

The Kin Who Count: Family and Society in Ottoman Aleppo 1770-1840.(Review)

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The Kin Who Count: Family and Society in Ottoman Aleppo 1770-1840, by Margaret L. Meriwether. Austin, TX: Texas University Press, 1999. viii + 212 pages. Appends. to p. 234. Notes to p. 256. Bibl. to p. 268. Index to p. 278. \$45 cloth; \$22 paper.

The author states in the Preface that she "wr(ote a book that will be useful to Middle Eastern scholars interested in families, in gender, and in Ottoman cities, and at the same time accessible to nonspecialists and to students" (p. vii). She has indeed succeeded in this endeavor: this is a very well-written book that demonstrates mastery of both archival and secondary sources on both Aleppo and the larger Middle East, and even the pertinent Western European literature. The comparative dimension the author develops by placing her work within the context of Middle Eastern history, especially the Ottoman empire, is its most significant strength. Following the new trend in Middle East historiography of taking into account Ottoman historical sources that had been shunned by earlier generations of Arab scholarship, the author portrays the intricate, constantly changing mosaic of the family throughout the region.

Meriwether focuses specifically on three aspects of family life--household, marriage and inheritance--among the notables of Aleppo who, unlike other social groups, could be traced through the sources due to their class position. The individual chapters of the book explore these aspects of the family. After the introduction, which concisely sets the stage for the work, chapter one focuses on the concept and meaning of lineage which provided all members of the patriline a social identity and position within the social hierarchy. Chapter two explores the boundaries of the group that comprises the family, by concentrating on the concept of the household, whose size and composition are determined by life course and mortality. Chapter three moves outside the physical boundaries of the family and explores the ties that develop with the rest of society, by focusing on marriage bonds and marriage partners; through marriage, connections within the family are reinforced and alliances with other families are cemented. Chapters four and five develop the temporal dimension of the family, by exploring how inheritance in the short term and endowment in the long term affect family structure. The discussion of inheritance highlights the economic network among the kin and the eventual devolution of property; the examination of endowment captures the attempts to create a more permanent network among the kin.

In the conclusion, the author states that, in spite of the diverse ways in which families are organized, most members belonged to three family groups--the lineage, the narrowly extended family, and the elementary (nuclear) family--where the ideal of the large patriarchal, patrilineal family was rarely achieved, and where women negotiated the gender system differently in different family arrangements. Meriwether then notes that the book's central research question (reflected in its title) of which kin counted within the family and why, "remains elusive" (p. 207). And therein lies the only weakness of the book, for Meriwether poses a question that her research methodology does not enable her to answer. Dismissing Western travel literature on Aleppo as biased, she relies mostly on court records and secondary sources and draws insufficiently upon cultural sources (e.g., biographies, local chronicles, stories, and poetry) that would have helped her identify how people gave meaning to family life and how they preferred some kin over others. Meriwether could have then compared these cultural scenarios with her historical cases to locate the family members who successfully negotiated the power dynamics both within the family and with society at large. Still, the comparative dimension of the work and its meticulous analysis make the book a mandatory read for all those interested in the history of the family in the Middle East.

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