

## Editorial Foreword

**AMBIVALENT KINSHIP** Marshall Sahlins, in his most recent book, argues that human kinship is best summed up in three words: “mutuality of being.” As a working definition, it is easy to remember, and it sounds reasonable. Kin are supposed to love and support and create each other. Yet we know that kin routinely fail to do these things. Our families can do us irreparable harm. Children neglect parents. Siblings become bitter rivals. Parents leave daughters and sons for dead. Even more unsettling is our inability to agree on what our mutuality, as kin, consists of. How should we limit or extend the moral responsibilities of our shared being?

**Lerna Ekmekcioglu** and **Jessaca B. Leinaweaver** explore the dissatisfactions, and the real dangers, kinship brings. During the First World War, thousands of Armenian women and children were abducted or adopted into ethnic Turkish families. Ekmekcioglu explores the effects of this coercive kinship, which was made in the aftermath of murder and rape, and the equally disruptive attempts of Armenian authorities to repossess these children and mothers. Their bodies—along with their political loyalties, their wombs, and their blood—were contested by ethnonational communities that were ill-prepared to accept Armenian/Turks as normal kin. Leinaweaver, working in the Peruvian Andes, looks closely at accusations of ingratitude, a universal idiom of kinship that interlaces notions of gift and obligation with those of child-rearing and familial care. Carefully piecing together the resentments felt by parents left alone in nursing homes, or godchildren who are exploited (or say they are) by their more affluent godparents, Leinaweaver crafts a dark lens through which to study complex changes in Andean socioeconomic and cultural systems.

**LARGER CONTEXTS OF ISLAMIC LAW** A certain orthodoxy has recently crept into Islamic studies. To put it simply, too simply, it is now important to establish that one is studying Islam, not just Muslims, or Muslim society, or “what Muslims do.” The Islam one studies in this special way is a “discursive tradition,” and the discourses and traditions that define it are grounded in the Quran, the example and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and a related array of ritual and interpretive acts. Analysis has fixated on the idea of a uniquely Islamic “discursive tradition” to the extent that critical insights can now be had simply by working around this motif, by exploring the fact that Muslims, even in their most pious moments, belong to worlds larger and smaller than Islam, and that Islam, even in its most discursive forms, has always been shaped by its connections to non-Muslim traditions and newly Muslim worlds. Nowhere is this more evident than in the ongoing evolution of Islamic law.

**Guy Burak** and **Michael G. Peletz** situate Islamic law in relation to transregional political and organizational forms. Burak argues that Islamic law in the eastern Muslim lands was fundamentally transformed during the post-Mongol period by new attempts to articulate and subordinate it to dynastic authority. The systematization of Islamic law commonly attributed to the European colonial era was a continuation, not an innovation, of imperial rule. To understand Islamic law in Ottoman, Safavid, or Mughal realms, Burak argues, one must consider not only the classical works of Muslim jurists but also a dynastic legal culture that had its origins in Mongol imperial codes. A similar attention to larger contexts is evident in Peletz's analysis of the *shari'ah* law courts in Malaysia, where an Islamic legal establishment is suffused by Japanese management techniques, the latest e-governance fads, sartorial and behavioral trends that are clearly modeled on Malaysia's more prestigious civil law courts, and other influences that have little (yet have everything) to do with a specifically Muslim sense of law. Adjudicating *shari'ah* in Malaysia, Peletz argues, means operating within a dynamic and rapidly evolving global assemblage, of which "Islam as a discursive tradition" is but one part, and not always the dominant one, among several.

**SPIRIT MEDIUMS IN POLITICS** It is one thing to consider the role of religion in politics, or religious people, or religious institutions. It is quite another to bring spirits and deities into the mix as political actors in their own right. The difficulty is not one of belief or skepticism. Rather, the problem is defined more vividly by the association of spiritual powers with human bodies and agencies. How does one distinguish the spirit that makes demands from the human medium who channels it? Where does the power of the medium stop, and the power of the spiritual force begin? Secular observers are not the only people who ask such questions. The answers are more urgently sought by political actors who take spirit mediums seriously, who rely on them, and who compete with them for access to earthly and otherworldly power.

**David Schoenbrun** and **Charlene E. Makley** offer us two very different examples of how mediums enter and are factored out of political fields. In a subtle reinterpretation of the origins of the East African kingdom of Bunyoro in the sixteenth century, Schoenbrun shows us how healing mediums were subordinated to new, kingly models of sovereignty. The oral traditions that preserve this dramatic shift, and reproduce it in listeners, work through emotive effects, through the commemoration of a traumatic loss and an aftermath in which mourning entailed, among other institutional changes, the separation of kingship from mediumship. The tense relationship between spirit mediums and state authorities is no less central to Makley's account of how Tibetan villagers dispute the effects of urbanization in post-Mao China. The mountain deity and his medium come up against the Communist state and its representative. Makley, herself channeling the spirit of Bakhtin, shows how Tibetans create a politics of presence as they act out and speak for different

models of legitimate power, sacred and secular. In both papers, linguistic analysis helps the authors find a neutral position from which to make sense of voices, but much more is at stake in these settings than artful, emotive performance. There is still work, in Bunyoro and Tibet, that only mediums can do.

**TERMS OF CONFINEMENT** We spend most of our lives in formal institutions. Born in hospitals, we graduate to daycare facilities, attend schools of various sorts, work for corporate or state employers, and then head off to retirement homes. Paradise, if it awaits us after death, will be a clean, well-managed institution. Hell, on the other hand, will be more like all those institutions we are forced to enter and cannot easily leave: the asylum, the prison, the detention facility, the concentration camp. The edges of modern society are marked by these coercive, controlling institutions. We are so disturbed by what happens in these places that we constantly monitor them, reform them, cycle people in and out of them, and, when these facilities become too hard to justify or ignore, we do away with them completely.

**Gustav Peebles** and **Claire Edington** analyze two institutions defined by their archetypal (and opposite) relationship to modernity: the debtors' prison and the mental asylum. One was not modern enough, while the other is so quintessentially so that it has gradually moved beyond its own walls and into the surrounding world. Peebles takes us on a grand tour of advocacy for and against the debtors' prison, which was successfully defined as a barbaric institution by nineteenth-century reformers, and is now a thing of the past. Although the arguments against it tended to stress its misfit with a modern ethic of rational capitalism and civil liberties, the real deathblow for the debtors' prison, Peebles contends, was the fact that too many modern, middle-class people were becoming debtors. In an economy based on credit, the debtors' prison was in fact too small, and new methods for managing fiscal misfortune were eventually devised by applying the surveillance powers of the nation-state to the economic behaviors of its citizens. We can no longer be confined to a debtors' prison, but we find it increasingly difficult (and unnecessary) to escape debt. Problems of entry and exit are the centerpiece of Edington's piece as well. In French Indochina, the psychiatric hospital was as novel in its operations as it was in the metropole, and its articulations with the outside world, the world of the normal, were extensive. Edington shows how the mental asylum was not a closed space ruled by experts. Rather, it was an ongoing dialogue between French and Vietnamese doctors, families, and larger publics. The mental hospital, for Edington, is not a crude or barbaric place—which the debtors' prison was widely declared to be—but a shared space in which colonial authority was negotiated, and disrupted, by the mentally ill and the families and professionals who collaborated in managing the fragile limits of normal life.