

## The Role of Women in 19th Century Mount Lebanon

*By Nada Awar*

Nineteenth Century Mount Lebanon consisted of an agricultural village society. Communication between the villages was difficult because connecting roads were very narrow, unpaved and in primitive condition. Donkeys were the popular means of transportation. The donkey driver, **Mkari**, acted as a means for communication and a post-man between the villages. People who could not afford the Mkari's fees or who did not own a donkey walked from one village to another whenever necessary.

The social unit of village society was the nuclear family. A family was lead by a male headmaster whose duties were to protect his wife and children. The ideal wife was a hard-working woman who could bear more baby-boys than baby-girls. Thus, a male child was the bearer of his father's name and assurance of the continuity of his family, while a female child was expected to marry at an early age, to go and live with her husband who would give her his name.

The marriage of a girl was decided by her father. In other words, marriage requests were accepted or rejected by the man of the house. A cousin was the preferred suitor. Being a virgin was (is) the most important prerequisite quality for a girl in marriage. If ever she dared to loose her virginity, she was to be slaughtered by her father, her brother, her uncle or her cousin. The shame she had brought upon the family honor, **'aard**, is washed away with her blood. Besides virginity, the beauty of the girl, her health and her working abilities were other qualities the suitor looked for when picking a wife.

After marriage, a woman was expected to fulfill her duties both inside and outside the house. She was to clean, cook, wash, bring water from the village fountain, feed the hens and cocks, feed the sheep, feed the silkworms, sew all the clothing for her family and herself, spin wool threads using a primitive hand spinning wheel, and knit woolen clothes for her family and for herself. She also had to take care of her baby or babies.

Hence, in the early morning, a woman began her duties by feeding the sheep, cleaning its place and bathing it in the fountain of the village. Each family bought a sheep in the beginning of May and slaughtered it in



Still Life With Blue Vase 1989 32,5 × 95 cm Mixed Media

November. The meat and grease were conserved in clay jars and subsequently used for cooking throughout the year. Feeding the sheep was manual and took two hours in the morning and two hours in the evening. The woman whose sheep was the healthier/fat was proud and envied by the women of the village. Feeding the silkworms was a second important job for the woman because silk season was a major source of income for the family. Silkworms were usually raised in the farmer's household. Silkworm food consisted of chopped black-mulberry leaves, three times a day. Then, cocoons were sold to factory owners. Many women worked in the silk-factories too.

The second morning duty of a woman was to feed the hens and cocks, and to collect the eggs. However, before feeding the hens, the woman would breast feed her baby, then give the child a kind of drug to put him/her to sleep all day to make sure that her work would not be interrupted. The drug was prepared by drying a seed known as «Khash-Khash» (a kind of narcotic), crushing it and mixing it with jam. After going to sleep the baby was tied to his small wooden bed or to the floor.

Cleaning the house, cooking and making bread were other tasks to be done before the woman went out to fetch her water supply in her clay jar from the village's fountain (the pipe-line system did not exist in that era). Consequently, a woman also had to carry her dirty laundry all the way out to the village fountain, where she would light a fire for washing.

Sewing and knitting clothes were also on the village woman's list of duties. Ready-made clothing was not available and the village dress was simple and uniform. The clever sewer and knitter was quite famous among her peers who asked her advice or assistance.

Conservation of food for the entire year took time and hard work. One of the items was **bourghul**, i.e. crushed wheat. The woman prepared bourghul by washing large quantities of wheat, boiling it, drying it under the sun and then manually crushing it using a

primitive stone called **Jarouch**. From bourghul a popular village dish similar to porridge, **Kishk**, was prepared. Kishk was considered a full meal for the farmer. Its preparation, the woman's job, involved mixing Bourghul with home-made yogurt and «Labneh», i.e. dried yogurt. The mix was left to dry in the sun for a few days and then crushed into powder, i.e. Kishk. Cooking the powder was the final process and produced the final product.

A woman also conserved a kind of cheese that she prepared herself. She also prepared raisins from dried grapes, fig-jam from dried figs boiled with **dibs**. Dibs was made by boiling grape juice for several hours until it turns into a sweet syrup identical to honey. The woman also conserved dried beans and vegetables for winter.

Outside the household, a woman was expected to assist her husband. She took her basket to the grape garden to pick the fruit. She also picked figs, beans, cucumbers and other vegetables. During the (wheat) harvest, the wife joined her husband in his tent in the field. She took her baby, her hens and her sheep with her. In the field, the woman helped in irrigating and harvesting the wheat, on one hand; and gathered huge amounts of green grass, dried it and put it in bags as winter food for the animals, on the other hand.

To conclude, a woman raised in accordance with traditional peasant norms and customs, accepted and cooperated with a male-headed society. She assisted and obeyed her father, husband, brother or cousin. Her role was very vital, either as a mother or as a daughter. Her fate was fully decided by men and she lived as a second class individual who was expected to do hard labor for the sake of self-sufficiency for her family.

The twentieth century brought about many changes for women. Agricultural peasant society witnessed progress and development of tools and technology, which relieve women from the painstaking duties such as feeding the herds, washing at the fountain, and conserving food. Hence, the duties of women are changing ●