

Muslim Women of the Fergana Valley: A 19th-Century Ethnography from Central Asia. Vladimir Nalivkin and Maria Nalivkina. Indiana University Press. 2016. 242 pp. (ISBN-13: 9780253021496)

This work offers readers a nineteenth-century ethnography focused on women in an Islamic society. Originally titled *A Sketch of the Everyday Life of Women of the Sedentary Native Population of the Fergana Valley*, it was first published in Russian in 1886 by the Russian couple Vladimir and Maria Nalivkin, who lived in a “Sart” (Uzbek) village in a territory new to the Russian Empire. Vladimir Nalivkin, a Russian military man, and his wife were among the first group of Russians who provided precious detailed reports on Central Asia for the Russian Empire. Unlike other Russian scholars, Vladimir and his wife were not specialists in Oriental studies; therefore, their work provides a new perspective on Central Asian Studies.

The book includes one introduction and ten chapters. The introduction by the editor, Marianne Kamp, provides a comprehensive introduction to the book. It provides brief biographies of Vladimir and Maria, focusing on their intellectual formation, the milieu within which they worked, and their scholarly production. Comparisons are drawn between their ethnographic work and those of several of their contemporaries in Russian Central Asia.

The first chapter, “A Short Sketch of the Fergana Valley,” deals with a physical description of the Fergana Valley, from the plants, mountains, and valley to the streets, mosques, and shops. It describes how Islamic religious ideas shaped the attitudes and livelihoods of the people.

The second chapter, entitled “Religion and Clergy,” starts with a translation of passages from the Qur’an, followed by a description of some beliefs and practices. Then it elaborates on Muslim women’s religious practices like praying at home or going on pilgrimages. In addition, this chapter, points out Sart women’s lack of formal

education.

The third chapter, “Houses and Utensils,” sheds light on Sart women’s daily life, their means of earning a living, their houses, and food. After explaining how houses were built, the authors refer to the construction of spaces meant to separate women from *namabram*, the men who were not members of the family. It follows a theme of class differentiation, illustrating the variance in wealthy and poor families’ consumption patterns.

Chapter four, “Woman’s Appearance and Her Clothing,” addresses women in terms of dress and appearance. It deals with family life, birth, marriage, relations within the household, holiday practices, and many other topics while repeatedly returning to sartorial details. This chapter moves from the description of clothing to examinations of social class, stages of life, and work and leisure.

Chapter five, “Occupations and Food,” examines Sart women’s labor, their sources of income, and the roles of older and younger women in an extended family household. By observing women’s actions in buying and selling, it draws the reader’s attention to poverty, wealth, and women’s efforts to overcome difficulties. It ends with further details about expenditure and diet that Russian administrators collected for taxation purposes and that social activists used to demonstrate that peasants were ill fed and overtaxed.

Chapter Six, “The Woman, Her Character, Habits, Knowledge, and Behavior toward the People around Her,” is a close observation of women’s family interactions, their festivities, customs, and child-raising practices. In this chapter, the authors take a comparative approach to Sarts and Russians’ social behavior to make a more comprehensive picture for their intended audience, who were Russians. The Nalivkins address men’s diverse styles of fighting, the morality of theft and waste, fears, folk healing, and magic.

Chapter Seven, “Pregnancy and Childbirth: A Girl,” describes Sart birthing practices and their preferences for sons. It reports on how all children were exposed to poor nutrition and some fatal diseases like smallpox, measles, scarlet fever, whooping cough, flu, edema, and skin diseases. It also indicates how orphan children were raised by their relatives and how the property they received was entrusted to a guardian.

Chapter Eight, “The Maiden: Marriage Proposal and Marriage,” explains how women’s lives changed completely after their marriage: “All her street games with friends and peers are ended. The maiden starts participating more and more in household activities such as cooking and cleaning” (p. 158). It also discusses polygyny and marriage of young adolescent girls. A large part of the chapter is devoted to *qalin*, the

groom's wedding expenses, and also *mehr*, which was the money usually paid by the parents of the groom to the bride. This chapter ends by indicating the varied reasons for quarrels among spouses and the fact that a peaceful and quiet life was the lot of very few families.

Chapter Nine, "Polygyny, Divorce, Widowhood, and Death of a Woman," argues that men and women obtained divorce easily and that being divorced posed no obstacle to remarriage.

Religion allows a Muslim man to have no more than four wives at the same time. If he already has four wives but for some reason wants to marry a fifth one, he must first divorce one of his current wives, and then religion does not prevent him from replacing her with a new one. A woman who becomes a widow or divorces her husband can also remarry an unlimited number of times (p. 175).

It explains that if the husband initiated the divorce without valid cause, he had to give the wife whom he is dismissing the promised *mehr*, and he lost the right to demand the return of *qalin*. If such a divorce was initiated by the wife, she, on the other hand, lost her right to *mehr* and had to also return the *qalin* her husband had paid for her. This chapter ends with the common customs for the funeral and mourning of Sart women.

The most challenging chapter of the book is Chapter Ten, "Prostitution". It examines Sart social attitudes regarding prostitution in general and in particular Sart women's motivations for becoming prostitutes and means for leaving prostitution. It explains how the owners of brothels, who were almost exclusively men, took three or four legal wives and traded in them. In addition, it addresses the lives of prostitutes, who were either women who were not able to divorce their husbands or girls who ran away from their parents.

Muslim Women of the Fergana Valley illustrates the lives of Sart women in multi-faceted ways. The Navilkins' knowledge of language helped them to provide a vast picture of Sart women's everyday life in the nineteenth century. The military education of Nalivkin provided him with outstanding skills in mapping, analyzing and statistically categorizing the Sart women. They report various aspects of Sart women's lives; however, they rarely use examples to support their ideas, which at times makes the book boring.

Applying a comparative approach, the authors examine Sart women through the lense of Russians. They were Russian, and they were observing Sarts, and the two belonged in utterly different categories. Therefore, the reader always recognizes a

distance between the authors as Russians and Sart women. At times, the Nalivkins consciously contrast their own Russian preferences with Sart preferences, though they concede nothing at all about the ways their own class backgrounds shaped their view of self or of Russianness. They consider some customs of the Sarts like sitting on mats and eating from low tables or cloths spread on the floor as lack of civilization. However, they were sometimes impressed by Sart women's wit in conversation and their ease in social situations, which the Nalivkins regarded as superior to Russian cultural patterns.

This work provides us with an enduring portrait of a moment after the Kokand Khanate was defeated, when its forms of Islamic rule were officially gone but before Russian imperial law, administration, and culture had come to dominate rural Central Asian communities. The Nalivkins' attention to the details of customs, dress, food, housing, and family relationships and their apparent appreciation of many aspects of Sart life make this project more valuable as a source of ethnographic and cultural information than most of the contemporaneous nineteenth-century Russian publications about the Sarts.

Maryam Kamali
Harvard University, USA