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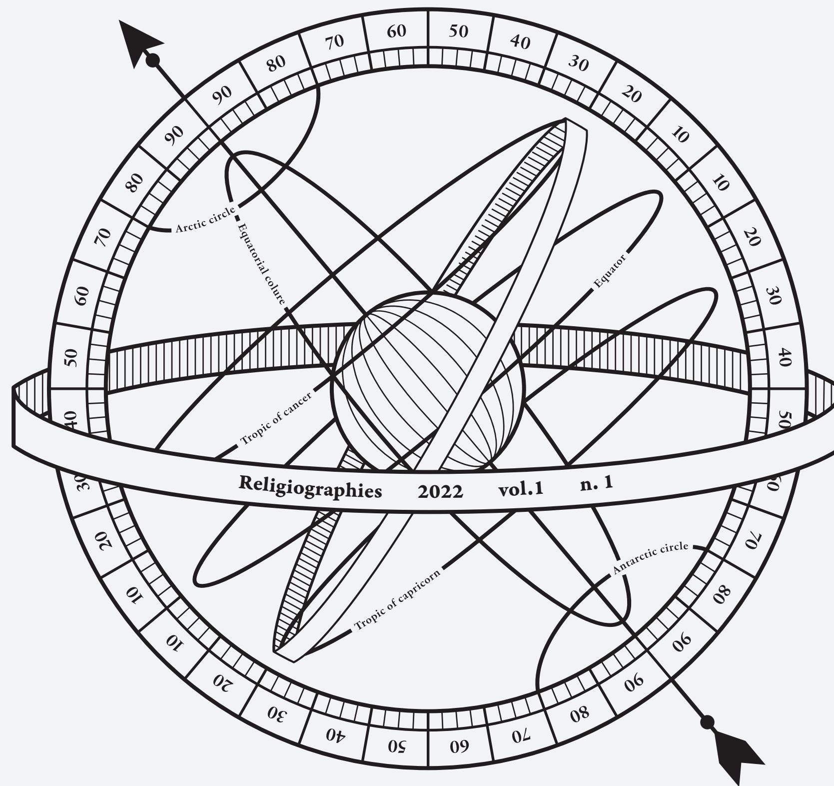

Special Issue

"Holy Sites in the Mediterranean, Sharing and Division"

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Book review by Lynda Clarke

Rose Wellman. *Feeding Iran: Shi'i Families and the Making of the Islamic Republic*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2021, pp. 262. Hardcover $ 85.00, ISBN 9780520376861, Paperback $ 34.95, ISBN 9780520376878

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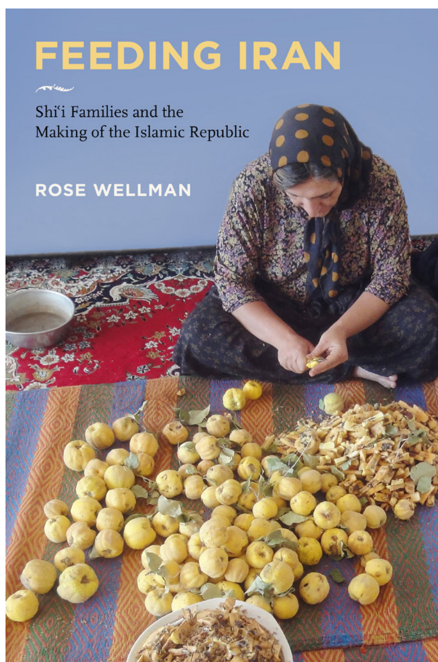

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Feeding Iran offers an account of kinship and the intersection of kinship and politics, based on an ethnography of an extended family in the small town of Fars-Abad in the southwestern Fars Province of Iran. The family is described as non-elite, non-urban affiliates of the "Mobilization of the Oppressed," a nation-wide voluntary force engaged in a variety of government-sanctioned activities, from the organization of charity and religious ceremonies to security patrols. One of the virtues of the study, as the author points out, is that it portrays the life and ideals of supporters of the regime, a part of the population that has been neglected due to a focus on less traditional, urban youth involved in opposition. Wellman, in fact, began her fieldwork not long after the 2010 protests against the re-election to the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, which were widely covered in the West. Although not the purpose of the book, it goes some way toward explaining the continued existence of the revolutionary regime.

As "card-carrying" members of the *Basij* (Mobilization), the subjects of *Feeding Iran* relate their ideas about kinship and belonging to the regime's presentation of the Iranian nation and Shiite Islam, while the regime, in turn, builds on those ideas to consolidate support. Wellman explores the private and public worlds of Fars-Abad to elucidate these social processes, using a wide lens that captures the meaning of kinship beyond genetic relations, across a "full spectrum of material substances, immaterial qualities, acts and processes" (p. 4).

The book opens with an Introduction to the key personalities of the family and physical setting. We learn that Wellman had gained the trust of her subjects, with whom she resided during her fieldwork, through a long prior association; that they dealt with gender boundaries by classing her as "almost *mahram,*" that is someone with whom the males of the household could associate without observing all the usual restrictions; and that religious difference was handled by regarding her as a potential convert learning about Islam. Wellman's role as an ethnographer seems to have shifted between observer participant and participant observer. She remarks that her subjects assumed that that she was in some way a believer or potential believer, which often happens in fieldwork, although Wellman joining her hostess on a prayer carpet for morning prayers gives one pause. The always complex issue of the positionality of the ethnographer is not, in any case, discussed from the point of view of theory or ethics, but rather portrayed through a brief description of the situation.

Chapter One, "Blood, Physio-Sacred Substance, and the Making of Moral Kin," examines kinship as an "embodied, sacred, and ethical process." A review of the formal structures of kinship according to Islamic law and local culture is followed by an account of how moral qualities such as purity and spirituality are believed to be transmitted through blood lineages of both sayyeds (descendants of the Prophet, who are especially revered in Shiism) and non-sayyeds. The blood of "martyrs," referring principally to soldiers killed in the 1980-1988 Iraq-Iran War, known as the "Sacred Defence," similarly transmits respectability and blessing to the martyrs' kin. Moral qualities, however, are not simply inherited. They must be cultivated. The folk of Fars-Abad accomplish this performatively through everyday rituals and acts such as prayer, sharing of food, correct gender behaviour, and careful maintenance of familial interaction and relations.

Chapter Two, "Feeding the Family: The 'Spirit' of Food in Iran," examines how food is used to nourish and fortify the family spiritually as

well as physically. The chapter contains mouth-watering descriptions of how a variety of foods are chosen, prepared, and served. Everyday food practices are intertwined with concerns for purity that have a religious cast and moral implications. Food should be procured from reputable, preferably local sources; not processed but rather prepared in the home; and carefully cooked and served with pure intention of blessing by the mother and other female relatives. Feeding the family with preferred foods with attention to their supposed physical and spiritual effects serves to reconstitute the smaller kin group, to the extent that even relatives outside the household are not included. Commensality with the extended family and larger society is established through the rhythm of fasting in Ramadan and charitable cooking and feeding, often coordinated with religious occasions or in honour of Shiite saints and frequently arranged in fulfillment of vows intended to benefit kin.

The role of blood in constructing the nation as kin is taken up in Chapter Three, "Regenerating the Islamic Republic: Commemorating Martyrs in Provincial Iran." Wellman describes how the government of the Islamic Republic evokes the blood of those fallen in the Iraq-Iran War to establish moral kinship between citizens. One of the ways this is done is by recovering bodies of the many unknown soldiers killed in that conflict and re-burying them, with great ceremony, at key locations across the country. Martyr commemoration, including re-burials, dates back to the years of the war itself, but Wellman says that her ethnographic account of such an event in Fars-Abad is the first related to provincial Iran, where the regime is said to enjoy much support. Since the martyrs are unknown, they can be imagined as kin. This is especially so for those who made sacrifices during the war, as many Basijis did, but the martyrs are meant to belong to the whole town, which their burying place strategically overlooks. The blood of martyrs is efficacious in ways similar to that of good lineage. As a substance, it is pure to the extent that contact with coffins and blood-stained cloth confers blessing. As a metaphor, it creates relationships between citizens honouring the martyrs through whom they are brought collectively closer to God. Iranian Shiite culture abounds in tropes about the life-giving purity of blood spilled in martyrdom, on which the regime draws heavily to mobilize the Basij and nation at large. References to the legend of Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet who fell in the 7th-century Battle of Karbala, are particularly compelling since they involve both family ties and bloody martyrdom in defence of Islam.

The fourth chapter, "Creating an Islamic Nation through Food," builds on Chapter Two as the third chapter builds on the first. The chapter begins by examining how food choices and etiquette function also outside the home to express virtue and authenticity. For instance, if one eats outside, a restaurant that serves Iranian rather than foreign food and in which unrelated people are not seated close together is better than a crowded, Western-style establishment. It is certainly wrong to eat or drink in public during Ramadan, even if one is not fasting, and "ugly" to eat on the street, especially for women. Just as in the home, halal foodways are the kernel of larger ideas about proper food and behaviour. Wellman shows food, like blood, to be very much a biomoral substance.

Food in the Islamic Republic of Iran is also a "technology of religious nation-making," as Wellman puts it, deployed by feeding the pious at multiple sites such as cemeteries and occasions such as Muharram, the month that saw the martyrdom of Husayn. At the vast "Paradise of

Zahra" cemetery in Tehran, food and blood together make citizens into virtual kin as visitors donate and share thick soups, puddings (and so on) in proximity to the martyrs of the Revolution and Iraq-Iran war, while surrounded by imagery and slogans proclaiming the shedding of blood in the cause of Islam. Here, in the shadow of the tomb of Khomeini, visitors address each as other as "sister" and "brother." Food serves to bring kinship not only to the nation, but also politics, especially since feedings are often sponsored by the state.

Feeding Iran contributes substantially to several fields. As a study of kinship and particularly the new kinship studies advanced by, notably, Janet Carsten, it shows how kinship in Iran extends beyond lineage and descent to relatedness created by everyday acts such as collective mourning and feeding. Blood and food, the substances of kinship, flow beyond the family into the nation and politics, carrying with them notions of purity and righteousness. Wellman's vivid description is particularly effective in capturing the role of the elusive quality of emotion in making relatedness. The book contributes to the emerging sub-field of food and nationalism. It describes how local foodstuffs and foodways are associated with purity, virtue and authenticity, in contrast to materially impure and spiritually vacuous foreign food and food habits. The pious supporters of the state on whom the study focuses regard preparing and serving good food as prime instruments in a struggle to preserve the family and ultimately Iran and Islam against corruption. Although the book is not a study of women or gender, we also learn much about women's activities and concerns since the ethnographer moves primarily in the world of women.

Wellman is careful to acknowledge that the Basijis among whom she worked do not represent all opinion or lifestyles in Iran. She may have felt a need to defend her engagement and friendship with ardent supporters of the regime. Academic readers are unlikely to mistake the emotional and perspectival empathy she applies in her fieldwork for over-rapport, let alone a political statement, so it is fortunate that she does not spend much time on this concern.