

BOOK REVIEWS

FUAD I. KHURI. *An Invitation to Laughter: A Lebanese Anthropologist in the Arab World*. Edited by Sonia Jalbout Khuri. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. Pp. 224. ISBN-978-0-226-43476-6 (cloth); ISBN-978-0-226-43478-0 (paper).

Fuad I. Khuri (1935–2003) is one of the few earlier-generation Arab anthropologists who have studied their own people. A Christian Lebanese in origin, Khuri's work spans over four decades and covers a wide range of topics such as the authoritarian state, tribalism, the Arab rich and Islamic notions of the body. Author of seventeen books and monographs, in his memoirs *An Invitation to Laughter* Khuri gives a lively account of a career that culminated at the American University of Beirut where he was Professor of Anthropology for two decades. His life also contains extensive field periods in countries such as Sierra Leone and Ghana (both among Lebanese trading communities), Bahrain, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Syria and his native Lebanon, with shorter trips to Yemen.

For Khuri, anthropology in the developing world could not afford to concentrate on the exotic of other cultures. As he put it, "The pressure exerted upon native anthropologists to deal with current issues facing their societies is enormous" (p. 80). The reader gets a lively account of how he devoted his life to reforming his own society through the means availed by anthropology as he describes and analyses the underlying mechanisms that create such phenomena as patriarchy, conspicuous consumption, corruption, autocracy or the secondary role of women. Still, in his attempts to show how these observable facts are shared by all peoples throughout the Middle East no matter religious or ethnic background, he unintentionally sometimes builds upon an essentialist image of the operation of a sort of 'Arab mind'. This is evident, for example, when he explains what he sees as the place of laughter among Arabs: "In Arab culture, laughing loudly in public demeans one's character; such behavior is associated with degraded, disreputable men and women, such as prostitutes" (p. 3).

This tendency also becomes visible in Khuri's accounts of Yemen, where he actually did not carry out extensive fieldwork but acted as a World Bank consultant. For Khuri, Yemen was an example of Arabic exotica with its curious table manners, its *badu* (literally peasant but colloquially used as a degrading name for a non-civilized person) with their "feminine make-up" and an obsession with sex and food. According to Khuri, half the Yemenis are called 'Abdalla' and in the Yemeni desert it is customary to offer one's daughter in marriage to a stranger who just happens to visit; something that happened to Khuri himself.

These minor criticisms aside, the book contains fascinating accounts of the anthropologist's experiences in the field, and in the field at home. Seldom have everyday experiences of war yielded an equally vivid account as when Khuri describes his life in Beirut during the difficult years of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990). Further highlights of the book are his experiences among the extremely wealthy sectors of his own society, discussions with various members of *'ulama* (Islamic scholars) and his failing to have Arabic translations of his books distributed to native audiences (practically all his books are banned in Arab countries). This is definitely a book that every student of the Middle East and anthropology at large should read: a witty, well-written account of life full of anthropological adventure.

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