

Building Families across Boundaries: Kinship Practices and Household Organization in Romanian/ Egyptian Mixed Marriages*

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Abstract : *This essay investigates some aspects of the everyday lives of thirteen Romanian/Egyptian mixed couples living in Cairo. It focuses on the intertwined aspects of household organization, gender relations and kinship practices. It also presents the circumstances in which the future couples met as well as the regulations of the states that are significant for understanding the lives of the spouses. The essay argues that for understanding a phenomenon such as transnational families one should place the investigation at the intersection between everyday practices and larger structures – political, economic and ideological. In addition, it tries to contribute to contemporary debates in the field of kinship studies and to discussion regarding the position of women in Middle Eastern societies.*

Keywords : Mixed marriages, Egypt/Romania, kinship, household organization and migration
Cuvinte-cheie : familii mixte, Egipt/România, rudenie, organizarea gospodăriei, migrație

Introduction

One common assumption that runs in recent writings dealing with the topic of mixed

marriages is that this type of marital union¹ has become more frequent in the last decades due to changes in the world usually described under the umbrella-terms of globalization or

* This essay is a shortened version of two chapters of my MA thesis entitled *Creating Families Across Boundaries: States, Kinship, Gender and Religion in Romanian/Egyptian Mixed Marriages* (Department of Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, Egyptology, The American University in Cairo, May 2005). The data that stay at the basis of the research is represented by around 25 un-structured interviews with 13 Romanian/Egyptian mixed couples residing in Cairo, carried out in two different periods : December 2000-May 2001 and November 2004-February 2005. Even if in the majority of cases I have talked with both spouses, the women's perspective predominates. The informants' names that appear in the text are pseudonyms.

1. There are several terms used in the academic literature to describe this type of marital union : intermarriage, outmarriage, intergroup marriage, cross-cultural marriage or mixed marriage. Diverse definitions were given as well. In this study, I take as the starting point the definition provided by Breger and Hill, according to who mixed marriages are the „marriages between people from two different linguistic, religious, or ethnic groups or nations” (Breger and Hill, 1998, 7). In addition, some scholars were interested in classifying mixed marriages into different types such as interfaith, interracial, interethnic, or cross-national (Cerroni-Long, 1984, 29-31 ; Cottrell, 1990, 152).

post-modernism (Breger and Hill, 1998, 13 ; Breger, 1998, 131 ; Cottrell, 1990, 151). However, it is important to underscore the fact that even if people are moving more (or at least at a faster pace) between spaces and countries, these movements are not taking place in the vacuum and are not balanced, but on the contrary are determined by wider contexts and by states' regulations. Hence, the study of mixed marriages should be placed in the larger context in which these unions take place and the impact of this context on the life of couples should be considered. Therefore, I argue for an approach to the study of families (be they mixed or not) that places them at the intersection between everyday practices and larger, political, economic or ideological structures.

Until recently, researchers interested in intermarriages usually ignored these wider social processes and mainly focused on the couples lives by emphasizing the problems that the spouses encounter (Merton, 1941 ; Smythe, 1958 ; Cerroni-Long, 1984 ; Imamura 1990 ; Sadek, 1990 ; Khatib-Chahidi *et al.*, 1998)². Another topic that attracted the scholars' attention was the social and psychological characteristics of the individuals who engage in mixed marriages and the possible reasons behind their choice, thus setting the

discussion in the realm of mate selection theory (Cerroni-Long, 1984 ; Khatib-Chahidi *et al.*, 1998)³.

In this essay I intend to move the main questions from the issues mentioned above towards a more detailed account of what is happening inside a particular type of mixed marriage, namely that between Romanian women and Egyptian men. I concentrate on two main areas : the organization of the mixed household and the couples' kinship practices. In addition, because I have claimed that it is important not to lose sight of the wider contexts that frame a particular mixed marriage, I present the political, social and economic circumstances in which the couples met.

„Getting to know each other” : introducing the mixed couples

According to the Ministry of Justice, the number of Egyptian men married to foreigners is 35,000 (Leila, 2001 ; Shahine, 2004)⁴. It seems that there are around 400 Romanian/Egyptian mixed couples residing in Egypt⁵. The ages of the Romanian women from the couples that I have interviewed vary to a great degree, ranging from twenty-three to fifty-four, with an average age of thirty-six.

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2. According to this body of work, the persons involved in mixed marriages suffer from isolation, disruption, alienation, marginality, as well as stress. There is less attention paid to the strategies that the individuals are using in order to cope with these problems or to the actual lives of the spouses.
 3. A robot-like portrait of a person most likely to intermarry will be : adventurous, non-conformist, emancipated and rebellious (Cerroni-Long, 1984, 39 ; Cottrell, 1990, 163). It seems that those who intermarry are in one way or another outside the norms of their society, be it out of personal choice or due to outside circumstances. Other scholars stress that those most likely to become engaged in mixed marriages are highly educated, marry later than the average for their society, are coming from families that already experienced cross-cultural unions, and do not have strong religious convictions (Khatib-Chahidi *et al.*, 1998, 50).
 4. Because these data do not come from official statistics, but from newspaper articles, I think that they should be treated with caution. Said Sadek mentions that in 1988, 3000 marriages were contracted between Egyptian men and foreign women, both Westerners and Arabs (Sadek, 1990, 11-12).
 5. This number is not official and was provided by one employee of the Romanian Embassy in Cairo. Unfortunately, I was not able to locate any official statistics regarding this issue, or regarding the number of Romanian/Egyptian couples living in Romania. To my knowledge the majority of Romanian/Egyptian mixed couples are formed by Romanian women and Egyptian men.

The age difference between the husbands and their wives is insignificant in most cases, while in three the former ones are around ten years older than their spouses. For the Romanians the average age at marriage was twenty-three, with two women marrying as early as nineteen and one eighteen. Three women were married before and got divorced, two in Romania, while the third one in Egypt to an Egyptian man. Also, two of the Egyptian husbands had been previously married. The average length of marriage of the mixed couples is twelve years. The shortest marriage has less than one year, while there are four marriages that lasted around twenty-six years.

As far as education is concerned four women have a BA degree, two others have a post-secondary school education, while five of them only finished the secondary school. One woman did not attend secondary school and another one interrupted it because of her first marriage. This finding is different from the ones of previous studies, which emphasize that the majority of women involved in mixed marriages has a high level of education (see Cottrell, 1990; Sadek, 1990; Khatib-Chahidi *et al.*, 1998). I was not able to collect complete data regarding the education background of the Egyptian men. I know that three of them have a PhD (two of them have private firms and the third one is a university professor), while four others (three medical doctors and one judge) have at least a BA degree. Additionally, two other husbands are managers in international corporations, while a third one is working in tourism. One Egyptian husband is part of the security personnel of a private firm and two others are currently unemployed. All the couples, with the excep-

tion of two, have children – four couples having two children, while the rest one. Their ages vary from three years old to twenty-seven. Three women are married to Copts and the rest to Muslims (from them four remained Christians, while the rest of six converted to Islam). The language mainly used in the daily interactions inside the mixed couples is Romanian in eight cases, Arabic in two and English in other two. However, in most cases, the spouses use a mixture of Arabic and Romanian.

The majority (nine out of thirteen) of the future spouses met in Romania where the Egyptian men were either studying or working. In the other cases, the future spouses met in Egypt where three Romanians were working and one was on a short visit. It seems that there is a pattern in the way people moved between the countries, determined by the wider political and economic conditions. The dividing line is represented by the year 1989. While I was not able to find out the exact numbers, it is largely known that during the socialist period students from different Third World countries came to study in Romania. This is also the case of three men from my sample⁶. At the same time, traveling abroad was very difficult for Romanians and the movement of people was strictly observed by the state and its subordinate secret police⁷. Thus, until 1989, due to these wider contexts, the Romanian/Egyptian couples resulted out of the movement of Egyptian men to Romania, while the women migrated only after their marriage⁸.

The situation changed after the fall of socialism, more opportunities for moving between the two countries emerging as well

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6. Two of them were enrolled in doctoral studies in the fields of agriculture and construction, while the third one pursued both undergraduate and graduate studies in the field of petroleum.
 7. Generally speaking, as Torpey shows, states monopolize the legitimate means of movement in their effort to construct the nation and to „embrace” the citizens with the ultimate purpose of extracting from them the resources needed for reproduction (Torpey, 2000, 1-3). In Romania, this was even truer due to the coercive character of the state.
 8. There is only one exception to this pattern – namely, the case of one Romanian who, being on a trip to Austria, decided not to return to Romania. Subsequently, she met her future husband while being on a short trip to Egypt.

as different motives for doing so. The collapse of the state structures also meant the disintegration of the centralized economy and the attempt of building a market economy, private property, civil society and a democratic political system. It is generally acknowledged that all these factors created, at least in the first years after 1989, a general climate of uncertainty as reflected in the constantly changing laws, the raising inflation, unemployment or the diminishing of the welfare state (Burawoy and Verdery, 1999, 2, 16 ; Hann *et al.*, 2002, 4). The other side of the coin is that completely new possibilities emerged especially in the areas of finance or trade (Burawoy and Verdery, 1999, 3). One strategy adopted by people in order to manage the new difficulties that they were facing was to migrate abroad for work. While the majority of people chose countries from Western Europe, others possibilities also existed, including Egypt⁹. Simultaneously, people from different countries decided to come to Romania to take advantage of the new opportunities that appeared after the fall of socialism. Some Egyptians were among them, as well as people from other Middle Eastern countries. Generally speaking, they got involved in import-export businesses, opened up stores, small restaurants, or exchange houses. Three of the Egyptians husbands from my sample could be included in this category¹⁰. Additionally, some Egyptians traveled to Romania as part of official economic agreements, as tourists or in order to study¹¹.

As it can be observed there seems to exist a pattern in the ways and motives that triggered the movement of people between Romania and Egypt. Thus, before 1989 the

majority of Egyptian men came to Romania for educational purposes, while, after the fall of the socialist state, beside education, another reason was work. Additionally, in this period Romanian women started to migrate to Egypt for employment motives¹². There are several points that emerge out of the above presentation. First, the case of Romanian/Egyptian mixed marriages shows that people are also moving between two peripheries, and not only between the core and the periphery, as is the focus in the majority of studies dealing with migration. Second, the Romanian women seemed to be involved in most cases in a type of migration that was not described by scholars and that could be called „marriage migration”. Third, while researchers underline the importance of economic forces in shaping migration, few of them investigate the ways in which the activities of the states result in or constrain population movements (for a similar point see Torpey, 2000, 5-6). As I have shown, the policies of the state can at certain moments allow only some types of movements while restricting others, as for example during socialism when foreigners could not come to Romania in order to open their own businesses and Romanians could not travel easily abroad.

The mixed household : residence patterns, division of labor, and women's work

In this section I look at the living arrangements of the Romanian/Egyptian mixed couples in terms of residence patterns, the division of labor inside the mixed household,

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9. Two Romanian women from my sample came to Egypt in order to work in tourist resorts such as Sharm El-Sheikh or Hurghada. They were employed in the field of public relations.
 10. One of them was working in a big wholesale store, another one had two restaurants that went bankrupt and worked afterwards as an employee in a supermarket. The third man also had a restaurant, but his initial purpose for coming to Romania was to migrate to Germany.
 11. I encountered these reasons among some of the Egyptian men that married Romanians. As far as the educational reasons are concerned, two men came for studying medicine a field that seems to be very sought after by foreigners.
 12. It seems that tourism is not an important avenue through which Romanians could meet Egyptian men, as is the case for Western women (see, for example, Abdalla, 2003).

and the management of the household income. I also describe the women's practices in terms of their participation in paid employment, as well as both spouses' opinions in this respect.

From the thirteen couples, nine live in nuclear households¹³. Four other women live with their mothers-in-law, or with other members of their husbands' families. In two cases, the mixed couples lived at the beginning of their marriage with the husband's extended families, moving afterwards and forming their own nuclear households. Another woman lived for a long period of time with her husband's children from a previous marriage. There are different ways for understanding the living arrangements of the mixed couples. On one hand, the nuclear household tends to become more the rule than the exception in the Egyptian context to the detriment of extended living arrangements (Khadr and El-Zeini, 2001, 148)¹⁴. On other hand, the acute housing shortages that exist in Cairo might make the option of living nearby the extended family quite difficult to fulfill. These economic conditions, nonetheless, could determine also the reverse situation, many newlyweds starting their married lives in extended households (*ibidem*, 146; Rashad and Osman, 2001, 31). I encountered this latter situation among some of the Romanian/Egyptian couples living with the man's extended family. The majority of the informants, both men and women, stated that the nuclear family is the best and, even, the

ideal form of cohabitation, especially in the case in which the spouses are from different countries¹⁵. They explained this by saying that in this manner the spouses can have their private life, build up an intimate relationship, and that the possibility of conflicts with the husband's families is minimized.

Besides coresidence, the term household also refers to a set of activities that are shared by its members such as food production and/or consumption, sexual reproduction, and childrearing (Yanagisako, 1979, 164-165). In addition, there are other activities that need to be carried out by the members of a household in order to assure its survival like cooking, cleaning, washing, paying the bills and so on. The majority of the Romanian women considers that the domestic work is their job and thus, they are the ones who carry it out. In some instances, they have domestic servants who are coming once a week (and only in one case on a daily basis). Nevertheless, most women told me that they actually do not like when a stranger comes to their houses and mingles in their way of organizing the household. Some of the women proudly told me that they manage the entire house without or with very little outside help. In these cases, even their husbands' help is not very much desired. On the one hand, these women maintain that they appreciate when their husbands provide some help, while on the other hand, they claim that men are more or less useless because

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13. With one exception, the couples reside in apartments situated in middle class and upper middle class Cairene neighborhoods such as Heliopolis, Mohandiseen, Maadi or Al-Haram.
 14. For a long time, scholars constructed an image of the „Arab family” as an homogenous, unchanging institution put in opposition with the Western family and characterized by: the lack of consensual union, the women's importance for the family honor, patrilineality enforced by endogamous marriages, the subordination and powerless status of women as expressed in polygyny, and patrilocal extended households (on this point, see Tucker, 1993; Young and Shami, 1997; Cuno, 2003). Recently, this construction was rightly criticized as simplifying a more complex reality in which a diversity of family arrangements existed (Tucker, 1993, 198-205; Young and Shami, 1997, 9-10). For example, in regard to the extended household, researchers showed that in many cases the nuclear household was predominant even in the 19th century (Fargues, 2003) and that „modernity” meant in many cases the increase in co-residence with the extended kin (Doumani, 2003, 5).
 15. Choosing to live in a nuclear household as a strategy for mitigating different familial expectations is mentioned also by other authors interested in mixed marriages (Yamani, 1998, 167).

they do not know what to do, do things in the wrong manner, or simply stay in their way. The men's household skills are devalued and sometimes even ridiculed. Nevertheless, in most cases, the Egyptian husbands provide some help with the domestic work usually by shopping and paying the bills.

However, not all the women share this perspective. Two of them told me that they do not do very much in the house mainly because they are also working, which implies that they have less time at their disposal. They also expressed the opinion that men should also be involved in the household chores, a fact that, in their cases, is indeed happening, the husbands providing help on a more constant basis, including by cooking or cleaning. Still, even in this situation, the women consider that they carry the main responsibility for coordinating the household work because the men do not do anything without their express request. What these two women have in common, besides their age (the late twenties), is a certain degree of dislike for the household chores that are put on a second level when compared to their work or free time and hobbies. This attitude was concisely expressed by Magda: „I am a career woman, not a *gospodină*”. Two of the women who are living with their mothers-in-law or other members of their husbands' families told me that while they engage on a daily basis in different household activities they do not carry this responsibility alone. What seems to be a common characteristic of these women is that they are not the ones who actually manage the household, this position being reserved for the mother-in-law.

What most informants, women and men alike, underlined is that, as far as the division of labor inside the household is concerned, one could find more or less the same situation in Egypt and Romania. Many times, my question regarding the Egyptian men's contribution to

the household chores was received with the following remark: „As if in Romania men do something...!” Especially the men who spent some time in Romania followed their spouses in this regard, as Said's words illustrate: „*I went in Romanian houses when I was living there and I saw that men are not doing much either, they do not help their wives. Sometime, the husband is just coming from work, eats and then starts to read the newspaper or to watch TV and meanwhile the woman is working in the kitchen*”. However, the two women whose husbands are more involved in the domestic work explained this situation by the men's staying in Romania and knowledge about this aspect of life there. Thus, the division of labor that can be found in Romania is presented in some cases as being similar to that in Egypt, while in a few others as being different.

It is hard to assess the extent to which the situation of the mixed couples from my sample is different or similar to that usually found in Egypt. For example, Homa Hoodfar shows that women take pride in their skills as household managers and sometimes prevent men to become involved in this sphere of life (Hoodfar, 1997, 163-171). At the same time, men are the ones responsible for shopping even if women tend to become more and more involved in this activity (*ibidem*, 175-176). Nevertheless, her observations are valid for the lower class and there is less information in the literature about this aspect of the life of middle class people¹⁶. However, taking into account the fact that in the majority of cases the Egyptian men married to Romanians do not participate on a regular basis and significantly in the domestic work, I think that the mixed couples follow in this respect the general trend that can be found in Egypt.

Another important element of the division of labor inside the household is represented by paid employment. From the thirteen

16. As far as women from the upper class are concerned they enjoy the advantage of having the financial possibility of hiring maids, cooks and nannies and thus, their responsibility is mainly to coordinate these domestic workers.

women interviewed seven are presently working¹⁷. In two cases, the women are the only members of the family who have a salary, their husbands being for the moment unemployed. All the women told me that they contribute to the family's income, albeit in different degrees. It seems that in these cases there is no clear division of expenses. Still, the men are those who are usually paying the rent (when necessary) and the bills. Women contribute to shopping expenses and buy the necessary things for themselves and the children. This situation seems to be quite widespread in Egypt among the middle class dual-worker families (MacLeod, 1991; Mohsen, 1991).

All the employed women are part of the private sector of the Egyptian economy¹⁸. As Ghada Barsoum shows the private sector in Egypt favors the cultural capital of cultivated classes such as foreign language knowledge, computer skills and well as a „classy appearance” in terms of dress or posture (Barsoum, 2002, 41-59). The „ideal candidate” is supposed to be like a foreigner. The same author notes that being a foreigner is a privileged status in the Egyptian labor market and that in many instances foreigners are paid higher salaries than local people just because of this fact (*ibidem*, 51-52). This situation did not go unnoticed by the Romanian women who all pointed out that they enjoy a much higher status here as compared to their home country even if they engage in the same activity. The other side of the coin is that the women's employment opportunities are diminished when it comes to the public sector or to some specific jobs. Their gender status also plays a role in this regard. For example, two women, both having a BA

degree, one in agriculture and the second in the field of petroleum, said that they were not able to find appropriate jobs for their qualifications. They explained this situation by referring to the fact that in Egypt these fields are not considered to be suitable for women.

The working women from my sample seem to appreciate very much their involvement in paid employment. Beside the financial benefits, the women have also other incentives for working such as personal fulfillment, the desire to do something useful and to avoid the boredom of staying all the time in the house as well as the need of having social relationships outside the sphere of their family. The Romanian women who are housewives expressed different opinions as far as work is concerned. Two of them said that they would not like to work because they do not have the appropriate educational background (one finished secondary school, while the other interrupted it due to her first marriage). The other three expressed some regrets in this regard because they believed that it is better to work in order not to become obsessed with the household chores.

When we discussed the topic of work and their attitude towards it, the Romanians also compared themselves with the Egyptian women. Several working wives described the Egyptian women as being „lazy”, as having no interest beside the house and the children and of expecting too much from their husbands. For example, Denisa said: „here the women's mentality is like this – they wait until they grow up, marry, have children and that is it, they are not interested in having a career”. None of the women with whom I spoke, working or housewife,

17. Another woman stopped working few months before I met her (in 2001) because she was expecting to deliver soon. She used to work first in a hotel in Sharm el-Sheikh in the field of public relations and then in Cairo as a ballet teacher in a private international school.

18. They are employed as follows: two are working in different private kindergartens, one is the manager of a kindergarten, another one is working in a gym as trainer, one in a private firm in the field of public relations, the sixth in a private firm that deals with the reengineering of tourist firms, while the last one is a freelance dentist technician.

put into question their right to work. The choice of staying at home was just this – a choice, or the result of outside circumstances. Maybe paradoxically, even in the one case in which the husband does not want that his wife works, the woman did not question her personal right to work, but saw it as temporary suspended. At the same time, some women seemed to appreciate that they had the chance of having this kind of choice in the first place and they all told me that this would not be possible in Romania. In addition, the women looked very satisfied that they were able to take good care of their children without further obligations besides the household chores. With one exception, the Egyptian husbands did not have any problem with the idea of their wives working in paid employment. Some of the Egyptian men whose wives are working told me that they consider this a very good thing for the women and for their family as well. In general, the men did not refer to their spouses' financial contribution, but underlined the importance of work for their wives well being in terms of individual satisfaction. However, all the men maintained that the primary responsibility for providing the basic necessities of life rests with the husband and that the wives' income should be just a supplement for extra expenses or used entirely by the wives for their own pleasures or for the children. In understanding the Egyptian men's positions in relation to their wives' employment I think that it is important to take into account several factors. One of them could be their social class position. The open-door policy of Sadat¹⁹ created more opportunities for upper middle class women in terms of jobs and, in the same time, pushed lower middle class women to seek employment due to the economic necessities created by inflation (Mohsen, 1991, 56). Because the

majority of the Egyptian men from my sample belong to the middle class, it is possible to say that the idea of working women is not something very unusual or new for them. Another factor could be the men's acquaintance with the situation found in Romania in regard to women's employment, where ever since the advent of socialism the majority of women worked for wages.

The differences in the strategies and opinions expressed by the women as far as work is concerned need to be seen in connection to their positions in regard to domestic work. I think that the legacies of socialism as well as the subsequent transformations have a greater impact in their attitudes than the discourses and practices that can be found in Egypt in this respect. One of the major purposes of the socialist states, at least at the level of discourse, was the creation not only of a classless society, but also of a society based on equality between women and men. Gender differences were supposed to be erased and collapsed in the common category of citizens of the nation and members of the Communist Party (Magyari-Vincze, 2003, 4). This implied among other things equal access to wage employment (*ibidem*; Gal and Kligman, 2000a, 5-6; Verdery, 1996, 61). It is important to remember that while women always worked, this work was mainly carried out for the subsistence of the household and not for outside reasons such as the „building of socialism”. Susan Gal and Gail Kligman rightly point out that in many cases women's labor force participation was coerced and because of this it is erroneous to see it as a form of emancipation (Gal and Kligman, 2000b, 75). Sometimes, this obligation for the state resulted in feelings of frustration, the women being overburdened and unable to fulfill in a good manner their roles of

19. Anwar Sadat was the one who initiated in the '70s the so-called *infatih* - the policies of economic liberalization and privatization as well as the opening of the country for Western foreign investors.

wives and mothers (*ibidem*; Magyari-Vincze, 2003, 5; Verdery, 1996, 65).

The demise of state socialism had different impacts on women. A new discourse emerged that tried to put the women back in their „natural” environment, the household (Verdery, 1996, 79; Gal and Kligman, 2000b, 29; Magyari-Vincze, 2003, 6). At the same time, the difficult economic situation prevented the actual realization of this ideal and women continued in the majority of cases to work or, at least, to try to work for a salary. In addition, some scholars note that those women who had to face sudden unemployment experienced feelings of exclusion, loss of self-esteem and loss of significant, economic and personal, social relations (Pine, 2002, 96). In parallel, especially young, ambitious women espoused the ideal of marital partnership and expected their husbands to provide help in the house as well as support for their careers (Gal and Kligman, 2000b, 82-83).

I think that the positions of the Romanian women in regard to the domestic division of labor as well paid employment make sense if one takes into account this wider context. Thus, the contradiction that many women experienced before and after the fall of socialism between participation in the labor force and motherhood seems, in the case of women married to Egyptians to be resolved, or at least made less stressful. Through their marriage to Egyptians and their movement in Egypt, the women have the opportunity of choosing between working or staying at home, a choice that, in the majority of cases, was not possible in their home country. At the same time, their position is not devoid of apparent paradoxes, seen for example in the attitudes towards work of those who are housewives. Some women seemed to have embraced the ideal of the compassionate, dual-worker family and they either required or expected that their husbands get involved in the domestic work, or, at least, considered that their careers come on the first place.

Many scholars maintain that the participation of women in the labor force is a

sign of women’s independence and autonomy (e.g. Nawar *et al.*, 1995). I would like to argue here that, while this might be true in some contexts, it could be erroneous to take this as a general statement that can be applied without discrimination to any case. For the Romanian women who would have had as the only incentive to work the financial need, the quite strict division of labor that can be encountered in Egypt (according to which the men are the main breadwinners), could prove to be quite advantageous. The women certainly do not see this situation as a sign of inequality between genders, but on the contrary as a source of power by the possibility of choice that it offered them. Some women seem to overtly enjoy and appreciate the possibility of staying at home while the husbands are bringing the necessary money. In addition, because the household work is considered to be the responsibility of women in Romania as well as in Egypt, this issue is not a source of conflict or mismatched expectations for the Romanian/Egyptian couples, as is the case for other cross-cultural marriages (see Imamura, 1990, 176-177).

Making descent and negotiating alliance: „mixed” kinship practices

In this last part of the essay, I am interested in investigated the kinship practices in which the mixed couples, as well as each spouse individually engage. My approach derives from Bourdieu’s theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). Thus, my understanding of kinship is as a social practice that is constantly in the making and always shaped and reshaped by wider contexts, and not as something fixed and unchangeable (Carsten, 2000, 2004; Franklin and McKinnon, 2001).

I have divided my discussion of kinship aspects of the Romanian/Egyptian mixed marriages into two main parts. The first one deals with descent, while the second with alliance. This division, traditional in „classical”

approaches to kinship, was more or less ignored recently, the emphasis shifting towards the processual, flexible and negotiated character of kinship (Carsten, 2000, 2004, Franklin and McKinnon, 2001). I maintain this perspective because this is the manner in which the informants themselves talked about their kinship relations. Thus, the Romanian women clearly made a distinction between „my family” and „my husband’s family”. This applies to the Egyptian men as well. I will start by looking at what is happening with the women’s and men’s relationships with their agnates, and I will move afterwards to discuss the alliance relationships established between the Romanians and their spouses’ extended families²⁰.

Anthropological studies of descent usually stress the transmission of goods, rights and obligations across generations, the main assumption being that this transmission happens in a continuous manner. However, there are situations in which this continuity is cut off due to a variety of reasons, migration being one of them. Such is also the case of the Romanian women married to Egyptians who moved to their husbands’ country. One could say that the women’s families are an example of what was recently called „transnational families” or multi-local/multi-sited families, defined as „families that live some or most of the time separated from each other” (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002, 3, 7). The Romanian women’s kinship ties are delocalized and extend across geographical boundaries, becoming in this manner transnational (Salih, 2002, 52). Thus, I am

interested in investigating the ways in which the women maintain their relations with the kin left in the home country. Additionally, I am raising the question of the effects of this situation on their understandings of kinship. Almost all the women said that they have more or less regular contacts with their families, usually by speaking on the phone, sending e-mails and, to a lesser extent, letters²¹. Also, some of them travel quite often to Romania or their families visit them in Egypt. Obviously, the possibility to travel is determined by the financial status of the family and was not so easy to achieve for all the couples. In general, the women who did not have the financial possibilities to travel in Romania or to invite their family to visit them in Egypt expressed some degree of frustration in this regard and felt that they are devoid of some meaningful relationships in their lives. Some of them told me that they feel abandoned and that they have nobody to turn to in case any problems arise in their marriage.

Thus, the ties that the women maintain with their families are either through the actual movement of people, or mediated through technological means. In addition, in two cases the women told me that they send remittances back to their families. Nevertheless, these are not the only means through which the women maintain some connections with their kin. Starting with Schneider, anthropologists paid increased attention to the means through which kinship ties are created. A special place in this context is occupied by bodily substance such as blood,

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20. Because the couples that I interviewed are currently living in Cairo, the relationships between the Egyptian men and their wives’ families are not a main concern, and, so I will only refer to them sporadically. Also, the informants themselves hardly talked about them.
21. There is only one woman from my sample who, while still in Romania, interrupted her relationships with her family following her marriage because they did not accept it. The Egyptian man was labeled as „unbeliever” and „gypsy”, while the woman was accused of being a prostitute. She only maintained a contact with one of her sisters. This case is peculiar among the mixed couples that I encountered. In most cases, the Romanians told me that, even if their family were not very happy about their choice, they accepted and agreed with the marriage especially when they had the possibility of actually meeting the prospective husband.

milk, saliva (Carsten, 2004, 109). I think that besides these corporeal substances, non-bodily substances can also serve in the constitution or continuation of kinship relations. For the case of Romanian/Egyptian mixed marriages I observed that photographs play sometimes an important role²². As Mary Bouquet argues, family photographs represent a visible and tangible evidence of meaningful relations between kin, and, therefore, should be included among the substantial codes of kinship (Bouquet, 2001, 93, 95). In addition, I would argue that photographs help maintain kinship relations in situations in which they are made less tangible by the migration of some of their members²³.

All the Romanian women were very eager to talk about their families and it seemed to me that the migration did not lead to a diminishing in the strength and importance of their relations with the agnates. It is obvious, however that these relations are not similar to those that would have existed if the women stayed in their home country. When the topic of „their family” emerged during our conversations, the women mainly referred to their closest relatives like parents and siblings. Thus, it is quite possible that one of the effects of their movement is a more restricted understanding of what represents a family. As Janet Carsten points out kins are sometimes „forgotten” especially in situations of demographic mobility (Carsten, 1993). While I will not go so far as to affirm that the Romanian women are forgetting part of their extended families, I think that they choose to put more emphasis on the kin with

whom they have the closest and most significant relationships, while the others are left somewhere in the background. Talking about transnational families, Deborah Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela suggest that the dispersion of family members across long distances and the impossibility of maintaining constant contacts lead individuals to consciously rationalize ties that were previously taken for granted (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002, 15). Thus, selecting only the closest relatives and underlining the relationships with them, as the Romanian women seem to do, might be an aspect of the process of deliberately constructing kinship ties in a context characterized by migration.

What is the impact of the Egyptian men’s marriage to a foreign woman on their relationships with the agnates? While I did not discuss this issue directly with the men I gained some insights into the matter from their wives’ observations as well as from some of the Egyptians’ affirmations, albeit in an indirect way. I am not aware of any case in which the relationships of the Egyptian men with their families were cut off as a result of their marriage to the Romanian women. It seems that some of the men, who met their future wives in Romania, married without the direct approval of their families. For example, one woman told me that her father-in-law imagined that his son’s marriage contracted in Romania was, in her words „only for the period in which he stayed in Romania, but not for Egypt as well”. Two other Romanians told me that they know that their spouses’ parents reproach them for

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22. The suggestion of looking at photographs as a means of creating and maintaining kinship ties comes from Chelcea, 2004. Angelika Bammer also mentions the importance of objects such as photographs, but also clothes, or objects in creating links between family members across frontiers especially in situations of displacement (Bammer, 1994, 92-93).
23. However, in other cases, photographs can function as vehicles for cutting kinship ties. For example, one woman, who had a son from her previous marriage in Romania, said that for some time after her move to Egypt she used to spend a lot of time looking at a picture of her son. At some point, her husband tore apart the photograph out of jealousy. The woman told me that, afterwards, she increasingly started to think less at her child and not to suffer so much. In this case, it seems that the woman saw the relation with her son as embedded in the photograph, and, without it, the ties also started to disintegrate.

marring a foreigner. Other women also told me that they believe that their husbands' families would have preferred them to marry local women. This attitude makes sense taking into account the fact that in Egypt marriage is not just a union between two individuals, but also between two families and that knowledge about the social background of a prospective spouse and the spouses' compatibility in terms of education, social status or religiosity are important factors in the decision to marry. Through their marriage to a foreigner, especially in the cases in which it took place in Romania, the Egyptian men went against these social requirements for a proper marriage, a situation which might lead to some disagreements between the husbands and their families and put some strains on their relationships. Nevertheless, one cannot generalize in this regard. For example, two women said that their future husbands' families actually encouraged the men to marry them and that they were quite happy with their choice. What these couples have in common is that they met in Egypt and thus, the men's extended families actually had the opportunity to meet their future daughters-in-law. In addition, both men had been previously married to Egyptian women and their marriage ended up in divorce.

Not only the mere choice of marrying a foreigner, but also the subsequent life of the mixed couples might lead to conflicts between the Egyptian men and their families. Many scholars observed that in Middle Eastern societies, the agnatic ties are more important than the affinal ones (see, for example, Altorki, 1986, Holy, 1989). In Egypt, it is considered that men are responsible for their parents

and siblings in terms of providing support, help and affection. This responsibility does not end with the man's marriage (even if he establishes his own nuclear household) or his sisters' marriage but is maintained all his life (Rugh, 1985 ; Joseph, 1999). Generally speaking, this situation carries the potential of creating competition between the spouses, between the wife and her husband's family, or even between the man and his family over time, resources and care.

In addition, the expectations of the women need to be taken into account. All the Romanian women noted the importance of family in the Egyptian context, which, according to them, plays a more important role in the life of an individual than in Romania²⁴. While, some women seem to appreciate this aspect, most of them consider that there should be some limits to the involvement of the family in its members' lives, especially after their marriage. This attitude from the part of the Romanian women as well as their different expectations in regard to the „proper way” in which a family must function have the potential of creating tensions between the Egyptian men and their families. For example, one Egyptian man told me : *„In Egypt people have the cult of the family. I think that this is good and bad at the same time. For example, if there is a controversy I cannot take the side of my wife in front of my mother even if actually I agree with her. That is why I think that the best way is for the couple to live separately”*. (Said) Unfortunately, I was not able to gain more insights into this matter, but I believe that in some cases the men have difficulties in managing their various responsibilities and in finding a middle way

24. Anthropologists also pointed out that family is the most important term of reference through which an individual places him/herself in the larger society (for example Rugh, 1985 ; Singerman, 1997). The decisions a person takes are informed by their effects on the family and people try their best to secure their positions within the family as a means of gaining support, legitimacy and power (Sigerman, 1997, 70-71). The idea of the importance of family as the most significant framework for people's lives was developed by Suad Joseph who argues that the notion of self developed in the Arab family is a relational one, being shaped by relations with others (Joseph, 1999).

between the different expectations of their spouse and families. One manner in which the situation can be made mitigated is by forming a nuclear household. The majority of the Egyptian men stressed the fact that it is very important for a mixed couple to live alone. The men's relationships with their agnates are also determined and influenced by the ones established between their wives and the husbands' families.

Most of the Romanian women followed their spouses in their emphasis on the importance of living „as far away as possible from his family”. They told me that they faced difficulties in coping with the demands of their husbands' families and especially in what they perceived as an intrusion in the couple's personal life. At the same time, the majority of women affirmed that overall they were well received by their spouses' families and that they have cordial but not close relationships. Interestingly, they did not consider themselves as being part of their husbands' families. During our conversations they referred to „his family”, the term „my family” being reserved for their own nuclear household or for the family left in Romania.

The relationship most often discussed was that with their mothers-in-law. It is usually assumed that in Egypt the daughter-in-law owes to her mother-in-law *wagib*, a term that refers to jural obligations paid in form of services or goods (Rugh, 1985, 90). Similarly, in Romania, at least until recently, the women, especially the young brides before giving birth, were supposed to show obedience to their mothers-in-law (Kligman, 1988, 43-47). Usually, the latter are described as having a bad nature, while the daughters-in-law are always the victims (*ibidem*, 43). The Romanian women were quick in drawing comparisons between the two countries in this regard. For example, one woman said: „A mother-in-law is a mother-in-law, in Romania as well as in Egypt. There is no difference, they are as bad everywhere”. Because I did not have the opportunity to observe in detail the relationships between the Romanian wives and their mothers-in-law it is hard for me to

confirm or, on the contrary, to refute this statement. It is quite possible that this sort of affirmation reflects more an ideology surrounding the mother-in-law than a real life situation. The women who maintained this sort of positions did not actually live with their mothers-in-law and only visited their husbands' extended families occasionally.

However, not all the women expressed the same derogatory opinions as far as their mothers-in-law are concerned. Five women told me that they felt adopted by their mothers-in-law and that they were treated more like daughters than as simple daughters-in-law, especially at the beginning of their stay in Egypt. In some cases, they referred to some aspects of their mothers-in-law behavior, such as giving them money for their personal expenses, teaching them how to speak and behave in the new society, and in general taking care of their physical and psychological well being. Still, other Romanians were not able to mention anything concrete, but, nevertheless, expressed their strong feeling that they were as if adopted. Authors dealing with the phenomenon of adoption note that in these circumstances nonbiological ties are sometimes transformed into biological ones (Howell, 2001). In the case of Romanian women, the affinal ties are translated into a biological idiom. I think that the foreign status of the wives plays an important role in this regard. Upon their arrival in the new country, the women lack any social characteristics, at least for the husbands' families if not for the husbands themselves. When Egyptian men are marrying local women their families have quite a large amount of knowledge regarding the future wives' social background, family, educational level and so on. In opposition, the foreign wife is like a newborn baby, not only because she lacks any previous social characteristics, but also because she does not have the basic skills for living in society. To a certain extent, the wife needs to pass through a process of re-socialization (Imamura, 1990, 173). In this situation, when the wife resides with her mother-in-law and the husband is out most

of the day because of his work, it looks quite normal that the main role in this process is played by the mother-in-law. It seems that because of the wives' foreign status, the usual affinal ties established through a marriage are not considered strong enough and need to be reinforced by the incorporation of the women into their new families not as daughters-in-law, but as daughters²⁵.

Thus, the relationships established between the Romanian women and their husbands' families are in some cases quite tense, or at least very distant, while in others are strengthened by their transformation into biological ties, even if only in a symbolic manner. How such diverse positioning could be explained? While I do not have a definitive answer to this question and this issue needs further investigations, I think that one factor could play a role in this regard. The women who told me that they feel that they were adopted by their mothers-in-law have a common characteristic, namely they share the same dwelling with their husbands' families or only with their mothers. Thus, coresidence might force people to find ways of understanding each other and of avoiding or minimizing conflicts.

Conclusions

In this essay I have described different aspects of the everyday lives of the Romanian/Egyptian mixed couples, focusing on two intertwined areas – household organization and kinship practices. I also outlined the circumstances in which the couples met and how they were influenced by larger political, social and economic conditions.

There are several points that emerge out of this presentation that I will summarize here. First, the majority of the Romanian/Egyptian mixed couples met in Romania,

where the men were either studying or pursuing different business activities. This implies that the Egyptian men have some knowledge about life in Romania, a fact that has further impact on the everyday lives of the spouses. Second, the nuclear household is the most widespread residential pattern among the couples and is considered to be a strategy for mitigating possible conflicts between the spouses and the husbands' extended families. Third, the quite strict division of roles from the Egyptian context is not always a source of conflict. On the contrary, it seems that some of the Romanian women gained a sense of power by the new possibility of choosing between being a housewife or a working woman. Fourth, women's migration forced them to relate in different manners to the families left at home and in the process to develop new understanding of relatedness in which the focus is put only on the most significant and emotionally rewarding relations to the expense of others. Finally, in some cases, in order to manage the foreign status of the wives and to better integrate them in the husbands' extended families, the affinal relations are translated in a biological idiom through what the women described as „adoption”.

Above I have outlined the main themes and findings of this study. In the rest of this concluding part I want to point to some more theoretical aspects to which this essay attempted to make a contribution. As I have already argued in the introduction, I consider that the study of family life should be placed at the intersection between everyday practices and wider structures, be they political, economic, ideological, or religious. Families do not exist in a vacuum but are part of the wider society, which shapes them as well as the actions of the individuals. In addition, families are not given and unchangeable, but

25. Andrea Rugh mentions a similar phenomenon in which people assign fictive-relative relationships (through the terms of address used) to strangers in order to create the semblance of relative marriage (Rugh, 1985, 129-130).

constituted in time and thus, it is important to acknowledge the role of history.

Especially in the last decades the topics of migrations and transnationalism received quite an extensive amount of attention from the part of the scholars. Because the Romanian/Egyptian mixed marriages are the outcome of the movement of people between the two countries, I think that this research could contribute to this body of research in the following ways. First, it shows that people are also moving between two „peripheries” and not only between them and the „core”, as the focus of studies seems to suggest. Second, the type of movement in which the Romanian women are involved, who in the majority of cases moved to their husbands’ countries only as the result of their marriage, was not accounted for in the literature.

Out of my engagement with kinship theory there are several points that emerge. The case of Romanian/Egyptian mixed marriages shows that in a situation of discontinuity the processual and malleable characteristics of kinship gain special relevance, as manifested in the relationships the women have with their families as well as with their husbands’ families. Moreover, especially in situations like this one, researchers should pay attention to the means through which those involved maintain their kinship ties. My example points to the fact that not only physical substances play a role in this regard, but also material ones such as photographs. In addition, this study also tries to show the importance of seeing kinship not only in symbolic ways, but also as a practice in which the influence of wider structures (such as states) plays an important role.

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