Chapter 1

Bethlehem between Tradition and Modernity

This chapter explores family structures and gender relation in a changing Bethlehem community. For the most part, Bethlehem Christians take pride in their Arab cultural heritage and traditional way of life. This heritage includes, among other things a patriarchal family structure, conceptions of collective family honor, and a focus on hospitality and generosity as central virtues. In particular, the patriarchal family structure, in which family ties carry great weight, and where authority is centered in the hands of senior males enjoys widespread support within the community.

At the same time, many young people long for greater social freedom, and a greater level of personal autonomy, especially concerning marriage arrangements and choice of marriage partners. This chapter will explore the issue of marriage arrangements as a field of contention in a community torn between the weight of local traditions and powerful forces for change.

Marriage and Family Relations

Within the Christian communities of the Bethlehem area, individuals have challenged the social constraints embedded in patriarchal family structures, marriage practices and rules of everyday conduct. At the same time, these communities have faced external challenges that have been a source of vulnerability, insecurity and internal fragmentation. These challenges have included the infusion of people from other parts of Palestine as a result of warfare and internal migration, a stifling Israeli occupation, centuries of contact with the outside world and exposure to Western cultural influence through emigration and homeland-diaspora connections, and the emergence of political Islam as a challenge to secular ideologies. Confronting challenges that have profoundly changed people's lives, family and village networks become arenas in which Palestinian Christians try to maintain a sense of control of their own lives and their own community.

Since the late 1970s, anthropologists have rejected a naturalistic conception of traditions as referring to a body of unchanging traits and practices handed down from the past (Handler and Linnekin 1984), instead arguing for an understanding of traditions as symbolic processes through which the past is constructed, interpreted and attributed with meaning in the present. In line with
this reasoning, anthropologists have written about ‘traditions’ as invented or constructed practices, emphasizing their role in reinforcing social ties and collective identities within groups of people, as a means of legitimizing institutions and social hierarchies, and boosting claims of cultural authenticity and continuity with the past (Hobsbawm 2012, Keesing and Tonkinson 1982). Among Bethlehem Christians, patriarchal family structures, and the social practices and authority relationships connected with these structures, are regarded as part of a traditional culture through which people characterize their own past, and claim a sense of connection with the past in a contemporary reality characterized with dramatic changes and social upheavals. In this context, patriarchal family structures and traditional norms can serve as vehicles through which social control and authority can be asserted within the Christian communities of Bethlehem. In addition, these structures can be a source of unity, moral strength, and social boundaries vis-à-vis other groups within the Palestinian community. As such, the defense of patriarchal family structures and traditional norms is central to processes of group formation among the Christians of Bethlehem. At the same time, the constraints and uncertainties that characterize Palestinian lives may encourage individuals to claim a sense of personal agency by liberating themselves from traditional norms.

**Patriarchy**

Studies from Palestine and other parts of the Middle East tend to emphasize the cultural primacy and persistence of patriarchy (Abu-Lughod 1989, Rubenberg 2001). In line with Suad Joseph, I understand patriarchy as ‘the dominance of males over females and elders over juniors (males and females) and the mobilization of kinship structures, morality and idioms to institutionalize and legitimize these forms of power’ (Joseph 1993:459). With reference to traditional notions of honor and shame, special emphasis is often put on the ways in which women in particular are socially monitored and disciplined in accordance with the prevailing norms of their communities (Abu-Lughod 1989, Rubenberg 2001). However, patriarchy is not reproduced only through means of social coercion and discipline. Suad Joseph emphasizes the importance of connectivity in the reproduction of patriarchal family structures (Joseph 1993, 1994). By connectivity she refers to ‘relationships in which a person’s boundaries are relatively fluid, so that persons feel a part of significant others’ (Joseph 1993:452). This concept relies on culturally contextualized and relationally oriented constructs of the self, which contrast with