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**THE FAMILY AS AN IRREPLACEABLE  
POINT OF REFERENCE FOR THE PEOPLE**  
*(An Empirical Research on the Household Nowadays  
in the Bethlehem Area)*

**ABSTRACT.** *The culture of European countries, especially those in the south, has long been similar to the customary practices of the Middle East. In the past in Europe, where there were no “extreme tensions” and cultural diversity, the family embodied moral and ethical values. The same thing happened in the Middle East, where the household was the irreplaceable point of reference for the family members.*

*This article aims to address some questions related to changes within both European and the Middle Eastern family through studies by European sociologists and through empirical research conducted in 2011 and 2013 in the Bethlehem area. It will try to answer some queries, such as: Are there still some similarities as in the past? Have different historical events helped to remove or bring back the family systems in Europe and the Middle East? Does social class affect the functions, the role or the structure of the Palestinian family? Although generalization of the results is impossible given that the empirical research covers only a small area of the Middle East, it has been possible, however, to broadly answer these questions.*

**Household and households: the frame of reference**

Over the centuries, societies have given some importance to family communities, identifying them as “groups of people who live together for a certain period of time, [...] united by ties of marriage or kinship”<sup>1</sup> or social structures tending to vary, which cannot be defined as “families” in a simplistic way but rather “family forms”, “as numerous as the regions, social classes and sub-groups within the global society”<sup>2</sup>. Several studies conducted by sociologists, anthropologists, historians and psychologists showed that one of the varied and complex traits of the family is that of being a constantly changing phenomenon, both in its composition and training, and in its internal relations which can be traced back directly to

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<sup>1</sup> 1. AA.Vv. (1984), *La famiglia e i suoi problemi psicologici*, Ed. Claire, Milano, p. XIII; Laing R. D., (1962), *La politica della famiglia*, Einaudi, Torino.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*; Michel A. (1973), *Sociologia della famiglia*, Il Mulino, Bologna.

the authority relationships between the members of the lineage: firstborns and cadets<sup>3</sup>. Continuity and change were the main points of reference to frame the changes in the functions of family structures: most human societies have been built on economic, social and affective relationships founded “on the couple-son unit”<sup>4</sup> and customary practices such as child care and sexual relations, though in different ways, have been reproduced from generation to generation consolidating the crucial element of continuity<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, the social and economic transformations such as the ability to cultivate the land, the increase and the decline of slavery in classical world economies, the influence of religion as well as the cultural evolution have led the families of some countries from forms of polygyny and polyandry to monogamous marriage<sup>6</sup>. In particular, the Western economic changes of the sixteenth century – as the great crises of mortality caused by epidemics, wars and famine – have reverberated dramatic consequences on households, causing a reduction in their size and a change in their composition, producing a quantity of households made up of a single person – as widowers, who rarely contracted a new marriage – and orphans. In these cases the consanguineous family, as artificial product of the community, has set itself as the most appropriate instrument for spreading the numerous practical and emotional needs of the members of these “incomplete” families.

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<sup>3</sup> For further details, to refer: Barbagli D., Kertzer D. I. (2002), *Storia della famiglia in Europa. Dal cinquecento alla rivoluzione francese*, Editori Laterza, Bari-Roma; Donati P. (2007), *Manuale di sociologia della famiglia*, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari; Flandrin J. L. (1973), *La famiglia: casa, parentela, sessualità nella società preindustriale*, Edizioni di Comunità, Milano.

<sup>4</sup> Goody J. (2000), *La famiglia nella storia europea*, Editori Laterza, Bari-Roma, p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Morgan L. H. (1981), *La società antica. Le linee del progresso umano dallo stato selvaggio alla società*, Feltrinelli, Milano.

The European family of “the world of yesterday”<sup>7</sup>, based on a rigorous social structure, influenced by the current cultural and moral system, anchored in order, in systematic nature and in the solidity of the state and of the economy, was the visible vehicle of transmission of binding moral principles. The monogamous and indissoluble marriage, virginity and chastity, requirements of European Judeo-Christian origin<sup>8</sup>, represented in the Western world, and namely in Central and Southern Europe, the valuable, normative, absolute, universal and irreplaceable ideal which men and women should aspire to<sup>9</sup>. The concern of parents – who were to transfer values such as obedience and self-denial – was to guide children towards a well-structured “autopoietic” supportive community lifestyle<sup>10</sup>. According to the religious precepts, marriage was considered in Europe as the only instrument of organization and legitimacy of sexual relations between men and women as well as of legitimacy for the children born to such relationships. Family members normally used to develop emotional ties and mutual trust, but this does not mean that the family was an arena devoid of any power relations. In past societies, domestic communities were actually centered on the male power. As income earner, the husband was endowed with various forms of legal authority over his wife and children<sup>11</sup>. Such collective practices of European ancient lineage fully adhere to the educational systems of both Christian and Islamic in Palestinian society. In the Arab culture, the family group was in fact traditionally the symbolic place of social cohesion, showing

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<sup>7</sup> Zweig S. (1994), *Il mondo di ieri. Ricordi di un europeo*, Oscar Mondadori, Milano.

<sup>8</sup> Carabetta C. (2002), *Amore e trasformazioni culturali e sociali*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> Luhmann N. (2001), *Sistemi sociali. Fondamenti di una teoria generale*, Il Mulino, Bologna.

<sup>11</sup> Crouch C. (2001), *Sociologia dell'Europa occidentale*, Il Mulino, Bologna, p. 256.

characteristics that were similar to those of Western families, such as the large number of its members, the tight internal bounds and the authoritative presence of the head of the family. But the domestic community was above all the guarantee of the great tradition narrative, perpetuating its value inside and outside the home walls, in the conversation with friends and neighbors but also with people from other cultures, as tourists or foreigners<sup>12</sup>. As a result, both the Palestine households and the European ones have progressively changed their way of cultivating emotional ties, especially with the children, the European households following different rhythms and patterns in their process of change. Starting from the second half of the twentieth century and thanks to the extension of life expectancy, the progresses in medical care, the reduction of drudgery, increasing prosperity and the technological revolutions have marked in Europe the transition towards an era in which individuals seem to have overcome economic restrictions assuming new consumerist attitudes<sup>13</sup>. Dazzled by the gratification of desires and the relentless pursuit of their own ephemeral and volatile pleasure, individuals have transferred such attitudes within the households abandoning the cultural model of an authoritarian family, characterized by ethical, respectful and obedient children and thus enhancing a model of family centre on the negotiating members. Domestic space becomes a place of “bargaining”. Discussions and conversations are replaced by reprimands and punishments, which become the mark of the overcoming of ancient relationships. Moreover, today in Europe we are assisting to the diffusion of forms of unions between men and women and forms of proliferation which are no longer based on the bond of marriage, as well as to

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<sup>12</sup> Kazarian S. S. (2005), *Family functioning, cultural orientation and psychological well-being among university students in Lebanon*, “The journal of social psychology”, 145(2) pp. 141-152.

<sup>13</sup> Vaccarini I. (2011), *L’atteggiamento esistenziale dominante nelle società occidentali contemporanee*, (Edited by) Vaccarini I., Marzano F., Botturi F., *Gli assoluti morali nell’epoca del pluralismo*, San Paolo, Milano.

the increasing of common law-marriage, children born out of the wedlock and celibate. On the contrary, marriage still remains the main institution in contemporary Palestine, where it is impossible to have a man or a woman joined together outside this institutional bond. In particular, the Koran both deplores free sex and celibacy, recommending marriage as the only way encouraging (and not hindering) paths of spiritual growth. For this reason, the laws of the Koran contrast both celibacy and monastic life. Family appears in general to the Palestinians as the only defense against the risk of social disintegration. Traditional instances perpetuated within the domestic communities are meant to guarantee the preservation of the memory of the Palestinian people<sup>14</sup>. The family is still seen as the “place of growing up” and “becoming an adult”, as well as an institution oriented to the preservation of traditional configurations. Unity and cohesion are recognized as the most connotative semantics within family conversation<sup>15</sup>. Collectivism prevails over individualism, respect for the elderly is not questioned. Religion occupies an important position in the lives of the Palestinians as the guarantee of traditional instances. It seems to work as a “regulator” of the emancipatory drives among the new generations, together with the importance of maintaining a respectable appearance within the community symbolically represented by the neighbors. However, even the domestic Palestinian community has lost its traditional patriarchal attitudes. This is partly due to the contact with the media and technology, but also to such broader processes as globalization and economy, which have influenced the educational choices of parents. The new generations are pointing to an improvement in their economic and social position thus opposing the “implo-genetic” orientation, which had characterized the family of the past.

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<sup>14</sup> These considerations are the result of a field research conducted by the author between 2011 and 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Haj, M. (1989), *Social research on family lifestyle among Arabs in Israel*, *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 20, 2, pp. 175-195.

However, the dimensions of social cohesion and collectivism still remain characteristic features of the Palestinian youth, attentive to the blood ties and to their roots<sup>16</sup>.

### **Structures and systems of the households**

Although the interest of scientific literature on kinship systems has touched, to a greater extent, the study of primitive societies, from the Industrial Revolution onwards the interest of Western sociologists has shifted towards the development of the family community. In reference to this point it is legitimate to quote the issues elaborated by Auguste Comte, who, on the basis of the epochal changes which began in the nineteenth century and expanded for the following centuries (heralding the transition from a military and theological stage to a positive and industrial one), defines the family “The cell of the society”, the fundamental seed of the social life of each person, deflecting the individual as autonomous entity and binding him to overlying social units, such as families and communities, which constituted the essential elements of order and social structure<sup>17</sup>. Even in rural Palestine in the nineteenth century, “life revolved around the family and the affairs of individual families were regulated by clans (*humula*) of different size, in some cases divided into sub-clans”<sup>18</sup>. The clans were not the only types of communities which were responsible for identifying and organizing life in villages. The importance of the role of religious leaders is undoubted as they were keepers of wisdom and inexhaustible source of comfort and “governed” the life of rural and urban population. In compliance with the previous conceptualizations, in the theming of the famous

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<sup>16</sup> Fronk, C., Huntington, R. L., Chadwick, B. A. (1999), *Expectations for traditional family roles: Palestinian adolescent in the West Bank and Gaza. Sex Roles*, 41, pp. 705-735.

<sup>17</sup> Miano M. (2010), *La famiglia nel pensiero dei sociologi classici*, FrancoAngeli, Milano.

<sup>18</sup> Pappé I. (2005), *Storia della Palestina moderna. Una terra, due popoli*, Einaudi, Torino, pp. 19-21.

sociologist Émile Durkheim it is possible to see family transformations interpreted as a “succession of stages” which began with the dark period of the household and ended with the rigorous structure of the monogamous nuclear family. The marriage, described by the sociologist as a “long-lasting intimate often even indissoluble association of two entire lifetimes”<sup>19</sup>, exerted an important social role of moral, ethical and legal balance which favored above all men, easy preys to insatiable instincts and hated polygamous behaviors. Durkheim believed that, in societies where there was “organic solidarity”<sup>20</sup>, the cohesion of the family arose from the “domestic law” prescribing restrictions and mutual obligations. To these issues he opposed the archaic idea of the family, built on religious imperatives and traditional elements, legacy of systems founded on feelings and beliefs. On this line it is possible to highlight the obvious discrepancies with the Islamic Palestinian (contemporary community also), because the *Shari’a*, or Holy Law, embraces human activity and regulates the functions of family members. In the same Islamic lexicon there is no space to define the classical Western significance of separation between temporal and sacral power<sup>21</sup>: the term “secularism”, in addition to be out of context, has not a semantic equivalent in the Arabic language, while the term mosque identifies just a place of prayer, and the Koran is the undisputed law<sup>22</sup>.

In the opposite direction to the evolutionary theories of Comte and Durkheim, there are the conceptualizations of Tönnies and Weber. Tönnies’s approach places family in relation to

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<sup>19</sup> Durkheim É. (1999), *Introduzione alla sociologia della famiglia*, in *Per una sociologia della famiglia*, (edited by) Citarella F., Armando Editore, Roma, p. 61.

<sup>20</sup> Miano M. (2010), *La famiglia nel pensiero dei sociologi classici*, FrancoAngeli, Milano.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis B. (1991), *Il linguaggio politico dell’Islam*, Laterza, Roma-Bari.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

two types of society: traditional and modern. The scholar, using the terms *Gemeinschaft* (Community) and *Gesellschaft* (Society), highlights the main differences under the political and cultural profile. In the pre-modern societies of Western countries, the dominant institutions were the family, the neighborhood and the local community. Individuals followed rules and orders which were based on customs and religious values: the division of labor found its place in the bonds of kinship where husbands, wives and children held predefined functions<sup>23</sup>. Vice versa in the industrialized urban society (*Gesellschaft*), the individuals, freed from the ancestral values and intent on the pursuit of their personal interests, did not live the mixture of work role and family. The “arbitrary will” outweighed the “essential will” and organizational structures, such as governments, political parties, trade unions and businesses, replaced the system of traditional societies founded on local communities<sup>24</sup>. In the community structures, home life was based on understanding, mutual aid, affection and mutual participation in the vicissitudes; “this common mutual way of feeling, which is the will of a community”, lied outside the components of the household from ridding themselves of moral and ethical precepts<sup>25</sup>. Contrary to what happens in communities, *Gesellschaft* families are free from constraints and limitations, family relationships are not based on solidarity, individuals are driven by feelings of convenience and utility, the father-son and mother-son relationship is deprived of “dignity and authority”<sup>26</sup>.

In Palestine the transit from community to society, as intended by Tönnies, never happened. The term community, though now largely in disuse, defines both the religious

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<sup>23</sup> Tönnies F. (1963), *Comunità e società*, Edizioni di Comunità, Milano, p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> Miano M. (2010), *La famiglia nel pensiero dei sociologi classici*, FrancoAngeli, Milano.

<sup>25</sup> Anshen R. N. (1965), *La famiglia, la sua funzione e il suo destino*, Bompiani, Milano.

<sup>26</sup> Coser L. A. (1997), *I maestri del pensiero sociologico*, Il Mulino, Bologna, p. 264.



community and the non-Muslim groups. During the years of the Ottoman Empire it was customary to use it as a technical expression to identify specific political-religious groups who benefited from certain rights. Even though the Palestinian community has been characterized by changes and claims of new trends, the modernist innovations in family life are always openly recognized as deviance, subject to social mark. Today, Palestinian children study, they know many languages, they travel, they work abroad, they choose the person they want to marry and they get married later than in the past centuries, although the Palestinians have never invalidated and weakened the norms and values transferred by “closed circles”: even today a Christian girl who marries a Muslim is disowned by her family and relatives<sup>27</sup>.

Weber examines the transit from community to society and frames it in the modern Western capitalistic society where behaviors, in the past often determined by the cultural heritage, were replaced by economic power, by the binomial means-ends, by purposive rational action<sup>28</sup>. The household, founded on permanent sexual unions, weakens its own functional centre which was also built on shared heritage and on the renunciation of personal income, introducing new possibilities of life for the members which invalidate the role of domestic “bearer of objective goods of culture”<sup>29</sup>. According to Weber’s setting institutions such as schools but also recreational settings such as theaters educate the subject to have new attitudes, marking the decline of the traditional life systems<sup>30</sup>. In this regard, the loss of rootedness and belonging to the kin group is not a phenomenon recorded in Palestine. Family

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<sup>27</sup> These considerations are the result of a field research conducted by the author between 2011 and 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Weber M. (1980), *Economia e società*, Edizioni di comunità, Milano, Vol. I, p. 76.

<sup>29</sup> Coser L. A. (1997), *I maestri del pensiero sociologico*, Il Mulino, Bologna, pp. 281-282.

<sup>30</sup> Miano M. (2010), *La famiglia nel pensiero dei sociologi classici*, FrancoAngeli, Milano.

and contiguous groups, friends, neighbors, despite the social and political transformations, have never been liberated from the functions of social control. The increase in schooling, thanks to the diffusion of foreign schools, the curiosity aroused by the openness to Western societies, the thriving literary blossoming and the press did not concur to the overthrow of the traditional systems which identified in the ancestral lineage the undisputed bulwark of the existence of the entire Palestinian population<sup>31</sup>.

### **Family and community for the Palestinians and European people**

In *Sociological Theories*<sup>32</sup> the family was defined as a place or space referring to the residence, as a cell of society, as a function in relation to the firmly established role of training and education for the care of children, as an evolution for its historical path, as a symbol, similitude of the momentous changes which have inevitably transformed the system within the family. More generally, the shapes, the family models, prescriptive and universal, of the early modern European age harked back to a society where marriage was the collectively accepted dogma, considered as “a natural stage of life [...] a socially shared

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<sup>31</sup> Camera d’Affitto I. (2007), *Cento anni di cultura palestinese*, Carocci Editore, Roma.

<sup>32</sup> See: Anshen R.N. (1967), *La famiglia, la sua funzione e il suo destino*, Bompiani, Milano; Barbagli M. (1984), *Sotto lo stesso tetto*, Il Mulino, Bologna; Dizard J. E. (1996), *La famiglia minima: forme della vita familiare moderna*, FrancoAngeli, Milano; Donati P. (1989), *La famiglia come relazione sociale*, FrancoAngeli, Milano; Donati P. (1989), *Lineamenti di sociologia della famiglia: un approccio relazionale all’indagine sociologica*, La Nuova Italia Scientifica, Roma; Flandrin J. L. (1973), *La famiglia: parentela, casa, sessualità nella società preindustriale*, Edizioni di Comunità, Milano; Goody J. (1995), *Famiglia e matrimonio in Europa*, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari; Lévi-Strauss C. (1964), *Le strutture elementari della parentela*, Feltrinelli Editore, Milano; Parsons T. (1974), *Famiglia e socializzazione*, Mondadori, Milano.

destiny”<sup>33</sup>, in which individuals were united in stable and prolific marriage at a young age, spending their entire lives in large patriarchal families<sup>34</sup>. In these households there was “a strict hierarchy of positions and roles defined on the base of ascribed characteristics such as age, sex and birth order”<sup>35</sup>. Nevertheless, domestic life in pre-modern age did not consist only of a big stable patriarchal family as it is certain that there were extra-legal forms of breaking off of marriage bonds, such as the desertion by the husband, and it was not infrequent for women to be sold as a commodity in markets<sup>36</sup>.

In reference to familial forms, the sociology of industrial cultures has expressed its issues in terms of “nuclear family”, where the family unit was based on the more general idea of social change and transition from the past common property to the private one<sup>37</sup>. The Western family models can be classified as nuclear, monogamous, of bilateral descent partly patriarchal and partly egalitarian, and they have their roots in feudal Europe although the spread of romantic love, a crucial moment of personal growth, has developed only since the eighteenth century<sup>38</sup>. The modern family was the trusted nest of children, the safe haven of spouses who, through mutual comfort, faced the uncertainties of life even if they lived in a “solid” society based on control and shaping their future<sup>39</sup>. The community gathering is

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<sup>33</sup> Miano M. (2008), *La famiglia: dalla distanza deferente all'intesa affettiva*, Armando Siciliano Editore, Messina, p. 12.

<sup>34</sup> Barbagli D., Kertzer D. I. (2002), *Storia della famiglia in Europa. Dal cinquecento alla rivoluzione francese*, Editori Laterza, Bari-Roma.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. VII.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. VIII.

<sup>37</sup> Goody J. (1999), *L'Oriente in Occidente*, Il Mulino, Bologna.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Bauman Z. (2011), *Modernità liquida*, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari, p. VI.

essential to individuals and could be described as a closely guarded territory where anyone doing something unacceptable was reprimanded and punished, as the place where the community was united by history, values, traditions and common destinies<sup>40</sup>. This linearity built on ethics, rules and self-sacrifice was validated by the presence of supervisory structures such as the church, the state, the school and the parties, representing not only the regulative vehicle but also the sanctioning one<sup>41</sup>. Austerity, sense of duty and obedience represented the rules of the social life of their children, who were fearful deferential followers towards their parents. The roles of the latter did not finish with the training and education of children: the domestic society, as well as the religious one<sup>42</sup>, was also an important deterrent against suicide<sup>43</sup>. Palestine is depicted as a land where the individual and collective memory was very important, especially thanks to its literary and theatrical autobiography, which was the glue to strengthen the Palestinian identity. The Palestinian literature was a source of authentic information for the family, which was markedly traditional and conservative, where the undisputed and dreadful father – in a period of great political changes – had to appease the youth concerns of his children<sup>44</sup>. For example Nagati Sidqi, a Palestinian writer who supported Marxist faith and was a convinced Stalinist, like many young Arabs decided to go to study in the Soviet Union although his father did not agree. His father, particularly furious, staged “a protest in front of the Government Palace against the Bolsheviks who had

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Carabetta C. (2010), *Giovani, cultura e famiglia*, FrancoAngeli, Milano.

<sup>42</sup> Goody J. (2000), *La famiglia nella storia europea*, Editori Laterza, Bari-Roma, p. 173.

<sup>43</sup> Durkheim É. (2008), *Il Suicidio*, Utet, Torino, pp. 224-225.

<sup>44</sup> Camera d’Affitto I. (2007), *Cento anni di cultura palestinese*, Carocci Editore, Roma.

kidnapped his son”<sup>45</sup>.

At the beginning of the twentieth century in Europe, the family constituted a decisive element in the processes of modernization, industrialization and in the development of capitalism, in particular Weber believed that modernization was the antagonist of tradition; individualism, freedom and independence become the emerging values associated with socio-economic changes. The nuclear family was the aggregation of domestic small entities, fully adhering to industrialized societies<sup>46</sup>, although the opportunity to work away from home divided the family groups<sup>47</sup>. Returning to the analysis of Stone<sup>48</sup> on the change in the mentality of English families in the early modern period, he considers the transition from patriarchy and deference towards affective individualism as the watershed which marked the evolution of Western civilization<sup>49</sup>. Specifically in the household we can observe behaviors between generations not recorded before: parents raise their children with love and understanding, they stop exercising power over their children. Once achieved economic independence, sons and daughters – particularly in Northern Europe – walked away from the family, and later retired parents will join them, not to have a financial support but for emotional support. This passage from “ethic family” to “affective family” did not indicate that the first had been completely dispossessed of its traditional role, but that a substantial change in the educational model had occurred, although over time it had become more equalitarian

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>46</sup> Goody J. (2000), *La famiglia nella storia europea*, Editori Laterza, Bari-Roma, p. 254.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 253-254.

<sup>48</sup> Stone L. (1983), *La famiglia, sesso e matrimonio in Inghilterra tra Cinque e Ottocento*, Einaudi, Torino.

<sup>49</sup> Goody J. (2000), *La famiglia nella storia europea*, Editori Laterza, Bari-Roma, pp. 261-262.

between generations<sup>50</sup>.

These “signs” of the transformation process, typical of modern society, and the consequent liberation from old constraints also spread in the Middle Eastern society but with obvious differences: the East tended to remain a society characterized by an evident orthodoxy<sup>51</sup> “laying down the criteria according to which an individual is judged in relation to the principles laid down by the institution”<sup>52</sup>. However, it is legitimate to point out that the Islamic family in particular, built on the example of the family life of the Prophet Muhammad, has gradually changed with the changing circumstances of the community. Sisters and brothers remain united, in the same Koran the bonds between brothers and sisters are supported because the reward in heaven will be great, although kinship ties are stronger in groups, which have maintained a tribal state. Authoritarian fathers and dutiful wives, but not without a position in civil life, deferent sons and daughters remain the cultural pattern of the lineage<sup>53</sup>. In this regard, the youth and the old age in classical Islam represent two antithetical criteria to identify in the first case subordination, self-abnegation but also energy and ardor, in the second case wisdom and authority<sup>54</sup>.

Immediately, after the war there was an educational system which was based both on tradition and on innovation. Only later with the sexual revolution – which took place first in

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<sup>50</sup> Pietropolli Charmet G. (2001), *Ragazzi sregolati* (edited by), FrancoAngeli, Milano.

<sup>51</sup> Deconchy J. P. (1980), *Orthodoxie religieuse et sciences humaines*, The Hague, Mouton, p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> Crespi F. U. (2004), *Identità e riconoscimento nella sociologia contemporanea*, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari, p. 61.

<sup>53</sup> Jeffery A. (1967), “La famiglia nell’Islam”, in Anshen R. N., *La famiglia, la sua funzione e il suo destino*, Bompiani, Milano.

<sup>54</sup> Lewis B. (1991), *Il linguaggio politico dell’Islam*, Laterza, Roma-Bari.

the United States<sup>55</sup> and then in Europe – the figure of the ethical father deflected to conform to the changing cultural needs. The relationships between parents and sons became more “fluid”, weakening the hierarchical structure of the previous century. “The identity of the family” is no longer based on the robust pillars of the sense of solidarity within the traditional parental group, but on more fragile pillars<sup>56</sup>. Now in the family structure there is a new figure, the “working wife”, the bearer of a role which is very different from the past one. In the fifties of the twentieth century in Britain about 15% of women worked, in 1991 this number was over 50% and as Goody points out: “with the ever-growing importance of secondary and higher education, [...] with the support offered by feminist groups, with the availability of home appliances at home, the growing need for money to buy all the items, [...] with the decrease in the security of marriage, the “working woman” became the norm”<sup>57</sup>. Today the role of wives-mothers who share with their partners the role of “purveyor of resources” increased even in strongly traditionalist countries, in line with the trends of other Western countries.

The signs of the importance of women’s role within the family characterized the private and public life in Palestine. In particular, in the early twentieth century, women, especially upper-class Palestinian, in the wake of the ideological battles undertaken by the Egyptian women, joined voluntary organizations – Orthodox-Christian and Islamic – which were engaged in assisting disadvantaged families<sup>58</sup>. In the context of socio-cultural changes of nationalist kind, Arab women committed themselves politically against the British Mandate

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<sup>55</sup> Sorokin P. (1956), *The American Sex Revolution*, Sargent, Boston.

<sup>56</sup> Nisbet R. (1977), *La tradizione sociologica*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze.

<sup>57</sup> Goody J. (2000), *La famiglia nella storia europea*, Editori Laterza, Bari-Roma, p. 267.

<sup>58</sup> Camera d’Affitto I. (2007), *Cento anni di cultura palestinese*, Carocci Editore, Roma.

and the Zionist movement<sup>59</sup>.

Although, in the twenties several women's organizations were created, the poet Fadwa Tuqan recalls that Palestinian middle-class women living in the city did not participate very much in political life<sup>60</sup>. On the contrary, in the countryside – where women worked in the fields and were not forced to cover their hair with the traditional black veil – they were free to carry out political activities. Then there was the creation of “a real network of women's organizations in urban and rural areas, which were actively involved in the emancipation of women, primarily by encouraging families to send their daughters to school”<sup>61</sup>. The female activism worried British government and above all Palestinian men, fearful that the process of transformation would have emancipated women from their residual category, so they did not allow women to hold important positions; since 1939 the feminists could no longer participate in demonstrations, but they continued their complaints from home by sending telegrams and letters to newspapers. On the cultural level, the movements for women's emancipation were designed to free them from the ancient traditional customs which did not allow them to live freely and also to change their image: the abolition of the veil, coercive peculiarity of Arab women, was hampered mainly by conservatives<sup>62</sup>, who feared the “westernization” of the Middle Eastern society. However, women managed to break free by the ancestral petty clothes that had afflicted them for thirty years only after the mid-fifties. In 1965 was made thanks to the PLO (*Palestine Liberation Organization*) a association of women but with the only aim of giving support and dealing with health. During the years of the Intifada of 1987,

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*



the women living in the country as well as in the city faced the Israeli army bravely. In working, political and social life, Palestinian women lived many oppressions: often underpaid, marginalized and subjected to the patriarchal society which they belonged to<sup>63</sup>. Today, women in the West Bank are placed as irreplaceable point of reference for the community. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, in their work entitled “The normal chaos of love”, analyze the personal relationships and family patterns in Western societies today. Traditions, rules and precepts that previously governed personal relationships are invalidated. The two scholars point out that today the variety of problems between the sexes has multiplied, they are not only about love, children, marriage or domestic chores, but also macro factors such as work, politics and economy influence the couple relationships. In particular, “the identities of adult men and women are becoming more and more independent from the assumption of family roles and fewer men and women define themselves in relation to their relationships with each other and with their children”<sup>64</sup>. Families have strong relationships built on a combination of emotions-happiness and in fact “parents expect nothing from their children except for their love [...], children expect to be accepted, loved, protected, helped for who they are, no matter what they do and will do”<sup>65</sup>. The passion for self-identity is more often referred to the members of the family, who put the emphasis on their professional and personal needs. The sense of belonging and family ties matter to the extent that they relate to the quality of interpersonal relationships, and not to produce and reproduce family relationships dictated by customary rules and models<sup>66</sup>. According to the sociology of

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<sup>63</sup> Pappe I. (2005), *Storia della Palestina moderna. Una terra, due popoli*, Einaudi, Torino.

<sup>64</sup> Di Nicola P. (2008), *Famiglia: sostantivo plurale*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, p. 169.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>66</sup> Touraine A. (2009), *Libertà, uguaglianza, diversità. Si può vivere insieme?*, Il Saggiatore,

literature and anthropology, Palestinians still continue to be important family groups, place of social unity, undisputed center of feelings of loyalty and the context where several activities take place. The western cultural systems, unusual in Palestinian households, do not adhere to the dichotomy public space/private space. The private space and silence are two fundamental elements of Palestinian social identity. To recognize when to speak and when to keep silent is the basis of the awareness of the barriers between the private and the public. In the past Palestinian families, especially in rural areas, were very poor and lived in houses without private spaces. The modern concept of privacy did not exist, husband and wife were never behind closed doors<sup>67</sup>. Only forty years ago, parents, children, daughters in law lived under the same roof and there they joined sexually, no one dared to speak or hazard allusions the day after. Sex is still a taboo and the decision of having or not having children submit individuals to labels and to the social sanction<sup>68</sup>.

The Palestinians crystallize the difference between “private and public attitude” since childhood. “What a shame!” is a common expression used to berate children and it is immediately followed by the question: “What will people say?”.

Every Palestinian has a “public glance” and while walking down the streets he wears a mask, a vehicle for the transmission of prestige, dignity, honor, respect. The face is the “social key” of a person who is recognized as respectable, dependable, self-contained, emotionally balanced and ready to open towards individual identity. Rarely their faces – within their community or city – reveal elements of vulnerability, weakness, desire, love, jealousy or disappointment and if this happens it is limited primarily to their parents, grandparents and

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Milano, p. 16.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Qleibo A., *Intimacy and the other*, <http://www.palestine-family.net>.

spouses. In the fifties and sixties Palestinian women sat outside their home courtyard, and gathered together with other women, cooking and gossiping. On occasion of the wedding of a relative they employed six months to sew the wedding dress. There was no television, no computers, so they preferred the company of close friends till dusk. However, in the seventies and eighties habits did not change and even today never change. Often women tell the new generations the story of Palestine, a tale of war and of love, of divisions and of brotherhood<sup>69</sup>.

## ***FIELD RESEARCH***

### **The Family today in the Bethlehem area**

In 2011 and 2013, I spent a long period of study in Bethlehem University to writing my doctoral thesis. The aim of the research in this long and exciting training period, was to underline some key factors fundamental to the identity of the Palestinians in Bethlehem: the culture, the history, the encounters/clashes with the Jewish population, the founding of the State of Israel, traditions, customs, family structure, the importance of community, and strong ties to the land. In this article, only results relevant to family patterns will be dealt with as from the data that emerged during the field research seems to be the focal point of the identity and life of the Palestinians.

I should point out that the data and information collected and the subsequent results relate to the urban reality of Bethlehem (Beit Sahour and Beit Jala), especially to those who work or live in Bethlehem, so the results cannot be generalized statistically in other Palestinian contexts.

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<sup>69</sup> Kattan A., *Traditions from the home courtyard*, Interviewer by Toine Van Teeffelen, <http://www.palestine-family.net>.

### **Planning of the research**

Among the non-standard methods of gathering information, I chose the semi-structured interview<sup>70</sup>. In order, to collect the impressions of both individuals and groups. Topics discussed include the educational system and family structure and there are also accounts of specific events and experiences, such as the first or the second Intifada. The dialogue between the interviewee and myself developed through a previously-arranged selection of open-ended questions focused on various topics. I tried to gather as much information as possible and the option to choose the questions and the order in which they were asked<sup>71</sup>. In this way I was able to diverge, to defer and return to a topic, to get more detailed explanations of the most important concepts. The meetings often took place at the home of or in the workplace of the person being interviewed and, occasionally, in the presence of others: family members, children, cousins, uncles and friends. For the interviewees to talk about themselves in their own home or work environment, put them more at ease and stimulated a great deal of dialogue. We sometimes looked through family albums, or I was given a demonstration of home craftwork, or a tour of a factory when interviewing workers or employers. With regards to contacting those to be interviewed, I divided the interview subjects into two categories: low-profile and high-profile. Those in the low-profile category included the non-wealthy, though with an education (diploma or graduate) and also those without an education. The high-profile group was made-up of wealthy and non-wealthy individuals, educated and uneducated. Represented in both categories were the young people, adults and the elderly,

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<sup>70</sup> Pinto R. (1964), *Méthodes des sciences sociales*, Dalloz, Paris, p. 644.

<sup>71</sup> Pitrone M. C. (2002), *Il sondaggio*, Franco Angeli, Milano.

both Christians and Muslims. It is important to highlight that it was much easier to find Muslims than Christians without qualifications. This is, probably, due to the fact that Christians represent only 30% of the population of Bethlehem, and the on-going high emigration rate plus the importance that Christian families give to culture and qualifications. The welcome offered to foreigners meant that I was easily able to find people to interview. Over the course of months, as I became acquainted with the local population, moving from Bethlehem to the neighbouring villages allocating time during the week to visit Israeli cities, to find those who lived in Jerusalem but worked in Bethlehem, or vice versa. I contacted associations, organizations, aid agencies, foundations, the United Nations (UN) and United Nation Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The interview set-up went like this: I contacted the subjects to be interviewed by e-mail or phone, explaining who I was and what I was doing. After obtaining permission for the interview, I arranged a meeting in a place of their choice, and expressed, without being intrusive, my willingness to go into their home. Before starting the interview, I explained what kind of research I was doing, my aims and how I would use all the information given, making it clear from the outset that anonymity would always be maintained with regard to both personal and general information. I made myself available at any time for further clarification on this matter with reference to the selected sample – thirty-five subjects – I did not consider the number of cases, I concentrated on the detail experiences related to me by respondents. Purely as a matter of synthesis the following are only some of the contributions made by the thirty-five respondents, those which best clarify the concepts expressed.

#### **Research: Interview results**

One of the most important revelations is the way in which family ties are undisputed,

and by the role the family plays for the Palestinians. With regards to the first aspect, the interviews revealed that Bethlehem society appears to be considerably burdened by moral constraints, and by persistent processes of religious doctrines. In addition, family systems have their own cultural heritage and rules, by which members of the domestic community have to live by in compliance with the requirements of the family to which they belong. On the other hand, thanks to the economic aid from other countries, internet, technological revolution and the ability to move away from home thanks to scholarships, the Palestinian youth of today, more than previous generations, have greater opportunity to study or to work in the West, of meeting other cultures, of widening their cultural and educational horizons: they learn other languages and are aware that we live in a globalized world. However, during the interviews, it emerged that cultural roots can limit these opportunities. To illustrate the above-mentioned assertions I include the parts of the interviews, which in my opinion are the most significant<sup>72</sup>. First of all, one of the aspects that characterize the Arabic social structure is the different ways of defining the word “family” and the “community to which one belongs”.

Ibrahim, a Palestinian from a refugee camp, explained during our meeting the subtle but crucial difference:

*«You see, for us there is not only one concept of family, we also have “aele” and “al-usra”. For us al-usra means the family consisting of father, mother and children, on the other hand if we talk about aele, we refer to families who all have the same surname, and there are never normally fewer than eighty. While al’amule, is the whole village. We say al’amule but the Bedouins call the village kabir. The concept of aele was greater in the past, that of the*

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<sup>72</sup> To ensure the anonymity of interviewees, all names have been changed.

*community, when there were problems you asked for help, much less so now. Everyone minds his own business and solves his problems within the immediate family. If in the past a family in the sense of al'amule had a problem, people would go out to do battle ... In the villages near Hebron it is still happening»*

For greater understanding, I should also include a part of the dialogue with Saib:

*«In the Palestinian-Arab world, the family is the basic social structure that imposes its own traditions on all members of its community, it is impossible to follow the traditions of ones grandparents»*

The decisions of each family member, from the simple choice of friends to hang out with, to emotional relationships and wider issues such as work or life plans, will inevitably fall into the sphere of the interests of the whole family. Deciding whether to study abroad or not, whether to get engaged or get married, do not qualify as spontaneous, individual initiatives but are submitted to the consideration of the whole family, the agent of control and limitation. As illustrated by the words of the interviewees on this point, the reality of the family just described is discussed with difficulty, especially by sons. Even deciding to go abroad to study, becomes a matter of debate within the family, such as in the case of Dana and her son Elia:

*«When Elia finished high school ... we had quite a problem at home, he wanted to study abroad. There were long discussions, sometimes he was angry with me, sometimes ... we even quarrelled, you know? He finished the first year of university, for the past year he has blamed*

*me: “You’ve kept here and did not want to be here. You forced me to study at the University of Bethlehem, I do not get good marks because it is not what I want to do”. He wanted to study international law, something related to politics ... not exactly politics, like law, as a lawyer ... something like domestic law, to be a lawyer or a judge. He is very clever, he has got a good memory, has this ability, can remember things for a long time. But he studied at the University of Bethlehem, something he did not want to study, because they forced him. Now he’s working hard to get a scholarship to study abroad! Something I initially did not know about, because I kept telling him “Come on, this is our city” [...] But then I thought, why does my son have to sacrifice himself to keep the ties here?. So, he is trying to get away with a scholarship from the Palestinian Authorities. We don’t know yet whether he will get one, but we are working on it»*

The in-family debates may even mutate into prohibitions by the parents, deflecting the attitude of negotiation, if it is their daughter woman who wants to go abroad to study after high school, as in the case of Sally:

*«I always wanted to be a painter and study interior design, but we do not have this specialization here in Palestine and ... my family did not accept me wanting to go abroad and ... you know how it is. I still, say to my parents “I want to go to Italy and study the paintings” and so on. Now they have accepted the idea, because I’m older. When I finished high school I was only 17 years old, so they saw me as a little girl, too young to go to Europe or the U.S. to study. Maybe now they will encourage me to go and study which is what I want but I’m not so sure»*



The previous dialogues focused on two Christians, however, a similar fate often awaits the young members of the Muslim household. In fact, both Ibrahim and Malash share the same fears as Sally's and Dana's families:

*«Here the boys go off to study, in Ukraine for example. We prefer the girls to stay here to study At the University of Bethlehem 70% of the students are girls ... the girls stay here and the boys go away. Training is important for both, however [...] My daughter has been away, to France, in Paris. She travelled a little, because she likes art, but I gave her permission to be away for a limited time» [Ibrahim]*

*«... I have had seven children. I know that education, that studying are important ... but I'm afraid to send my daughters abroad because they do not know anyone ... and I need to see my daughter with my own eyes every day. I'm afraid because she's a girl and no one protects her» [Malash]*

Prohibitions for daughters also affect the sentimental domain. It seems that there is still a tendency for arranged marriages albeit less strictly than in the past. As a result, the conversation with Nora, a Christian from Beit Sahour, who has travelled extensively and whose parents have lived and worked in the United States:

*«It is impossible to live in this society without the influence of our family. In this society you cannot decide without the family knowing about your ideas. The family in our culture protects every member in this way: deciding for you. They know what is good and what is bad for you, they know what is the right way and the wrong one: It is impossible for you to make a*

*different decision to the one they have made. In our society, for example, marriage is important, and if a girl who is older than twenty-five is not yet married, the parents arrange a marriage between families. It happened to me! A wealthy family with a doctor son asked my father for the opportunity of him having me as a girlfriend .... I did not agree, I did not like the way. I cried for months ... but I was forced to meet him and I did not like him above all because I saw him as old ... I was only twenty-three, he was almost forty ... luckily after three months we discovered that he was not a good man, ... he was engaged to many girls! I must admit, however, that since then, my parents listen to me more and they also apologized to me for the ugly matter»*

This unjust fate is not the only and unique trend. During my meetings with the Palestinians, I realized that changes were beginning to take place. Perhaps the desire for new growth in training and work opportunities abroad can be satisfied. Doors to compromise have been opened, with an allowance for more negotiating. Undoubtedly, the cultural emancipation of the parents also allows a certain openness towards women, as in the case of Mustafa:

*«My wife and my children have a certain influence on my decisions. But, you see, I do not interfere in their lives. Luda, my daughter, can do whatever she wants, because she is now an adult, she has finished college. Whatever she decides, I can give her some advice, but I cannot interfere. And it's the same with the other boys. I think ... certainly, for an educated man like me, it's the right thing to do. Certainly, I would like to hear why she made the decision to live abroad. If I felt that her decision was wrong, I would give some advice: "I would say, I don't think your decision is entirely correct for this, this and that reason". But the final decision is hers, because it is her life. She must decide for herself. Her mother and I*

*could give her some advice, but the decision would be hers. And I personally ... this is what happened with my son Tayseer, who went to Ireland. I did not support his decision. Personally, I did not want him to go to Ireland. I said: "I think if you stay here, maybe in the future, for your children, it is better." But when he decided to go and settle there ... he took his family, his children, and he went. I had no right to interfere, of course »*

However, the route favoured by Palestinian boys and girls, concerning the choice of studying in a foreign country, reverberates, even years after their return to their homeland, because the affection of loved ones – of a woman or a man to marry – cannot be found anywhere else in the world, but above all the basic fear is the loss of identity. For the majority of Palestinians in Bethlehem that I interviewed, to live in a foreign land on a permanent basis would mean distancing themselves from their Arab roots as well as from the domestic community.

Certainly the family does not just represent a constraint. The vicissitudes, the tremendous historical and current events of this land, would never have been overcome without family union, mutual affection, true support and psychological support. The union of family and the sense of belonging to the land constitutes the culture of all Arabs – even if not Palestinian by birth but by adoption – of all social classes, as in the case of Mona, thirty-five, divorced and the mother of two children, she never forgot Syria, mark of Arab obvious attachment to the place of birth:

*«I am of Syrian origin, and I always think of my family in Syria ... my children cannot go because they do not have a Palestinian passport and Syrians think we are now Israelis and they are not happy when we go back. Such was the desire to see my family that I tried to get*

*into Syria from Jordan, but I could not ... they turned me away. I have two children Alas and Mohammed, and during the second Intifada were living in Jenin. My house was located halfway between the Israeli and Palestinian border. One day a group of Israeli soldiers came to my house, they began to shoot ... well I do not really know why ... and one a shot struck one of my sons, who still has shrapnel in his side (she uncovers the belly of the child and shows me the scar). Then the soldiers killed three people in the garden. It is really hard for me to talk about the Second Intifada, because it was very painful ... the soldiers behaved in an unthinkable way ... they entered the house, destroying everything ... they mixed the sugar with the salt. Afterwards, we had some difficult times... but my kids are everything to me they were my strength!»*

Even more incisive with regard to family ties, is the touching story of Jasmine:

*«My face was serene ... beautiful ... happy ... when I was 13, I started getting ugly, because of problems in my family. Especially after the second intifada ... problems, pain ... a lot of problems. In 2003, during the second intifada, my younger brother was sick, he had cancer of the blood and we started to go to the hospital in Jerusalem. Then later in 2006, my grandmother had cancer and then my sister. My brother is fine now, but my grandmother and my sister are dead. You should know something, my house was very close to mukata a place where the government was the President Yaser Arafath, the seat of the Palestinian government. In the intifada the Israelis bombed the mukata, and then all the neighbouring houses and where we lived too and we could hear the explosions but above all we breathed-in the dust, the bomb-smoke. We moved house in 2006, because my sister was very ill and my father began to build this house in 1999, but we were only able to go to live there in 2006 and*

*because of my sister we did so many things, we moved there quickly. She only lived there for seventeen days. It was very important to my father, because he wanted her to live there.*

*She was a year older than me ... when I think about her illness I feel bad because I don't think it is a normal thing. Because she was sick after the intifada, after they threw all these bombs, this toxic material, chemical material. Three people in a family who get cancer are many, so many! You must know something, other families in the same street ... 35 people in the same street, all of our neighbours, it is not one case, it is not a normal thing!*

*But my grandmother and my sister now have a more beautiful life because the whole world is bad ... not only Palestine ... people every day are becoming harder and are not human, there is no humanity, everyone thinks of himself. Now after five years, I have changed all my ideas ... really I want to see peace not only in my country but in the world»*

In Palestinian culture, by tradition, the family group is the symbolic place of social cohesion: the family keeps the values and perpetuates the traditions both within the home and in relations with the community. Although the family is the privileged place of social interaction, the erosion of the traditional family is beginning to register. For the Palestinians who live their working day in Bethlehem but reside in Jerusalem seem to indicate the gradual surrender to constant social disintegration. The following words of Walid clarify this point further:

*«... If you live in a village ... for example if you have a problem, they will support you. If you have a problem with other people, they will support you. If you need a job, they will support you. If you need education, they will support you. At certain places in Hebron, they collect money from the members of the tribe, male members of the tribe. They educate all the*

*members of the tribe, they supply the money for education. For marriage, and for building a house, for example. This is financial support. It is a social and economic support for members of the tribe, of the clan. But this is weakening with time, because of modernization. You cannot keep in touch with your cousins, and the cousins of your cousins, and so on. That would be difficult, you don't have time for that. If you live in a village you have time for everything. But if you live in a city, like me in Jerusalem, I only have a relationship with my sisters and brothers. I don't have time to keep in touch with distant relatives, second and third cousins, only the first cousins. I take care of my close relationships Ok?. And so it depends on how you live your life; your beliefs, also. It's different from one person to another. For some people it's very important, they feel more secure, having relationships with the cousins of their cousins. For me no. Some people are obliged to do that, because of social responsibility. For me, nobody forces me to do that because I live in a big city like Jerusalem. So, I only have a relationship with the people I feel, I want to my sisters and brothers»*

The belief that everyone can be free from the many obligations inherited from the past should have strengthened individualism, but the cultural heritage – on which the wider Arab culture is built – even if overtaken by the Palestinians living in Israeli cities and working in the territories, is substituted by other constraints: by policy and legislations. In fact, as highlighted by Hanna and Walidy:

*«In the Arab community in Jerusalem ... I don't see that much difference between it and Bethlehem, Ramallah and Nablus. The only difference that I see is that the people who live in Jerusalem are constantly reminded that Israel is in control. While here you can sometimes forget. For example, in Jerusalem I get everything, all the bills for water and electricity, in*

*Hebrew language. My taxes, my health insurance ... everything is in Hebrew, so I'm continuously reminded that Israel is in control, and I'm not Israeli. But here in Bethlehem, in Ramallah, in Nablus for example, you can stay for a week and forget about Israel. It's easier»*

[Hannah]

*«I have a Jerusalem ID (identity card) because I'm a resident of Jerusalem. Being a resident in Jerusalem is not easy, because we have to pay all the taxes, we have to pay what they call ... all the insurances, national insurances ... they call it national insurances. You have to pay a lot of money to have a house in Jerusalem, to rent a house in Jerusalem, to remain a resident of Jerusalem, in order to keep Israeli identity, the blue Israeli identity card. So that I can travel easily. Otherwise, you know, I have to stay in the West Bank and lose my Jerusalem ID, which I don't want to lose, because I was born in Jerusalem and I would like to remain in Jerusalem. That would be easy from a formal point of view. I don't need a permit to go anywhere, because I carry a Jerusalem ID. It's different for the Palestinians who live in the West Bank. They need a permit, Do you know that? For me, I don't need a permit, the problem is psychological. The problem is more a psychological one rather than an issue of whether I can or I can't. Whether I need a permit or I don't need a permit. I don't usually go there, to the other side, the Jewish side, the Israeli side. Because, I don't feel at ease being there. Because I look like an Arab, a Palestinian, and they look at us differently. If they know we're Arabs, they would ... maybe, you know, we'd face some problems sometimes» [Walidy]*

The Palestinians who work in Bethlehem and live in Israel, seem to be in self-denial with regards to atavistic values, while those who live and work in the villages and towns of the Palestinian Territories, such as Bethlehem, appear to be linked to the superstructure

dictated by the past. However, family-ties, religious precepts, tradition and culture, continue to represent the elements upon which the Palestinian domestic community is built as it was in the past. However, the gradual decline of patriarchal attitudes, contact with the media and with new technologies, seem to influence the expectations of the Palestinian family. Expectations with regards to education and learning, especially are ever growing even in the poorest families.

### Conclusions

In the distant past, family structures in the Middle East and Europe were very similar. Then, following political, social, economic and historical events the cultural paths of the two continents diversified, and family patterns of the two civilizations, European and Arabic became very different. Nevertheless, research shows that, especially within Palestinian society in Bethlehem, the family continues to play a role and to have a function that corresponds to the traditional cultural heritage. The phenomena typical of Europe, for example the approach to love or to serial monogamy as mentioned by Giddens<sup>73</sup>, and Bauman's considerations with regard to "fluid values"<sup>74</sup> are not acceptable in Bethlehem, where identity continues to be based on assimilated traditions and culture, old reiterated behavioral conformism. In fact, from the interviews conducted in the Bethlehem area in 2011 and 2013, before the aforementioned postmodern phenomena in Europe, They seems very distant from today's younger generations. With reference to this point, according to Lilian, one of those interviewed *«this is all due to religious fanaticism, it is the failure of the*

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<sup>73</sup> Giddens A. (1995), *La trasformazione dell'intimità. Sessualità, amore ed erotismo nelle società moderne*, il Mulino, Bologna.

<sup>74</sup> Bauman Z. (2012), *Modernità liquida*, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari.



*secularization process ... it could not be otherwise, as the structures of the Arab family, seem to be more or less the same in the Middle East and seeing that religion has a strong influence on political life, or more generally on the life of the Arabs».* Looking at what Lilian says, there is a clear reference to the Muslim religion which is the most widespread religion in the Middle East and in the West Bank. In Bethlehem alone, Muslims constitute 80% of the population. With reference to this point, I do not believe it is an exaggeration to say that Christians and Muslims share a common cultural patrimony, albeit with some obvious differences regarding their traditions. They share a common belief, at times full of hope and sometimes with resignation, that one day they will live in a land where those in power do not impose their supremacy upon those who did not fight in the wars: because they did not want or because they did not believe in them or simply because they were not yet born.

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