



**Review: [Untitled]**

Reviewed Work(s):

*The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* by Leslie P. Peirce  
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but primarily a political manifesto for a particular modern Oromo nationalism. As we continue to learn from central Europe, political platforms and serious scholarship do not mix well.

Writing the neglected history of a people like the Oromo does not require rescripting history or inventing a nation-state in the past. Nor does pointing out the book's nationalist bias entirely discredit it. *Oromia and Ethiopia* is often an effective synthesis, offering a challenging reinterpretation of modern Ethiopian history. Its line of analysis is consistent, if at times wooden, and it has an excellent bibliography. Using ethnic nationalism as a historical lens is, however, a difficult and dangerous approach to understanding the complexity of modern history.

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*The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire.* By Leslie P. Peirce (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993) 374 pp. \$60.00 cloth \$19.95 paper

For centuries, the Ottoman harem has obsessed European observers. Inaccessible, it became an object of fantasy. Europeans imagined it as a place of sexual license, and also a cabal radiating a dangerous female power in affairs of state. The women of the harem were seen both as sexually submissive and politically powerful.

As Peirce points out, this perception is not true. If the garden kiosks of the Topkapi palace were intended for indulgence, the harem system was intended for sexual regulation. The harem was not the resort of idle women, bent on intrigue for lack of any other activity; it was a hierarchical, bureaucratically managed community. If the harem had political influence, it was not the result of untoward intrigue, but a natural consequence of the Ottoman expectation that women, as members of the royal family, had important social and political roles. In the Turko-Mongol heritage of Inner Asia from which the Ottomans descended, women were secluded as a mark of their high status, but not, as a result, excluded from public affairs. The governing distinction in Ottoman thought was not between public and private, but between inner and outer, privileged and common, *hass* and *amm*. Without leaving the harem, women exercised power in the outside world.

Peirce stresses these themes in her introductions and conclusions to various chapters, but the narrative history that occupies the greater part of the book tells a somewhat more nuanced story. The central theme of the narrative is the Ottoman political system, from the perspective of dynastic politics. This system was not always or necessarily favorable to women.

Even though, in contrast to the practices of the Arab Near East, women in Turko-Mongol societies occupied a prominent place in their

communities, Ottoman dynastic policy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was intended to subordinate them. At first, Ottoman sultans married the daughters of defeated princes, mainly Christian in the fourteenth and Muslim in the fifteenth centuries. These marriages signified fealty and political subordination. From the midfourteenth century, however, the Ottomans emphasized their superiority and elevation beyond all other elements of society. Just as they had come to use slave soldiers and administrators to replace the Turkish tribal and religious leaders who were their allies in the conquests, the Ottomans adopted a policy of taking concubines, but not wives.

Relations with concubines were strictly regulated; no concubine was permitted to bear more than one child. Upon the death of a reigning sultan, his sons would compete for the succession; the victor would exterminate his brothers and their children. In this way the Ottoman dynasty assured itself of 200 years of father-son successions and a steady line of politically and militarily competent rulers. Peirce tells this story but does not mention in her conclusion the fact that for two centuries the Ottomans not only subordinated, but also marginalized, contrary to their cultural heritage, the place of women in the dynastic system.

The restoration of an important role for women in Ottoman society began in the reign of Suleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566). Suleyman broke with Ottoman tradition by making Hurrem, his beloved consort, his wife, and allowing her to bear several sons. Murad III (1574-1595) ended the system of pitting brothers against each other for succession to the Sultanate and confined Ottoman princes to the harem as a way of controlling the inevitable rivalries for political power. Subsequently, a series of accidents brought a half-century of weak and sometimes childless sultans to the throne, which allowed women to play a more direct role in succession considerations and Ottoman dynastic politics. By the midseventeenth century, the accumulated new precedents had become the norm.

These changes in the position of women were not only the result of accidents; they also reflected a fundamental underlying change in the way in which the Ottoman empire was to be ruled. For two centuries, the central political issue in the Ottoman empire had been the struggle for power between the Turkish aristocracy of pastoral and Central Asian origin that provided the shock troops of the Ottoman conquests, and the slave military forces built up by the sultans as a counterweight to the Turkish elites. The slave forces staffed the Janissary corps, the artillery and the palace service, and many important provincial governorships. By the middle of the sixteenth century, they had triumphed completely over their Turkish rivals. Their victory coincided with the end of warrior expansion, and with the bureaucratization and routinization of Ottoman rule. Suleyman was known to his subjects as the lawgiver.

To cope with these changes the Ottoman sultans moved progressively in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries toward the creation of an enlarged family household and court, to serve as the core of the imperial state. To consolidate this household, fratricidal civil wars to

determine succession were abolished, and the royal family—including the Sultan's mother, his several consorts, and their children—once dispersed throughout the empire, were gathered under one roof.

This extended family served dynastic interests as a consequence of a new marriage policy. Now, the sultan's own daughters would marry his high ranking slave functionaries, as a way of binding selected officials to the family of the ruler. The loyalty of the slave elite, no longer ensured by shared interests in competition with other elites, would be dictated by clan and factional ties. This strategy, however, had its costs, because marriages created not only loyal but rival factions. The royal consorts, their daughters, and their sons-in-law, with their clients, supporters, and functionaries—inside and outside of the harem—now formed factions competing for influence and power. A whole new arena for intrigue, rivalry, and political struggle had been created.

The in-gathering of the royal family converted the harem into a department of state. The large family of the sultan—his mother, his wives, his wet nurse, the sons and daughters, and their servants and staffs—had to be organized in a bureaucratic fashion. Incomes were allotted to the members of the family; staffs of officials had to manage the harem properties. The harem, too, served as a training school for young women who were taught useful crafts, such as embroidery, singing, and musical performance, and were cultivated in the social graces necessary for personal service. The harem was the equivalent of the palace school for pages. It had become another complex branch of the Ottoman government service.

In the new system, the power of the sultan's mother was vastly enhanced. She became the chief administrator of the harem service. Her influence upon family issues, succession, and the factional politics of harem marriages affected the policies of the government. The royal mother played a diplomatic role in contacts with Europe. Her symbolic importance rose correspondingly. The procession of the "valide sultan" from one household to another became a great public occasion, even though she was not to be seen. The royal mother would receive a public funeral and be buried in the tomb of the sultan's father. She took on the charitable projects of the dynasty, supervising gifts to the poor and the construction of mosques, baths, and fountains for public water supply, endowments for Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem, patronage of the pilgrimage, and so on.

Thus the apogee of female power! Peirce's interpretation is persuasive, but one cannot help but think that female power is a by-product of the restructuring of the political system rather than a value in itself. Despite the positive attitude toward women in Turko-Mongol societies, the Ottoman sultans had for centuries pursued a marriage and succession policy that ruthlessly negated the importance of women; eventually, however, though the sultan's mother, consorts, and daughters exercised a wider influence, they did not hold government offices.

The story of women and sovereignty still contains ambiguities. Although we may want to give the Ottoman political story a contem-

porary gloss and demonstrate the openness of Muslim society to female power, the matter may not have been paramount in Ottoman times.

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*Japan in the World*. Edited by Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian (Durham, Duke University Press, 1993) 365 pp. \$42.50 cloth \$18.95 paper

A collection of sixteen essays—most of which are provocatively critical and enlightening—this volume nevertheless suffers from an identity crisis. Is it, as the book jacket proclaims, a work that “assesses Japan’s current dealings in international politics, society, and culture”? Or is it, rather, an attempt to contest the existence of any unitary subject—political, social, or cultural—that might be called “Japan” or “the Japanese”? It is to some degree the strength, but inevitably also the weakness, of this volume that the answer must be yes to both questions.

Here, “Japan” is both ideological construct and unproblematically real entity: The ethnocentrism of objectifying epistemologies is suggested repeatedly, as when Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto argues for “the fundamental imperialism of the self-Other dichotomy” and Rob Wilson asks, “To what extent is it possible—or even desirable—to represent a non-Western culture from within the syntax, terms, and narratives, or the policies and protocols of Western culture?” (331). Yet, as might be expected in a volume on *Japan in the World*, straightforward objectifications of “Japan” and “the Japanese” abound. Perhaps this ambivalence relates to what, in the title to his essay, Yoshimoto calls the “difficulty of being radical.”

Contributions to the first section, entitled “The World,” tend to take for granted the objectivity of “Japan” as a political, historical, and cultural entity. They include Tetsuo Najita’s reflections on the historical figuration of Japan’s industrial revolution, Perry Anderson’s brief suggestions on how to compare Japan’s modern history with Germany’s, Eqbal Ahmad’s broad, if also brief, attempt to assess the level of racism in United States–Japan relations, Arif Dirlik’s informative review of China’s response to Japan’s early-1980s *Historikerstreit* about textbook accounts of the Pacific war, and Bruce Cumings’ playfully profound interpretation of “Japan in British/American Hegemony, 1900–1950.”

Unaccountably, the “Society” section contains only two entries: Miriam Silverberg’s broadly convincing attempt to sketch the contours of a “new cultural history” of interwar Japan, and Christena Turner’s absorbing participant account of variations in the work ethic among Japanese industrial workers.

The “Culture” section is by far the largest, and is also where the volume’s epistemological identity crisis becomes most acute. It begins with the transcript of a fascinating conversation between a “Japanese”