Contemporary Kurdish Families in Finland:
Traditional, Modern or Something Else?

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Family is a central institute that regulates person’s life in Kurdish communities and thus family relations are highly valued. Marriage – as closely related to family – is one of the key factors that maintains desired family relations. However Kurdish family patterns are usually seen and considered to be in terms of traditional for the reason that family have a great power over the individual. Still it is assumed that parents have to give their approval for the marriage. One way of sustaining family ties and family dynamics typical for Kurdish communities in the context of migration is marriage patterns. Example of this is the phenomenon called transnational marriage: an immigrant search for his/her spouse from country of origin and brings her/him back to the country of settlement. However this is not the only way of getting married among Kurds in Finland.

In my presentation I will discuss about the concepts of modern and traditional in the context of migration. Is it reasonable to use these concepts when trying to understand Kurdish families and marriage practices? Are we entitled to call them traditional or should we use other words to describe them?
CONTEMPORARY KURDISH FAMILIES IN FINLAND: TRADITIONAL, MODERN OR SOMETHING ELSE?

This paper is the output of ethical dilemmas I have confronted in my PhD work. I have been struggling with the issue of how to write about ‘the Other’ especially when ‘the Others’ are living among us, as our neighbors, colleagues, friends, or as the classmates of our children. How to present other ethnic groups and migrants, in this case Kurds and their way of understanding marriage and family, which in a prompt glance look traditional to us and which are easily presented as traditional in relation to our culture and our ‘modern’ way of life especially in the media but also in academic texts (see Alinia 2004; Grip 2002; cf. Lievens 1999; cf. Reniers 2001)? Most importantly: how to avoid cultural determinism, exoticising and fostering stereotypes when depicting immigrants and their ways of life?

In this paper I will concentrate on scrutinizing two closely linked concepts – modern and traditional – which I find necessary to discuss with as one way of handling my ethical problems. Even though this conversation is not new in an academic world, I still argue it is highly important to ponder consequences of using concepts which have their roots in Western culture – like modern or traditional – when presenting people with other cultural background than our own. This is particularly important in studies of groups already being marginalized as ‘the other’. Especially the recent Finnish political atmosphere which can be characterized ‘critical’ and suspicious against immigration and immigrants makes me ponder possible consequences of my research concerning those who have been studied.¹

Before conversing on actual theme of this paper I introduce my research questions, theoretical and methodological background of my research as well as subjects of this study: the Kurds. They hopefully give some kind of conception of the research I am conducting.

THE INTELLECTUAL PUZZLE OF MY STUDY AND THE RESEARCH MATERIAL

As an ethnologist I am interested in the dynamics of social and cultural continuity and change in kinship, family and household patterns among Kurds. In more particularly I have set following questions: 1) how migration and transnationalism shapes or influences Kurdish families, persons and their family lives, and 2) what kind of role does marriage have when considering continuity and change in family relations in transnational context? In addition I examine the motives and strategies which families and subjects have in relation to transnational marriages.

My theoretical frame of reference leans on transnationalism. To transnationalism I refer loosely as multiple social, political, economical and cultural interactions linking people across the borders of nation-states. (see e.g. Jackson, Crang & Dwyer 2004; Vertovec 2009) There are two reasons for using transnationalism as my main theoretical foundation. First, the social networks of Kurds living in diasporas are considered to be transnational (see Alinia 2004; Emanuelsson 2007; Khayati 2008; Wahlbeck 1999), meaning that many Kurds have relatives and acquaintances not only in their country of origin but also all over the Europe. These relations have an impact on family relations also in a country of settlement. The second reason is connected to the first one: I am interested in to examine the phenomenon called transnational marriages.

¹ In the parliamentary elections which took place on 17th April 2011 Perussuomalaiset (The Finns as the party recently launched its official English name.) became third biggest party in Finland with 19.1 percent of total votes. Especially some of its most visible members became known from their ”migration critical”, nationalistic opinions. (The result of the elections can be seen for example from here:  http://yle.fi/vaalit/tulospalvelu/2011/index.html)
marriage which refers to situation when migrants marry partners from their family’s country of origin. These marriages are typical especially non-European and non-Christian migrants, and social networks have proven to be in a high importance when selecting an appropriate partner. (e.g. Beck-Gernsheim 2007; Lievens 1999; Schmidt 2008)

Even though (transnational) marriage migration has not been compounded in Finland equally remarkable grounds of immigrating as for example in Norway, Great Britain or Germany, it has increased also in here within last ten years especially among Muslims from Middle East, Turkey and South Africa. For example statistics refer that especially women from Turkey, Iran and Iraq – from the area where most of the Kurds live/have lived – rarely marry Finnish men but prefer marrying men from the same country of origin. (e.g. Martikainen & Tiilikainen 2007; Martikainen & Haikkola 2010.) This is the basis where I have begun with my study.

My primary material will consist of in-depth interviews of Kurdish families and family members. My endeavor is to interview couples whose marriage can be categorized as transnational but also Kurds who are married with a Kurd but whose marriage has no transnational origin. In order to catch up a more profound picture I am also conducting interviews with young single Kurds and their point of view with family and marriage. In addition I aspire to participate in different ceremonies such as weddings, when observation, photographing and field notes play a part as additional research materials. I have also sketched to use statistical data so as to reach a different perspective to my research. However these plans are still more like outlines and not yet very contemplated.

KURDS AS SUBJECTS OF THE STUDY

The migration history of the Kurds in Finland is relatively short. First Kurds came in Finland in 1970s, but most of them have arrived as refugees from the beginning of 1990s until nowadays. In the end of the year 2010 there was living over 8000 migrants and their children who spoke Kurdish as their mother tongue. (Statistics Finland 2011; Wahlbeck 1999.) Even though most Kurds have come as refugees in Finland, migrant’s children as well as migrants who have arrived as a child along their family are approaching the age of marriage. International researches have already shown that immigrants with certain ethnic backgrounds (for example migrants from Turkey, Pakistan and Morocco) have tendency to keep on practicing marriage patterns typical for their culture in their new country of settlement also among the second generation (see e.g. Beck-Gernsheim 2007; Lievens 1999; Schmidt 2008; Shaw 2001). This is one of other things I am interested in to figure out in my dissertation whether this is the case also among Kurds in Finland. For now, my very preliminary research material seems to support this picture.

I have confined my research with Kurds from Turkey, Iran and Iraq. Firstly, these countries account for at least 90 per cent of the Kurdish population, and also most Kurds who live in Finland have come from these countries. Secondly, to my knowledge, in a general level marriage practices have certain similar features regardless the country of origin of the Kurds. For example consanguineous marriages as well as arranged marriages have taken place among Kurds especially in past generations but they do exist in some scale also in nowadays. The commitment to the institution of marriage and the family in general is a fundamental part of the Kurdish culture. Kurdish or more generally non-Western family and marriage patterns are easily considered to be traditional by Western people for the reason that family have a great power over the individual. In non-European, non-Christian countries marriage and partner selection is a family matter rather than a merely union between two individuals. (see e.g. Barth 1954; Ertem & Kochturk 2008; Hassampour 2001; Lievens 1999; Yalçın-Heckmann 1991; Wahlbeck 1999.) In my study I stress I can reach wider range of marriage practices not to
oversimplify the picture of Kurdish marriages and families. I find this important way of breaking stereotypes and too simplistic picture and image of Kurdish marriage and family life.

MODERNITY AND MODERN VS. TRADITION AND TRADITIONAL?

As we know, there are no neutral, ahistorical concepts that lay in a culture-free space, and there is always a risk to use them as such. Self-evidently, concepts route us to see a phenomenon or a subject we are examining as a certain kind of perspective. This affects the way we present the subject. That have an impact on how the results of the research are interpreted in turn, and how they can be applied for example in political, cultural and social contexts. Thus it is not irrelevant what concepts we use and how we do it.

What do we mean by speaking of modern, modernity as well as tradition and traditional? How are these terms connected to each other? According to folklorist Pertti Anttonen (2005: 12–13) the concept of tradition is inseparable from the idea of modernity; both as discursively constructed opposition and as a rather modern metaphor for cultural continuity. He emphasizes that traditions are above all modern’s constructions and productions.

The word ‘modern’ includes meanings ‘recent’, ‘up-to-date’, ‘new’ or ‘fashionable’. It is derived from the Latin adjective and noun modernus, and it was invented during the Middle Ages from the adverb modo, meaning ‘just now’. (Calinescu 1987: 13) Modernity is conceived of as modern in relation to non-modern, which is attributed with a variety of characterizations such as premodern, old, antique, old-fashioned, conservative, primitive, feudal, and traditional. In these conceptualizations, change takes place only in the modern, while tradition denotes the lack of change, even resistance to change. (Anttonen 2005: 28, 34.)

Dichotomy between modernity and tradition has its roots in scientific discourse and modernization theories in the nineteenth century, when there was a need to discuss and explain processes of change in Western Europe. Then ‘modern’ got the connotation of ‘improved’ and ‘advanced’ from the older connotation of ‘belonging to the present’. (Anttonen 2005: 34.) As Anttonen puts it:

The concept of modern has come to denote a particular historical period, style, socio-cultural formation and mode of experience. It is Western modernity, the post-medieval era in the history of European or Western civilization that is regarded as being intrinsically different from what precedes it in time and space. This is called the ‘modern age’ or the ‘modern period’, signifying a stage of cultural development called Modernity. (Anttonen 2005: 27–28; see e.g. Beck, Giddens & Lash 1994)

Theories of modernization usually imply a two- or three-part distinction between traditional societies, modern societies and possibly postmodern societies. The content of the modernization may vary, but it often comprises technology, Western bureaucracy and science, urbanization and industrialization, democracy and human rights. In this context tradition is often understood as the opposite. (Ytrehus 2007: 155)

However tradition can be conceptualized as un-oppositional to modernity then when it is used as a metaphor for cultural continuity, as an indication of the presence of history in the present. Then traditions can be seen as statements in identity politics; they can be said, for example, to symbolize the inner cohesion of a given group. However, such continuity may also receive a negative charge when traditions stand for persisting cultural attitudes or practices that appear to be difficult to accept, for example then when they are in conflict with the law. (Anttonen 2005: 36.)
THE MYTHS OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL STUDIES RELATED TO PRESENTING ANOTHER CULTURE AND ITS PEOPLE

Line Alice Ytrehus (2007) calls as ‘myths’ some implicit premises that are still present in contemporary cultural studies, criticized earlier but which easily remain embedded in our concepts and models, in which we depict people and their culture that differ from us. Particularly two of these myths are meaningful in relation to discussion of modern and traditional: the myth of contemporary non-Western cultures being traditional and static, and the myth that individuals from ‘traditional’ societies are governed by their religion and tradition.

In differentiating between traditional and modern societies, Ytrehus (2007) highlights that there is an implicit or explicit understanding that firstly, Western cultures belong to modernity and those which differ from Western cultures are premodern or traditional. Secondly, societies are thought to develop from the traditional to the modern, and in some cases still further. There is a return here to the theory of cultural evolution which presumes that a culture develops from simplicity towards complexity, and that traditional societies do not develop at the same pace as modern. (Ytrehus 2007: 155–156.)

The myth of the static nature of non-Western cultures is widespread in functionalism as well as in evolutionism. This myth that non-Western societies are static is often related to the myth that culture is homogeneous (Ytrehus 2007: 156–157; see also Mohanty 1991). Ytrehus highlights that the relatively static society of the exotic others is constructed by an implicit comparison with ours. The researcher and the reader necessarily make comparisons in interpreting and translating from one culture to another. There are some conventions in anthropology about how the culture of another society is presented, that easily maintain the image of the static culture. That is to say: an ethnographical ‘now’ (Ytrehus 2007: 156–157; see also Ingold 1996: 201):

   The ethnographic present is a particular genre, and thus illustrates that the myth problem is not dependent on what the researcher believes, but is tied to blindness to history embedded in the very form and presentation of the analysis (Ytrehus 2007: 157).

What comes to the second myth related to ‘traditional societies’ and their relation to religion and tradition, the main thesis is that modern people can choose between several options in a given situation, whereas traditional people are governed by their tradition and culture. This myth includes the cultural determinism which can be seen very problematic. Individuals from ‘traditional societies’ are easily presented as cultural bearers, rather than as co-constructors of culture. (Ytrehus 2007: 157–159). According to Ytrehus (2007: 159) the cultural determinism is most widespread in descriptions of Muslims. It is usual to describe social relations and social problems in terms of culture especially when presenting immigrants from other countries – the more remote culture/country, the greater the emphasis given to cultural differences (Ehn 1992: 4). It still remains a challenge to avoid cultural determinism in migration and cultural studies.

CONCLUDING WORDS: HOW TO PRESENT PEOPLE WITH DIFFERENT CULTURAL BACKGROUND?

In recent years and decades more and more criticism in anthropology and sociology has been targeted toward the dichotomy of tradition and modernity in the context of globalisation and migration. (e.g. Gilroy 1995; Knauf 2002; Welz 2004; Özdalga 2002) For example the idea that extended family belongs to traditional society while the nuclear family is the result of modern urbanization and industrialization has been challenged (see Baştug 2002).
It has been introduced alternative ways of discussing cultural varieties for example in the context of globalization. Rather than understanding modernity and tradition as opposite categories it has been adopted the idea of multiple modernities or alternative modernity; that each society or social group generates its very own version of modernity. The main idea is that modernity and tradition are locally configured and thus there are particular regional forms of modernity. (e.g. Knauf, 2002, see also Stark 2006) According to Gisela Welz (2004: 417) this allows anthropologists to acknowledge as modern those cultural practices that co-exist with capitalist modernity but do not conform in any narrow way with the Western model of a modern way of life.

Also Anttonen (1993; 2005) suggests that it becomes meaningless to characterize a society as either modern or traditional if the modern and the traditional are analysed as two aspects of change. When traditions are conceptualized as models or symbolic constructions of cultural continuity, they exist just as well in modernity as in non-modernity. In this approach every society has modern as well as traditional aspects. (Anttonen 2005: 36–37; see also Ytrehus 2007: 156.)

I am attracted to the idea of seeing both modern and traditional in every society. However this does not abolish all the problems related to the issue of presenting people with other cultural background, especially when these people are living among us. I see problems both analysis as well as writing and presenting my results. For example, I have to solve the dilemma of how I will describe Kurds, their family life as well as their ideas of marriage under the impact of Finnish culture and society. I also have to deal with the question of how I should present possible changes in the marriage patterns but not automatically assume that they take place only because of Finnish ‘modern’ way of life. This would lead me easily to see changes in the light of modernization theory.

This paper raises more questions than answers. However I am not the first one to struggle with these problems. For example Marja Ågren (2006) had pondered same kinds of questions in her study of second generation Finns in Sweden. She highlights the way researcher writes about his/her subjects and their lives and gives a good advice: it should be done in a way that also readers who share the reality of those who had been studied, can understand and approve it as a real (Ågren 2006: 36). Thus I am willing to believe that the ethical problems of my study can be solved. The key to the solution may lie in the interviews, the discourses of the interviewees as well as mutual (re)negotiations between researcher and informants. Most importantly – careful listening of their stories as well as how they speak about their marriages and family is needed – whether they see them traditional, modern or perhaps totally something else.

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