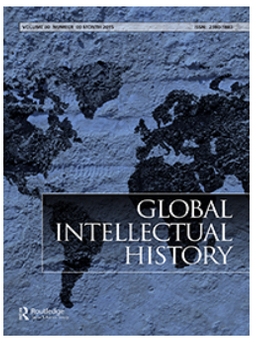

Global Intellectual History

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rgih20

Framing emptiness: Response to a grandiloquent discussion of dynasty

Jeroen Duindam

To cite this article: Jeroen Duindam (2021): Framing emptiness: Response to a grandiloquent discussion of dynasty, Global Intellectual History, DOI: 10.1080/23801883.2021.1886743

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23801883.2021.1886743

Published online: 25 Feb 2021.

GLOBAL INTELLECTUAL HISTORY
https://doi.org/10.1080/23801883.2021.1886743

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Framing emptiness: Response to a grandiloquent discussion of dynasty

Jeroen Duindam

History Institute, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

KEYWORDS Dynasty; kingship; global history; comparative history

In July–August 2020 *Global Intellectual History* published a collection of articles about dynasty. Reading the guest editors' introduction about the 'invention' of dynasty, I was pleased to see several paragraphs discussing my work. My gratification turned to bafflement after I noticed that it was presented as symptomatic for '… academic "common sense" which homogenizes global history into a history of dynasties, and thus flattens heterogenous [*sic*] political systems into false resemblances'.[1] This unfounded interpretation demands a riposte, and I gladly use the opportunity granted to me by *Global Intellectual History*. My response extends beyond the immediate issues at stake and has a wider relevance for global history's methodological quandaries.

Writing my *Dynasties: A Global History of Power 1300–1800,* and its brief 2019 sequel, *Dynasty: A Very Short Introduction*, I fully anticipated sharp rebuke.[2] My comparison juxtaposes polities of all sizes and positions in world history: miniature African chiefdoms are considered in one breath with the Chinese empire. Moreover, I focus squarely on comparison and mention connections only in passing. In short: I sin against accepted guidelines of comparative history, and disregard the current dominance of the 'connected-entangled-*croisée*' perspective in global history. Devotees of either of these two paradigms, I surmised, will be critical. I welcome discussion about my choices. They reflect the aspiration to move beyond the current stalemate of global history, where the main paradigms seem to have settled into competing orthodoxies. These pages of *Global Intellectual History* are disappointing to me not because they are sharply critical of my work, but because the editors entirely miss the intellectual provocation inherent in it.

So what has been the core of my initiative? My comparison was initially limited to Europe and Asia. Taking seriously comments about my book proposal kindly provided by anonymous readers of several leading presses, I chose to include Africa, the Americas, and Austronesia. I had worked on ritual kingship in Africa and South-East Asia before turning to the comparison of European early modern courts, and so could hazard to accept the challenge. This decision changed the course of the project more radically than I had anticipated. African examples, most notably African matrilineal practice,

CONTACT Jeroen Duindam j.f.j.duindam@hum.leidenuniv.nl Doelensteeg 16, 2311 VL Leiden, The Netherlands

helped me to shift gears and fundamentally reconsider formats of dynastic power and models of kingship worldwide. Barring the succession of kings' sons (except in cases of royal incest), matriliny complicates the concentration of power in the hands of a small ruling house, and invites circulation of power. It blurs the distinctions between rule by one, few, and many. Matriliny underlines inclusiveness and circulation rather than exclusivity and concentration – the building blocks of patrilineal polities. Charting the contrasts and overlappings of patrilineal and matrilineal succession, I could clarify varying roles of women in the dynastic setup. This became another focal point of my comparison. Hence the book cover: dowager-empress Mentewab of Ethiopia.

Milinda Banerjee and Ilya Afanasyev, the editors of the volume, have entirely missed these fundamentals. *Dynasties* is taken as a confirmation of academic clichés. The verdict is clearly stated: narratives such as mine ' … underplay the rich heterogeneity of political systems present in different societies in centuries past, many of which were non-monarchic in nature. They also obscure the significance of hereditary authority in modern political, social, and economic life.'[3] The editors state that my 'liberal teleology sees the modern "Western" world as a democratic disruption of a millennial heritage of monarchic hierarchy'. I (or the hazy group of authors I seem to represent) paint an ' … excessively conservative picture'.[4] The outspoken position of the editors is underpinned by references to four pages taken from the introduction and the conclusion of *Dynasties*, cited wholly out of context. Let me give you a specimen of their citation technique:

> Throughout history, rule by a single male figure has predominated [*the editors skip four lines about women and succession through the female line.*] Chiefs, kings, and emperors reigned over most polities across the globe for the last 10,000 years [*the editors skip remarks about small and mobile kinship based groups and 'stateless' societies, and jump to the opening sentence of a next paragraph.*] In whichever way royal leaders actually emerged or represented their origins, the dynastic organisation of power lasted.[5]

After eviscerating my statement, the editors do little to investigate its empirical basis. They move forward to underline that a view such as this ' … naturalizes "premodern", precolonial, or non-European politics as primordially hierarchical',[6] ignoring an explicit remark on the page they cited, where I stress that hierarchy and dynasty have frequently been used as a convenient rhetorical counterpoint to modern 'egalitarian' society. Another long quote, now from the conclusion, gets similar treatment, not by cutting key sentences, but by wilfully disregarding long qualifications on the same pages – as well as the empirical detail provided on every page of the book.

Do I need to repeat that there are no grounds whatsoever for these assertions? Both *Dynasties* and the concise but wider-ranging *Very Short Introduction* phrase misgivings about facile dichotomies between East and West, North and South, premodern and modern. I highlight continuities in the practices of power and families, and underline the persistence of the dynastic impulse in the modern world (a chapter in the *VSI* leads the reader to modern family businesses, 'political families', and authoritarian rulers mimicking kingship). Adding insult to injury, the article of one of the editors, Milinda Banerjee, presents various views as alternatives to 'my' position that could easily have been gleaned from my work – though with a far more diverse and extended empirical underpinning.[7]

What is at stake here? Did terminology cause these bizarre misunderstandings? 'What's in a word?', the author of a more thoughtful contribution to this collection asks.[8] Its editors associate current usage of the term 'dynasty' with hegemony and colonialism. What does it mean for me? Not much. At an earlier point in my career, uncomfortable with the explicit European and Castiglionesque connotation of the term 'court', I introduced 'dynastic centre' as a more open alternative. Writing the proposal for my *Dynasties* book, I considered 'academic' titles such as 'An anthropology of rulership' or 'A global social history of rulership'. My Cambridge editor was undoubtedly right to point out that these arid titles would not help sales, and I complied. I have used the term dynasty loosely, as an open term indicating sovereign power, without stipulating heredity or any particular forms of succession – and certainly without subscribing to the make-believe of continuity so prevalent in the history of dynastic power. Dynasty, I write in the *VSI*, ' … was always a construction. It was the result of a volatile mixture of cultural rules defining kinship, the vagaries of demography, and the attempt of families to ensure their continuity in power'.[9] On the same page, I discuss the history of the term and its parallels in other languages (e.g. *dawla, khandan, chao*). I note that in Europe 'house' long was far more common, showing that dynasty started out as a term reserved for Egypt and gradually expanded to include other 'Oriental' courts before it was adopted by European royalty in the *Sattelzeit* and beyond – a point elaborated in greater detail by Natalia Nowakowski in the current collection of articles.[10]

What might have triggered Banerjee and Afanasyev to assume that I pursue ' … the project of conceiving the global history as the history of "dynasty"'?[11] As a comparative social historian of European courts with a background in anthropology, I have felt compelled to accept the challenge to 'go global': am I culpable for not choosing to focus on ' … peasants, pastoralists, and other labouring actors'?[12] In a recent *Past & Present* article condescendingly alluded to in the introduction's footnotes, I explicitly list 'cities, villages, armies, religious communities, hospitals' as alternative foci for detailed global comparative research.[13] Clearly, these themes will need other researchers. My aim has been to break through the intellectual deadlock of global history by proposing a renovated form of comparative research, not to install dynasties as the master narrative of history – a silly idea.

Why did the editors of this volume erect a straw man, instead of engaging with the arguments and methods proposed in my book? I can only speculate. We have all experienced the difficulties of bringing together mostly disparate contributions, a challenge even more difficult for global historians than for area specialists. I understand, but have tried to keep in check, the reflex to jump to the level of ambitious conceptual rhetorics as a way out of this predicament. Again, a detailed and sharply critical altercation with my arguments would have been excellent – but it cannot be found in the introduction, in Banerjee's overblown article, or in any of the other, more sensible, contributions. Rather than stimulating the authors of the contributions to explicitly engage with shared questions or paradigms, the editors seem to have opted for the conceptual-ideological escape route. They present an opaque brew of Marxist, post-colonial, subaltern and croisée truisms. Theirs is a modern form of 'creating alterity': we are on the right side, look at the bad guys on the other side of the road! This tendency, alas, can repeatedly be found in global history publications, though not usually at this rather crude level. It represents the stalemate I alluded to earlier.

Some of the editors' assertions deserve a different type of answer. Let me outline two final contentions related to the dominant presence of hierarchical thinking in premodern history and to the question of the 'instrumentality' of royal propaganda. Banerjee repeatedly states that I woefully underrate the presence of peoples without any form of hierarchical rule – a misunderstanding based on reading my choice to focus on dynastic rule as the denial of 'acephalous' societies with relatively egalitarian, age and gender-based hierarchies. Such forms, my book elaborates, persist to some extent in polities with kings and queen-mothers, particularly in matrilineal contexts. An authoritative recent statement in this field by Marshall Sahlins and David Graeber goes substantially further, suggesting that notions of kingship and hierarchy are present in the cosmologies even of egalitarian peoples and can indeed be seen as a constant in premodern world history. This suggestion has been taken up in the powerful comparative examination of religion and politics by Alan Strathern, another recent attempt to reconstitute comparison as a key method of global history.[14] What I can easily observe is that rebellions usually adopted royal champions (false or true, a thin line in any case): notwithstanding endless bloodshed in dysfunctional dynastic houses and frequent popular rebellion, only very few polities opted for different formats of power. Why? The answer is directly connected to the next point.

Banerjee presents an unambiguous view of royal power: 'the dynastic construction of the political past and present was absolutely a creation of "top-down propaganda" and "coercion" launched by states and ruling classes'.[15] This statement mixes traditional views of *repraesentatio maiestatis* with more advanced Gramscian ideas about manufactured consent. While it is neither wrong nor false, it flattens historical experience into an instrumental mode. Undoubtedly coercion was always present, yet it was never the sole foundation of consolidated polities. To be sure, kings were quite aware of the impact of a great show. Ceremonial specialists at the French court discussed special effects such as lugubrious sounds, smoke and fire, specific colours.[16] Courts comprised a range of artisans and actors able to make this work. Was it all just make-believe? Of course not. Famously, Clifford Geertz once inverted the labels, stating that 'Power served pomp, not pomp power'.[17] Geertz's provocation helped to make room for an anthropological understanding of ritual among historians, for the immense power of mentalities, ideas, images, and ritual performance. Was the mandate of heaven merely a trick to subdue restive populations? After fighting his way to the throne, the Hongwu emperor or Ming Taizu, himself an upstart, viewed the misbehaviour of his sons with trepidation, expecting that the mandate would be taken away.[18] The sense of divine choice limited the freedom of kings, and left leeway to servants around them – a commonplace notion at least since Frazer's *Golden Bough*. Why not examine the complexity and the inconsistencies in the behaviour of power holders as well as peoples in past and present? This is what the *Dynasties* book tried to do:

> The populace, however, was not necessarily swayed by the images emanating from the court. They appraised dynastic power in their own categories, including fearful images of ruthless tyrants as well as friendly paragons of virtue. Both the heroes and the villains supported the edifice of dynastic power: the Janus-faced view allowed the populace to explain deviations from ideals they approved of or in any case accepted as inevitable. A mixture of ideals, rewards, and threats, proportioned differently for various social groups, kept together dynastic realms.[19]

Perhaps this riposte can open the way for another, more fruitful discussion: how to move beyond the constraints inherent in the currently dominant paradigms of global history?

Notes

1. Banerjee, "How 'Dynasty' Became a Modern Global Concept," 11.
2. Duindam, *Dynasties*; Duindam, *Dynasty*.
3. Banerjee, "How 'Dynasty' Became a Modern Global Concept," 11.
4. Afanasyev and Banerjee, "The Modern Invention of 'Dynasty': An Introduction," 9.
5. *Dynasties*, 2–3; Afanasyev and Banerjee, "The Modern Invention of Dynasty'," 9.
6. Afanasyev and Banerjee, "The Modern Invention of Dynasty'," 9.
7. Banerjee, "How 'Dynasty' Became a Modern Global Concept," 10, citing Lyall on forms of succession; 17 mentioning 'brittle' forms of kingship non-Mughal examples in India, and correctly stating that as far as India goes, I mostly focus on the Mughals. Both themes are discussed at length in *Dynasties*, e.g. 138–139 on British colonial administrators and their view of 'tanistry' (the transfer of the English discourse on Irish tanistry via Joseph Fletcher to current Central-Asian studies is a bizarre example of intellectual *histoire croisée*); 45–46 in the context of the Asante, idealised by Rattray as 'Greek democracy', with a federal structure and the practice of 'destoolment'.
8. Nowakowska, "What's in a Word? The Etymology and Historiography of Dynasty".
9. Duindam, *Dynasty*, 5.
10. Nowakowska, "What's in a Word?"
11. Endnote 24 in Afanasyev and Banerjee, "The Modern Invention of Dynasty'," 12.
12. Afanasyev and Banerjee, "The Modern Invention of Dynasty'," 9.
13. Duindam, "A Plea for Global Comparison: Redefining dynasty".
14. Graeber and Sahlins, *On Kings*; Strathern, *Unearthly Powers: Religion and Politics in World History*.
15. Banerjee, "How 'Dynasty' Became a Modern Global Concept," 17.
16. Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles*, 183.
17. Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre-State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*, 13.
18. *Dynasties*, 50, quotes and literature cited there.
19. *Dynasties*, 294.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Jeroen Duindam http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7175-5545

Bibliography

Afanasyev, Ilya, and Milinda Banerjee. "The Modern Invention of 'Dynasty': An Introduction." *Global Intellectual History* (2020). doi:10.1080/23801883.2020.1796231.

Banerjee, Milinda. "How 'Dynasty' Became a Modern Global Concept: Intellectual Histories of Sovereignty and Property." *Global Intellectual History* (2020). doi:10.1080/23801883.2020.1796232.

Duindam, Jeroen. *Vienna and Versailles. The Courts of Europe's Dynastic Rivals 1550–1780*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Duindam, Jeroen. *Dynasties. A Global History of Power 1300–1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Duindam, Jeroen. "A Plea for Global Comparison: Redefining Dynasty." *Past and Present* 242, no. Supplement 14 (2019). (open access) doi:10.1093/pastj/gtz044.
Duindam, Jeroen. *Dynasty. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
Geertz, Clifford. *Negara: The Theatre-State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.
Graeber, David, and Marshall Sahlins. *On Kings*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017.
Nowakowska, Natalia. "What's in a Word? The Etymology and Historiography of Dynasty – Renaissance Europe and Beyond." *Global Intellectual History* (2020). doi:10.1080/23801883.2020.1796233.
Strathern, Alan. *Unearthly Powers: Religion and Politics in World History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.