

The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

MODULE 3

3.1. LIVING IN GRANADA. GENDER, CLASS, ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS

By *Bárbara Boloix*

Department of Semitic Studies at the University of Granada

Given its essentially Arabic and Islamic nature, Nasrid society was in general terms quite homogeneous, and its day-to-day affairs were governed by the Maliki school of jurisprudence and religious law. However, it was enriched by the nuances of the different social categories which its inhabitants could occupy, including gender, class, ethnic origins, place of origin, religion, and so on.

To begin with gender, the population of the Nasrid kingdom of Granada consisted of both men and women. Men's lives were led both in the private domestic and the external public spheres, and men were mainly responsible for religious, social, economic, cultural, and intellectual activity. Nasrid society was patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal, meaning that aspects such as genealogy, lineage, or religion were transmitted to descendants through the male line, and the man also determined the place where the family lived. Although some clan components were maintained in the Nasrid social sphere, in reality tribalism was fairly weak there, and other links of social cohesion were more important, such as a shared place of origin, as attested by the proliferation of geographical nisbas (demonyms) among its population, due to migratory movements.

Meanwhile, women were also important social agents, even though their lives were mostly led inside the home, where they took charge of domestic tasks and caring for their families. They ventured into public only for very specific destinations, such as the homes of neighbours or family members, public cisterns and bakeries, or markets, although it appears that men would usually go to the markets to avoid the women of their families dealing directly with sellers. Others left the home to work in areas such as pottery and silk production, while they could also do this work at home, with looms and other equipment. When appearing in public, women were always veiled according to Islamic law, based on religious tradition, which protected their integrity, as the honour (*sharaf*) of the entire family depended on their chastity and virginity. As women, education in mosques and madrasas was forbidden to them,

The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

so any who had access to some type of education were taught at home, or at the home of their teachers, from whom they were separated by a curtain. However, we know that women were able to own and manage property, exercising these rights through a legal representative (*wakil*), and as well as jewellery (which they kept in chests and coffer), fabrics, furniture and household items received in dowries or inherited, they could also own real estate, such as houses, oil mills, flour mills, bakeries, shops, grain silos, and storerooms.

The typical gender segregation of Islamic civilisation is clear in the different spaces of the public sphere, such as streets and squares, mosques and oratories, souks and *ḥammāms*, where direct contact between men and women was avoided. Whether they lived in an urban or rural setting also determined their way of life, and thus the radius of interaction between the sexes and women's freedom of movement, as the tasks of rural life required women to leave their homes more, although there were architectural resources such as covered passages and wall-walks to conceal their presence in the street.

Meanwhile, the population of the kingdom of Granada retained the custom of marriage between cousins - preferably paternal, but also maternal - respecting the preferred type of marriage in Arab and Islamic culture. This created endogamous family structures, motivated by economic concerns, as marriage within the family protected the family's property, avoiding it being split apart by external agents.

Social class (*ṭabaqa*) also marked important social differences within the Nasrid population, producing an upper (*al-jāṣṣa*) and lower class (*al-ʿāmma*). The upper class consisted of the Nasrid dynasty itself, its courtiers, and legal-religious, economic and intellectual elites, all of whom had considerable properties and high social standing. The lower classes were mostly illiterate and lived modestly. In practice, polygamy was the domain of wealthy men, who could afford to make the most of the freedom which was granted by Islamic law, in its interpretation of the Quran, to have up to four legitimate wives and as many concubines as they wanted. In contrast, the lower class was monogamous, with members of the immediate family living in the same house, but without the relatives of the extended family living with them, as had always been thought.

The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

Ethnic origin was also an important factor of social differentiation. Most inhabitants of the kingdom of Granada were of Arab lineages, and in fact the leading chroniclers of the kingdom emphasised the “Arabness” of both the dynasty and of Nasrid society, claiming that this emirate had recovered the purely Arabic nature of al-Andalus, which had been lost in ascendancy of Almoravids and Almohads. The frequency of specifically Arab Muslim names, both for men and women (such as Muḥammad, Yūsuf, Fāṭima, and ‘Ā’īša) attests to this social phenomenon. However, “Berbers and emigrants” were also present in Nasrid society, as Ibn al-Jaṭīb reveals. Most of the Berbers were from the Zanāta tribe, and came from the contemporary Marinid kingdom of Fez to join the Nasrid army. These Berbers generally settled in the rural and mountainous areas of the territory. Meanwhile, since the 13th century, the Nasrid kingdom had welcomed Mudéjar emigrants from parts of Iberia that had been conquered by Christians, who may have been the community served by Nasrid Granada’s “cemetery of foreigners” (maqbarat al-gurabā’).

Finally, religion was another differentiating factor in Nasrid society. Although most of the population were Muslims, there were Jewish and Christian (dhimmi) minorities, as the Almohads had previously expelled both these populations from their territories in al-Andalus and North Africa. There are thought to have been about 3,000 Jews in Granada, completely Arabised and working as artisans, goldsmiths and translators, who had to pay a series of taxes to keep their religious, legal and cultural freedom. From the 14th century, Emir Ismā’īl I obliged Nasrid Jews to wear a mark and an insignia to distinguish them from Muslims, and to respect the rules of coexistence with them.

The Christian populations were not descendants of the Mozarabs or Christians who had lived in al-Andalus since the 8th century, but had arrived more recently in the Nasrid kingdom from various places (such as Iberian Christian kingdoms or Italian republics), as soldiers, political refugees, slaves (although slaves were required to convert to Islam), merchants, or peasants in frontier areas. In fact, the tax per head (ḡizya) that these Christians had to pay to maintain their legal and religious practices and cultural traditions were used by Emir Muḥammad III to build the Royal Mosque of the Alhambra.