



4-1-2005

*Desert Patriarchy: Mormon and Mennonite Communities in the Chihuahua Valley* by Janet Bennion

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**Recommended Citation**

Sawin, Mark Metzler (2005) "*Desert Patriarchy: Mormon and Mennonite Communities in the Chihuahua Valley* by Janet Bennion," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 44 : Iss. 2 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol44/iss2/14>

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Janet Bennion. *Desert Patriarchy: Mormon and Mennonite Communities in the Chihuahua Valley.*

Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004

BOOK REVIEWS

Reviewed by Mark Metzler Sawin

As a fifth-generation Latter-day Saint from the dusty lands southwest of Salt Lake City, anthropologist Janet Bennion, who has written extensively about women's roles in contemporary polygynous societies, begins this study of the Chihuahua fundamentalist colonies by explaining that she, too, is "a desert rat." As such, she relates to the subjects of her book *Desert Patriarchy* as both an insider and an outsider. Referencing Clifford Geertz's Balinese cockfight, she explains that her methodology is to operate "as the interpreter of the culture" by "vividly representing the natives' voices and the creative images and symbols of their lifestyle and perspectives" (xi-xiii). Her thesis contends that while a desert environment does not absolutely create patriarchal, fundamentalist, separatist cultures, its geographic realities do strongly support them. "The roots of this process lie in the teleological relationship of environment and culture: the desert facilitates religious patriarchy and female networking, which in turn create a social structure conducive to isolation and separateness" (3). She says "the desert has always drawn religious fanatics" who set up societies that are "dominated by patriarchy and informal female support networks," and that this system of "desert patriarchy is obviously the driving force behind the adaptive longevity of the white colonists in Chihuahua, northern Mexico" (4).

The study begins with a historical overview of the colonies. Bennion's descriptions of the Colonia Juárez and Colonia LeBaron are vivid and astute, deftly placing the movements into the historical context of the Mormon experience in America and tracing its roots back to Loren C. Woolley's split from the mainstream church and establishment of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Drawing

from extensive interviews with family members from different factions of the LeBaron family, Bennion constructs a thorough and sympathetic history of the volatile and at times violent LeBaron colony. This unapologetic, first-hand history may prove irksome to some as Bennion's concern is to describe the group through its own eyes and thus does little to show its alienation from the mainstream church. She uses this same descriptive technique with the Mennonite colony, but with even less historical rooting. Bennion is primarily a scholar in Mormon studies, and her contextualization of the Chihuahua Mennonites is painted in broad strokes, relying heavily on outdated sources instead of the many recent and thorough studies available—the four-part *Mennonite Experience in America* series and Kimberly D. Schmidt's scholarship on the lives and work of conservative Mennonite women are obvious omissions.<sup>1</sup>

Bennion explains “desert patriarchy” by dividing it into six components that are present in the Chihuahua groups.

**Male supremacy.** This is a “unique form of Anglo *machismo*” where men control production, reproduction, financial resources, and the group's spiritual salvation. This salvation is built on a “patrilineal pathway to heaven that runs through him, his father, his grandfathers, and so on, to God.” This results in communities that have “a large pool of female mates/laborers, and strict male-male competition for women, resources, and priestly authority” (5).

**Female networking.** This system formally “sustains male privilege” but informally, and more importantly, “is the socioeconomic foundation of society that maintains social life on a daily basis.” Women form networks of “emotional, economic, and spiritual ties among co-wives, female friends, and relatives” which supplement, and at times oppose, patriarchal power. Formed in the context of strict male authority, these networks promote a form of women's solidarity that is stronger than that which exists in “a more liberated female-dominated social setting where women bicker with each other rather than unite against male authority” (6-7).

**Nonsecular education.** Each group runs its own schools that stress practical skills and forbid or largely ignore anything that does not pertain to their daily lives or theological understandings. Education is highly gendered and usually stops before or during high school, especially for women.

**Imbalanced sex ratios.** There are far more women than men of reproductive age due to men's dangerous work conditions and greater exposure to the outside world (8-9).

**Alternative sex and marriage forms.** In the break-away communities with Mormon roots, the “prestigious males” (those with land and

authority) marry the majority of the young women, forcing all other men to “either leave the colony or look elsewhere for mates” (9). In the Mennonite colony, endogamy (marrying within the group) is the norm. In both groups, men are usually 5 to 10 years older at marriage and women have their first child while still in their teens.

**Circumscription.** This “occurs when the emigration of dissatisfied factions is blocked by features of the physical or social environment.” The tight-knit social structures of these communities, combined with the “heat, drought, predators, poor soil, and imposing sierras” of the desert make it very difficult for members (especially women) to leave. Most “prefer to stay in Chihuahua, in spite of its difficulties, rather than face ostracism and rejection in the larger society” (10–11).

The driving point of *Desert Patriarchy* is the importance of geographical circumscription. Bennion argues that patriarchal societies in metropolitan, tropical, or fertile farming environments are unable “to achieve the same longevity and maintenance of cultural traditions” as those located in deserts. The desert’s harsh physical realities reinforce the other characteristics of patriarchal societies and thus, she contends, “the desert . . . is the mechanism by which patriarchal fundamentalism best flourishes” (11–12).

The bulk of this work consists of first-person narratives describing the experiences of Bennion and her three student assistants in the colonies. These are well-written, hands-on descriptions that follow the new ethnographic models that use “more literary, first-person forms to ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’ the reader about the culture—making the reader a participant in the unfolding of the process” (xiii). Bennion succeeds in this format, providing sharp descriptions that allow the reader to feel the heat, dust, and rhythm of the communities, but at times the story comes without enough analysis to explain why these things are significant and not merely interesting.

The narrative drive and provocative descriptions of these unique communities make this work both important and enjoyable. The descriptions of the polygamous colonies, especially the LeBaron group, are strong and will surely promote further study. The descriptions of the Mennonite colony are also solid, but do not always fit well with Bennion’s central arguments. The primary contribution of this book is its further explication of Bennion’s work on women’s roles in fundamentalist, polygynous societies. It convincingly demonstrates that the polygynous colonies’ patriarchal structures promote a female network that allows for surprising amounts of female autonomy and power. This is a significant contribution to gender and religious studies and will surely spark further scholarship. Less successful is Bennion’s argument for the importance of geographic circum-

scription. The desert does provide an environment that pulls communities together in an effort to survive, but the ethnographies of the colonies often belie her argument for geographical circumscription, suggesting instead that communal pressure, fear of the outside world, and familial ties provide far more convincing explanations of how and why these communities remain cohesive. In the end, Bennion's geographical circumscription argument seems stretched and overstated. Hutterites in the fertile farmlands of Canada and Orthodox Jews in the heart of New York City maintain strong, patriarchal communities without the benefit of a desert. Many desert-dwelling communities (such as the Hopi and Zuni) do not. The significance of the desert to the maintenance of patriarchal societies is provocative but not well proved in this otherwise valuable work.

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1. *The Mennonite Experience in America*, 4 vols. (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1996); Kimberly D. Schmidt, *Strangers at Home: Amish and Mennonite Women in History* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).