


REVIEW

Feeding Iran: Shi'i Families and the Making of the Islamic Republic. Rose Wellman (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021). Pp. 262. \$34.95. ISBN 9780520376878

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In this book, Rose Wellman aims to describe how everyday life and religiosity are directly connected with the Islamic Republic, concluding that the state and lives of its supporters are intertwined through food, among other things. The scarcity of academic work about food in Iran, and the potentially delicate nature of ethnographic research far from the posh neighborhoods of northern Tehran, explains the anticipation for this book. While anthropology students will find this book useful, and despite its clear contribution and the hard work put into its production, *Feeding Iran* can read as denying Iranians agency, generalizing complex cultural traits, and exhibiting an essentialist view of Islam.

Interestingly, every person mentioned in the book takes a pseudonym, and the author even assigns one to her town of observation, the isolated “Fars-Abad,” a bastion of Islamic Republic supporters (p. 32–33). Although pseudonyms are assigned to keep the family safe from possible retribution by the security forces, Wellman provides so many clues that it is not difficult to discover real names and locations. Similarly counter to the author's intentions and perhaps their safety, one could also unmask the name of the host family. However, perhaps for some that is not as important as the content of her study, to which I now turn.

Wellman dedicates each of the book's four chapters, which are accompanied by seventeen black and white photos all taken by the author, to one theme. Before that, however, in the introduction, she explains her reasons for the book, introducing her host family and the location. Following on, chapter one focuses on interpersonal norms in a conservative environment, who is considered a blood relative, and what “moral kin” means. In chapter two, the author discusses everyday food practices in a household environment that protects the sanctity of the interpersonal relationships explained in the previous chapter. Made obvious by its title, “Regenerating the Islamic Republic: Commemorating Martyrs in Provincial Iran,” chapter three explains how the regime tries to keep the Islamic Revolution alive through certain practices, such as repatriation of the discovered remains of soldiers martyred during the Iran-Iraq War. Finally, chapter four focuses on food as a motif in the creation of an Islamic nation.

The patriarch of the author's host family is a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War who intensely supports *velāyat -e faqih* (the guardianship of the juriconsult). Wellman lived with Ahmad, Nushin, and their adult children, observing their everyday conduct to understand how they prepared, consumed, and shared food, effectively anchoring her argument in the concept of kinship strengthened through blood and food-sharing. These practices are influenced by the regime's religious view of kinship, which it promotes nationally.

One of *Feeding Iran's* major setbacks is its gross generalization of customs and traditions practiced prevalently in the 1800s, but also by this family, and assuming that this is how the

great majority of Iranians deal with food. Though she mentions that there are exceptions to her observations (p. 24), her disclaimer is easily missed. Additionally, in the heart of the text, Wellman suggests that these 19th-century customs are common practice in Iran. The author's convincing penmanship perhaps explains the almost persuasive tone that made this reviewer even doubt his own experience with food in Iran.

It is well accepted that people's social behavior is the outcome of a multiplicity of factors, and so the author's drawing a direct line between a group of people and their government as the sole reason for their conduct is challenging. The book's overall argument is based on the conviction that Basiji families, such as that of Ahmad and Nushin of Fars-Abad, are under the constant influence of the Islamic Republic's effective nation-building efforts, implying that other possible factors such as regional climate, food availability, and centuries-long historical precedence are inconsequential. Take the following example: it is common in extremely conservative and observant families to question the source of food. Some Muslims might fear that if the persons who purchased the ingredients or cooked the meal were corrupt or non-Muslim (considered *najes* [impure/unclean] by some) (p. 85), or if the food was purchased with money earned in *haram* (forbidden) ways, then that food is unconsumable. However, during the tenure of the Islamic Republic and because of its utter mismanagement of everything from the economy to the environment to politics, many people and large numbers of its champions have ceased questioning the source of their food, shedding many of the ultraconservative beliefs/practices that Wellman observed with such intensity in her host family.

If one were to claim that this family is perhaps among the rarest of families that scrutinizes its food with such passion, then they would not be wrong, but our author extrapolates by claiming her "hosts' kitchen practices were typical of pious Iranians across the region and in Iran more broadly" (p. 86). She has chosen to highlight this family's practices as the norm of feeding among Shi'i families influenced by their location in an isolated town and "membership in the Basij" (p. 86). If anything, the sensitivities with which Nushin handles food paints not a portrait of how regime supporters deal with food, but instead how a seemingly overanxious woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown trusts nothing and nobody, constantly skeptical of the sources of her food in her small town (p. 92). Fascinatingly, the author reports that the entire family sees signs of God in everything, even when they enjoy pomegranates on a Thursday night, which Wellman portrays as a common event throughout Iran (p. 97). On the contrary, however, it appears that neither God nor the Islamic Republic have much to do with how this family deals with food, because when the author asks Nushin why she bothers making her own quince lime syrup (to be used as a jam) and pomegranate sauce, Nushin responds, "the product is delicious, and the quality is so much better," clearly contradicting the author's former claim (p. 98). Although these two points are not exclusive, one cannot help notice how Nushin's point could be the one valid statement in Wellman's observations, witnessed by anyone privy to the private lives of families who opt to make their own food, free from preservatives and other chemicals.

The discussion of the repatriation of Iran-Iraq War soldiers' discovered remains is the author's other attempt at demonstrating how the Islamic Republic tries to strengthen itself through blood and kinship (p. 4). The repatriation of remains is a ceremonious affair when coffins draped in the national flag are buried in public. Through these state funerals, the state attempts to keep revolutionary ideas alive, reminding the nation that the Islamic Republic owes its survival to the almighty and by the spilled blood of citizens, who are everyone's spiritual brothers. The reburial of soldiers' remains in parks, universities, and roundabouts has been a constant state method of commingling politics and Shiite religious ideology. Wellman participates in one such event and rightly observes that the exhumation and burial of Iran-Iraq martyrs remains a political ploy through which the state draws comparisons between Imam Hussein's martyrdom in 680 and the 1979 revolution and war (p. 36). But she misses the fact that regardless of the state's objective,

it is public knowledge that families themselves have and still struggle to find the remains of their loved ones; their action cannot be viewed only in the context of state manipulation of the public's emotions. Besides, this argument of using Shiite ideology during and after the war is nothing new. Additionally, by strictly discussing the state's reasons for repatriating soldiers' remains without mentioning how martyrs' families (especially women) organize to pressure the state to find their loved ones, Wellman portrays these families as passive victims. The resulting image is one of desperate women waiting for help. If the author had not taken a deductive reasoning approach to find rare cases to fit a certain narrative and then projected her explanations onto Iran's eighty-million-strong population, we would be reading a very different cultural analysis. As disheartening as many things are in the country, not everything in Iran can be explained by politics, as the state has limited power to force citizens to do as it likes. Basically, people still matter.

The way the author discusses concepts such as nationalism without sufficiently and effectively engaging with scholarship on the subject is also concerning. The deductive reasoning used to contextualize Iranian nationalism becomes apparent again when the author observes two Fars-Abadi men passionately describing the nation differently (p. 21–22). One understands it based on Persian cultural supremacy and ascribes it to a region. The other argues from a Pan-Islamist perspective and references the Palestinians as part of the *ummah*. The latter argument was also most often claimed by Ayatollah Khomeini in his anti-colonial argument to unite Muslims against western hegemony. But the author's faint reference to Pan-Islamism leaves the uninitiated confused about the discrepancy between these two Iranians' understanding of "Iran." It must also be noted that Khomeini vacillated between two ideological understandings of nationalism—the Pan-Islamist approach and modern nationalist approach.

What could have perhaps prevented some of the above shortcomings is more thorough research and appropriate source analysis, in addition to further critical review of published material in Persian and English. Furthermore, errors such as the incorrect claim that 50,000 bodies are still missing from the Iran-Iraq War (p. 132), when the latest missing number is less than 12,000 according to the International Committee of the Red Cross, or Khomeini being the creator of the Sacred Defense Week (p. 133), leave one surprised.

Looking at food and its multi-dimensionality could heighten our awareness of many historical and sociological nuances of a culture. Aside from the stated, Wellman successfully demonstrates the diversity of opinions and approaches to food in Iran. Beyond the obvious purpose of food, the author provides ample examples that, in this very small family and its intimate circle, food preparation and consumption have a spiritual and political dimension. Wellman should be applauded for engaging with this small group of Iranians that think of food as a tool to create social and political bonds, which in and of itself is significant.