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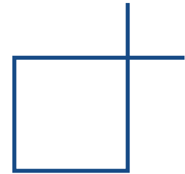

programmatictexts

Silence, secrecy, ignorance, and the making of class and status across generations

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Abstract

A peculiar aura of uncertainty and difficulty of knowing surrounds class, and especially its transmission from one generation to another. In this programmatic text we trace silences around the reproduction of class through our ethnographic research in Kenya, Egypt, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, and Palestine, and among migrant diasporas that link those countries with Somalia, Afghanistan, Western Europe, Russia, and the Arab Gulf states. We propose a comparative and nuanced attention to the ways in which *concealment and silences* – that is, ways of not displaying things or not speaking openly about them even while they may be known; *secrets* – that is, knowledge that is actively prevented from circulating; and *ignorance* – that is, ways of not knowing or not addressing something, together contribute to the reproduction of social status across generations. That reproduction, we argue, is in need of not being known or addressed because the moral and institutional claims and the public image that are inherent to status are frequently contradicted or complicated by the process in which the resources have been gathered, and by the ways in which they are passed on. The passing on of status from one generation to another therefore needs to be understood in a way that is not restricted to its discursive and performative dimension of explicit markers and accomplishments. Marks of distinction, accomplishment of status – and also stigmas of discrimination and stories of failure – are likely to consist equally of aspects that are concealed, forcibly kept secret, or not addressed. At the same time, every display and utterance that qualitatively or quantitatively values a person's or group's standing vis-à-vis others is likely to be enabled and accompanied by blind spots and silences. These can be best studied from the bottom up through a qualitative enquiry.

* Katrin Bromber was the lead author of the first draft of the text. Samuli Schielke took over the lead authorship in spring 2023. The ethnographic passages have been written by the individual researchers and edited by the lead author in agreement with them. All authors participated in the conception and partly in the writing and revision of the introductory and concluding sections. A draft version of this article was presented to the conference *Un/growing into Generational Roles* at ZMO on 8–9 June 2023, organised with funding by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation. We express our thanks to the conference participants for their generous and inspiring feedback. We also express our gratitude to the anonymous peer reviewers for their valuable feedback, and to Svenja Becherer for making the publication of this article possible.

Keywords: *generations, intergenerational relations, class, silence, secrets, anthropological theory*

Introduction

A key characteristic of class hierarchies and status is the possibility of their reproduction across generations and the necessity of active work to accomplish that reproduction. Differentially distributed and distinctive forms of housing, care, education, professional skills, mores, and styles allow younger generations to pick up the status or mobility trajectories of their parents and structure how children can care for their ageing parents and grandparents. These are well-known and well-studied aspects of class societies, and they have been addressed from different angles by classics of social theory, be it in terms of production and political organisation following Marx (1907 [1852]), consumption and lifestyles following Weber (1980 [1922]), or economic, social, and symbolic capital following Bourdieu (1979). Productive and insightful as these approaches are, each in their own way, they share a limitation that is related to their Eurocentric origins. Our social scientific common sense of class is based on the empirical realities mainly of Germany, Great Britain, and France in the times of Marx, Weber, and Bourdieu, that is, metropolitan centres of Western Europe from the early 19th to the late 20th century. This was a context in which social classifications were explicit and visible as markers of social belonging, and capitalist production processes were to a degree visible and graspable by those working in them. The 21st century, with its increasingly in-transparent, extra-territorialised production and value extraction processes, along with the intertwining of class privileges with race, ethnicity, citizenship, and location on a global scale, calls for focus on an aspect of class reproduction that can perhaps be better perceived and appreciated in contexts other than the former imperial centres of Western Europe: the productive link of the reproduction of social status and class with concealment, silencing, secrets, and ignorance. When we speak of class, we mean inequalities based on differential access to the means of production, status, and their reproduction across generations. Our definition is intentionally wide in order to encompass the variation of specific classifications as well as logics of classification we have encountered in our research. Our definition of generations is more specific: we intend generations as a relationship of succession and transmission from the older/parents to the younger/children and grandchildren. This includes the biological chain of childbearing, parent-

hood (including adoption and fostering), ageing, death, and succession, as well as other relationships that are phrased in terms of parenthood and succession, such as master–disciple relations or patriarchal power and its transmission (Cook and Waite 2016; Rasmussen 2018; Coe and Alber 2018; Sakti 2020).[1]

Such succession is often far from simple and linear, however. It is the outcome of conflicts, negotiations, struggles, and acts that those involved may not want to acknowledge openly. A peculiar aura of uncertainty and difficulty of knowing surrounds class, and especially its transmission from one generation to another. 'Middle class' has become a widespread societal ideal to which both the rich and powerful and the poor and dispossessed claim to belong, which makes it notoriously difficult to know who is middle class and what makes them so (Schielke 2012). Class as cultural capital hides in plain sight when it is successfully naturalised as good taste, while those stricken by poverty may seek to hide it. Class in terms of consumption involves not only public display but also intimate spaces, especially private homes that are defined by their protection from public sight. Class as a relationship of production is often in-transparent: exploitation is extra-territorialised into foreign countries or segregated neighbourhoods; migrant workers often do not share their experiences with people at home; and in societies with a history of slavery, slave descent is often widely known yet seldom mentioned. Such divides can be further reinforced in Muslim contexts if they are structured (not all are) by concerns such as those about the destructive force of envy (*hasad*) and about non-kin men looking at women and entering female spaces.

In this programmatic text we build on comparative ethnographic research in Kenya, Egypt, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, and Palestine, and among migrant diasporas that link those countries with Somalia, Afghanistan, Western Europe, Russia, and Arab Gulf states. We propose a comparative and nuanced attention to the ways in which *concealment and silences* – that is, ways of not displaying things or not speaking openly about them even while they may be known; *secrets* – that is, knowledge that is actively prevented from circulating; and *ignorance* – that is, ways of not knowing or not addressing something, together contribute to the reproduction of social status across generations. That reproduction, we argue, is in need of not being known or addressed because the moral and institutional claims and the public image that are inherent to status are frequently contradicted or complicated by the process in which the resources have been gathered, and the ways in which they are passed on. The ethnographic examples we provide in this article show how this can happen through silences that help to reproduce inequalities while maintaining a performance of egalitarianism (as it does in the Swahili coast, studied by Jasmin Mahazi in Section 1), through the idea that wealth is best protected by hiding it and through the moral obligation to not pose any questions to the parental generation (as in Somali communities, discussed by Tabea Scharrer in Section 1), through military secrets that complicate veterans' and others' claims for benefits and recognition (as in Iran, explored by Ahmad Moradi and Sana Chavoshian in Section 2), through the need to leave unaddressed hardships and types of work that are not suitable for status (as in Egypt and Kyrgyzstan, taken up by Samuli Schielke and Aksana Ismailbekova in Section 3), and through the difficulty of communicating life histories that go against the public identity of a family (as in Palestine, discussed by Johannes Becker in Section 3).

Our regional and thematic focus is grounded in the shared work of the Age and Generation research unit at the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) since 2019 and draws upon and develops ZMO's signature approach of studying translocal entanglements (Freitag and von Oppen 2010). Rather than assuming a normality of Euro-American societies or a unifying force of globalisation, we draw upon grounded ethnographic and historical research in locations we know well through long-term research, and along trajectories of migratory and social mobility between these and other locations. In doing so, we also argue that our ethnographic research in Muslim societies and among people who are not included in the global metropolitan elites has wider validity for the understanding of how class relations are reproduced across the globe. The imagined normality of a Euro-American middle class is grounded in post-colonial, racialised, and capitalist hierarchies that render invisible the exploitation of major societal groups and regions of the world. At the same time, many post-colonial societies have adapted the compelling idea of the middle class as a driving force of development and given it new directions – and thereby also new blind spots (such as educational capital in the Swahili Coast, which we take up in Section 1; and migrant work, which we discuss in Section 3). With the ethnographic examples that we develop in this programmatic text, we therefore join and contribute to a line of studies that seek to understand class hierarchies, strivings for upward social mobility, and anxieties about status loss among groups of people who do not belong to a globally privileged group but do seek a degree of privilege and distinction in the context they find most relevant (Daechsel 2006; Freeman, Heiman, and Liechty 2012; Rakhmani 2016; Kroeker, O'Kane, and Scharrer 2018).

There is a long-standing misconception about Muslim-majority societies, and especially Middle Eastern and tribally organised societies, as having no or few relevant structures of class inequality. For example, Charles Lindholm (1996) claims that the 'Islamic Middle East' (which for Lindholm begins somewhere in Afghanistan in the east and continues up to Morocco in the west) shares an ethos of competitive individualism. Lindholm takes the male free tribesman or merchant as the only relevant figure of analysis, thus leaving unaddressed structuring hierarchies between men and women, masters and slaves, landowners and peasants, followers of different religions and sects, and various urban social groups in pre-colonial societies, not to mention in contemporary societies with their many hierarchies based on education, economic

1 We do not focus on historical generations of people with a shared formative experience (Mannheim 1928; Edmunds and Turner 2005); however, it is evident that these two foci are not mutually exclusive, and relations of transmission and succession often are also structured by having or lacking a shared formative experience (Becker 2013).

resources, proximity to the state, the rural–urban binary, religious belonging, and migration. Lindholm's claim is obviously false in regard to societies such as Egypt that are organised by a visible and explicit class structure (Schielke 2012). It also does a poor job of understanding societies that may appear to be structured along tribal lineages rather than social stratification, such as Somali contexts, where wealth and status may not be displayed conspicuously and yet differential access to economic and cultural resources also shapes different educational, occupational, and migratory trajectories (Scharrer 2020; Scharrer and Suerbaum 2022). In addition to providing a theoretical contribution to the understanding of class reproduction by focusing on its unuttered and secretive aspects, we therefore also make an empirical point about the relevance of class hierarchies – that is, inequalities based on differential access to the means of production, status, and their reproduction across generations – in societies of East Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia, where they have often received less scholarly attention than they deserve.

In the following, we highlight through ethnographic examples from our individual research projects three modalities that are helpful to understand how the reproduction of class can be grounded in the hiding of key elements of that reproduction: *concealment and silencing*, *secrecy*, and *ignorance*. Each of these practices hides something in a different way, but they all do so with the important shared intention or outcome of passing on resources, values, ways of life, and privileges from one generation to another.

The ethnographic knowledge of the authors is based on our individual research projects with our own research questions and specific methodological solutions. The importance of hiding and not knowing repeatedly emerged in our research projects in ways that compelled us to address the issue and to highlight these three modalities rather than others. Conflicting emotions that are intimately interwoven with secrets and silences could not be ignored. Dealing with the sensitive topic of secrets and evasions also meant that it could only be approached by the researchers through immersive fieldwork, good rapport, and long-term knowledge with a local community. Learning to improvise in informal settings and chance occurrences has proven to be the most useful method, while in interviews things that are not initially said may only emerge over time and after repeated encounters.

In the first section of this text, foregrounding ethnographies by Jasmin Mahazi and Tabea Scharrer, we take up the way in which status hierarchies are downplayed yet remain important in East Africa, and we argue that the concealment and silencing of status differences and their sources is instrumental for the continuity of privileges such as international educational trajectories. In the second section, based on the work of Ahmad Moradi and Sana Chavoshian, we look at the way in which military secrets affect the search for status and benefits for those involved in military and sanctions-subverting economies in Iran, and we argue that secrecy enables trajectories of mobility that are obscure even to close family and neighbours and thus can also prevent people with secret careers from gaining access to some of their anticipated status and privileges. In the third section, building on research by Samuli Schielke, Aksana Ismailbekova, and Johannes Becker, and with additional input by Antoinette Ferrand, we follow three trajectories of migration (between Egypt and the Gulf region, between Kyrgyzstan and Russia, and between two cities in Palestine) where not knowing the whole picture is instrumental to the material accomplishments and means of distinction of returning migrants as well as the status claims of an urban class that defines itself in part by silencing the role of migrants from rural regions in family and urban lives. In conclusion, we bring the conceptual lines of these ethnographic enquiries together into an argument about silencing and concealment, secrecy, and ignorance as active performances and labour that are necessary to constitute visible, explicitly acknowledged social realities.

1. The concealment of wealth and the silencing of status in Swahili and Somali communities

Our ethnographic enquiry begins with two communities from the Horn of Africa: Somali people among whom Tabea Scharrer conducts long-term research in Kenya and Germany, and Swahili people among whom Jasmin Mahazi conducts participatory fieldwork in coastal cities of Kenya. The two communities are linguistically and culturally distinct and have different principles of generational transmission (patrilinear in Somali contexts, mainly matrilinear in Swahili contexts). They share, however, their original homeland at the Horn of Africa, their Muslim faith, and a certain spirit of egalitarianism that often makes status and class differences hard to notice at first glance.

In Jasmin's research context in Swahili coastal towns in Kenya, knowledge is overtly and covertly passed on to the next generation, always in pursuit of the succeeding generation's well-being, by adjusting to current socio-economic and political conditions. An important site of her research is Swahili weddings, matrifocal communal occasions at which mothers and female family members earn their reward in the form of prestige, honour, respectability, and money for the achievement of bringing up and successfully integrating a new full member into society.

Wedding celebrations are apt sites to think about social stratification, wealth, power, and value in the context of their reproduction in a generational rite of passage. The parents' and primarily the mothers' investments into the starting capital of their newly married daughters and sons through wedding ceremonies ideally promise upward social mobility for the next generation. Several different wedding ceremonies are celebrated through specific music and dance performances that provide the space for negotiating one's social status. They start at the engagement; reach their dramatic peak at *kupamba*, the presentation of the bride after her marriage has been consummated; and conclude with the showing of the bride to a female public at another person's wedding. All these ceremonial steps also include the exchange of gifts, many of which serve to equip the kitchen or the house of the new couple.

The mothers' ability to organise successful weddings of course depends on their economic means, but they equally require communal solidarity, which is based on social recognition and *heshima*, which can be translated as

'respectability' or 'honour'. *Heshima*, in turn, needs to be earned through sociability and generosity, or through the display of wealth – such as by the bride's mother, who at the wedding is showered with verbal praises and monetary gifts in the form of decorative objects shaped in various imaginative ways: flowers, necklaces and crowns, incense burners, cup trophies, coffee sets, and wedding cakes. Giving money in the shape of adornments is a way to highlight the person-related moral qualities of money (Graeber 1996) and thus to downplay its impersonal and amoral purchasing power.

Another valuable wedding gift is the oral art of performance of poetry, particularly for the bridal pair and the bride's mother. Among Swahili-speaking peoples, two concepts that define their gendered social interaction have contributed to the artistic performance of veiled language (Mahazi 2023), and praise poems in particular have become a source of social capital. These paradigms are *heshima* and *sitara* (protection or modest concealment), both of which draw upon widespread Islamic concepts (see e.g. Abu-Lughod 1986: 234). *Sitara* includes the protection from disclosure to a judging audience of anything intimate that in a public context could arouse shame (*ona haya*) (Ivanov 2020: 99). If something remains 'concealed' or 'veiled' and not perceivable, it preserves honour and respect and prevents the occurrence of shame during an actual embodied encounter (Ivanov 2020: 134). Jasmin's analysis of wedding music and dance performances and song lyrics shows how the different ritual performances provide a space for negotiating one's social status, for example through praise poems for the bride's mother. Intentionally less prominent in this negotiation and recognition of status are the hierarchies and social divisions within which successful wedding celebrations and social mobilities are possible.

The term 'class' is an English loan word in Swahili and is used mainly to describe the divide between former slaves and their masters, which since the end of slavery has been transposed to contemporary rich and poor (Romero Curtin 1984). As Jasmin learned during her fieldwork, references to 'class' as a heritage of slavery were hushed, and addressing it was considered inappropriate by a colleague of hers. Another main socio-economic division of the population is based on the opposition of the long-established and the newcomer in coastal towns. Irrespective of their wealth, genealogy, religion, and scholarly background, newcomers to a town in the 19th and 20th centuries faced acts of discrimination such as being restricted to building their homes with mud instead of being allowed to use more durable building materials such as lime and coral stone. However, these socio-economic differences were permeable. Social institutions such as music and dance groups and particularly intermarriage offered paths of upward social mobility to newcomers who could prove their virtuosity, generosity, *heshima*, and humanity (*utu*) (Kresse 2007: 142) and successfully perform these to climb the social ladder. Even the status of enslavement was negotiable because it was not linked with descent ('race') and genealogy. Social class as defined by wealth and genealogy was introduced in the Swahili coast by Arabian and European colonisations, and it was particularly reinforced during British colonial rule through the expansion of the capitalist economy and the issuing of passports and identity documents – the latter classified according to racialised categories. Hillewaert (2019) shows that in the 21st century, socio-economic hierarchies in Lamu continue to be defined more on the basis of humanity, virtuosity, generosity, and respectability (*heshima*) than on wealth or genealogy.

Heshima is constituted in relation to 'the other', including non-living others such as clothing, adornment, or a particular space or room, which together create a space of embodied interaction. *Heshima* is established through another religious and social paradigm, namely *kusitiri* (veiling), or better, through the reciprocal exchange of 'veiled' feats and glorious deeds (Ivanov 2020: 37). *Heshima* is thus something that one can only command in a respectful and generous social relationship with others, while at the same time it requires a good measure of 'veiling': a cultivated silence about private and sensitive matters, and an ability to not display them for public view. To be publicly perceived as respectable, one needs to prove oneself capable of appropriate forms of discretion, privacy, and concealment. *Heshima* along with the cultivation of the right kind of leisurely activities produces status and class distinction, not unlike the command of 'taste' that Bourdieu (1979) analysed in French class society.

With *heshima* and *sitara* as paradigms of gendered social status and interaction among the Swahili (Mahazi 2023; Ivanov 2020), wealth as a source of power and distinction moves from frontstage to backstage. To say that someone is poor, even about oneself, among the Swahili is never degrading or insulting. To the contrary, it could even be understood as virtuous, since one has not accumulated the wealth that was provided to be equally shared among us worldly beings by the powers of the Almighty (Nassir 1992). This understanding of course also encourages one to hide one's wealth. Islam may have contributed to the blurring of explicit class identification with regard to wealth among the Swahili, as it supports the approach of not showing wealth except through generosity, and yet it also encourages the hoarding of wealth.

Many rich coastal dwellers live in moderate to poor housing, and only the number of children they have managed to send abroad for their education reveals that their family, kin, and influential networks are financially well off. The practice of concealing educational opportunities began in the 19th century with the arrival of missionaries and Christian schools, to which the long-established residents of a town discreetly took their children while preaching to new arrivals and people of lower status that those institutions jeopardised the children's Muslim faith. Going away or abroad for one's studies has long been a common practice for the coastal inhabitants, but now the radius has expanded to Western and Christian countries, something that has further enforced the secrecy surrounding it.

Contemporary society at the northern Swahili coast is characterised by both egalitarianism and elitism at the same time; these are negotiated on a daily basis and kept in balance through different social institutions, such as wedding celebrations, gifts, and poetry, that perform an egalitarian spirit and an ethos of respectful concealment

and veiling, which in turn allows the elites of an urban society to command respect and transform their money into genuine sources of status such as pious virtue, educational capital, and mobility. Without concealment and veiling, there would be no respect and no status. But this works only as long as family structures that support the economic advancement of the next generation are upheld. Then the Swahili wedding can remain an open space for negotiating and renegotiating one's social status. But when generations are economically disconnected and when each generation has to stand for itself, such as in cases of migration, then status and 'class' begin to align more explicitly with material and financial wealth (Amin 1964: 6).

In the Somali context where Tabea has conducted fieldwork in Kenya and Germany, she has also encountered a certain secrecy concerning wealth, but also poverty. One interview partner told her that when meeting fellow medical students, he 'dress[es] nicely and drink[s] tea with them. I don't show my problems' (Hamza, Nairobi 2018). This may have to do with pastoralist economies carrying within them elements equalising economic differences (a quality often linked to egalitarian political systems). This argument has been brought forward by Broch-Due and Anderson (2000) concerning major parts of Somali society up to the colonial period. They mention levelling effects due to droughts, but also the exclusion from society of those too poor to be treated as 'equal'. In the Somali context, the explicit categorisation and hierarchisation of society focuses on clan, based on patrilineal descent. In academic works, this focus builds on Lewis (1999 [1961]), who describes the importance of clans for Somali society during colonial times. The notion of clan was further strengthened in the debates about the Somali civil war, with the cause or at least the evolution of the civil war often attributed to Somali clan structure. There also exists, however, a small body of literature showing that socio-economic stratification was present in Somali society in pre-colonial times as well, and that it has gained in importance since (Aronson 1980; Haaland and Keddeman 1984; Hogg 1986; de Waal 1996; Gundel 2002; Watete et al. 2016). Besteman (1998) shows that in the post-independence era migration was already one element of creating class differences within Somali society, through urbanisation processes or work migration, which was reinforced by the migration process after the breakdown of the Somali state. Linked to large-scale migration since the end of the 20th century, the display of wealth has changed. Somali returnees from Europe or North America often stand out in public because of their conspicuous consumption, such as frequenting expensive restaurants and cafés, living in upper middle-class compounds, and sending their children to costly private schools.

Following Broch-Due and Anderson (2000), sidelining wealth and poverty had a stabilising effect for some time and for some parts of the population. And yet this does not apply, for instance, to the Somali kingdoms that existed up to the early 20th century, nor to the descendants of slaves, who remain a distinct group up to the present. And in any case, it does not apply today. Socio-economic inequality has grown with changing economic and political structures. And yet it remains a topic that is not really talked about in public conversations, and differences of wealth and status are often not displayed in public. Again, this has been changing in migratory contexts. Hence, structures, discourses, and habitus are not changing at the same time.

This results in a silencing of wealth and poverty, which Tabea has also encountered in the way work and wealth are talked about within families. Children are not in a position to ask their parents about how they provide for the family, and hence what the material sources of their status are. This does not mean that wealth and poverty are a taboo, a forbidden topic. Rather, the silences around it reflect a sense of privacy and respect whereby children ought not challenge their parents and put them in an uncomfortable position, along with an ethos of equality where the display of wealth by means other than generosity is frowned upon, but where it is also shameful to not be able to offer generosity and thereby display one's poverty.

The concealment of wealth and poverty, and the silence over the means towards status and its reciprocity – notably education and international mobility – is a moral accomplishment for those engaged in it, associated with Islamic norms of modesty and generosity in both Somali and Swahili contexts, the matrilocal ethos of mutual recognition through acts of gift-giving and veiled speech in the Swahili context, and preference for kin over class as a public source of status in the Somali context. However, the current practices of these are overshadowed and undercut by more violent forms of silencing in the wake of colonial rule over the Horn of Africa. The collapse of the Somali state appears to have gone hand in hand with the erosion of pre-colonial ways to equalise some economic differences. The matrifocal traditions of knowledge in the Swahili coast have been subject to an annihilation of endogenous knowledge, of historical pasts and life forms (Moradi 2022: 1), which began with the Arabian and European colonisations and continues in the present with the rise of patriarchal strivings allied with new religious movements to silence matrifocal traditions of knowledge. Hence, in order to make sense of status and class relations in contemporary Somali and Swahili societies, it is important to think along multiple lines of stratification and the skilled practice of concealment and indirect expression through gifts, acts, and veiled speech. It is also important to address the ineffability of coloniality (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015; Maldonado-Torres 2007), which has resulted in a different kind of silencing: not the respectful veiling of wealth and status, but the violent erasure of traditions of knowledge and social techniques that have allowed for the balancing of elitist and egalitarian strivings.

Concealment and silencing as they emerge in these two ethnographic encounters can be surrounded by much singing, music, and a lively exchange of words and gifts as in a Swahili wedding. Concealment of some things is part of the successful public display of other things, such as in the hushing of hierarchies between former masters and slaves, of differential access to education among the egalitarian spirit of a Swahili wedding, or in maintaining the privacy of one's affairs and choosing one's words well

to perform the virtue of *heshima*. Silence can be very obvious, or almost unnoticeable. And as Dragojlovic and Samuels (2021) remind us, silence can be a sign of oppression, the reverse of collective memory in the aftermath of historical trauma, but also a form of respect and care. Silence is not merely the absence of articulation, but rather the conscious avoidance of specific topics, even though they refer to shared knowledge. And concealment, the non-verbal equivalent of silencing, is not simply the absence of perception, but rather the conscious marking of some things as publicly knowable and others not. Michael Herzfeld (2009) argues that the part of one's life that should not be subject to public scrutiny often needs to be marked publicly, which makes secrecy (in the sense of concealment of intimate or private matters) a public performance. Luke Freeman (2013: 600) describes silencing as a 'generalized speech act' in regard to the fundamental social distinction between free and slave descent in highland Madagascar. He argues that this silencing creates a liveable fiction of equality, making the stigmatised status of slave descent less visible yet at the same time entrenching the existing structural divisions. This seems to be an apt description of how the silencing and concealment of wealth and class work in the Horn of Africa as well. Importantly, adding to the insights of Dragojlovic, Samuels, Herzfeld, Freeman, and others, our research shows that these practices also structure the transmission and reproduction of status, from lavish weddings to which everybody is invited to international educational trajectories to which only the children of a few families have access, and from the maintenance of a spirit of equality and pious modesty among clan and kin to the ignorance of a young generation in diaspora about the sources of wealth and connections that allowed their parents to bring them up.

2. Maintaining secrets in families affected by war and sanctions in Iran

Across the world, joining the military often has been seen as a means of achieving social mobility (Bromber and Krais 2018). Financial rewards as well as educational and occupational opportunities for one's children are often used as incentives in military mobilisation campaigns. In their ethnographic fieldwork with veterans of Iran's military expeditions as well as with sanctions-circumventing entrepreneurs, Ahmad Moradi and Sana Chavoshian highlight a different kind of intersection between social mobility and status, and hidden and inaccessible knowledge about its sources, one that works in a different way than the skilled silencing and concealment of status in the Horn of Africa discussed earlier. In this section, we show how the link between the military, entrepreneurship, and social mobility is complicated through practices of secrecy that enable but also complicate and obstruct the careers and family relations of former combatants and other participants in secret operations.

We understand secrecy as the compulsory withholding of knowledge that is accompanied by the potential of that knowledge becoming an 'open secret' (Taussig 1999), something that many tacitly know or claim to know but that is difficult to articulate or to know for sure. This points to an inherent tension in the social practice of secrecy: in order to maintain a secret, it needs to be socially present and animated (Herzfeld 2009). Secrecy is not diametrically opposed to revelation and disclosure. In our media-saturated social life, claims to the secret and who has control over telling and withholding information are constantly challenged. Disclosure, therefore, does not necessarily lead to the death of a secret; it may also contribute to further opacity and contested claims to the truth. In the light of these two interrelated aspects of secrecy – withholding of knowledge on the one hand, and hard-to-verify claims about having access to it on the other – we discuss the case of disabled Afghan veterans in Iran upon their return from regional conflicts, followed by the case of the families of Iranians imprisoned in the US for violating international sanctions.

Iran has a very large population of Afghan citizens, up to four and a half million, who arrived in the country as refugees and asylum seekers. Many of them were born and have lived their entire lives in Iran, and while they have some limited access to public education, many other welfare benefits and resources are not accessible to them. This precarious position makes soldiering in Iran's international military campaigns – notably in the ongoing war in Syria – an attractive career for Afghan men, offering the promise of good wages as well as institutional recognition and welfare benefits as war veterans. Being a veteran can be a status with strong ideological legitimacy given the role of war and martyrdom in the making of the Islamic Republic.

Many Afghan veterans returned from the war in Syria with permanent disabilities and sought to gain the status of disabled veteran. By being recognised as a disabled war veteran, Afghans can receive an official status that plays a significant role in their social upward mobility. The status of veteran, along with its associated monetary benefits, can be passed on to the next generation insofar as it paves the way for the children of the family to receive an official education at the school of their choice or to pass the university entrance exam through a special quota, to which they might not have had access otherwise. Additionally, a veteran's pension and the special quotas are officially passed down to the next generation after the veteran's demise.

In the case of Afghans, this process has been shrouded in secrecy. During fieldwork in 2015, Ahmad came across a major contradiction. At the time, the presence of Iran-backed militia forces in Syria was kept secret. In this context, disabled Afghans struggled hard to acquire state care and social recognition while concealing their involvement in the military. Bodies of Afghans, therefore, became sites of concealment and revelation that required public performance of secrecy and constant negotiations among families, extended kinship, neighbours, and the public at large.

One such veteran was Jamal,[2] who had returned to Iran after a gunshot in his leg led to its amputation in 2014. He was collecting signatures from his neighbours in Islamshahr, a suburb of Tehran, for a form called a 'local testimony' (*esteshhād-e mahalli*). The petition asks neigh-

2 All names of individual research participants in this programmatic article have been replaced by pseudonyms.

bours and 'local trustees' (*moa'tamedin-e mahalli*) to testify that Jamal, as a former fighter and a disabled veteran, is unable to support his family because his income is limited and he has no other financial resources other than those his neighbours are aware of. More than half of Jamal's neighbours declined to sign the form. They refused to testify to his poverty as they were not sure 'how much money he has been receiving from Bashar al-Assad', suspecting that he had accrued wealth in exchange for his militia services in Syria, 'a large sum' and 'in dollars'.

Jamal, like thousands of other Afghans, was subject to public suspicion about his military involvement in the Syrian war. Afghan veterans and their families refer to this collective scorn as 'the wound of the tongue' (*zakhm-e zaban*) – remarks by relatives, neighbours, and distant acquaintances – the effect of which is more excruciating than the pain veterans endure due to their injuries or their families feel at the loss of their kin at war.

With the whole expedition in Syria being a military secret during 2015, it was even more difficult for Jamal's neighbours to know the details of it. The brutal way in which al-Assad and his allies won the war is widely known, however, and may have been known or guessed among Jamal's neighbours as well. In the absence of reliable information, the secretive involvement of Iran and the militias it backed in Syria were exposed through the injured bodies of veterans returning to live in their own neighbourhoods. The histories of transnational violence surfaced on the local scale and plagued everyday encounters with mistrust and derision. In this social context, families of Afghans frequently complained that they had to inhabit the everyday shadowed by scepticism. Rumours about the financial gains and the direct benefits they received from the war became the everyday staple of their life while they sought to reconstitute a way of living with lifelong disability caused by their injuries.

In parallel with Iran's involvement in military expeditions, a patriotic commercial campaign to subvert US-led economic sanctions was underway. Although the international sanctions to restrain Iran's nuclear programme had been in effect since 2006, January 2012 marked a major intensification of sanctions, with Iran's central bank put on the list, the seizing of all bank transaction processes outside Iran, and a ban on its oil exports to Europe. While conducting fieldwork on women's religious gatherings in 2015, shortly after the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, an agreement on Iran's nuclear programme that brought temporary relief from sanctions, Sana learned about 'sanctions prisoners' (*zendaniyan-i tahrim*). Her interlocutors were mostly the wives and mothers of soldiers who were killed, missing, or imprisoned in the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88) and thus felt sympathetic with the cause. Iran's Supreme Leader, echoed by former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, had formulated the issue as an 'economic war' or 'resistance and resilience'. However, sanctions never had such an emotional grip on these women before the exposure of Iran's sanctions prisoners.

The regime of sanctions against Iran starting from 2012 left the routes to supply goods via Turkey and the United Arab Emirates intact (see Yildiz 2020), resulting in a thriving contraband commerce of oil (*sukhtbari*) on the borders with Pakistan and northern Iraq. Scientific exchange in prohibited fields such as biophysics and material sciences continued through unofficial scholarly collaborations with European and American universities, along with an illegal trade in spare parts for the maintenance of energy provision, infrastructures, and aviation.

Like Iran's participation in the war in Syria, these commercial operations were secret. They were run by families and individual entrepreneurs with dual nationality (usually Iran and the United States) who made a financial profit from the operation and could also claim to be involved in a national cause – except that with their work being conditioned by secrecy, they could not make public claims, and their moral and political status was ambiguous due to their dual nationality and the intertwining of patriotism and profit in their work. The sanctions-subverting entrepreneurship remained a secret shared between the Iranian state and its collaborators until the international agreement about Iran's nuclear deal in July 2015 that resulted in some sanctions relief, along with the pardoning of five Iranian traders of electrical devices who had been imprisoned in the US for violating the sanctions. They were exchanged for five American nationals being held in Iranian prisons. The relaxation of the sanctions on Iran and the release of the traders prompted hope among Iranian diaspora communities. Family members of other inmates in the US moved to Tehran, hopeful that the initial prisoner exchange would be followed by the release of their kin as well. Their anticipation of light at the end of the tunnel was frustrated, however, when Donald Trump's administration unilaterally withdrew from the agreement in 2018. When negotiations were finally initiated again in 2021, Iran announced that there were more than thirty inmates being held in US jails for sanctions-related activity.

The structure and nature of activities around the circumvention of the US-led economic sanctions against Iran has been surrounded by anxiety, ambiguity, and taboos. While they have been 'nested' (Yildiz 2020) in the economy and impacting living conditions for as long as four decades in Iran, there are no clear moral codes to address the sanctions. Instead, they are associated with contradiction and discord among Iranians. Trade affected by sanctions appears as a hazy field of knowledge which is 'better not to know' (Taussig 1999: 6). Most contradictory and hazy of all is the US prohibition on trade in materials classified as 'dual-use', that is, suitable for both military and civilian use. Some who have engaged in the 'dual' business, ranging from spare parts and machinery to scientific expertise, have been sentenced to prison in the US, putting their families in limbo. With some delay and after the return of the cloak of sanctions over Iran's fragile economy, the same ambiguity generated public distrust of the state and its collaborators in circumventing the sanctions. Did these collaborations enable the supply of goods for survival? Or did they serve the needs of Iran's military expeditions? Did those involved in them do it for personal gain regardless of the purpose, or did they sacrifice their comfortable lives in the US for the sake of their motherland?

This moral conundrum hung over many conversations during Sana's fieldwork in 2021. She explores modes of disclaiming engagement with sanctions within families of Iranian-American dual citizens from a generational perspective, seeking to understand the pragmatic circuits that allow for maintaining the ambiguity about sanctions within families. She learned that even among those who moved to Iran during the period of sanctions relief, many are living in hiding under the shadow of having an imprisoned family member in the US and are destitute. Finding a person from a religious or pro-regime family who was willing to talk about the issue was also difficult. In contrast to wartime prisoners, who have been celebrated as heroes in Iran, there is no nationalist and religious narrative around Iranians imprisoned in the US for sanctions-circumventing business, nor is there public or official solidarity with their families. On the contrary, the figure of the sanctions-subverting entrepreneur is demonised in the new hardliners' state media as the ultimate profiteer (*kaseb*) responsible for economic corruption. Moreover, in contrast to Afghan veterans of the war in Syria, who sought institutional recognition by the state but faced suspicion from their neighbours, family members of sanctions-subverting entrepreneurs need to disclaim their collaboration with the state. Through her former interlocutors in women's religious circles, Sana learned about Ziba, the ex-wife of a sanctions prisoner. Ziba was forced into an ascetic life in spite of her wealthy background, coming from a landlord family and having been previously married to a rich husband.

When Sana met her in a café in Tehran, Ziba had been living together with her young son Adnan in her parents' small flat in a middle-class district for five years. Although the two chose a corner of the café with empty tables on both sides, Ziba was very cautious about their surroundings, lowering her voice and pulling her long black sleeves to her fingertips, covering her youthful hands.[3] Although she was hesitant to speak, she also had an urge to discuss her mother's interventions in their lives with an outsider who was also aware of her ex-husband's condition. Ziba had studied and worked as an architect in California for twenty years. In her parents' house, however, she was following her mother's pious code of conduct and attire. At home, she was helping in the women's weekly meeting to recite the Qur'an under her mother's direction. When skipping the pious circle, she would stay longer in the local mosque with Adnan to attend a sermon. Although she was already separated from her husband at the time of his arrest, she categorised herself as an unmarriageable woman whose life was intertwined with the story of sanctions. Worried about Adnan, her parents had advised her to move into one of the houses they owned in a better region, but she refused in order to avoid rumours being spread by 'neighbours who might think the house is bought and decorated with the sanction profits'. She also believes that 'unclean money' (an important Islamic moral-economic concern) affects her life and those of her children; nevertheless, she stressed the rumours as the main issue.

Recently, her mother had proposed to arrange a marriage for Adnan with one of the women in her Qur'an circle. The prospective bride was, in Ziba's opinion, rather old, introverted, and unstylish, but she had the advantage of 'already knowing their situation, and she would never ask to live abroad!', as Ziba quoted her mother's words. Ziba deemed it prudent not to say anything and to wait for Adnan's decision. Adnan wished to open his own business, for which he must finish a two-year period of obligatory military service. An early marriage and the sponsorship of his single mother could reduce its duration. For Ziba, Adnan had become her only hope to expand their social relations and to restore the pride of the family. The history of her husband's business activities could only harm this project, which limited the range of her actions to secure her son's future lest he also be associated with harmful rumours about hidden wealth.

In the void of communication with her US colleagues and Iranian state officials, Ziba and her son felt protected and redeemed by the religious circle around them. Instead of asking questions or spreading rumours, they kept her secret and built a network of trust.

Had Sana met Ziba at an earlier stage in her research, she might have identified the well-established and widespread Islamic theory of envy (by neighbours, competitors, and also kin, often referred to as the 'evil eye' in Western writing) as a cause of her loss and misfortune, and therefore also as a rationale to hide her wealth and its sources. In her current situation, however, Ziba's problem was not with envy but with the suspicions others had about the source of her family's wealth, and her inability to prove that it had already been legitimately held by her family before the sanctions business. This she shared with former Afghan fighters, whose neighbours found it hard to believe that they did not have large amounts of money in foreign currency hidden somewhere.

Kali Rubaii (2020) has argued that uneven networks of trust among strangers and smugglers in war environments open up new theoretical vistas in understanding security-making and the line between crisis and survival. Building upon her argument, we suggest that in addition to trust, the networks of combatants and smugglers and their families are also shaped by secrecy and distrust, albeit in unpredictable forms that are both extraneous and intrinsic to social solidarity, ethical reasoning, and family. For both Afghan veterans and families of imprisoned sanctions-breakers, secrecy plays a role that is both productive (in soldiering work and sanctions-subverting business) and disruptive (in the difficulty of state recognition and in suspicion by neighbours) of the capacity to pass on status and resources from parents to children. The two groups differ, however, in terms of their relation to the state and in their class positionality: while Afghan veterans seek to be recognised by the state in order to attain a level of welfare and educational security, families of entrepreneurs distance themselves from the state. Their silence is fed by their pride, and yet it often leaves them with the worrying prospect of downward social mobility.

3 The covering of her hands was a marker of piety that at the same time hid her bourgeois habitus. Soft, white skin would reveal that she was not engaged in manual or household work.

3. Migrants and their families, and the importance of not knowing

In his work on the migratory trajectory from Algeria to France, Abdelmalik Sayad (2004) argues that a perspective that privileges either the place of departure or that of arrival results in an incomplete understanding of migration – an incompleteness that is a feature not only of social sciences, but also of migratory societies' self-understanding: 'Emigration and immigration are social mechanisms that must fail to recognize themselves for what they are in order to become what they must be' (Sayad 2004: 5).

In this third section of our programmatic article we take up the lead offered by Sayad and follow three migratory trajectories in which practices of ignorance and silencing are instrumental for turning the hard work of migrancy into recognisable and publicly known accomplishments of social status and its transmission to one's kin and children: Egyptian migrants to the Arab Gulf states and Kyrgyz migrants to Russia, studied by Samuli Schielke and Aksana Ismailbekova; and the relations between old city dwellers and people identified as rural-to-urban migrants in the Old City of Jerusalem in the research of Johannes Becker.

In contrast to the spirit of downplaying wealth that we encountered in the Horn of Africa, Egypt, where Samuli's ethnography has its starting point, stands out as an openly class-conscious society in which class distinction is proudly displayed, addressed, and promised in the advertisements for upper-class gated communities and international schools (Roushdy 2021). The explicitness of social class coexists with a remarkable vagueness about its sources, however. It is difficult to know how much Egyptian families actually earn because formal salaries often make up only a part of real incomes, which also rely on privatisation of public services, diversion of private and public sector funds, freelance second jobs, and migrant remittances. Statistical indicators developed by state agencies reflect this uncertainty, focusing on consumption, property ownership, level of education, and location in the absence of reliable data on income (Tignor and Abd al-Khalek 1982; Sinha et al. 2019).

The extent of ignorance about the sources of class status is especially remarkable between international migrants and their families. In 2009, in the early days of his research with Egyptians in the Gulf, Samuli brought a gift from a man called Amr (whom he met during his fieldwork in Qatar) to his parents back in his home village. Amr hadn't travelled home for vacation during the three years of his work contract. He was saving as much as he could for his marriage. His parents welcomed Samuli into their home, and his father, after a moment of awkward hesitation, revealed that he did not know what his son did for work. Apparently, he had never asked his son, and the latter had not volunteered to tell him. The striking thing for Samuli was that there was nothing particularly sad, painful, or embarrassing to hide. Their son was a security guard at the headquarters of a sports institution in Doha. Most of the time, he served as the building's receptionist. His salary was not high, but he had a good relationship with his colleagues and better working conditions than many of his fellow security workers at other worksites. Why would he not tell this to his parents?

We do not know why Amr did not share with his family what he did for work – nor why his parents did not ask him directly. But we do know that in the Egyptian code of good manners, it is imperative to avoid *ihrag*, the embarrassment of one's counterpart by asking them a question or making a request that would force them either to refuse – which would be impolite – or to act against their will or interests out of politeness. We also know that migrants and their families worldwide often consider the type of work one does abroad as not important, especially if this work doesn't contribute to one's social status (Mains 2011; Elliot 2021). 'Collaborative silences' (Nieswand 2014) enable the separation of the work one does abroad in order to attain status from the status one gains back at home. Farah Hallaba and her collaborators, who organised an exhibition at the Contemporary Image Collective in Cairo in 2022 on the experience of Gulf migration among the Egyptian middle classes, encountered a pervasive absence: Egyptian cinema and movies feature many migrants to the Gulf, but only in the stages of departure and return, and through the effect of their absence on the families. The *ghurba* (the condition of living abroad without making one's home there) itself is not represented. The exhibition makers, who had all grown up in Egyptian families in the Gulf, also realised that they remembered strikingly little of their own lives in the Gulf: 'We live in a void' (Hallaba 2022). The exhibition addressed the peculiar outcomes of this void: a material investment in carefully decorated homes with modern appliances and gilded salon furniture while breadwinners or entire families live in an extended state of deferred future. Hallaba argues that the societal ideal of migration to the Gulf as a temporary stage to realise something back at home normalises deferred lives, hides them, even erases them from memory.

Amr worked as a teacher in Egypt and having been a security guard in Qatar added nothing to his social status back home – in fact, it might have reduced it. What mattered is what he brought back: money to get married and buy a plot of land on which he would later build a house. How he got these did not need to be addressed.

Ghurba as an exceptional state of non-home that is necessary to gain the money to build a home, while the details of it are not important to know, enables the entertaining of parallel realities. It constructs the rural or urban neighbourhood community as a conservative home-based one in which people are in their right places in a well-ordered hierarchy, and it extra-territorialises other forms of living that might complicate those hierarchies (extramarital love stories and unconventional lifestyles, for example). It allows people to find all kinds of work, which does not need to be addressed as long as it effectively contributes to one's status back home.

Ignorance and evasion are needed for morally and societally valued projects to be realised in coexistence with forms of living, sources of wealth, and economic practices that are difficult to reconcile with such projects. These issues are usually not concealed or secret in the sense that knowledge about them would be actively prevented or banned from circulating. For example, the hard time that migrants have is well known and talked about in general terms, and so is the marital infidelity of many men when

the occasion arises. However, there is a widespread (but not uniform) tendency to not know or not address the specific details that concern the lives of individuals. Such practices of not knowing enable experiences of stability and improvement. The hard work that went into building a presentable house remains unseen. And as the next generation embarks on the trip to build a new house or a new floor in the old family house, the hardship of *ghurba* can be transmitted from father to son, reproduced and unresolved.

Such tensions can persist over generations without ever needing to be resolved. But where tensions result in ruptures, and where hard work may not result in displays of success, shame comes into play. It is shameful to be poor, homeless, and to have no properties in the region of Osh in Kyrgyzstan where Aksana has conducted fieldwork with families whose breadwinners migrate to Russia. Families that are poor and do not have a new house of the kind migrants build are called 'homeless'. It is not a home as such they lack, but a representative one that radiates success. Such 'unfortunates', as they are also called, are looked down upon, and their lack of a home is considered a sign of instability. They may feel discriminated against, even when nothing is said directly against them. 'Homeless' parents find it very hard, for example, to contract marriages for their children. 'Homelessness' among ageing couples also signals that they probably have reduced social networks. Their poverty is associated by others with laziness, irresponsibility, and alcoholism. It is a sign of loss, failure, and shame. To avoid the shame of finding oneself marginalised and deprived of the ability to act in social networks, many people do everything they can to keep their poverty hidden.

The moral binary of shame (*uiat*) and honour (*namyz*) constrains and guides the behaviour of Kyrgyz men and women within and outside lineage groups. It influences the way in which lineage members see themselves but also the way in which they are perceived by other lineages. The social and public nature of shame is expressed in the Kyrgyz phrase *el emne deit* ('what would people say?'). The situations in which it is used imply that it is shameful to not care for one's parents, not help one's relatives, and not educate one's children. Caring for them on a high level, in turn, should bring and maintain great honour for the family and even distant relatives. Julie McBrien (2021) argues that shame is a visceral and relational practice 'that textures everyday life, cultivating discomfort in the body when spoken, gendering and aging those involved in its practice, and setting the boundaries of propriety' (McBrien 2021: 1). Every Kyrgyz man identifies himself as part of a larger group (father, children, and distant relatives); shame is thus also embedded into groups. Each family competes for honour and seeks to avoid damaging the reputation of the whole lineage by putting it in a bad light, for example, by being poor.

In the village where Aksana conducted much of her fieldwork, she encountered Adil, whose family history of migration helps us to understand the productive role of ignorance vis-à-vis the shame associated with poverty. His family was poor when their children were small, but as soon as the children grew up, they migrated to Moscow and began to earn more money, and they built a house within a short period of time. This changed the family's social status dramatically. In a short time, they earned more than what most migrants could earn in Russia. Nobody knows how. And nobody asks. The issue is not openly addressed in public. Other villagers would rather praise the parents for raising successful children. The kind of work they undertook is not a relevant issue. The relevant issue is that Adil moved from the shameful condition of economic instability to the honourable status of a full-fledged member of the community thanks to his children's success. Their life in Russia remains unknown not because Adil tries to hide it, but because other villagers do not try to know.

This ignorance is not unique to the work undertaken by Adil's sons. Migrants often told Aksana that they keep quiet about their real work so that 'our parents will not be concerned if we engage in dangerous or unhealthy activities', and so that they will not be ashamed if this becomes known in the village. The main social obligations of these migrants, and the expectations of the people in the village towards them, are usually fulfilled when the migrant children return and build a house, ensuring they receive support and social recognition from the villagers. In this way, the facts and genuine experiences of migration and the migrant life remain behind closed doors, unspoken and ignored.

The ways in which migrants frame their experiences in a manner acceptable to the community constitute a sort of camouflage, a way of hiding in plain sight by merging with one's surroundings. For example, migrants often occupy lower positions in restaurant work in Russia, but when speaking about their work they prefer to emphasise the *place* (i.e. restaurant) rather than the work they do. Aksana's research participants in the village often showed her pictures of their migrant sons in front of banks, business centres, or restaurants, praising their hard work and support of their families without discussing their exact responsibilities, position, or working conditions. The outcome of such camouflage is that the names of buildings and companies and impressive photos are known and highlighted, while descriptions which might accurately represent their lives are left out. In the process, the voices of migrants in their own terms are muted. When they are heard, they speak in the dominant language of patrilineality and the honour–shame binary. In this way, concerns and tension between migrants and their parents can be avoided. This works best when different generations live geographically apart. In many Kyrgyz families the generation of adult children – both men and women – live and work in Russia, while their children are raised by the grandparents in the village of origin. This arrangement generates multiple other problems (Ismailbekova 2020) but maintains the separation of the labour undertaken to attain status on the one hand, and the accomplishment of status on the other.

Migrants worldwide tend to settle permanently in their places of work if they can. What may have been intended as a circular migration often results in the emergence of new urban populations. This is most evident in rural-to-urban migrations, which tend to generate social stratifications along a line between old-established res-

idents and new arrivals. When otherwise effective ascriptions of religious or ethnic difference don't play out, the sheer difference in the duration of residence can be sufficient for boundary making (Elias and Scotson 2008). Ascriptions of migrants as 'rural' or of a 'different status' or 'different class' are brought forward through the juxtaposition of the best of the established and the worst of the outsiders along with 'blame gossip' (Elias 2008). For the voice of the old-established to prevail, the voices and stories of the new arrivals need to be silenced.

In Jerusalem, where Johannes has conducted qualitative sociological research, such a figuration between the established and outsiders evolved between the end of the 19th century and 1967, a period during which a large number of Palestinians migrated to the city from the countryside and other Palestinian cities (Becker 2017, 2020). Most of these migrants came from Hebron (al-Khalil) and its environs. Many were poor and worked in Jerusalem in low-status jobs. From the beginning they were framed by the established Jerusalemites as socially problematic, peasants, backward, and/or socially conservative and overtly religious (Qleibo 2010, 2011; Davis 1999; IPCC 2009).

This figuration has been overshadowed by the Israeli occupation and its heavy impact on the everyday life of all Palestinians. It still plays a role, but it does so in the background, where it is hidden and not publicly discussed. In the interviews and conversations Johannes conducted in Jerusalem, the theme was usually mentioned in passing but it rarely took centre stage. Old-established Jerusalemite families still perceive – but only sometimes explicitly describe – the character of Jerusalemite society as more civilised and cosmopolitan, and endangered or lost through the Hebronite families. At the same time, Hebronites fear that the Israelis will use the Jerusalemites' impression that Hebronites don't really belong to the city to eventually displace them,[4] even though Hebronites today form the majority of Jerusalem's Palestinian inhabitants.

Johannes realised how this divide remained effective through the silence that surrounded it during his fieldwork and especially during life history interviews in families with a mixed heritage, among them the Nasr family.[5] Nabila Nasr comes from old-established Jerusalemite family of the same name, while her husband Jamal is from a family of poor migrants from Hebron. In an interview conducted by Johannes's Palestinian colleague Anan Srour, Nabila fashioned an elitist self-image and self-presentation as a 'civilised' member of a Jerusalemite family. She introduced her husband and his family only in a side remark as being 'from Hebron' – with a wink, as if expecting Anan to know what this means.

When Anan asked her explicitly to explain, Nabila spoke at length of a 'cultural gap' between her and her husband and pointed to his origins as the reason for the problems in their marriage and why she avoided his family. She characterised him as a typical Hebronite: conservative, patriarchal, and oriented towards the extended family. In another interview which Johannes conducted later with their son who grew up with Nabila's Jerusalemite parents, the son avoided any mention of his father's origins, even when explicitly asked about it. His mother Nabila and his grandparents, he said, attached great importance to him not establishing contact with Hebronite neighbours in the Old City, whom they perceived as uneducated and poor. He showed Johannes the Jerusalem history book that his grandmother read to him: 'When she finished the book she started reading it again.' He focused on his mother's family: 'I know that they're from Jerusalem [...] they didn't come from the outside, no, they, the father and the grandfather, they were in Jerusalem.'

When Johannes asked if he could conduct further interviews with other family members, Nabila Nasr and the two children hastily tried to arrange appointments with the mother's family. Only after these bids failed and as the very last option did they ask Jamal, the husband. The interview with him took place in the presence of Nabila and their daughter. Jamal spoke of growing up as the son of poor migrants in a dilapidated neighbourhood of the Old City, from which he and his family were later evicted by the Israeli government (Becker 2020), and how his situation improved through education and his subsequent marriage. Jamal evaluated this ambivalently: he said that he had successfully escaped poverty but was now constantly confronted with pejorative ascriptions. In the background, while Jamal spoke about his life history, Nabila and their daughter joked loudly, laughed at some of his stories – especially when he talked about his poor upbringing – and sometimes interrupted him, as if trying to put a boundary between him and them by ridiculing Jamal. At one point, Jamal tried to stop the interview by saying in English: 'This was only short about my life, it is very nice to repeat it, it's the first time that I am talking about what was, so thank you for this meeting.' In this family dialogue, or perhaps rather non-dialogue, the family thus drifts apart: Jamal remains an outsider whose voice is either silenced or not taken seriously because of his ascribed Hebronite belonging. Instead, belonging to a Jerusalemite family is placed at the forefront.

In an act of camouflage that echoes Aksana's fieldwork with Kyrgyz migrants, Jamal chose not to highlight his origins in order to blend in. However, his story adds a dimension of more explicit silencing that is similar to what we developed in the first section of this article: his story is actively suppressed by his family because it does not fit with the urban identity and status claims of an old-established Jerusalemite family. For Jamal and Nabila's children's generation, we see another mechanism at work. The urge to silence Jamal's part of the family history by the dominant Jerusalemite family – by Nabila and her parents – produced the children's ignorance and lack of interest in their father's past. They were puzzled and uneasy when confronted with the past when their father was finally given space to talk.

Why do people often deliberately leave things unaddressed, practise camouflage to blend in, and remain silent or silence others in their migration trajectories? Our

4 For example, in a 1978 ruling by the Israel Supreme Court that sanctioned the eviction of a Palestinian family from their Jerusalem property, referring to their Hebronite origin; see Israel Supreme Court (1978).

5 All names and further details have been changed.

ethnographic cases show that the labour and means for the making of one's status often do not align well with the ideal outcome of the process, which is why the former are better left unaddressed in order to focus on the latter. This is true of migrant workers in the Gulf and in Russia as well as of old-established Jerusalemites. At the same time, however, there is genuine difficulty in knowing. The lived experience of migrancy is often difficult to convey to people who have not experienced it, which is why even well-informed people can be shocked and surprised by the reality, and children can find it hard to relate to their parents' careers. Following the observation offered by Sayad at the beginning of this section, ignorance and incomplete understanding thus appear to be not a fault but a systemic feature of the migratory process. This incompleteness of knowledge along with a preference to not know appears to be especially pronounced in migratory trajectories where different aspects of life and livelihood are located in different places. It also seems to be a more general feature of accomplished status, however, and especially of status that is passed on and inherited.

Conclusion

Silence, secrecy, and ignorance are important ways in which class and status are established and maintained from one generation to the next. The practice of transmission combined with the possibility of upward and downward mobility is crucial to class: a privilege that cannot be taught or passed on is not a class privilege; an inherited marker of status that cannot be potentially gained or lost over generations is called race or caste rather than class. However, the accomplishments of status, privilege, and comfort – as well as their counterparts failure, discrimination, and dispossession – have a peculiar tendency to make the conditions of their production invisible. They become normative and naturalised in large part by the force of silence.

At the beginning of our collective enquiry to understand this tendency, we tried to approach it through the anthropological concept of taboo. Taboos are normative interdictions that maintain symbolic boundaries (Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki 2015: 850), such as words that should not be used in polite public interactions, or places that should not be entered without ritual initiation or purification. Inequality in an egalitarian society, military secrets, and gaps in knowledge about migrants' lives at first seemed to fit with the idea of taboo topics about which one is not supposed to speak. And yet when we tried to bring the concept more precisely in line with our fieldwork knowledge, inconsistencies and tensions emerged. Vernacular use of the word 'taboo' comes with Freudian undertones of repressed sexuality, which was not an issue in our research. The Arabic and Islamic terminology of *ḥarām* (banned) and *ḥaram* (sanctuary) may at first seem to be equivalent with taboo, and yet they indicate either the prohibition of acts or the sanctification of holy sites and female domestic spaces. They do not apply well to knowledge and ignorance. The means of concealment and silencing, secrecy, and not knowing that we have explored in this programmatic text, along with the specific skills and practices that constitute them, such as *heshima*/respectability (in Section 1), suspicion (in Section 2), and camouflage (in Section 3), involve norms, power, and violence. They have symbolic consequences in the self-understanding of ethnic groups and socio-economic classes. But their way of working is not that of the normative interdiction. Rather than symbolically effective taboos, we were encountering practices that were effective because their symbolic and normative visibility or knowability was evaded or suppressed.

Emotions are an important part of this work of evasion and suppression. While we have not focused on the emotional dimension in the scope of this article, all our ethnographic cases feature important cultivated emotions, such as the sense of *heshima* (honour or respectability) in the Swahili coast; anxiety and distrust as well as their counterpart, the comfort of mutual trust, in Iran; the embarrassment (*ihrag*) caused by confrontational questions as well as the ease and comfort accomplished by evading them; and the embodied sense of shame about things that should not be known as well as that of pride about things worthy of display in Kyrgyzstan. Our methods and materials are too heterogeneous to make conclusive claims about these and other emotions; however, they open promising avenues for further research.

The conceptual categories we have developed from our fieldwork encounters are often not distinct in ordinary practice, and they do not allow for a neat taxonomy of ways of hiding. For example, the ignorance about migrants' working conditions and sources of income which we discussed in Section 3 is a different way of not knowing than the skilled cultivation of respectability through silence and concealment which we discussed in Section 1 in the context of Swahili and Somali communities. In one, knowledge is not sought and requires no effort of concealment; in the latter, it is kept private or implicit through an often explicit performance of praise, politeness, and protection from sight. And yet in both the operation enhances one's status. Both are in turn different from the compulsory secrecy and its flip side distrust, rumours, and fear of exposure that surround military campaigns and commerce in the shadow of sanctions, which we discussed in Section 2 in the context of Iran. Secrecy and distrust are more ambiguous vis-à-vis one's status because while secrecy can enable discretion about sources of wealth and status, it can also put both at risk. The educational trajectories in missionary schools that enabled the educational mobility of Swahili elites are a case in point of a practice where secrecy and silencing come together with cultivated ignorance about the sources of wealth and status. Similarly, Jamal's children's ignorance of their father's family involves both active silencing and tactful evasion and ignorance. The variety of the configurations we have encountered calls for ethnographic, qualitative sociological, or historical bottom-up enquiry rather than categorical top-down conceptualisation.

While we call for caution about categorical generalisation, we do argue for a general, programmatic claim of an empirical kind. The passing on of status – regarding both the resources that enable it and the moral and cultural grammars of evaluating those resources – from grandparents to parents and children, and also from masters to disci-

ples, needs to be understood in a way that is not restricted to its discursive and performative dimension of explicit markers and accomplishments. Marks of distinction, accomplishment of status – and also stigmas of discrimination and stories of failure – are likely to consist equally of aspects that are concealed, forcibly kept secret, or not addressed. At the same time, every display and utterance that qualitatively or quantitatively values a person's or group's standing towards others is likely to be enabled and accompanied by blind spots and silences. This is not a fault or failure. Rather, it appears to be a recurring and productive pattern through which humans can entertain complex lives and strive for moral ideals. Often, a degree of secrecy and silence is considered a moral virtue in itself. At other times, it is not virtuous but enables another virtue to be upheld. For social scientific research, this is an invitation to consider various ways of hiding and not knowing as productive elements of human societies and reproduction and also to consider those that may enable our own stances when we pass judgement on the ignorance and silence of others.

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