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A CULTURAL PRACTICE BETWEEN MATERIAL CULTURE AND
IDEOLOGY: SANITARY APPLIANCES IN MODERN,
TRADITIONAL LEVANTINE JEWRY,
AND IN THE NORMS SET BY A LOCAL RITUALIST

1. *Introduction*

Elsewhere¹ the present author has discussed upper-class Baghdadi Jewish domestic space in the first half of the 20th century². The traditional house in Baghdad we are going to mainly refer to, was what architects call a Near Eastern «courtyard house». Vernacular housing in Baghdad has been classified and discussed by al-Azzawi³. A book devoted to the same subject is Warren and Fethi⁴. Socio-climatic considerations about traditional houses in

¹ E. Nissan, «Narrating Courtyards, Roofs, and Mezzanines: Domestication of Jewish Identity in the Memory Culture of Iraqi Jews», 2008, to appear.

² A book in preparation by this author is both more detailed, and with a broader scope.

³ S. al-Azzawi, «Oriental Houses in Baghdad: Concepts, Types and Categories» (I-III), *Ur: The International Magazine of Arab Culture* - London, I (1985), pp. 3-14; II (1985), pp. 30-41; III (1985), pp. 7-21.

⁴ J. Warren - I. Fethi, *Traditional Houses in Baghdad*, Horsham [England], Coach Publishing House, 1982 [in English, with a summary in Arabic].

Abstract

In this article, we discuss sanitary appliances in Baghdad in the first half of the twentieth century and late nineteenth century, with particular reference to the local Jewish community, a community that used to be quite prominent, but is no more. We outline the normative setting within the culture: Judaism has ritual prescriptions about cleanness, and this is highly relevant to enclosing the space where one relieves oneself. We consider how a much revered local modern rabbinic ritualist promulgated a vulgate normative for congregants, by reference to material culture in Baghdad in his own days (the late nineteenth century). We then turn to a specific upper-class Jewish family house in Baghdad, and consider sanitary appliances, as part of an oral history project. We discuss objects, terminology, and behaviour. A particular subsection is devoted to the position of the toilets and of the washing sinks within the house under consideration. Reconstructed maps are provided. Next, we consider professional blackhole cleaners in pre-Republican Baghdad, and dwell on occupational correlates of affiliation with denominational communities in town. For comparison, we also have a subsection on professional cleaners within Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, and some related lore. Of the two appendices, the first one is concerned with Baghdadi Jewish ritual baths in the deepest cellar (three levels of cellars were usual in traditional houses). The other appendix is about cradles. In the notes, we supply among the other things some comparison across periods and cultures.

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