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Book Review:

“An Ethnographic Exploration of the Druze in Syria,” review of:
Kastrinou, A. Maria A. 2016. *Power, Sect and State in Syria: The Politics of Marriage and Identity amongst the Druze*. London, New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd. ISBN 9781784532208.

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The book 'Power, Sect and State in Syria: The Politics of Marriage and Identity amongst the Druze' constitutes an exceptional work. It offers one of the few elaborated ethnographic studies of the Druze community in Syria. A. Maria A. Kastrinou, an anthropologist with extensive fieldwork experience in the region, has significantly contributed to scholarly discourse on sectarianism, statelessness, and refugees in the Middle East. In this book, Kastrinou employs marriage as a lens to explore several different aspects of this community, including rituals surrounding births and funerals, architectural features of dwellings, public folklore festivals, and dance performances. This unique perspective allows for a careful exploration of community life. The book's core thesis suggests that sectarianism is not an innate, immutable characteristic but a historical phenomenon shaped by broader social, political, and economic contexts (Kastrinou 2016, 12). It discusses the manipulation of sectarianism by political entities from the European colonial period to the present-day Syrian state. Kastrinou describes the contemporary Syrian state as an imperial rather than a national state, meaning that this power structure positions itself as a guarantor of diversity, thereby ensuring its indispensability to Syrian society (Kastrinou 2016, 151).

The book is structured into eight chapters. In her introduction, Kastrinou traces the roots of sectarianism to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the ensuing European interventions, ostensibly claiming to protect minorities and human rights. These interventions coincided with peasant liberation movements, leading to the use of sectarianism as a foundation for citizenship in Lebanon and Syria. Kastrinou defines sectarianism as the practice of shaping group identities (religious, ethnic, etc.) in a specific historical context as well as the discourse of creating a narrative of difference and "otherness" based on these identities (Kastrinou 2016,13). Endogamy marriages serve to reinforce these imagined sectarian identities, thereby challenging the notion that sectarianism reflects "natural" identities. Furthermore, the author states that sectarianism differs from religious affiliation. Historically, "sect" had a completely different connotation before the mid-19th century. It refers to "a family of rank regardless of its religious persuasion" (Makdisi 2000, 35). Accordingly, a distinctive feature of the Druze community, according to Kastrinou, is the subordination of personal independence to familial obligations (Kastrinou 2016,126). However, she argues that in individual interpretations maintain social relations that construct community (Kastrinou 2016, 222).

The second chapter examines the interconnectedness of house design, family structures, and cultural symbols. It argued that houses are not 'things' but 'things

of relations' (Kastrinou 2016, 33). The third chapter examines the role of the body in Druze cosmology as well as the ritual practices of birth and death. Chapter Four discusses challenges to endogamous traditions. It also illustrated this subject with the example of a Druze acquaintance who was ostracized for marrying outside the sect is used to illustrate this subject (Kastrinou 2016, 124). Chapter Five delves into the Syrian state's promotion of folkloric festivals inspired by marriage rituals. These festivals aim to deepen regional and ethnic distinctions, reinforcing heterogeneity rather than striving for homogeneity. People portray these state-sponsored events as a form of "soft power," manipulating cultural and sectarian harmony for political ends (Kastrinou 2016, 136). Chapter six offers insights into how young people negotiate power dynamics, contributing to a broader understanding of civil society formation in contemporary Syria.

In the seventh chapter, Kastrinou describes a theatrical performance on marriage and links it to European interventions in Syrian society. She argues that these interventions reflect a condescending Western attitude toward the East rather than genuine acts of goodwill (Kastrinou 2016, 212). The concluding chapter brings together empirical and theoretical findings and relates them to the situation in Syria and potential future developments.

Kastrinou's ethnographic data from her fieldwork (2008-2010) with the Druze community in Jaramana, a suburb of Damascus, and a thorough engagement with political and anthropological literature form the foundation of the methodology. Her innovative approach combines original personal observations and insights with historical analysis and comparisons to previous research. Additionally, despite the obstacles presented by the Druze community's protective stance on their community, the author examines concealed meanings, citing the saying, "What happens here stays here" (Kastrinou 2016, 117).

The essay's thesis is easily identifiable, and the title accurately reflects the essence of the work. Nonetheless, given the book's specialized nature, non-specialist readers may encounter challenges grasping certain contexts. The book provides sufficient explanations of the methodology, and the findings seem fairly robust.

Kastrinou's definition of sectarianism is worthy of consideration as it differs from the prevailing perception of the term often associated with religion. This aligns with the sense of sectarianism concerning the Druze, which carries a unique meaning beyond religious implications. However, what applies to the Druze may not necessarily apply to other sects. Furthermore, specific marriage practices and notable social dynamics observed among the Druze may vary from those of different groups within Syria or the broader Middle East.

Furthermore, despite the perception of sectarianism as a construct of imagination and perception, it has undeniably left tangible impacts that are visible to all, particularly concerning the Druze community. Due to endogamy and geographical clustering, this community exhibits common and distinctive traits that blur the line between reality and imagination, warranting further investigation and analysis.

In conclusion, the book compellingly argued its central thesis, that sectarianism is a historically contingent and politically constructed phenomenon. Kastrinou adeptly ties her findings to the ongoing Syrian conflict and the state's role in perpetuating sectarian divisions. Her analysis illuminates the strategic manipulation of sectarian identities by the Syrian regime. The book critically examines the impact of European interventions in Syria, revealing how these external forces have historically influenced and manipulated local sectarian identities. This dimension adds depth to the discussion, highlighting the geopolitical intricacies. However, its focus on a single Druze community near Damascus limits the generalizability of its findings.

In any case, 'Power, Sect, and State in Syria: The Politics of Marriage and Identity amongst the Druze' represents a significant contribution to scholarship, offering a profound exploration of the Druze community's socio-political dynamics. Kastrinou's methodological rigor and theoretical insights provide a fresh perspective on sectarianism and state power in Syria. Despite its focus on a single community, the book's strengths in offering a detailed, context-rich analysis make it an invaluable resource for scholars and students of anthropology, Middle Eastern studies, and political science.

References

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