The Milk Tie
Jeremy MacClancy

INTRODUCTION

Milk is a unique universal. It is the only common food produced in humans, for humans. It is the only food every mother makes, the only food every person consumes at the beginning of their life. Since breast-feeding is so central a part of infant-rearing it is unsurprising that a host of food historians (Hardyment 1983; Fildes 1986), medical researchers (Wickes 1953; Hamosh & Goldman 1986), anthropologists (Raphael 1973; Raphael and Davis 1985; Durham 1991) and feminists (Coward 1989; Carter 1995; Draper 1996) have studied its nutritional pros and cons, its cross-cultural variability, its patriarchal politics, the evolution of Western attitudes towards it, and the polemic about supplying powdered milk to mothers in the Third World. Yet in the midst of all this work about milk in the West and beyond, what is surprising is that one distinctive and historically significant topic appears to have been neglected until relatively recently: the establishment of an indissoluble “milk-tie” between infants of different parents who suck at the same breast, and the important social, political, and economic consequences which follow from it.

The aims of this paper are: (I) to carry out a systematic survey of the literature on the milk-tie; (II) to try to derive some generalizations about this practice; and (III) to isolate and underline its continuing, contemporary relevance in a surprising variety of domains.

I

The milk-tie is not a universal phenomenon: in some cultures women never give suck to others’ infants, regarding the very idea as distasteful, unnatural or
even dangerous to the life of the woman who attempts it (Fildes 1988: 265). Among the Baganda of East Africa, for instance, mothers refuse to allow surplus, expressed milk to be fed to other babies: those Baganda infants whose mothers are unable to feed them die (Jelliffe 1962: 22).

But the milk-tie is a strikingly widespread phenomenon, practised by peoples from the Balkans to Bengal, from Marrakech to Mandalay. It is all the more disappointing then that the vast majority of data available on this custom consists of mere snippets of information collected by travellers, doctors and ethnographers. All these here-gathered gobbets give us is some idea of the historical or contemporary extent of the practice.

Starting with the westernmost examples first, Dunn writes of the campaign waged in the late eighteenth century by one Moroccan tribe against another. When the latter finally surrendered, the former did not subordinate them but,

united with them in a pact known in the region as tafargant (interdiction). The initiating ritual involved the exchange of milk from lactating mothers […]. Tafargant stipulated not only peaceful relations and mutual aid but also strict prohibition on marriage between the two tribes. This taboo implied symbolic brotherhood between them, but it may also have had the practical function of eliminating one major cause of tension. (Dunn 1973: 97)

Maher (1984: 107) states that, in the Middle Atlas region of Morocco, a mother must have the permission of her husband before she nurses another’s child. All the examples of milk-kin that Maher came across were obtained between a mother and relatives of her husband. None were obtained between a mother and her relatives. This suggests that each husband was careful to ensure that his wife’s wet nursing only served to strengthen the links between his immediate family and his kin.

Information on milk-kinship in the Near East is tantalizingly brief. Hammel (1968: 30) and Filipovic (1960) both mention that, in the Balkans, sibling-ship can be created between two children if they are suckled by the same mother, but neither author gives further details (but see Doja 1999). In traditional Turkey, a mother’s child and her nurseling become “milk-siblings” and thus cannot intermarry (Davis 1977: 237-38).
There are more reports about milk-kinship in the Middle East, all of which state that while the practice is still maintained today, the number of children so nursed has declined greatly in recent decades. On the island of Socotra, 550 miles east of Aden, infants are nursed by women from outside the father’s clan; if both parents are from different tribes, “they are placed with the tribes or clans that stand closer to that of the mother” (Naumkin 1993: 282). In the southern Egyptian village studied by Ammar (1954: 102), people remembered who had wet-nursed whom so that the local marriage taboos would not subsequently be broken. Wet nursing rarely occurred among close relatives, where future marriage of the children was anticipated. Ammar underlines the importance of the milk-tie by reporting the locally-repeated tale of Harun al-Rashid, an eighth century caliph of Baghdad, who decided to kill one of his viziers and to punish the man’s family because he believed they were plotting to depose him. Though the vizier’s mother appealed to Harun, whom she had nursed as a child, he went ahead with his decision anyway. One chronicler considered this “An example of tyranny that overrides one’s duties towards his breast-feeder who is like mother” (Ammar 1954: 99).

Among the urban elite of Saudi Arabia, Altorki (1980: 240-41) argues, milk-kinship was created for two primary reasons.

- **Domestic Convenience:** Since a woman was (and still to a great extent is) compelled to veil before any man other than a close kinsman, whom she could not marry, a man might ask his slave woman to nurse his daughters, so that they would not later have to veil to her son(s).

- **Forestalling Potential Marriages:** Given the local preference for the intermarriage of cousins and the prevalence of extended households composed of the families of adult brothers, a jealous man could prevent an undesirable marriage by having his wife nurse the children of the envied brother.

The members of the Iranian landowning elite with whom Khatib-Chahidi (1992: 119) spoke, thought both of these reasons highly bizarre. For the sake of domestic convenience, these Iranians did not have to establish milk-kinships with their servants. Instead they got around the problem by means of temporary fictive marriage contracts (a traditional device) between the servant and one of the children of the household head. If they did have to
call on the services of a wet nurse, their only concern was to avoid a choice of milk mother which could affect future marriage arrangements.

According to Granqvist (1947:252), who lived among the Palestinian Bedouin in the 1920s, local Muslim infants could be nursed by Muslim, Christian or Jewish mothers. By the same token, a Muslim could nurse a Christian, and the consequences would be understood in local terms. In 1881, in Damascus, the milk of the British consul’s wife failed. As her son records:

A girl was duly produced (by an astute sheikh of the ‘Anizah group) and according to my mother’s testimony I drank her milk for several weeks. This is in the eyes of the Badawin entitles me to a certain “blood affinity” with the ‘Anizah; for to drink a woman’s milk in the desert is to become a child of the foster mother. This fact has been of assistance to me in my dealings with the Badawin. (Dickson, 1952: 7)

Going beyond the Middle East, Lyall (1882:221) stated that among the Rajputs of India chiefs chose wet nurses for their children from a well-known pastoral tribe. The nurse’s family held a recognized hereditary status of “kinship by milk” and when the once-nursed man finally assumed the chiefdom, his milk-brothers often attained much influence and position at his court. Also, in the Muslim Thai village studied by Hanks (1963:128), if a wet nurse was employed, her child had to be of the same sex as the child to be nursed. This was not only because the milk intended for a child of the opposite sex was believed to cause disease and even death in the nurseling, but because incest might occur otherwise when the milk-siblings became adults.

Almost all the reports about milk-kinship cited so far are overly pithy and fail to site the phenomenon adequately in its various contexts. To gain a more exact idea of the ends to which milk-kinship was put, it is necessary for us to look at two further, more intricate examples, from the Caucasus and northern Pakistan.

For a far-sighted father, marrying off his children strategically was one way to extend, in the right direction, his family’s network of kin and relatives; using his children to create milk-ties with people they could not marry was another way. In pre-Revolutionary Russia, Christian villagers of northern Georgia and their Muslim counterparts over the Caucasian mountains used to sell their produce to one another by making hazardous treks through the high
The milk tie passes (Dragadze 1987). Since cross-creed marriages were prohibited, the best way for a pair of already close trading partners to strengthen their relationship was for one of them to nurse and bring up a child of the other. In order not to appear suspicious, the family of the “adopted” child rarely made the trek over the mountains to visit. The child returned home before entering adolescence so that it could not be thought the “adoptee” family was exploiting his, or her, labour. After all, the ultimate aim of this tie was not for the partners to make a balanced exchange but to ensure the survival of the partnership across generations, for the milk-siblings would speak the same language, know the same traditions, and help each other with transport, trade and hospitality.

In Georgia today, milk-siblingship is seen as an important, intimate relationship. The parents exchange favours, gifts, and visits, and it is expected that the milk-siblings will be on close terms with each other throughout life. Neither they nor their children can intermarry.

The most radical, elaborate use of the milk tie for political purposes occurred in the tiny kingdom of Chitral, northern Pakistan (Biddulph, 1880:82-3; Jettmar, n.d.). In this markedly hierarchical state of royalty, aristocrats, commoners and slaves, which survived as a functioning polity until the 1950s, the rulers used to give their children away at birth to be fostered by noblewomen. These women would share the nursing of the children with as many of their female dependents as possible. In this way the welfare of a royal child involved a large number of people. Foster-parents of a princess received land and other gifts on presenting her at court when she reached seven; on her marriage, one of her milk siblings would accompany her to her new home. Those who had reared a prince would not only receive similar gifts on his handing-over but stood to gain even more: if at an early age he were made the governor of a province, his milk brothers became his main advisors and ran his executive. A prince was usually made governor of the area where he had been fostered so that he would be fully acquainted with the locals and would consider himself, to a certain extent, one of them.

Nobles who headed tribes or clans followed the royal example by farming out all their infants to families of lower status, who in return enjoyed particular privileges and were excused the payment of certain tithes. As a contemporary visitor to the region observed, “The foster parents continually show great devotion and abnegation to this cuckoo in their nest, and their own chil-
dren suffer. I have known cases where the foster fathers have spent all their subsistence on some useless brat of the aristocratic class” (Schomberg, 1938: 225). Again like their superiors, nobles might have their babies passed around a whole village or local tribe. Thus an infantile aristocrat suckled by several dozen different women might grow up to have 50 milk-mothers, 50 milk-fathers and hundreds of milk-siblings, all who would support and protect him if need be.

It seems like a cunningly simple political system, a state ruled at all levels by massively extended families linked by blood, marriage and milk. Trouble is, the system had a fatal flaw: unregulated accession to the throne, whether by seniority or achievement, lead to very bloody conflicts between the parties of different pretenders. When a king died, aspiring princes rapidly mobilized all their kin. Pretenders reminded nobles of their milk ties and nobles did the same to their lower status relatives. During these interregna, aristocrats acted as the bodyguard of their pretender; commoners and slaves formed the rank and file in the forces of their noble milk-brothers. Those groups who failed their prince, as sometimes happened, were indelibly stigmatized. Generally, however, almost all groups gave unswerving loyalty and effective protection to their candidate for the crown.

The stakes were high. If a pretender was successful, he gave high offices, land, and other gifts to his aristocratic milk-brothers, who passed on some of this largesse to their own supportive milk kin. But if his bid for the throne failed and he was not killed in the process, he and all his noble backers were banished immediately. This enforced exile was unavoidable for it was feared, rightly, that otherwise a pretender’s milk-brothers would strive to assassinate the new incumbent. They fled to the mountainous areas on the margins of the monarchy, which the king’s men could never properly bring under control and which acted traditionally as places of refuge for his defeated brothers and their milk kin. There the vanquished prince and his band made a living by obtaining help from the local peoples, or violently subjecting them to his will and establishing his own mini-state. Those aristocrats who could not easily accompany them on their flight (old people and mothers with infants) lost their homes and land and were forced to live in misery. Commoners of the defeated party might be enslaved to victorious nobles or sold to traders.

It is easy to see these conflicts from above, as primarily the bloody consequences of competition at court. But they may also be viewed from
below, as battles between tribes for power, with the princes as valued assets or risky liabilities. Thus powerful tribes, headed by ambitious nobles, far from being the puppets of milk-brother princes, could become the driving force of the system, persuading their royal kin, when the moment arrived, to make a bid for the throne.

There were also other, less risky ways for tribes and clans to exploit the system to their own advantage. Once, when the Roshte tribe incurred the wrath of the king, he confiscated their house and lands, which he handed over to others. To save themselves, the Roshte had to flee. Only one of them, a woman with an infant, decided to remain. A friend of hers had just borne the king his first son, of which he was very proud. The friend, clutching her baby, stole out of the palace and nursed him. She immediately took the child to her former house, burst in, and proclaimed that she was now the milk mother of the prince. When its inhabitants realized what she was shouting, they had no option but to leave. The king, though enraged, could not object to the demands of his new kinswoman. He restored all rights to the Roshte (Parkes 2001).

So far, I have given a list of instances of milk-siblingship, founded on the sucking at the same breast by genealogically unrelated infants. Yet it is important to note that, in areas where milk-kinship is already established, the symbolism of the practice may be exploited performatively in order to create structurally similar relations between adults. In these cases, the milk-kinship based on infantile breast-feeding is used as a model for the creation of a lifelong tie. Granqvist (1947:114) states that a Palestinian woman who wished to adopt a stranger boy or man, could do so by publicly putting her nipple into his mouth, saying, “Thou art my son in God’s Book, thou hast sucked from my breast.” According to Granqvist (1931:65), “One reason for adoption is often the fact that a woman has to be alone with a strange man for some time as on a journey, and to protect her reputation she adopts him.”

The existence of milk-relations may also be used by women to achieve some degree of gender equality. Patricia Daugherty, who worked among the Yorul community in the Taurus mountains above the south Turkish town of Alanya, has reported that its women may well take advantage of the milk-tie in order to gain some measure of control over the otherwise male-dominated system of arranged marriages (Daugherty pers. comm.).
Furthermore, the creation of a milk-tie may be exploited in order to shore up a reputation that is on the point of being ruined. In Georgia, if a husband thought his wife unfaithful, he called the suspected paramour to his house, bared his wife’s right breast, put salt on it, and asked the man to kiss it. The suspect had no option: if he kissed it, he would be milk-tied to the woman for life and so could not, under threat of punitive retribution, have sex with her; if he did not kiss it, he incriminated himself and faced punitive retribution. Once the deed was done, the husband would address the couple: “Man, behold your mother. Woman, behold your son.” He could now rest assured; his wife and new milk son-in-law could meet openly without fear of raising any suspicion, for incest was out of the question.

A similar use of the milk-tie was employed among the Afghans of the Hindu Kush, as noted by a British colonial officer:

In cases where conclusive proof (of adultery) is wanting, and which are brought for settlement before the ruler, guarantee is taken for the future by the accused placing his lips to the woman’s breast. She thenceforth is regarded as his foster mother, and no other relations but those of mother and son can exist between them. So sacred is the tie thus established esteemed, that it has never been known to be broken. (Biddulph 1880: 77)

One British colonial officer, working in the same general area, who had agreed to participate in a ceremony of elective kinship with a local youth, found that the ritual entailed more than he had expected:

A goat was procured, quickly killed and its kidneys were removed. These were cooked at a fire and cut into morsels by an officiating (local) who fed us both... on the point of a knife. At short intervals we had to turn our heads to one another and go through the (sickly) motion of kissing with our lips a foot or so apart. But—the surprise was in reserve... My coat and shirt were suddenly torn open and some butter was placed on my left breast, to which the youth applied his lips with the greatest energy and earnestness! I jumped up as if shot—but the thing was over! (Robertson 1896: 30-31. I thank Peter Parkes for bringing it to my attention.)
What the official had not anticipated was that the ceremony would turn into a rite of submission, whereby the subordinate places oneself in a state of symbolic dependency, like that of a child to a mother.

II

Our list done, we can attempt to generalize about the nature of the milk-tie. The first generalization we can make is that the extent of the tie is greatly variable between cultures, and even at times within cultures. Some authors speak of milk-kinship as though it were exclusively a relation between a pair of milk-siblings (Simoons 1976: 316; Farb and Armelagos 1980: 96). But these representations of the practice are far too restrictive, for milk-kinship, even in the most restrictive cases, always involves more people than just the pair of siblings. In the Moroccan case studied by Maher, the milk-kin are a close circle of the husband’s relatives. In contrast, in the eighteenth-century Moroccan example provided by Dunn, two whole tribes entered into a single milk-tie. In Georgia, a pair of families is united by each tie while in Chitral a consciously created network of such ties could unite whole regions of the former kingdom.

In Islam, even though the Koran and the hadith (pronouncements of the Prophet) are explicit and fulsome about whom milk-kin may not marry, Muslim jurisprudents have debated, in an at times tortuous manner, the definition of what exactly constituted a milk-tie (Altorki 1980). To them, the tie was not knotted by a single feeding but determined by a complex formula. Learned scholars crossed pens on such matters as exactly how many feeds, and of what volume, were necessary to knot the milk tie. Estimates ranged from one to ten feedings to a few drops on separate occasions. Some jurists contended that an infant’s involuntary pause while sucking marked the end of one feed and the beginning of another; others would only recognize this break if the mother had deliberately interrupted her suckling. Some argued it was sufficient for a child to drink five times from a pot containing a woman’s milk; their opponents counter-argued a child had only to drink from a pot containing a woman’s milk collected on five separate occasions. Further issues in this arcane debate included the nature of testimony required for proof of the relationship, and whether cheese made from a woman’s milk was an acceptable substitute.
These debates might, at first glance, seem to be a culturally particular example of the legal pedantry which jurisprudents of any culture might indulge in. But these debates were not exercises in Islamic hair-splitting. Exactly how long and when an infant sucked at a woman’s breasts were relevant legal questions, as the belated discovery of a distant milk relationship between husband and wife led to mandatory divorce. Further, as Khatib-Chahidi argues (1992: 123), practising Muslims need to know to whom they are related and in what ways if they are to perform their devotional duties effectively, because, for some of them, merely looking at a potential marriage partner “while saying their prayers would mean their devotions were nullified and had to be repeated.” Thus some of the rulings relating to milk-kinship may, “Reflect the behavioural implications of the forbidden degrees of kinship for marriage: they represent not so much an indication of whom a person may or may not marry, but those of the opposite sex with whom one may or may not act in a relaxed manner” (ibid).

The second (and key) generalization we must make is about what the milk-tie does. Khatib-Chahidi (1992: 124) characterizes it as “a means to get friends or allies”. This is far too restrictive. As a well-grounded generalization, all we can state is that the milk-tie is a means of establishing a lasting connection between two groups of people. It is a tie that in many ways is meant to be as significant, and as lasting, as those based on blood. Like human blood, human milk is an essential life-enabling substance. And by using milk (whether a nutritionally significant amount or not) to deliberately create a link of kinship, people try to naturalize the cultural. In other words, they exploit the parallels between blood and milk in order to make this fictive form of kinship appear as natural as that based on genealogy. In this context it is revealing that Waldren, who has done over two decades of research in the Majorcan village of Deia, reports that “an old woman recently died leaving her house to a young man she had nursed, rather than to her children or grandchildren” (Waldren pers. comm.).

Perhaps what is most interesting about the milk-tie is the variety of purposes to which that connection can be put, and the associations we can make between certain purposes and certain forms of social organization. It is evident that, in societies where rules of intermarriage consolidate the coherence of certain sub-groups (and so isolate them in the process), the establish-
ment of milk-ties is a means of creating lasting links with groups of people whom one is not allowed to marry into. This is clearly the case for caste-divided societies such as the Chitrali; for groups who need to maintain co-operative relations with their neighbours, such as Albanians, the Rajputs, or the tribes of eighteenth-century Morocco; and for religiously-defined groups who wish to uphold links with members of other faiths, such as the Christian villagers of northern Georgia or the Palestinian Arabs studied by Granqvist (Doja 1999; Parkes 2003). (The prompt provision by a sheikh of a local wet nurse for the British Consul’s son may be interpreted in the same vein.)

The establishment of a milk-tie may be used, not to bring people together in a mutually beneficial manner, but to increase the social distance of one group from others to the ultimate benefit of only one party. Thus, in the example of the jealous Saudi brother, he was able to exploit the consequences of creating a milk-tie in order to forestall marriage between his children and those of his envied sibling.

The examples of the suspicious husbands and, in eighteenth-century Morocco, of the imposition of peace on a subordinate tribe illustrate a further end to which the milk-tie can be put: making others one’s milk-kin as a way to control their behaviour.

III

As far as the evidence will allow us to state, the practice of milk-kinship is in decline, thanks to the increasingly widespread distribution of formula milk, to the general shift from extended rural families to nuclear urban ones, and to the gradual decline of kinship as the central model of co-operative interaction. (It is, however, easy to overstate this decline: work by Long (2003) in Australia suggests that its practice there is under-reported as health-care professionals denigrate the practice). Parkes has argued that though it has waned in Southeast Europe because of increasing security provided by national states, it does occasionally revive for strategic reasons: to create pacific alliances or allegiances which cross-cut ethnic, political and religious divides (Parkes 2004a, 354).

This present decline is no reason for us to continue to ignore the practice. For milk-kinship is not just a historical oddity (though knowledge of
its existence and types is important for the historical record); it is not just an
ethnographic curiosity (though information about its nature and function is
important for our understanding of the varieties of kinship). Perhaps above
all, knowledge of the milk-tie and its diversities helps to illuminate the social
uses to which food may be put, and the ways that the uniqueness of one food
may be put to unique ends.

But recently, just as it appeared that ideas about milk-kinship were
about to be consigned to purely historical dimensions, the arrival in the
Middle East of new reproductive technologies has, quite unexpectedly, given
these notions a new context in which to flourish. Thus Morgan Clarke points
out that for many Muslim religious authorities, genetic relations determine
parenthood, i.e. paternity is based on the origin of the sperm and maternity
on that of the egg. But this means that a daughter produced by donated sperm
would have to veil herself at home when in front of her wife’s husband, i.e.
the man raising her. One way round this is through the creation of milk-
kinship between him and the young female he is helping to bring up. So far,
parents keep these strategies to themselves. As Clarke states, “The extent to
which these complex ramifications of kinship may unfold is an open ques-
tion” (2006a: 27). In this sense, the prior existence of an alternative mode of
motherhood enables Islamic jurists to ponder further ones:

We are familiar with the milk mother and the rulings concerning milk sib-
lingship. Now that we have realised that people have two ties to the mother,
a tie of creation and inheritance whose origin is the ovary, and a tie of preg-
nancy and nurture whose origin is the womb. Until now, the tie of the
womb was applied to both by extension. But what if now the two relations
branch out, the creation from one woman and the nurture from another?
Where does the tie of the womb stand vis-à-vis ovary filiation? What are the
rights of the nurturer and what are the legal consequences? (Qaradawi 1990:
562-3, cited in Clarke 2006b: 18)

In other words, one consequence of the importation of Western medical tech-
nologies has been to stimulate Muslim authorities to rethink and revitalize
Islamic forms of what is called “ritual kinship” (Clarke 2006c and 2007). Also,
given that adoption is traditionally proscribed in Islam, the nursing of orphans
is today being encouraged in Saudi Arabia. This initiative has received “acco-
lades in the local media” because, among other reasons, it has the important consequence that the orphaned child brought into a family “is no longer considered adopted in the eyes of the law but rather the equivalent of a blood relative.” (“Milk kinship can be an interesting adoption tool”, Arab News, 07/09/2007.)

The study of the milk-tie has also been boosted by the shift among anthropologists from perceiving kinship as descent to regarding it as a moral discourse, expressed in genealogical terms, yet predominantly concerned with the forging of alliances grounded on mutual power interests (Alvarado 2006). Once this move is acknowledged, then examples of milk-kinship become privileged opportunities to examine this strategy of creating links. What was formerly “a residual category of fictive kinship... is increasingly becoming a focal point of contemporary kinship studies” (Alvarado & Parkes 2006), as demonstrated by recent work in the Maghreb and pre-Saharan Morocco (Ensel 2002; Gélard 2006). For instance Van Til, working in southeast Mauritania, has found that today though fewer and fewer people establish new milk kinship ties, those already existing persist for generations. Here the system of milk kinship serves to mask relations of dependency between slaves and ex-slaves, and their masters or former masters; thus the persistence of the kinship links helps to ossify the hierarchy between the advantaged and those less so. In this way, ties of milk continue to undergird social inequality in local society (Van Til n.d.).

Conte and Walentowitz take a slightly different tack. They emphasize that milk-kinship must not be examined in isolation, but in relation to local ideas about the embodiment of the person and about social relatedness in local Islamic terms. For them, ethnographically particular refractions of milk-kinship have to be studied in local conjunction with “the wider, gendered fields of social proximity, law, politics and cosmology.” Thus for her, milk-kinship should not be seen in categorical terms, but as an integral part of “a grammar of proximity through which ‘substance’ is defined in terms of relationality” (Conte & Walentowitz 2006).

The work of Parkes has been a major stimulus to this revival of interest in milk-kinship and associated practices. In a magnificent series of brilliant papers he has demonstrated the socio-political centrality of these forms of kinship as alternative social structures throughout Eurasia (Parkes 2001; 2003; 2004a; 2004b; 2006). He has also courted controversy by criticizing the somatic thesis of Françoise Héritier, who succeeded Lévi-Strauss in his chair.
at the Collège de France. She claims to have uncovered a peculiar Arab folk-
physiology of lactation, whereby breast milk is regarded as transformed male
semen. Parkes argues her thesis is unsubstantiated by current ethnographies
and judges it an “over-hasty structural extrapolation of schematic jural con-
ceptions of adoptive kinship, when these are interpreted in negligence of their
historical formation” (Parkes 2005: 324). So far French ethnographers have
yet to pick up the gauntlet to defend their retired colleague (the only partial
exceptions being Vernier 2006; Fortier 2007).

Whether or not Parkes is right, examining the milk-tie has now moved
towards the centre-stage of kinship studies, thanks partially to his own exem-
plary work, the shift within kinship studies from focussing on descent to alli-
ance, and from the arrival of the new reproductive technologies in Muslim
countries. More generally what all this serves to illuminate is the nature and
process of anthropological debate. What was once viewed as an ethnographic
oddity is today understood as an important topic in its own right. In this
sense, milk-kinship becomes a further example of the way research not driven
by agendas of “social relevance” may yet come to serve exactly those ends.
What may appear to be abstruse scholarship one day can become material of
real import the next day (MacClancy 2002: 14). Milk-kinship: an anthropo-
logical topic whose time has come?

**BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

Altorki, Soraya

Alvarado Leyton, Cristian
2006 “Towards a comparative study of ritual and mimetic kin-
ship”. Paper presented at workshop *Rethinking ritual kin-
ship*, European Association of Social Anthropologists
conference, Bristol, 20 September.
Alvarado Leyton, Cristian and Peter Parkes

Ammar, Hamed

Biddulph, John

Carter, Pam

Coward, Rosalind

Clarke, Morgan
2006a  “Shiite perspectives on kinship and the new reproductive technologies”, in ISIM Review 17, Spring, 26-27.
2007  “Closeness in the age of mechanical reproduction: debating kinship and biomedicine in Lebanon and the Middle East”, in Anthropological Quarterly 80 (2), Spring, pp. 379-402.

Conte, Edouard & Saskia Walentowitz
Davis, John

Dickson, Harold Richard P.

Doja, Albert

Dragadze, Tamara

Draper, Susan B.

Dunn, Ross E.

Durham, William H.

Ensel, Remco

Farb, Peter and George Armelagos
Fildes, Valerie

Filipovic, Milenko S.

Fortier, Corinne

Gélard, Marie-Lucie

Granqvist, Hilma

Hammel, Eugene A.

Hamosh, Margit and Armond S. Goldman
Hanks, Jane R.  

Hardyment, Christina  

Jelliffe, Derrick B.  

Jettmar, Karl  

Khatib-Chahidi, Jane  

Long, Debbi  

Lyall, Sir Arthur  

MacClancy, Jeremy V.  

Maher, Vanessa  
1984  “Possession and dispossession: maternity and mortality in Morocco”, in Hans Medick and David W. Sabean (eds.)

Naumkin, Vitaly

Parkes, Peter
2004a “Milk kinship in Southeast Europe. Alternative social structures and foster relations in the Caucasus and the Balkans”, in Social Anthropology, vol 12, n. 3. 341-358.
2004b “Fosterage, kinship and legend. When milk was thicker than blood?”, in Comparative Studies in Society and History, 46. 587-615.

Qaradawi, Yusuf al-

Raphael, Dana (ed.)

Raphael, Dana & Flora Davis
1985 Only Mothers Know. Patterns of Infant Feeding in Traditional Cultures. Westwood, CT: Greenwood Press.
Robertson, Sir George Scott  
1896 *The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush.* London: Lawrence and Bullen.  

Schomberg, Reginald Charles F.  

Simoons, Frederick J.  

Van Til, Kiky  

Vernier, Bernard  

Wickes, Ian G.  