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Jews and Islamic Law in early 20th-century Yemen
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Jews and Islamic Law in early 20th-century Yemen explores the place of non-Muslims in Yemen's *shari'a* based legal system. The book focuses largely on the Mutawakkilite Kingdom (1918-1962), covering approximately thirty years of Yemen's history: from 1918, when Imām Yaḥyā Ḥamīd ad-Dīn gained Yemen's independence from the Turks, to 1949, when Yemeni Jews moved *en masse* to the newly established state of Israel. Drawing on the self-published memoirs of three Jews 'intermediaries', Mark S. Wagner investigates the multifaceted relations which embroiled Muslims and Jews in everyday economic practices, intercommunal violence and court cases. Simultaneously, he deploys this previously unanalyzed material to shed new light on political dynamics concerning the Muslim community itself. The autobiographical writings of the three wealthy Jewish merchants provide, in Wagner's hand, a 'view from the back window' (p. 10), emphasizing the backstage of Muslim power struggles – a backstage that outsiders, like Jews in Yemen, have the privilege to access and exploit. Yet Wagner's work is not only concerned with a careful contextualization of Muslim-Jews relationship in the social, political and economic framework of early 20th-century Yemen. It also provides a valuable analysis of the impact of broader international events on the life of Yemeni social actors.

Jews have been studied through many lenses. Wagner's analysis stands out against other scholarly strands, inasmuch as it abandons any speculative assertion on Islam as an abstract system in favor of a careful contextual analysis of the experiences, motivations and interests of situated social actors. Judicial outcomes are ably analyzed as the product of structural and ideological factors interacting with idiosyncratic personality traits and interests. This analysis not only brings into focus the role of non-legal practices, but also provides an unprecedented portrait of early 20th-century Yemeni society at large.

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The book moves from the final stages of the Ottoman occupation in North Yemen. When Imām Yaḥyā gained power in 1918, a sizable Jewish community used to dwell on the highlands, and its relation to the Islamic state suddenly came to be regulated by a local version of the Pact of ‘Umar: a document outlining the sumptuary laws ensuring the Jews’ subservient status (p. 17). Concurrently, the Imām overhauled the entire judiciary system. Wagner’s book tirelessly puts into dialogue these two dimensions: on the one hand, the reform of the legal system and the internal field of struggle of Muslim legal practitioners; on the other hand, the role of the Jews in these struggles for power.

In the first chapter, Wagner focuses on the reform of the legal system and depicts Jews’ usage of Islamic courts. The examined cases well demonstrate how Jewish individuals exploited Muslim courts to maximize their interest at the expenses of their peers. Moreover, Jewish sources provide a fresh perspective on the internal dynamics of the relationship between the Imām and the Muslim intelligentsia, dynamics that soon would have precipitated the events to the revolutionary outcome of 1948.

In chapter 2, the ‘Latrines decree’ is thoroughly analyzed. Through this decree, the collection of feces was imposed as a right/duty upon the Jews. Wagner carefully reviews the theological debate that, during the 18th century, led to a first proclamation of the decree, and the renewal of this sumptuary law during Imām Yaḥyā’s reign. This case proves how the Muslim intelligentsia constituted a heterogeneous field of struggle, and how Jews profited – in this case economically – from apparently oppressive measures. In the same Chapter, the case of a Jew intermediary striving to obtain the right to ride a bicycle, thus circumventing the prohibition of riding mounts, is presented: once again, his life and his strategies appear caught in the middle of an internal political challenge between Muslim rulers themselves.

Chapter 3 focuses on boundaries and practices that kept Jewish and Muslim communities separated. Opening with failed and successful camouflage practices deployed by Jewish intermediaries to pass as Arabs, it continues analyzing practices of commensality as a means to tie together or separate the two communities. It concludes with cases of transgression of the boundary.

Chapter 4 investigates the relation between economic niches and the ‘liminal’ status of the Jews. Jews constituted a third sex between male and female, the middle ground between earthly and supernatural dimension, and the brokers between sobriety and intoxication. Although despised in terms of status, their economic role was necessary within an economic system which recognized a strict association between work and lineages. This mutual dependency granted Jews a measure of power and economic wealth, as demonstrates the monopolistic trade which developed between the Imām and a rich Jewish mercantile elite.

Chapter 5 deals with intercommunal violence. Yemeni Jews were considered, within the tribal system, protected individuals and part of the honor (*sharaf*) of a tribe, as well as protected People of the Pact. In this guise, they were not authorized to carry weapons nor exert any kind of violence. In the first part of the chapter, Wagner considers how the conflict over Palestine increasingly led Muslims to reactionary violence against the Jews. In the second part, he brings into focus cases of Jews who behaved violently against Muslims. By a thorough description of a court case, he demonstrates how Jews manipulated the multilayered system of Yemeni hierarchy to get away with their crimes against Muslims.

Jews and Islamic Law in early 20th-century Yemen offers an important theoretical and methodological contribution to the study of minorities and marginal groups. Wagner's analysis thoroughly puts into dialogue Jewish and Arabic sources to emphasize the interaction between two internally divided fields of struggle: the Muslim and the Jewish one. The Jewish intermediaries' memoirs are critically interpreted as the work of three interested social actors, writing for a Jewish audience in Israel. Wagner not only deploys the memoirs as a historical source, but also investigates how the authors emerge from their texts. Furthermore, he systematically compares the intermediaries' memoirs with different sources, emphasizing contradictions and connections. Wagner's work, as a whole, presents a complex portrait of early 20th-century Yemeni society, always juxtaposing "theory" and "practice" (p. 124), rules and exceptions, structures and agency.

This work speaks to social anthropology, providing useful insights into the social reality of contemporary Yemen. The debate around the "Latrines decree" (p. 38-42) teaches us that categories of "purity" and "ritual pollution" do not fully explain the stigmatization of crafts and professions in the Yemeni caste-like system. This system is, in fact, characterized by a strong association between lineages and professions, with two consequences: first, the division of labor entails a high degree of mutual dependency, granting a measure of power even to low rank minority groups; second, practicing a craft directly points to belonging to a lineage (pp. 96-97). Eventually, the book sheds light on a classical topic of the anthropology of the Middle East: the role of outsiders within tribal systems. Yemeni Jews, in their quality of protected outsiders, inhabited a 'liminal space', serving as intermediaries, or "backstagers", for the tournaments of value of the Muslim community.