



Exploring gender: Islamic Perspectives on Breastfeeding

Shivram Balkrishan

Govt. College, Shimla-6, HP, INDIA

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Abstract

*The tradition of infant fosterage, *ridā'a* or, "milk kinship" seemingly esoteric and intricate topic although receives extensive treatment in the Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) of the classical jurists (*faqih*)—hitherto lingered a virtually unknown ethnographic fact. The description "milk kinship" itself is persuasive. Major focus of the present study lies in its stress on the feminine substance of milk which does introduce a gender balance in the kinship system whose idiom is cast in patrilineal terms by which genealogical links are agnatic and agnatic ties are bound by nerve.*

Keywords: Qur'an, Hadith, Muslim jurists, breastfeeding, milk kinship.

Introduction

Social and Historical anthropologists possibly by and large conscious of the former implication of "Milk kinship" created during infant fosterage prominently accepted all through the ancient Mediterranean where it became significant as a jurally acknowledged acquaintance of cliental association predominantly in Islam. Hitherto there is no ample review of such fosterage from a comparative historical viewpoint, nor has its archival credentials been passably gathered for examination. The present paper intends to address this circumvent but from women locale using the example of the most "natural" relation of all, the one between mother and infant during the period of breastfeeding. Who breastfeeds, for how long, and with what type of support, deference, and recompense can tell us a great deal about social feelings toward childhood and the mother-child acquaintance, as well as the importance positioned on motherhood in common. The degree to which the father alternately offers common support for mother and child or controls and limits the breastfeeding affiliation, for instance, can contour the father-child and husband-wife relationship in the long term. There was as much religious implication as there were tactical reasons for it.

Forms of Kinship in Islam

Kinship is a central sphere in human being and is an introductory systematic instrument in anthropology. Kinship beliefs and relationships among Muslim are intense in feelings and binding in obligations such that any dialogue about kinship leans to be intuitive. In current Islamic legal dialogue, both Sunni and Shiite, *qarābah* ("closeness") is the overarching type within which the range of lawful sub-categories of kinship (and affinity) are included: namely, *nasab* (filiation, "consanguinity"), *muṣāharah* (affinity) and *riḍā'a* ("milk kinship"). A member in relation of either type, then, is *qarīb*, a "close" individual, and is owed different rights and has equivalent duties. The term *riḍā'a* (*al-riḍā'a* in Arabic, *shiri* or

reza'i in Persian) represents the relationship involving a child and a woman – not its own mother – who nursed it¹. In its legal sense *riḍā'a* means a child suckling milk from the breast of woman for a definite point in time professedly phrased as the stage of fosterage². Although milk kinship vary from the institutions of fosterage it's often referred as "fosterage" and generally classified by English translators of the medieval chronicles as being an example of the same institution³.

Breastfeeding has a religious base in Islam. The Qur'an advocates that the mother suckle her offspring for 2 years if feasible, and states that each infant has the right to be breastfed (verse 2:233). If the mother is incapable to suckle, she and the father can commonly agree to let a wet nurse feed the child (verse 2:233). The practice of wet nursing, resulting milk kinship, as we learn from a variety of sources – the Bible, the Code of Hammurabi, Egyptian papyri, Greek and Roman literature – was indeed deeply ingrained in ancient cultures⁴. The practice in wide-ranging was buoyant by various, sometimes contrasting, inspirations, depending on the social group and the individual, economic, and social conditions⁵. It could in fact range from the inconvenience of a temporary withdrawal from social duties to anxieties about the aesthetic consequences of nursing. There are several references in the *Qur'ān* to breastfeeding, and it is abundantly clear that milk from mothers and wet nurses was as important in pre-Islamic society as it was/is elsewhere.

Breastfeeding and Islam

The issue of the *Qur'ān*'s approval of wet nurses was understood to mean that no mother could be forced to suckle her baby unless this meant the nursing's health would be endangered. *Qur'ān* commentators observe: the injunction ("those who bear children suckle their children..." *Qur'ān* II: 233)⁶ was projected to support [rather than compel mother to suckle]⁷. Muslim jurists in their collections of positive law

(*furu al-fiqh*), *fatawa* (opinions of points of law) and *nawazil* (real life cases and the way they resolved them) from the eight-ninth centuries A.D. onwards devoted long and detailed discussions on wet nursing the fact that the *Qur'an* had already touched upon this issue⁸. Medieval *Qur'an* commentator al-Razi (d.1209 AD) describes under what circumstances infants could be handed over to the wet nurses (Commentary on *Qur'an* II:233)⁹

If a woman married another and fulfilling of her duties toward that husband (namely, her duties to have sexual relations with him and to bear him children) prevents her from suckling; if her husband divorced her and she is averse to suckling in order [to remain attractive enough so] that another man will marry her; if she refuses to accept the child with the intention to hurt her former husband for having divorced her and to vex him; if she become ill or the flow of her milk stops; [onset of another pregnancy while child was still being breastfed]. In each of these cases, it is permissible to turn from mother to another woman on the condition that a wet nurse can be found and that the child accepts her milk. If not, it is the mother's duty to suckle them¹⁰.

Anthropologists have laid emphasis on breast-feeding rightly as far more than a simply biological act, it is an characteristic of "mothering" the culturally created bonding between mother/ or wet nurse and child, grounded in specific historical and cultural practices.⁴ Infant feeding as a matter of course entails not only the physical survival of the child but also complex forms of socialization of mother and child.

According to several *Qur'anic* traditions and in subsequent commentaries milk and blood enforce similar relationships, similar privileges, and similar restrictions and regulations (e. g. *Qur'an* IV:23)¹¹. Indeed, the *Qur'anic* rule is obviously based on the idea that milk is somehow formed from the blood of the womb, while there are also statements in *hadiths* reports, as said below, that make a connection between the wet nurse's milk and her husband semen¹². Hence the breastfeeding practice in Islam comes into view to be a culturally distinctive – but by no means unique. We find its comparable magnification as an impediment to marriage in canon law of numerous eastern Christian churches and its equal in the juridical development of spiritual kinship in a different place in Christendom¹³. However its widespread amplification on analogy with natal kinship in classical Islamic text may also be attributed to its strategic affiliative role as a alternative to jural adoption (*tabanni*) after this was prohibited by *Qur'anic* revelation (*Qur'an* XXXIII:4-5). *Hadith* customs evidently specify a common manipulative deployment of milk kinship as a ways of dodging *hijab* seclusion. Preponderance of occurrences of milk kinship cited in *hadith* served so as to enlarge the network of relatives on whom one could rely for support and assistance¹⁴. As other societies used mechanisms such as adoption and godparenthood when they wanted to create legal pseudo-familial relations with

certain people or groups outside the original framework of kinship, Islam emphasized the substance of milk relationships.

The practice, in actual fact, was so significant as to have aggravated wide-ranging debate in the Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) of the classical jurists (*faqih*). The present study explores a juridical-cultural history of *ridā'a* in Islamic societies from a woman angel, the main nurturer of a child, who finds herself in a distinctive situation in relation to her children, her husband, and society in common. Interested in the intellectual and cultural construction of breastfeeding, the study has scrutinized only selected legal texts, which, by their nature, are normative and theoretical, do not directly express sociological realities or regional differences, and were essentially written by men; and medical treatises, which have similar attributes. These texts were chosen not so much as sources of social history but rather as means by which to access the moral and symbolic world in which parents, infants and their nurses lived.

Historical enquiry on breastfeeding in general is stalled by the fact that there are nearly no records of breastfeeding or wet nursing. This is not amazing, since those aspects of life that are most vital and most proverbial generally do not leave written evidence. However if one espouse a approach; by examining legal papers and treatises, much light could be shed on matters such as women's prominence in the family, the nature of their relationships with their children, the nature of relations with wet nurses, as well as power arrangements within the family. For instance, men not only controlled breastfeeding—it is the man who chooses and hires the wet nurse—women also participated to their advantage. Most of the medical and demographic literature concerning breastfeeding and nutrition is generally concerned with the welfare of children, not of women. The wet nursing, while regarded as the second best option, clearly offered an infant the obvious advantages of adequate nutrition. Men may also enjoy other privilege at the expense of women and children. In many states in medieval period when it was believed that sexual intercourse "spoiled the milk" middle-class husbands barred their wives from breastfeeding rather than relinquish their sexual privilege.⁷ The Islamic rules of Milk relationship do not amount to giving female milk the same status as male semen; "milk comes from the man"¹⁵.

Breastfeeding is mentioned six times in the *Qur'an* (II: 233, IV: 23, XXII: 2, XXVIII: 7and12, LXV: 6) apiece of which reflects, constant with the fortitude of *Qur'an*, anxiety for the helpless nursling. Islam's foundational legal texts (the *Qur'an*, early commentaries, and *Hadith*) in fact have added much to the ethics of the subject. Whilst analysing the grounding of these ethics with a view to discovering early attitudes towards and on gender issue we find that breastfeeding is viewed as a natural maternal act as well as a right, to the extent that period of nursing dictates the extent to which a divorce should be financially supported by her ex-husband. In terse, breastfeeding is a right of the infant and a right of the

mother, rights that must be acknowledged and maintained by the child's father, who was answerable for all nursing expenses. On the other hand, breastfeeding is not utterly obligatory, and should a mother be unable or averse to nurse, the father should provide a suitable wet nurse—for the duration desired by the husband or necessary for the infant. As for wet nursing, not only it is sanctioned, but monetary compensation for it is legitimized as well. Most considerably, in accordance with the general opinion of the Muslim commentators and jurists, the breast milk acts as an impediment to marriage, similar to blood, is universally recognized in Islamic law. To marry a relative by nursing is prohibited as a form of incest. This notion, which first appears in *Qur'an* IV: 23, was later developed in elaborate detail in *Hadith*. Expanding on this, early commentators conclude that a man is also forbidden from marrying his milk aunt, milk niece, milk daughter, and milk mother of his wife. The notion of 'sire's milk' (*laban al-fah l*) — the thought that the husband is the proprietor of the milk since his semen causes it to flow— only expands the circle. Though the *Qur'an* does not make clear why such relationships are prohibited, there is some suggestion in early medical thought that a woman's milk is a product of her blood, and so by ingesting it, a blood relationship is formed. The concept of *laban al-fahl* as developed in *hadith* literature was apparently stirred by ancient popular ('instinctive') ideas about generation, gestation, nursing and breeding, which held that it was the man's semen which causes flow of breast milk. The physiological explanation offered by Galen was that "while in the uterus we are not nourished by blood, and the source of milk is from blood undergoing a slight change in the breasts" – or, as a modern physician puts it metaphorically "the breast has evolved as the umbilical cord of the new born"¹⁶.

Being suckled together "creates fraternal bonds which have a widespread social and moral effect", as J. Chelhod writes (in *Encyclopedia of Islam*)¹⁷, and it is considered a "vital element" on a par with blood. While most specialists on women's issues in Islamic law know of this legal principle (*yuharramu min (a)'l-radā' mā yuharramu min(a)'l-wilāda'*) that can be derived from a *hadith* attributed to Prophet: "what is forbidden as a result of blood relationships is forbidden as a result of milk relationships as well". When looking into its social propositions it would yield some fascinating conclusion. The practical effects of this include pushing exogamy ever outward and thereby strengthening the Muslim community. Several played the milk prohibition to their advantage, in order to expand the pool of friends with whom they could be open and free, who might otherwise be forbidden to them, a practice that was censured. It may have been a deliberate method to make "adoption" possible and multiply ties of loyalty and filial duty. To expand a little more, in a society which does not recognize the notion of adoption, milk kinship could take on that role. It could also widen the network of those people on whom one could rely for assistance. The rules governing

meetings between a man and his *mahram* were less strict than those which applied to his relations with women eligible for marriage. Thus, the creation of a *mahram* relationship through nursing could extend the circle of men and women who were allowed to meet relatively freely, a practice which reportedly had been employed already by the Prophet's wives. As this was feared by some jurists to invite abuse, they introduced rules which established tie, for e.g., a minimum of five feeding sessions in order to validate a milk relationship and suckling had to be within the nursing age of less than two years, etc. Avner Giladi relates numerous such cases culled from fatwa collection¹⁸.

When we look in to the tradition of Arbo-Islamic medicine for providing a valuable scientific corollary to the juridical discourse surrounding breastfeeding we finds that Arab Muslim doctors supported maternal breast-feeding as healthful for both mother and child, but also supported wet nursing as a reasonable alternative when the mother was unable or unwilling to breastfeed for the duration desired by the husband or necessary for the infant. Physicians appear to have been responsive also of the immunogenic qualities of her milk. Animal milk was totally rejected as a possible nutritional source. Arabo-Islamic theories of pregnancy and nursing, like all of the Islamicate medical tradition, were taken from [Ancient] supposedly from the Greeks, specifically from Hippocrates and Galen, whose ideas were imported into Arabic between the ninth and eleventh centuries. Although no independent inquiry occurred it is well acknowledged that Arabo-Muslim medicine drew heavily from the ancients and Arabo-Islamic science took Greek science as a key starting point.

Gendering Wet Nursing

Milk, interpreted as a different form of the mother's blood, was seen to transmit not only nourishment but also central traits of character (*sifat al-radā*). This had consequences for the choice of wet nurse. Ideally, the doctors argued, a wet nurse should be a pious Muslim. Otherwise, anxious parents were warned, the infant could be irreversibly harmed by the polluted food and drink. Interestingly, jurists, who had to deal with social practice rather than medical theory, took a more realistic stance, emphasizing the potential harm to an infant by a negligent or morally dubious wet nurse but being less particular about her religion as such.

The high priority given by Islamic law to the infant's welfare, means that breastfeeding, if possible by one's mother, is highly encouraged. The notion which was repeated in Muslim medical writings, as for instance, in those of Al-Majusi in late tenth century¹⁹:

It is due that newborn infant sucks its mother's milk since this is the most appropriate milk for it and most suitable for its nature, provided that there is no disease in the mother to corrupt her

milk. This is so because the embryo is fed, while in its mother's womb, by her menstrual blood. When the infant is born, nature moves the blood to the breast, changing it into milk which it is nourished so as to ensure that ailment it is being fed will be similar to what it was given in the womb.

However, this has had implications for the relationship between the infant's parents, because sexual relations with a lactating woman were rejected by Muslim physicians and regarded with great ambivalence by jurists because of their assumed harm to the mother's milk flow. Similar to the European prohibitions of such relationships until the early modern times, this rejection was again based on Greek medical thought. Husbands, who were considered as those responsible for the welfare of both mother and infant, were thus confronted with a number of choices. Since the taboo was basically a medical rather than a religious one, it could be ignored. Reasonably wealthy men alternatively could respect it by engaging in other licit relationships with other wives or slaves, or by hiring a wet nurse. Divorce would have been another obvious option, which is why the jurists shed much ink in establishing rules to protect nursing mothers by obliging the infant's father to pay maintenance during the whole nursing period of two years (the formal minimal period of nursing as per *Qur'an* II: 233).

In practice, Islamic theories of breastfeeding had broad social connotations. For case in point, even though women's bodies and milk were the husband's to dispose as he wished, a woman exercised power within the family, via dependability for the man's children, throughout her protected nursing and supervision rights. Furthermore, awareness that maternal nursing is the best for an infant replicated an awareness also of the significance of the mother-infant bond. This optimistic approach toward the benefits of nursing could have been improved, we observe, had there been no pessimistic attitudes toward the colostrums (whose nutritional and immunogenic qualities were not understood)—a mother was encouraged to find alternative means of feeding for the first few days until her [transitional] milk came. In practice the medical prohibition against sex while nursing helped space pregnancies, avoid exhaustion, and thus foster stronger touching bonds with her child. In modern discussions of breastfeeding, ancient and medieval jurists' rulings are engaged as a significant factor in harmonizing the findings of modern science with the *shari'a*. This comprises a rejection of substitute foods, and encouragement to impart the benefits of the colostrums to the infant by beginning nursing as soon as possible. In regard to fewer more gender issues in Islamic law, vibrant scholars of the subject such as Vanesa Maher²⁰ and Avner Giladi²¹ would refer to a woman's body as her husband's property. In this regard I would say that husband, by virtue of the marriage contract, is viewed as having more or less unlimited right of sexual congress with his wife, but this is a usufructory ownership (*manfa'ah*) only, not an actual ownership. The absolute owner of an object has the legal right to damage or even destroy it, but this is clearly not the case with a wife who

can seek redress for abusive or harmful behaviour on the part of her husband, and can certainly claim recompense for physical injury.

Conclusion

As we see in present study breast milk is the womanly stuff that makes suckling of others' children a means to make and forbid kin ties. Suckling is not merely breastfeeding rather it is kinship. As milk flows, suckling prohibits unions and suckling milk turns consanguine kin into suckling kin, limiting the spouse pool in contexts of endogamous marriage and polygynous unions. It is remarkable to see how lines of incest through breastfeeding were expanded or contracted jurists were often called upon in the legal literature to resolve whether a marriage were unacceptable because the couple might possibly have shared the same breast, or whether a precise event constituted nursing such as to effect the milk prohibition. We include here the discussions pertinent to gender. One of these is a discussion of the perceived reliability of the nurse as a solitary witness (that a husband and wife should not be married because they are milk-relatives, for example), and of the tension between Islamic law's general rejection of women's solitary testimony and the alternative possibility that an incestuous union might occur. We find here that in such cases most jurists, while not making her testimony binding, encourage the couple to separate of their own accord; we suggest, plausibly, that this is a concession by a generally patriarchal system to wet nurses, on account of both the weightiness of the situation and the critical social roles played by these women. Another example shows evidence of how although women's status—as judged from the perspective of her autonomy and legal rights—may have been formally lower than that of men, the concept of a mother's inviolable right and sacred duty towards her child actually allowed her to carve out a sphere of social power, such as the right to nurse her children and to custody in case of divorce.

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