

Family History in the Middle East: Household, Property, and Gender

Beshara Doumani, ed.

Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003. 340 pages.

The study of families and their histories opens up a cross-disciplinary dialogue among anthropologists, historians, and other social scientists, including area specialists. The content of Doumani's edited book, *Family History in the Middle East: Household, Property, and Gender*, falls convincingly into such disciplines as history, anthropology, Middle East studies, women's/gender studies, and Islamic studies, since the collection of articles provides various in-depth case studies drawn both from Islam and from political, economic, legal, and social perspectives.

The anthology's main theme suggests that the family is an entity that, along with the progression of history, evolves continuously. By reconstructing the family histories of elites and ordinary people in the Middle East from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century, the book challenges prevailing assumptions about the monolithic "traditional" Middle Eastern family type. Instead, it argues cogently that the structure and boundaries of these families have always been flexible and dynamic.

The book is divided into four sections that explore issues concerning the family from the perspective of politics, economics, and law. In the first section, "Family and Household," Philippe Fargues, Tomoki Okawara, and Mary Ann Fay analyze the structure of the nineteenth-century family and household and illustrate how its formation was influenced by changes in the

political milieu of the time (i.e., the emergence of nationalism and national identity).

Even though these three authors explore different groups of people in different cities, they all show that there is no single universal family entity, and that the notion of family, which is time- and culture-dependent, is transformable according to the changing sociopolitical milieu. In addition, as Fay's article shows, the definition of a family's boundary is also transformable. Comparing two generations (that of Umm Kabira, the first wife of Huda' Sha`rawi's father, and that of Huda Sha`rawi herself), Fay suggests that there is a different sense of family membership under polygyny and monogamy, as well as different emotional involvements among the family members (refer to Kenneth M. Cuno's contribution for more detail).

The second section, "Family, Gender, and Property," explores families and their relationships from an economic perspective, taking marriage as a starting point. Here, Erika Friedl, Martha Mundy and Richard Saumarez Smith, and Annelies Moors, explore such issues as how relations among family members are defined by inherited property and bridal gifts, how marriage reproduces family and gender relations, and how philosophies of marriage have been changed.

The common factor in their case studies is the suggestion that in the Middle East, family property and its inheritance and distribution between male and female family members are gendered. Generally speaking, the men inherit productive and/or residential property and are assigned several times more than the women, who usually inherit movable property, including jewellery (see Annelies Moors for more details). This social practice, while reproducing the patrilineal family type, confirms a patriarchal social structure and its embedded gender ideology.

The third section, "Family and the Praxis of Islamic Law," reconstitutes the family and the relations of family members in the legal arena. In their articles, Beshara Doumani, Iris Agmon, and Heather Ferguson explain how family members are defined in legal terms and how the process of contesting and conciliating family disputes in Islamic courts consolidates and confirms the boundary of family. Several examples are given in which legal representations in court cases suggested the family's patriarchally oriented nature in "public" and "formal" space. In other words, the family was inevitably represented through the male line in the court, and no women or children could represent themselves legally. These authors also identify the moral code of people in the nineteenth century in their case studies of legal representation in the courts, in which the correct and incorrect behavior of

individuals within a community was defined (see Ferguson's contribution for more details).

The final part, "Family as a Discourse," considers the discourses of modernity and the identities of family. Kenneth M. Cuno and Akram Khater both look at the ambiguous position of families that were neither modern nor traditional, and neither eastern nor western, at a time when Middle Eastern societies were changing under the waves of modernization, westernization, and globalization. Through case studies, respectively, of Egypt's khedival house and Lebanese immigrants in the United States, both authors argue that family becomes a historical process that evolves continuously due to endless negotiations between new sets of expectations and reality.

The book will attract the attention of readers, since it covers the dynamics of family issues from several angles and provides rich case studies from various disciplines. Most of the authors employed diverse methods of data collection, and sources include historical archives as well as field work (mainly oral sources). However, certain methodological questions can be raised. First, what were the actual relations of people beyond the written or registered records, especially with regard to gender relations, where women were interpreted as having inferior positions in the family hierarchy. Can we say that women were inferior to men simply because they were invisible and silenced in the formal records? Second, how accurate and reliable are the oral sources, which rely mainly on an individual's past memories.

The book's content and methodological and theoretical approaches make it a useful reference tool for academics as well as general readers interested in the history of the family in a Middle Eastern context. It is likely to stimulate interest in the study of family histories among ordinary people in the Middle East and, at the same time, open up new possibilities for future research.

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