

## **Close Relationships: Incest and Inbreeding in Classical Arabic Literature**

*Geert Jan van Gelder*

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The two taboo concepts of incest and inbreeding are not so easy to detect in classical Arabic literature. True, a persistent reader of classical Arabic literature, whether belletristic or historical, is bound to meet unexpectedly rude remarks on the incestuous habits of one historical figure or the other (most often a non-Muslim) while reading a scholarly discussion on historical events. Nevertheless, the sources do not address incest and inbreeding in a straightforward manner. Centuries of pious and even sanctimonious discourse may have covered these topics with a thick layer of dust, a layer that Geert Jan van Gelder toils to remove in his comprehensive monograph *Close Relationships*.

As an illustrious specialist in classical Arabic belles-lettres, van Gelder recruits his command in the vast scope of sixth- to nineteenth-century Arabic literature to reveal a surprisingly large amount of stories, anecdotes, and sayings about incest and inbreeding hidden in the well-known canonical literature. By doing so, he proposes a resolution to the presupposed contradiction between strict taboos against incest in pre-Islamic and Islamic societies and the role that incest played in reality. By drawing selectively from the written sources, he produces an uneven but still convincing conceptual blend showing the reciprocal relationship between literature and life. What may perplex the reader is the author's perspective of literature overlapping reality, or vice versa.

One of van Gelder's motivations for writing the book is to analyze ancient customs in pre-Islamic and Islamic societies by adopting psychological, anthropological, and literal perspectives. He locates himself in relation to modern interpreters of incest, like Sigmund Freud, Émile Durkheim, B. H. Stricker, Edward Westermarck, and Edward William West, just to mention a few. Whereas on the one hand he seeks ideas behind the texts of belles-lettres, historical fragments, myths, religious and legal texts, on the other he revels in a strong language of jests, anecdotes, songs of semi-vernacular and vernacular origin, thus brilliantly building up a sort of reality of his own. Van Gelder is cautious enough to discourage the reader from taking this seriously: "Literature is never a true mirror of society and reality" (p. 185).

The book is composed of four chapters. Chapter 1 deals with attitudes in pre-Islamic and Islamic Arab societies toward inbreeding, especially their awareness of its biological hazards, in view of the favorable status of marriage between cousins, which is not considered incestuous by Middle Eastern standards even today. The pre-Islamic wisdom, drawn from close observation of animals' behavior, especially camels and horses, is well reflected in pre-Islamic poetry, as van Gelder shows (p. 18), and in medieval prose, which is dedicated to describing nomadic life. Thus, "Seek strangers, then you will not produce stunted offsprings" is almost a commandment (p. 14). However, this recommendation, along with warnings that growing up together in a tribe or a close family is supposed to form some impediment to sexual attraction, was ignored to some degree by later Arab societies (p. 23).

Chapter 2 deals with the Arab view of close-kin marriages in non-Arab communities. Based upon a close reading and analysis of several medieval texts purportedly written to establish the Arab's superiority over other communities, this chapter provides several interesting insights. For example, the Persians were perceived as the epitome of close-kin marriages; however, "they are almost never described as suffering from the physical and intellectual degeneration that may result" (p. 62). As for the Jews, their very rare custom of levirate (viz., the practice of marrying the widow of one's childless brother to maintain his line, as required by ancient Hebrew law) is described by al-Mas'udi as an incestuous act of a father marrying his daughter. Therefore, they are seen as "uglier, weaker and more stupid than the Christians as a result of their inbreeding" (p. 62). The same accusations appear in heresiographic literature with regard to heretical Islamic sects.

Chapter 3 deals with the Islamic regulations concerning incest. Based upon the customs of the pre-Islamic Arabs, these include the unique rule of forbidding marriage between milk-brothers. Islamic historians, such as the ninth-century author Ibn Habib, strove to prove that Islam made the rules stricter by forbidding the marriage of stepmothers and sons, as well as the marriage of two sisters simultaneously. At the same time, he emphasized that because of their healthy instincts, the pre-Islamic Arabs were very close to Islamic regulations (pp. 78-79). The chapter bases its discussion upon the two verses from *Surat al-Nisa'* (4:22-23), which specify the cases of forbidden marriages, and a wide range of scholarly interpretations from the four Sunni legal schools.

When it comes to legal terminology, it is very odd to discover that there is no single Arabic term for incest. The legal manuals discuss fornication (*zina'*) in general, but not incest. On the other hand, the collected fatwas

often reflect everyday practice and thus are an excellent source for depicting a quite reliable picture of incest.

Chapter 4, an important critical literal aid, contains a brief but dense synopsis of both ancient and more current literature on the theme of incest. The author describes in detail poems with blunt 2-5 letters words equivalent to “the four letter word” in English (p. 131ff), antinomian poems, lampoons, jests, and stories from the *Thousand and One Nights*, along with stories of Biblical figures, that are found in the Arabic sources. Van Gelder deals with the lowest and the loftiest language, as well as with the bawdy and the canonized genres, with the same ironic and tongue-in-cheek tone. In that respect, it is quite disappointing to see that the story of the pre-Islamic poet and hero Ta’abbata Sharran, which provides an example of Oedipal relationships on the Freudian model, is mentioned only briefly while the reader is cordially requested to find his/her way to S. Pinckney-Stetkevych’s article on the subject.

Van Gelder’s book, which fills a lacuna in literary research, is a refreshingly written book that has the courage to popularize scholars’ discourse on incest and inbreeding. Its relevance to politics, literature, philosophy, and culture, which is more than obvious, stimulates further research in closely related areas of inquiry and themes.

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