Avner Giladi


*Muslim Midwives* is the culmination of a lifetime career that has led Giladi from studying medieval Islamic pedagogy to examining concepts of childhood, to reconstructing breastfeeding practices. He has now produced a book that concentrates on the profession of midwifery and the social status of midwives in medieval to early modern Arab-Islamic history. More broadly, it is a book about gender, power relations and patriarchy. As in earlier monographs, Giladi converts these abstract and obscure issues into knowledge shared by contemporary laypersons and bearing onto everyday realities and practices. As is the case with his previous books, Giladi’s monograph is the first foray into this topic.

Giladi’s starting point is that birthing is a cultural rite, rather than merely a biological-instinctive routine. He draws upon Jacques Gélis’s argument that birth is the main form of recruitment into family and kinship groups; hence the modes of conducting delivery, the acceptable persons in attendance, the degree of intervention for survival, the treatment of the woman herself and then her infant, are all under cultural stricture, under sets of beliefs and rules about how things are done (17).

Giladi does not spare any effort in tapping into all the relevant genres of written sources available in Arabic from the seventh to the fifteenth century, from al-Andalus in Spain to Iran. He explains that unlike the abundance of sources at the disposal of scholars of pre-modern Europe, there is almost no archival material, utilitarian objects, or paintings pertaining to birth from the pre-modern Islamic world. Furthermore, all existing sources regarding Islamic midwifery were authored by men. Hence locating relevant sources is one of the challenges facing the historian of the midwifery in the Middle East. Giladi
demonstrates that such sources exist, but one needs to put extra effort in order to find them. For his part Giladi covers medical writings on gynecology, obstetrics, and pediatrics; legal responsa (fatāwā); belles lettres (adab); moral tracts; chronicles; and biographical and hagiographical collections.

Giladi brings the primary sources to life in his analysis thanks to his discussion of terminology, direct citations and translations that pay particular attention to nuances in the texts. While this is extremely valuable for scholars of the Middle East and Islam with a good command of Arabic, it may impede other classes of readers who could have benefited from a more accessible text, in particular students in Middle Eastern History and Studies as well as scholars of other regions.

The book comprises six short chapters, each dealing with specific aspects of midwifery and the social and professional category of the midwife. Among these aspects are the evolution of midwifery into a type of professional expertise alongside the phenomenon of experienced older women who volunteer to help in birthing within the family or neighborhood; the midwives’ relationship with male physicians; rituals of fertility, deflowering and birthing; midwives as expert witnesses at the Muslim court and other social privileges that transgressed gender lines; the imbalance between the midwives’ numerous central roles in the female life cycle and their under-representation in the sources.

The introduction is by far the longest section in the book. It surveys medieval and early modern Arab-Islamic views on birth and midwifery, and serves as the background against which the specific characteristics of midwifery are later analyzed. Giladi discusses dominant images and concepts of femininity, wifehood, motherhood, generation, impurity, and how these affected the midwives’ position. Midwives were the custodians of familial lineage, which situated them in a privileged but complicated space between male and female worlds, between patriarchal society and female individuals, and between learned and written medicine and popular and oral medico-religious practices. Hence the midwives’ social and professional status was ambiguous by nature. They incited fear, contempt, but also respect for their power, knowledge and abilities.

In the Epilogue Giladi takes his readers to a later period: the Ottoman and modern Middle East. Based on historical sources, secondary literature, and anthropological works, he notes both the significant changes in the long tradition of midwifery during the past 150 years and remnants of the old tradition that have remained to a great extent intact. In nineteenth- and twentieth-century Egypt and Iran, for instance, midwives became agents of a European-style health system, but still assisted women with fertility problems and abortions as they had done before. Notwithstanding the spread of modern hospitals and