



Rhoda Ann Kanaaneh. *Birthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. xvii + 283 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-22379-0.



Reviewed by Ruba Salih

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Population counting and reproduction measures have been crucial tools in the creation and expansion of the Israeli state. Central in the Zionist project was indeed the de-arabisation and consequent Judaization of Palestine. Along with the entire eradication of Palestinian villages, the Israeli state has carried out this project throughout the years by means of a powerful immigration policy and other instruments, such as the political use of census, family planning and the development of a powerful and pervasive modernization narrative which constructed reproduction as a field whereby to assess the modern or rather backward character of a people.

Birthing the Nation very cogently explores Palestinians' reproductive strategies and narratives in the Galilee vis-a-vis these colonial constructions. One of the main arguments of the book is that, in the last few years, "family planning has emerged as a central category of distinction, domination, and contestation in the Galilee" (p. 22). It is a terrain through which the relations between identity and nationalism, the body and the self could be explored. Moreover, the sphere of repro-

duction, and its related narratives and representations, by virtue of belonging simultaneously to the realm of the public and the private, the political and the intimate, is a crucial arena through which exploring how notions of self and other are dialectically constructed and challenged in a context of an ongoing colonial domination. Kanaaneh manages to conduct the reader through a very rich and vivid ethnographic journey across what she terms Palestinians' "discourses" and "counter-discourses." In a context where the field of reproduction has become one of the privileged ways to "measure" the modern or traditional character of not only families, but ethnicities and populations, Palestinians have responded by, on the one hand, internalizing and reproducing the modernist outlook and, on the other hand (and in opposition to the dominant Zionist construction), by representing the Arab large family as the symbol of their "authentic" culture and a gendered powerful tool for national resistance.

The first chapter documents very well the connections between demography and modern nationalism. Kanaaneh shows how "political

arithmetic" dominated the nationalist construction of Israel since the very beginning of its creation. The idea that Arabs should not number more than 15 percent of the whole population of Israel was indeed expressed by Ben Gurion in 1948. The aim of enlarging the Jewish population, while discouraging by all means and keeping under control the growth of the Palestinian population, was carried out over the years through what Kanaaneh calls Israel's "political arithmetic." This was translated in to an ambivalent and ambiguous politics of family planning, which, albeit disguised under the modernization language, set as a priority population control for Arabs but not for Jews, among whom reproduction was encouraged and rewarded. Census was another important tool of nation-building and a means by which political arithmetic was carried out. It was a measure that served as a tool to monitor and control the number of Palestinians. Kanaaneh shows how counting people can have different political implications and meanings, which bear specific importance for both the Israeli and the Palestinian nation-building projects. In Israel, family planning and people's counting was done not only with the aim of increasing the number of Jews but particularly of European Jews, producing or reinforcing a social hierarchy which placed European Jews at the top and Mizrahi or Sefardi Jews at the bottom. In this context, "purity" is maintained through a set of prescriptions that make intermarriage and interreligious adoption illegal acts.

Most of the other chapters discuss Palestinian forms of population politics and illustrate the different ways in which "the structuring of Israel's institutions, policies, discourses on the basis of a distinction between Jew and Arab eventually comes to be mirrored by a reverse calculus among Palestinians, if not equal in power" (p. 56). Indeed, by and large, the Palestinian response has been to construct high fertility rates as an act of resistance. Both in the Occupied Territories and in the Galilee, an anti-modernist discourse, aiming at re-inventing certain traditions to the benefit of

the nation, has been retrieved, which of course perceives women's bodies as the field over which the demographic battle should be conducted. These processes involve the revitalization of traditionalist gendered practices and ideological constructions, which center not only on women's roles as mothers, but on women's ability to produce boys specifically, in order to fulfil their national duty as mothers of the nation.

However, Kanaaneh rightly underlines that differently than the nationalist state-based political arithmetic of Israel, the Palestinian nationalism is often produced in opposition to, rather than because of, state mechanism, especially when it comes to the Galilee, which is the specific context where the fieldwork was conducted.

The reverse or oppositional argument is not the only one being displayed. There is a more modernist outlook that contests the political arithmetic as a dangerous terrain, which could actually turn against the Palestinians, in the light of increasingly difficult economic conditions and the lack of infrastructures that affect Palestinians as a consequence of colonialism and occupation. Chapter 2, "Luxurious Necessities," shows how Palestinians in the Galilee have been seduced, to an extent, by the requirements of modern life, the main aspects of which seem to lie in increased consumption patterns associated with a reproductive choice of one or two children. This discourse idealizes the small modern, consumer family as the best and sole model to face changing and steadily thorny economic transformations. Accessing modernity in these terms is a double-ended process, in that it allows Palestinian people "to blend and balance seemingly conflicting desires: to resist Israeli domination and to imitate it at the same time; to resist its ethnic population policy by adopting its economic strategies for the family" (p. 91).

However, Kanaaneh's point is that by persisting on associating women's fertility with nationalism, all these discourses contribute, in one way

or another, in turning bio-politics into instrument of domination and liberation (p. 63). Bio-politics highly politicizes reproduction for the sake of the nation, and also influences reproductive decisions.

In the chapter "Fertile Differences," Kanaanah shows the context in which reproductive practices and discourses have become significant markers of identity and otherness in the context of the Galilee and beyond. Like many other colonized people, Palestinians have internalized, almost in Fanon's terms, the Israeli dominant representations that, through the modernization rhetoric and language, tends to depict them as pre-modern, or even anti-modern, irrational reproducers of large families. For many Palestinians, reproductive strategies and choices, thus, have come to be a major terrain against which to assess the modernity of people, or alternatively their authenticity and resistance to colonial, dominant discourse. These kinds of representations, however, are not simply imposed, but interact with deep-rooted Palestinian social constructions which, for example, tend to oppose the traditionalism of "Beduins" and villagers (*fellahin*) to the modernity of city dwellers (*madaniin*).

Along the lines of other research on post-colonial societies (but rightly emphasizing that there is nothing post about colonialism, when it comes to Palestine), Kanaanah shows how Palestinian reproductive choices and practices, as well as other discourses and the very social and political structure of Palestinian society in the Galilee, are not simply the result of a pure, authentic, continuous culture that Arabs keep reproducing to differentiate themselves from the Zionist counterpart. The *hamula* system, for example, or the social construction of the "Beduin" as almost a separate ethnicity (although engrained in the Palestinian social reality) have been shaped and manipulated by Zionist discourse in the course of the years as part of the colonial policy of divide-and-rule and it is against this background that we need to un-

derstand the production of narratives of tradition and modernity amongst Palestinians.

In the final chapters the book highlights "important links among reproduction, gender, nation, economy, difference, and the body" (p. 251) by illustrating the different narratives around the whole set of practices that accompany the realm of reproduction, i.e., contraception methods, conceptions about the body, child raising, consumption strategies etc. This material sheds a further light on how reproduction and its related practices constitute a particularly significant entry point into the ways in which local, ethnic and national identities are negotiated in the context of the Galilee. Again, very often the dichotomous understanding of the "modern versus the traditional" is the main lens through which people's reproductive choices are discussed and evaluated. These narratives are produced in a context where Israel has kept orientalizing the "Arabs" by representing their reproductive and consumption practices as consequences of their "backward" and irrational culture, thus blaming them for their economic marginalization, and opposing this to the modern and rational character of the Israeli (European) society. Here again, the author successfully shows how these same tokens are redeployed by Palestinians in an attempt to liberate themselves. In so doing, however, the dominant modern versus traditional discourse of the Israeli state comes to be reinforced rather than challenged.

It is precisely here that the book could have reached an even greater value by discussing further how Palestinians in the Galilee are producing alternative conceptions of modernity that disrupt and contest the binary categorization of the Israeli state. Although Kanaanah does underline that this dualistic attitude does not account for the whole picture, in that many people are indeed able to escape the dichotomous reductive framework imposed by the Israeli modernist dominant discourse, the reader would have liked to know more about these alternative ways of life and how

they are conveyed in alternative narratives, for example, by highlighting how "modernity" comes to be indigenized by Palestinians living in the Galilee. Notwithstanding, the book is a rich and fascinating ethnography that should be read not only by scholars and students interested in the Palestinian Israeli conflict, but should be of interest to students of gender, nationalism, demography, and identity.

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