also need to study the emergence of new revolutionary art forms, including the dramatic emergence of stunning graffiti art in places like Egypt. There are also the “high arts” being showcased at various exhibitions in the Arab Gulf. From high to low, from dance to fine arts to film, we need a vibrant anthropology of art that captures the wonderful work of the creative geniuses living and working across the region.

FINAL THOUGHTS FOR A VIBRANT MIDDLE EAST ANTHROPOLOGY

I end by offering practical and pragmatic suggestions for activating scholarship in these areas. First, for those anthropologists working in research universities that support Middle East area studies centers, the U.S. Department of Education Title VI grant that supports these centers is renewed every four years, including in 2014. Anthropologists should apply for funding to support small workshops, larger conferences, film series, exhibits, community outreach events, and Middle East anthropology programming more generally.

Second, I urge more senior Middle East anthropologists to take the leadership of these centers, which tend to be dominated by historians and
political scientists. If we are to increase anthropological creativity, then we need to take a major seat at the Title VI funding and directing table.

Similarly, we need anthropologists to assume the editorships of the major Middle East journals. Over the past ten years, both *JMEWS* and the *Review of Middle East Studies (ROMES)* have been edited by anthropologists (including me, Sondra Hale, and Gregory Starrett). The *International Journal of Middle East Studies* under the editorship of historian Beth Baron has also been very "anthropology-friendly." It is my hope that the younger generation of Middle East anthropologists will look to editorship as a major career goal.

Anthropologists also need to become public scholars, who write op-eds and appear on media talk shows about the region. Most of the Middle East media pundits are clearly not anthropologists. But I am convinced of the merits of speaking to the broader public through my own participation last year in "The Op-Ed Project," designed to encourage women and minority scholars to become "thought leaders" through finding their "public voices." I wrote an editorial for *Slate* on changing manhood in the Middle East (Inhorn 2012b), which generated some interesting feedback and expanded my friendship circle. I encourage other anthropologists to write more publicly about their work as well.

I also invite anthropologists to participate in the new MESA organization called the Association of Middle East Anthropology (AMEA), which was created, in part, to bring anthropology back in a more robust way to MESA. Along with former MESA President Suad Joseph, I am one of the honorary cofounders of AMEA. I hope to see many anthropologists at future AMEA meetings at MESA.

Finally, we need a stand-alone, international conference on the anthropology of the Middle East, which would bring Middle East anthropologists from around the world to a single community-building conference. In my view, a group of younger scholars should work to organize such a conference, at a time and place apart from either the AAA or MESA meetings. This would be a wonderful goal for members of both the AAA’s Middle East Section and MESA’s new Association of Middle East Anthropology. With that in mind for the future, I thank you for this wonderful honor, which you have so kindly bestowed upon me.
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