
Reviewed by:
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As I read Tsipy Ivry’s fascinating *Embodying Culture: Pregnancy in Japan and Israel*, I couldn’t help but imagine how Yanagisawa Hakuo might read it. Yanagisawa was the Japanese Minister of Health, Labor, and Welfare when, in 2007, he described women as “baby-making machines” while attempting to explain why Japan’s low birth rate continues to fall (Walsh 2007). He stipulated that one of the primary reasons for the decreasing birth rate is that women -- those baby-making machines -- are less inclined to have babies. The media jumped on his gaff immediately. Many commentators pointed out that it betrayed a ministerial incompetence in not recognizing the myriad reasons why people are having fewer babies in contemporary Japan, and therefore explained why the government’s pro-natal policies have not increased the birth rate. I think it is no insult to Ivry to suggest that the Japanese bureaucracy would surely make more effective policy if they were familiar with her sensitive and trenchant analysis of the experience of pregnancy in two cultures.

This one example suggests how politicized pregnancy and childbirth have become in Japan, and Ivry’s timely book adds ethnographic description and analysis to public discussions about exactly what pregnancy means. She approaches this question by situating Japanese experiences in comparison with contemporary Israeli constructions of pregnancy, and the resulting book will be of interest to scholars working in either society. Side-stepping any apology for its comparative nature, the structure brings cultural differences into striking relief and left me wondering why there isn’t more work relating Japan and Israel. After all, as Ivry points out both nation-states represent their strength partially through the fecundity of a seemingly “pure” population and each government sees an increased birth rate as a partial solution to national problems. Ivry describes Israeli pro-natalism as resulting from Zionism, patriarchal familism, and Jewish religious imperatives, while Japanese pro-natalism stems from top-down attempts to reverse what is one of the lowest birth rates in the world. In each culture having babies connotes personal, familial, and national interests.

In these loaded cultural contexts, what does pregnancy mean and how do women experience it? In her descriptive analysis, Ivry characterizes the patterns of meaning surrounding pregnancy in each culture before finding leverage in explicit comparison. In Israel, pregnancy regularly includes medicalized testing of the fetus: expectant mothers are likely to undergo amniocentesis and other tests for genetic abnormalities, many of which might be partially funded by the state. In contrast to Rayna Rapp’s (1999) description of how amniocentesis prompts moral debates regarding the social value of people with developmental disabilities in the United States, Ivry reports that very few Israeli couples question using abortion to end pregnancies that seem to include genetic abnormalities. Quoting Sagi and colleagues (2001) Ivry suggests that, “Israeli patients...
tend to terminate pregnancies upon diagnosis of relatively minor defects such as harelip, chronic sinusitis, or deformed feet, or upon unclear amniocentesis results” (p.40). Thus for many Israelis, the debates about fetal testing are not about what to do if the fetus appears to be “abnormal,” but how the tests themselves might cause miscarriage. Much anxiety, represented here in fantastic ethnographic detail, is about how to balance the risks between not testing (or under-testing) a fetus and dealing with potentially disabled children. Pregnancy in the dominant Israeli understanding, creates a liminal moment in which risks are especially high and ultimately unsettled until after birth.

In contrast to Israeli narratives that delay celebration until after a healthy birth, Japanese social norms describe pregnancy as a vital period of mother-child bonding. One major difference Ivry highlights are the vocabularies used: while Israeli doctors and expectant parents are likely to use words like “fetus” or “it” to describe an unborn child, Japanese people most commonly use “baby” and even “mother” to describe a pregnant woman with no children yet born. Maternity, and to a lesser degree, paternity, seem to be constructed at the very beginning of pregnancy in Japanese cultural understandings. Being pregnant is about making sure a woman has bonded responsibly with her baby, a process that includes detailed note-taking and reflective diaries that Ivry describes as anathema in Israel. These diaries include information on everything from results of doctor’s visits, the mother’s diet at each meal, and her bowel movements to how she felt and what the unborn baby seemed to be doing. Most of the work of being pregnant in Japan is about self-monitoring, reflecting, and narrativizing the development as ways to bond mother and baby. In a fascinating point, Ivry convincingly states that these data suggest Japanese subjectivity begins closer to conception and Israeli fetuses only move from being an object (“it”) to being human after a healthy birth. These patterns are reflected in the book’s cover: in a black and white image of a pregnant Israeli woman facing a pregnant Japanese woman, the latter gazes warmly at her large belly while the former, presumably less willing to fantasize about her “baby,” stares past her body to a point on the floor. Even in this composite image we can see the variation in ascribed subjectivity that Ivry highlights so clearly.

Although there has been much academic interest in reproduction, Ivry correctly points out that this often brings attention to unusual pregnancies or new reproductive technologies like in-vitro fertilization. This book reminds us why pregnancy – and not just the newest technological methods – is a fascinating window into culture, and the themes it considers will be of interest to teachers and students in anthropology, gender studies, medical anthropology, epidemiology, and area studies.

REFERENCES CITED

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