

BESHARA B. DOUMANI, *Family Life in the Ottoman Mediterranean: A Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Pp. 370. £72.99 cloth, £23.99 paper. ISBN 9780511989605.

REVIEWED BY FRANÇOISE DE BEL-AIR, Researcher and Consultant, email: f_dba@hotmail.com



Beshara Doumani's illuminating book marks a new step in the social history of family in the Middle East. Using property devolution strategies as an entry point, Doumani challenges prevailing assumptions about modern Middle Eastern societies. He historicizes and contextualizes the so-called Arab family, and its relationship with Islamic law. More specifically, the book's findings deconstruct three common assumptions about Islam, gender, and modernity in the region: that family and religion are the organizing principles of traditional Middle Eastern societies; that these societies are characterized by a distinct family type throughout space and time; and that there is a linear evolution from patriarchal, patrilocal, extended family type to the modern nuclear family unit.

Building on the analysis of shari'a courts records (*sijils*) of family pious endowments (*waqfs*) and lawsuits between kin, during the years 1660 to 1880, the volume analyzes, compares, and explains the variation of property devolution practices in two towns of the Ottoman Bilad al-Sham: Tripoli in present-day Lebanon and Nablus in Palestine. Concentrating on family *waqfs*, the study highlights the creativity and surprising diversity of property devolution strategies devised by the founders of family *waqfs*. This diversity, first, "reveals a great deal about how family is understood, organized and reproduced" (21). Family *waqfs*, the "encounter between kin *and* court," as much as family lawsuits, "the encounter between kin *in* court," are indeed "productive of notions of kinship, gender and property" (43). The family *waqf* appears as a "family charter" that "governs not only property relations between kin, but also the moral-disciplinary order of kinship" (103). Endowments bypass and/or circumvent the

prescriptions of Islamic inheritance law, by including or excluding beneficiaries and in the way they share and distribute assets. The design of the waqf thus reflects the motivations and concerns of the founder, whether pious, legal (for example, the absence of a male heir), economic (avoiding the dismantling of a patrimony), or affective (as exemplified in the case of Husayn Çelebi al-Husayni of Tripoli, described on pages 105–14). An act of individual agency, the endowment also enacts the endower's own representation of "kin who count" in terms of gender, age, line of descent, agnatic proximity, etc. (193).

Second, a comparison between the designs of family waqfs in the two towns reveals that "this historically contingent diversity [of property devolution strategies, hence, representations of family] is intimately linked to deeply entrenched differences in local political and, to a lesser extent, spiritual economies" (17), or in other words, in the two towns' local and regional political economies and cultural fabrics. Focusing on privately-owned, urban agricultural orchards (*bustan*) of mulberry for the silk industry and citrus for export, devolution patterns in Tripoli privileged the conjugal family over the male lineage and systematically included women; equal endowments were made to daughters and sons in one third of the cases (195). In Nablus, the family residence (*dar*) lay at the core of endowed assets, the family women were mostly excluded as beneficiaries, and joint waqfs between agnates were common. Endowment patterns thus reflected the differences in the structure of local economies. In Nablus, the livelihoods of the urban population (merchants, shopkeepers, and artisans) depended mainly on forward-purchase moneylending to peasants granted usufruct cultivation rights over government (*miri*) land, as well as trade in textile and soap manufacturing (226–27). Based on multigenerational patron-client networks, these activities most often excluded women. Endowments thus aimed to concentrate and consolidate resources in the hands of older male agnates, anchored in the *dar* as a "bounded corporate space" (108). In contrast, Tripoli females' ownership of trees, land, and water resources, or capital investments in "co-cultivation contracts," in which owners and farmers shared the income generated by the orchards, favored conjugal (rather than agnatic) family units and "militated for a large middle class and inclusion of women in property devolution strategies," (225), with women as founders and beneficiaries of waqfs.

Third, the historical and macropolitical contexts also influenced the design and functions of family endowments throughout the two periods compared in the book: 1660–1730 and 1800–1880. The author

describes, for instance, the use of waqfs by Ottoman officers seeking to “graft” themselves onto Tripoli’s local society and economy (95–6). Periods of political and economic turbulences, such as the region’s reconquest by the Ottoman government in the late seventeenth century, opened avenues for changes in the composition of elites. The Egyptian military occupation (1831–1840) spurred the rise of new commercial elites to political power in Nablus, which accelerated the growth of “constitutive” family waqfs, aimed to lay the foundations for new families, around new material and cultural assets. This context indeed accelerated the concentration of wealth and the eviction of females from property devolution strategies during the nineteenth century in the city (163–66).

These findings are set out and analyzed in an increasing degree of detail throughout the seven chapters of the book, in addition to an introduction/preface. Each chapter is introduced by a detailed case study illustrating one analytical angle and specific characteristics of the waqfs. Chapter one opens on the description of the devolution strategy of Maryam ‘Anklis, which according to the author reveals the “mutually constitutive” (35) connection between political economy and legal practices, on the one hand, and notions of kinship, gender, and property, on the other, the central topic of the book. An introduction to the rest of the book, this first chapter sets out its conceptual framework, methodology, and structure. Chapter two singles out and describes the two types of court documents analyzed in the book, family waqfs and lawsuit registers, a “communal textual memory” of the inhabitants of Tripoli and Nablus (43). Chapters three, four, and five each tackle a major aspect or function of the various family waqfs. A “family charter” in chapter three, family waqfs are a “social act” in chapter four, where the author analyses and categorizes who endowed waqfs, and why, to highlight their many implications on gender and kinship dynamics. In chapter five, the waqf is “a boundary marker,” which helped shape the divergent property devolution strategies in the two cities. These are explained in detail in chapter six, using the analytical framework of political economy. Chapter seven concludes the book. An appendix (301–11) lists and indicates the location of Tripoli court records.

Doumani’s book is, first and foremost, an admirable achievement, based on the processing of no less than 15,000 unindexed and digitally unsearchable documents. Nevertheless, this method, as explained by the author, enabled him to locate bundles of related documents that permitted his reconstruction of the histories of specific persons, families, or properties over decades and even centuries (42).

This reconstruction of endowers' agencies, concerns and strategies, family ties and perceptions, and sociopolitical and economic contexts indeed singles out the book as extremely lively. Though repetitive at times, and overladen with many and exceedingly long footnotes, the book reads well and is recommended for an audience of advanced students and specialists.

The historicization and contextualization of the diverse family and kinship relations in the two local settings of Tripoli and Nablus allow for revising common assumptions about the Arab or Muslim family and gender relations, and by extension, to question the very existence of so-called Islamic cultural, legal, and religious "traditions." Yet, as particularly demonstrated in chapters three to six, the strength of the book also resides in the author's efforts to unveil, reconstruct, and quantify the spatial and socioeconomic patterns in property devolution strategies, as well as associated gender and family dynamics. Strengthened by the political economy approach, these findings highlight the very existence of distinct family structures at the local and regional levels in the Ottoman space.

However, as acknowledged by the author himself (133; 141), the waqfs endowments leave aside rural, Bedouin, and poor populations. Consequently, the sources used in this publication permitted only a partial account of local sociodemographic dynamics. As suggested for example by the work of The Cambridge Group for the History of Populations and Societies on European Past, confronting shari'a court archives with other sources, such as censuses, population registers, and vital statistics records, would capture a more comprehensive picture of the Bilad al-Sham's social structure and family dynamics. However, such reservations notwithstanding, the book will be extremely useful for any social scientist interested in gender issues, family law, kinship, and demography in the Islamic world, whether a social historian or contemporary studies specialist.