



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

# Women and Birth

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/wombi](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/wombi)

## Review article

# Milk siblingship, religious and secular: History, applications, and implications for practice



Virginia Thorley\*

School of History, Philosophy, Religion &amp; Classics, The University of Queensland, QLD 4072, Australia

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 8 July 2014

Received in revised form 15 September 2014

Accepted 15 September 2014

### Keywords:

Milk siblingship

Culture

Kinship

Breastfeeding

Milk banking

## ABSTRACT

**Problem or background:** Milk kinship has religious and practical importance to Muslim families that is not well understood in Western cultures. The relationship occurs when an infant receives the milk of a woman other than the biological mother, creating familial relationships between the child and the woman whose milk is received. As milk siblings, her children and the recipient infant must never marry each other. Midwives in Western countries may encounter this in relation to human milk banking.

**Aim:** This review provides a context for respectfully assisting families with their decision making when they are offered banked milk.

**Methods:** A database search was conducted and other publications were found manually.

**Review/findings:** Milk siblingship can be religious or secular. In Islam similar prohibitions on marriage exist to those for blood relations. The mothers therefore have to be known to each other to prevent an inappropriate marriage. This relationship has been a barrier to use of human milk banks by Muslim families as milk from several mothers is usually pooled. Nevertheless, donor milk has been used for premature neonates in two Islamic countries, applying the religious requirements. Recent interpretations by some Islamic scholars permitting milk banking may be acceptable to some families, but others will heed other rulings.

**Conclusion/implications:** NICU staff may encounter difficulties in providing banked human milk to infants from Muslim families. Different rulings exist and Muslim families in Western countries come from a variety of traditions. Sensitivity is required to explore these issues with families.

© 2014 Australian College of Midwives. Published by Elsevier Australia (a division of Reed International Books Australia Pty Ltd). All rights reserved.

## 1. Background

The concept of milk siblingship can be either religious or secular, depending on the culture and setting. In Islam, children who are suckled by the same woman become, in effect, related by milk as siblings. Milk siblingship comes under the consanguinity laws, which prevent marriage between individuals related by blood or by milk. Thus the mothers must be known to each other so as to prevent the inadvertent future marriage of children who are related by milk. Milk siblingship also exists as a custom, but not a law, in other religious groups, though to a lesser extent today. In a secular context, the term 'milk siblingship' is used as a descriptor for the emotional bond observed between children who are not biological siblings but are breastfed by the same woman, who may be referred to as their 'milk mother'. It is used informally in peer groups such as local chapters of organisations

that provide support to breastfeeding mothers or link home-birthing women.<sup>1,2</sup> However, it is when it has a religious context, for Muslims, that it has the potential to impact the care provided to a family in the clinical setting.

## 2. Aim

Many midwives, International Board Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLCs) and child health nurses practising in Australia and other Western countries are unaware of the practice of milk siblingship, but may encounter situations in relation to use of donor milk in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU).<sup>3</sup> This review article sets out what milk siblingship is and attempts to address misconceptions held about it.

## 3. Methods

The articles cited in this review were found from the author's files gathered over several years and supplemented by a search of

\* Tel.: +61 0409 876 848.

E-mail addresses: [v.thorley@uq.edu.au](mailto:v.thorley@uq.edu.au), [vgthorley@optusnet.com.au](mailto:vgthorley@optusnet.com.au)

the databases Web of Science, Medline, Scopus and Google Scholar for the terms 'milk sibling', 'milk siblingship' and 'kinship and Islam and breastfeeding'. No articles were found in Medline and a single article was found in Scopus. However, four eligible articles were found in Web of Science, after articles on the new reproductive technologies were eliminated, while eleven of the thirteen articles found on Google Scholar with the search terms '<milk sibling' OR 'milk siblingship'>' were eligible for inclusion.

#### 4. Review

*Milk siblingship* is the term used for the relationship between otherwise unrelated children who have received milk from the breast of the same woman. It has also been called the *milk bond*. It is best known as an element of the consanguinity laws in Islam, religious laws setting prohibitions for Muslims on who can marry whom and thus preventing incest.<sup>4–6</sup> However, milk siblingship, in terms such as 'milk brothers' or 'milk sisters', is a custom of ancient origin in many other cultures without necessarily having a religious foundation. Across cultures there is a concept of a special bond created between individuals by receiving the same milk.<sup>7</sup>

##### 4.1. Milk siblingship in Islam

The question of how many breastfeeds or sips of expressed breastmilk are required to create the milk relationship has been debated by Muslim jurisprudentialists within both Sunni Islam and Shi'ite Islam. It must be emphasised here that Muslims living in Western countries come from a variety of traditions and so will seek guidance from different sources.

Ghaly draws upon the teachings of four Sunni Schools of Islamic law and two Shi'ite Schools to describe the complex process of making religious rulings (*fatwas*) on new practices, including on human milk banking, which did not exist in the past.<sup>8</sup> He cites the opinion of some Sunni jurists that the child must be breastfed at least five times, while other Sunni schools consider a small amount sufficient. Fortier states that the Maliki school of Sunni jurisprudence, among the Moors of Mauritania, is divided on whether as few as one to three breastfeeds create milk kinship.<sup>9</sup> Both Ghaly and the Iranian law academic, Sardoueinassab, cite a Shi'ite school of jurists which has ruled that suckling must have occurred at least ten times.<sup>8,10</sup> Sardoueinassab states that, if there cannot be ten consecutive feeds, a 24 h period of breastfeeding suffices, to fulfil the requirement that there should be enough breastfeeds to build the child's flesh and bone, as stated in the Qur'an. According to Ghali, the Ja'fari school within the Shi'ite tradition acknowledges only direct suckling at the breast for the milk relationship to occur, but not if the breastmilk was given by bottle, cup or tube.<sup>8</sup> Despite differences in interpretation, the consensus is that milk must reach the child's stomach and assuage hunger, that it, it must be sufficient to be nourishing and 'build' flesh and bone, and the child must be under two years of age.

There are implications for human milk banking for premature infants in an Islamic country or elsewhere if the parents are Muslim and the mother is not yet producing sufficient milk. The use of human milk is well known as a cost-effective means of reducing the risk of necrotising enterocolitis (NEC) in neonatal intensive care nurseries (NICUs).<sup>11,12</sup> There have been differing rulings by jurists on the use of human milk banks. Pooled milk, as practiced in human milk banking, is usually considered unacceptable as the donors of the pooled milk, usually several, are unknown to the parents of the recipient baby. This is because of the religious requirement that both mothers know each other so that there will never be an inadvertent marriage of their children.

Nevertheless, two instances from Islamic countries have been reported where donor milk was used with NICU infants after

careful efforts to meet the religious requirements. In Kuwait Al-Naqeeb and colleagues enabled the same woman's milk to be provided to five infants (twins and triplets) in the NICU to supplement their mothers' own milk by meeting the religious requirements.<sup>4</sup> This mainly involved introducing the donor mother (the mother of two of the premature twins) and the mothers of the recipient infants so that they all became known to each other. The authors also conducted rigorous screening of the donor mother and her milk. Thus no religious obstacle was raised to the feeding of expressed breastmilk to these infants who were too immature to suckle directly. More recently, Hsu and colleagues reported their successful use of donor milk in Malaysia through following the religious laws.<sup>13</sup> Moran and Gilad have described how non-puerperal induced lactation fits within these cultural and religious contexts.<sup>14</sup>

A differing interpretation of milk pooling was used in a fatwa issued in 2004 by the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR), which drew upon the fact that milk banks in the West were no longer theoretical, but increasing in number, and take great care with the safety of the milk they dispense.<sup>8</sup> As the donors cannot be known and neither can the exact amount from each woman be determined, this doubt may allow some leeway for leniency.<sup>8</sup>

El-Khuffash and Unger have described this new fatwa that interprets the special situation of NICU infants in relation to donor milk, after considering the situation of Muslims living in Western countries where milk banks exist.<sup>3</sup> According to these authors, this ruling argues that the religious requirement is that the infant be suckled (*ridā'* or *radā'*, that is, fed directly at the breast) for the milk relationship to be created.<sup>3,8</sup> For an infant fed by nasogastric tube or bottle, suckling is not involved in their receiving the milk. Furthermore, this guideline states, since the amount from any one donor should not be enough to build flesh, and the small quantities consist of milk from several unknown women, the amount received from any one of the donors, though unknown, is insufficient to meet the requirement.<sup>3,8</sup> An important consideration left out of the discussion is the need to provide support to assist the biological mother to maximise her milk yield so that any use of banked milk is minimised.

As there is still a variety of interpretations of whether the issue of milk kinship is a barrier to acceptance of pooled milk from unknown donors via a human milk bank, the unit and the parents will need to seek appropriate advice. The Internet portal, [www.islamonline.net](http://www.islamonline.net) provides links to a variety of resources, as a starting point.

In its simplest sense milk kinship involves the children breastfed by the same woman, but it can draw in a wide range of other kin, especially historically, when political and power networks have been required by powerful families. MacClancy has described the complexity of interpretations of milk siblingship in Islam.<sup>15</sup> An undesirable future marriage can be strategically prevented by making the two parties siblings through drinking from the same woman's breasts as infants.<sup>6,16</sup> Occasionally a marriage has taken place when it was unknown that the two parties received the same milk in infancy and were therefore related by milk as brother and sister. In Islamic cultures today, when this relationship is discovered later, the marriage is annulled.<sup>6,8,17</sup>

##### 4.2. Milk siblingship in other cultures

Milk siblingship was traditional in other cultures originating in the eastern Mediterranean and the Caucasus.<sup>6,18</sup> While the gender of the children was not necessarily a barrier to co-feeding, occasionally there has been a cultural requirement that the children be of the same gender.<sup>6</sup> For instance, until at least the first

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/2636006>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/2636006>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)