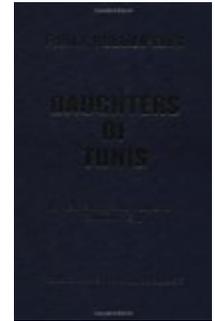




Paula Holmes-Eber. *Daughters of Tunis: Women, Family, and Networks in a Muslim City*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2003. xxii + 166 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8133-3944-3; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-3943-6.

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The New Generation of Tunisian Women Talk of Their Changing Society

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Multiple encounters in the metropolitan area of Tunis with four women coming from different parts of the country—Hannan, an embassy translator, aged 27; Miriam, a household worker, aged 28; and two housewives, Nura, aged 43, and Sherifa, aged 26—enabled Paula Holmes-Eber to meet a large number of other women and to gain entry into a variety of social milieus. She also carried out numerous interviews with women who are first- and second-generation emigrants from rural areas and from other Tunisian cities. Moreover, she carried out participant observations in family contexts as well as on beaches not frequented by tourists, where, as she notes, “going to the beach is generally a day-long social affair, [and] women had the time and leisure to talk to me freely” (pp. 11-12). These contexts allow the author to re-examine how women of the “new generation” react to the changes occurring in their society.

During her periods of research (1986-1987 and again in 1993), she examined the effects of education, work, emigration, and the new laws with regards to marriage on the relationships between women and their families, in a context where these “new women” were now studying and working with men. She also examined whether development was affecting women of different social classes in similar ways and how women adjust their beliefs and the roles in marriage. Holmes-Eber faced few practical difficulties in interacting and talking with these

women—only two of all those she approached refused to be interviewed and two others accepted money in return for their participation—and she also tells us that she did not collect information from men.

This study was carried out in a particular historical period, the end of Bourguiba’s rule and the beginning of a new political regime with a program (entitled “Renewal”) that specifically targeted women and underprivileged groups; these sectors are the focus of this collection of Case Studies in Anthropology. This setting does not make the study appear dated but rather allows it to carry an historical dimension that reveals a number of socio-political tensions (democratization, freedom of the press and political organization, unemployment, etc.) as well as cultural ones (the rights of women, mixing of the sexes in education and the workplace, etc.) that both preceded this study and persisted after it.

Hannan, Miriam, Nura, and Sherifa, along with many others, discuss these tensions with the anthropologist. Moreover, questions are raised concerning issues such as the veil (forbidden or allowed) and public space (mixed or not mixed), problems which have put a number of these women in situations of great difficulty. Shedia, for example, whose husband was arrested for his political activities, later underwent a divorce related to this event. The author succeeds in relating many such events without ever falling into a weeping melodrama.[1] Holmes-Eber shows how these women, although affected by this socio-political environment, manage to sustain them-

selves while honoring a tradition that they re-invent and re-interpret. Hospitality, for example, remains an activity with an important moral element among women and, in their struggle to survive, they engage in it not simply as individuals but also as members of their community.

This book provides the author an occasion to show how, when women obtain certain rights in the context of rapid urbanization in a “developing” country, they necessarily reinvent tradition. Thus, the role and impact of *ziara*, which Christine Eickelman treated in 1984 in Oman, takes on new content when seen in this context and with regard to changes happening subsequently. If the first two networks—those constituted by family and neighbors—persist, Holmes-Eber also traces a third, made up of friends. This last network results from the access urban women have to public space, where, from the time they are young girls and later as mature women, they enter into contact with women and men who do not belong to the customary circles, which favors a new sociability. Whereas consanguinity continues to operate in the milieux explored by the research, a large number of the women encountered had married men who either were related to them or were friends of the family.

The author also discovers that, with regard to this generation and in these social milieux, there is an economic impact caused by the expansion of this practice to groups coming from the same regions. Here, the quantitative data provides a better understanding of the population she is studying, and her situation and interaction with her subjects helps us see the adjustments she made in the course of her work. Finally, these results and others in this study allow her to revisit notions such as “modernization,” “household,” and “patriarchy,” as well as to emphasize the persistence of the cleavage of class relationships.

In showing us that there is not one daughter of Tunis but many daughters, the author succeeds in avoiding the orientalist prism of the “Muslim woman.” She is also sen-

sitive to a complexity and diversity that many studies in recent years have failed to convey, focusing as they often have (as has official discourse) on educated, working women of the upper middle class, seeing them as central “westernizing” figures. As part of this complexity, we learn that pre-marital sexual relations are rejected except in the most “liberal” families; that marriage continues to mark the end of women’s professional careers (but that, in some cases these women take up working from home); that the majority who continue to work outside the home have very good positions and a standard of living well above average (the greater their education, the greater their potential); and that staying at home continues to be a sign of virtue, carrying different meanings according to social milieu.

This study offers new perspectives, but one failing is its lack of dialogue with the work of writers from the region, whose data and arguments she does not address, other than providing some citations in the bibliography. Such a dialogue might have helped the author to avoid some errors, such as her claim that there are no programs for the poor (p. 7), or her utilization of the term *arriviste* to refer to struggling social groups, whereas the term usually is employed to designate people who, while having obtained significant monetary wealth, have not managed to acquire the tastes and cultural activities introduced by the bourgeoisie (as Bourdieu has argued). Also, the implications of women’s sociability, where women are agents as both members of a community and as individuals, for questions such as conflict avoidance (women may function as a cushion or mediator between conflicting parties), is not sufficiently emphasized. This study is nonetheless a very interesting one and should become part of the standard literature in this field.

Note

[1]. Evelyne Accad conveys a number of examples of this in her *Blessures des mots, Journal de Tunisie* (Paris: Indigo, 1993).

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