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ETHNOGRAPHIES OF ISLAM

Ritual Performances and Everyday Practices

Edited by Baudouin Dupret, Thomas Pierret, Paulo G. Pinto and Kathryn Spellman-Poots

INTRODUCTION

Baudouin Dupret, Thomas Pierret, Paulo Pinto, Kathryn Spellman-Poots

In the last three decades, the social sciences in general and anthropology in particular, have developed an ambiguous relationship with their descriptive traditions, as epistemic relativism and self-defeating critique has lead scholars to reflexive deadlocks and fruitless glossing over issues. Instead of attempting to describe the social world as it unfolds when empirically observed, researchers often lose the actual object of interest and propose new narratives in its place that are devoid of the contextual and praxiological specificities of any actual situation. This holds especially true where religious phenomena are concerned. This is probably due to a theorising attitude, what Wittgenstein called the “craving for generality”, that looks for big explicative schemes and neglects the situational and self-producing capacity of the social world to produce its own endogenous order. Without advocating a return to positivism, we contend that the social sciences should pay closer attention to actual social practices and adopt a more empirical and analytical attitude vis-à-vis their object of scrutiny.

We can identify at least three problems in the social sciences which justify some sort of ethnographic re-specification of our attitude vis-à-vis “the real”. The first one is the tendency to seek for the nature of things instead of their workings, which often results in a “descriptive gap”. The second is the quest for data which is often oblivious to the conditions of how this data is produced and thus provide the reader with sketches that somehow miss the phenomena under scrutiny. The third problem resides in the depreciation of descriptive work due to its limited capacity for explanation; although an adequate description is nothing less than a thorough analysis of a chunk of the world as it actually functions.

An important development in the social sciences over the last three decades has been the spread of the ethnographic approach beyond the boundaries of anthropology. Nowadays it is not uncommon to have researchers in other academic disciplines, such as sociology and political science, who use ethnography. This trend has allowed the social sciences to gradually shift their focus from the structural organisation of social systems to the role of people in producing and reproducing social processes through their everyday practices.

Let us first define precisely what we mean by “ethnography”. Recently, it has become increasingly common to call any anthropological research that is based on fieldwork “ethnography”. In this volume, we adopt a different approach by defining ethnography as the description and analysis of practices *from the perspective of the social context in which they were produced*. From this point of view, formal interviews are not ethnographic instruments if they are used to collect *ex post* accounts on practices that were performed in another context; their ethnographic relevance is limited to the moment of the interview itself.

Conversely, carrying out ethnography does not necessarily imply that the researcher is *present* during the interactions s/he studies. Ethnographies can be based on video recordings, as well as written documents, as long as they are not approached as mere *contents* but as *contextualised practices*. Any document is the outcome of an action that was performed for all practical purposes, that is, that had a teleological aim constraining the way in which this document was written. The practice of writing a text can therefore be retrieved from the close scrutiny of its internal organisation, its lexicon, its sequential ordering, its orientation to the context of its production, its embedment into a whole set of various documents, and its capacity to look retrospectively and prospectively at the process it is a part of.

The ethnographic approach allows a researcher to describe the complex ways in which people orient themselves to normative codes, material, corporal and social constraints, as well as the intentional strategies that inform their social practices. This is particularly important for

the study of religious phenomena, for ethnography allows for a more complex and pluralistic understanding of how people attach and belong to religious communities, and how religious subjectification affects cultural and individual practices.

It is also necessary here to specify what we consider as “Islamic” practices. From the point of view of social sciences, “Islam” is neither a set of practices and beliefs precisely bounded by textual “orthodoxy”, nor just any social practice carried out by people who happen to be Muslim; discourses and practices are “Islamic” when Muslims refer to them as such.

The contributions to this volume all refer to Islam as a practice; and therefore as something which must be described in action. We are more likely to gain an understanding of the meaning of religious practice through the close description of people’s orientation to, and reification of religious categories as it emerges from their actual experiences in a given social context.

This volume does not offer a methodology however. Neither does it propose a reflection on methodology. Instead it proposes an exploration on the various possibilities that ethnography creates for the understanding of Islam in particular social contexts. Therefore, this volume aims to promote a pluralistic use of ethnography in research about Islam in anthropology and the other social sciences. All the contributors to the volume have used ethnography to engage with and relate to specific empirical realities. The aim is to show the strength of this approach, despite variations in terms of the object of analysis, the theoretical frameworks or the disciplinary traditions of the researcher. We argue that this attitude, what we could also call an epistemology, allows for a more precise and complex understanding of the practices and discourses that constitute social realities constructed and perceived as “Islamic” by those who live them.

Another aim of this book is to encourage ethnography in the study of Muslim practices that have seldom been approached in this way, that is, the “literate”, “urban”, or “upper class” aspects of Islam. The focus of ethnographers on “folk”, “popular” Islam has its roots in the colonial division of academic labour between anthropology and the disciplines related to the Orientalist tradition (philology, history, philosophy). Whereas the former was characterised from the outset by a focus on social spaces that were peripheral to urban political centers (countryside, tribes, popular religiosity), the second exerted a *de facto* monopoly on the study of the textual tradition and, more generally, on “high” urban culture.¹ Tellingly, whereas in Europe, Durkheimian sociology was chiefly concerned with the rapid social transformations entailed by industrialisation, when transposed into colonial North Africa, it turned into “Durkheimian anthropology” and devoted itself to the analysis of “traditional” forms of social organisation.²

This situation did not change much in the early postcolonial era. In the heyday of modernisation theories (1950s-60s), the social sciences in general were very disinterested in Muslim religious practices, which were seen as mere remnants of “passing traditional society”.³ Such an intellectual context only reinforced the “marginal” bias of the anthropological tradition. At a time when most social scientists were obsessed with “secularisation”, “urbanisation”, and “mass literacy”, major anthropological works on Islam dealt with saints and tribes (Ernest Gellner), jinn-related therapeutic rituals (Vincent Crapanzano), and Sufi brotherhoods (Michael Gilsenan).⁴ Clifford Geertz proposed a more ambitious approach, showing how Muslim practices and beliefs were invested with cultural meanings and shaped cultural systems, which were expressed in specific *epitomic* places like the mosque, the bazaar or the tribunal.⁵

Some contemporary ethnographic enquiries that departed from this dominant trend were just as revealing of the “peripheralisation” of Islam in the social sciences. Indeed,

although Dale Eickelman and Richard Antoun wrote the social biographies of literate men of religion, both of them chose to concentrate on figures living in the countryside. Moreover, Eickelman depicted his Moroccan religious judge as the representative of a model of religious authority that was rapidly being rendered irrelevant by modernisation.⁶

Other ethnographies led to a deeper criticism to the analytical framework used to understand Islam and Muslim societies. Through their ethnographic account of the *mevlud* recitals, a ritual performance that celebrates the birth of Prophet Muhammad in Turkey, Richard and Nancy Tapper brought a critical reassessment of the conceptual dichotomy that dominated the analyses of Islam (orthodoxy/heterodoxy) and gender relations in Muslim societies (male dominance/female subordination). In doing so, they showed how both men's and women's recitals are integral parts of the ritual construction of the religious persona of the Prophet, as a powerful symbolic reference in Turkish religious culture.⁷

From the early 1980s on, the Iranian revolution and the rise of political Islam have considerably revived academic interest in Muslim religious practices. However, new research trends that appeared at this stage were more inspired by the Orientalist tradition and political sciences than by anthropology; the focus was on discourses, historical accounts and structures more than on the observation of practices in context. As a result, ethnographic enquiries on topics that fall beyond the scope of "traditional" anthropology have remained relatively rare except, to a certain extent, for legal practices,⁷ and mosque-based communities or educational groups.⁸ For instance, there are still very few similar studies on issues such as Islamic scholarship,⁹ political Islam,¹⁰ and official religious administrations.¹¹ Because we think that our knowledge of such topics has much to gain from ethnographic insights, we have included articles in this volume on the ulama in Egypt and Syria, (Aishima, Pierret), Islamic charities in Turkey (Alkan-Zeybek), Salafis in France and Egypt (Baylock & Bechikh, Kreil), the cult

that developed around the tomb of the late Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri (Vloerberghs), and reference to Islam in the Egyptian Parliament (Klaus & Dupret).

The first part of the volume, entitled *Performing rituals*, deals with “traditional” subjects of the anthropology of religion, namely rituals and symbols. The rituals described here include therapeutic magic in Gilgit, Pakistan (Varley), the preparation of the *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) in Tunisia (Boissevain), the transformation of mourning practices in the Syrian countryside (Lange), the evolution of Ashura rituals among British Shi’s (Spellman-Poots), a collective ritual prayer in Saharan Algeria (Ben Hounet), the Sufi ritual of *darb al-shish* (body-piercing) in Syria (Pinto), the religious socialisation of Brazilian converts to Islam in Rio de Janeiro (Fonseca Chagas), the celebration of the Prophet’s Birthday by the Syrian ulama (Pierret) and the devotional practices at Rafiq al-Hariri’s tomb in Lebanon (Vloerberghs).

Instead of solely privileging the role of these elements of Islamic religiosity in the construction of group solidarity or the reproduction of normative guidelines of the religious system, the ethnographic approaches in the articles of this section reveal how rituals and symbols function as performative and communicative arenas in which the religious agents construct and negotiate their belonging to a particular Muslim community. In this sense, Islamic rituals and symbols will be scrutinised in each context not only for what they *mean* but also for what they *produce* in terms of creating, shaping and affirming religious subjectivities, cultural expectations, power relations and patterns of authority and community.

Ethnography allows for a better understanding of how ritual and symbolic idioms are constituted and used to connect meanings and norms to the selves of the agents. Empirical data produced through participant observation provides the basis of analytical models that take into account the tense relationship between Islam as a normative construct in textual or oral discourses and the multiple discursive, practical and experiential dimensions that it

receives once it is mobilised in the religious practices of Muslim communities. Therefore, this part of the volume deals with the effects of the ethnographic approach on the conceptualisation and analysis of Islam as a shared cultural idiom in specific social contexts.

The second part of the volume, *Contextualising interactions*, is concerned with interactions that are not religious rituals, but that nevertheless orient themselves to and reference Islam: inter-community relations within French Islam (Baylock & Bechikh), daily religiosity on a Jordanian university campus (Cantini), informal conversations between young Muslim revivalists in Tanzania (D'hondt), perceptions of Salafi Muslims in Egypt (Kreil), relationships between Turkish Islamic charity volunteers and their beneficiaries (Alkan-Zeybek), the handling of a divorce-case in a Yemeni court (Dahlgren), reference to Islam in Egyptian parliamentary debates (Klaus & Dupret) and controversies over the public image of the late Shaykh al-Azhar 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud (Aishima).

Social actions are irreducibly events or actions in a social order where words are parts of “language-games”. Instead of looking for “big concepts”, which are often constructed as “floating entities” independent of any instantiation or context of use, we suggest in this part of the volume that it would be better to ask how the members of any social group conduct their activities and eventually give it a label (e.g. “Islamic”). In the case of Islamic law, for instance, this means to focus on how *people*, in their many settings, orient themselves to something they call “Islamic law” and how *they* refer legal issues to the Islamic-law model. Such an attitude suggests that we focus on the methods people use locally to produce the truth and intelligibility that allow them to cooperate and interact in a more or less ordered way.

There is a missing “what” in much research on religion, in that social scientists tend to describe various social influences on the growth and development of institutions while taking for granted the many practicalities that constitute ordinary action and reasoning. There is a real descriptive failing, which only permits researchers to advance worldviews that are

alternative to those of the actors or to remain insensitive to practice as it is understood by daily practitioners. We speak of a descriptive gap. In order to bridge this gap and to fill the missing “what”, we must re-orient ourselves to the content of ordinary practices and the place that references to religion can occupy within it. This would allow paying close attention to the technicalities of the many settings in which this action or referring takes place, its situated character, and the specific modes of reasoning which are attached to social practices.

The book ends with a special section, *The ethnography of history*, which aims to point to other possible uses of the ethnographic approach, in this case in a dialogue with history. Michael Gilson's chapter presents an ethnography of the Hadhrami diaspora in Southeast Asia through the claims that their members pose to history. Documents, genealogies, historical references and nostalgic remembrance appear in Gilson's ethnography as cultural devices that connect the Hadhramis in Southeast Asia to the imagined pasts and homelands that allow them to live their diasporic identities in local contexts.

The overall ambition of this book is to highlight the various uses and conceptions of ethnography that can be mobilised for a deeper understanding of Islamic practices, discourses and forms of subjectivity. The articles here show how researchers, coming from various areas of the social sciences, were able to produce detailed descriptions that could convey the complexity and dynamics of the social phenomena defined as Islamic by the agents that live and experience them. We hope that these examples provide support for further debate on the impact of ethnography on the ways in which Islam is portrayed and understood in the various social sciences.

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Notes

1. Lindholm, Charles “The new Middle Eastern ethnography”, *Man*, vol. 1, no. 4, November 1995, p. 806.
2. See Ferrié, Jean-Noël *La religion de la vie quotidienne chez les Marocains musulmans: rites, règles et routine*, Paris: Karthala, 2005.
3. Lerner, Daniel *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958.
4. Gellner, Ernest *Saints of the Atlas*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969; Crapanzano, Vincent *The Hamadsha; a Study in Moroccan Ethnopsychiatry*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973; Gilsenan, Michael *Saints and Sufi in Modern Egypt: an Essay in the Sociology of Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973; *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East*, London: Croom Helm, 1982. While Gilsenan initially (1973) subscribed to the modernist idea that Sufi brotherhoods were declining “popular”, “traditional” social structures, in his later writings (1982) he recognised the continuing presence of Sufi religiosity in the Middle East and underlined its connections with the literate religious elite. He also highlighted the successful adaptation of certain Sufi brotherhoods to social change.
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6. Eickelman, Dale *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985; Antoun, Richard *Muslim Preacher in the Modern World. A Jordanian Case Study* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.
7. Tapper, Nancy & Tapper, Richard “The birth of the Prophet: ritual and gender in Turkish Islam”, *Man*, vol. 22, no. 1, March 1987, pp. 69-92.
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9. See for instance: Mahmood, Saba *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005; Horstmann, Alexander “The inculturation of a transnational Islamic missionary movement: Tablighi Jamaat al-Dawa and Muslim society in southern Thailand”, *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol. 22, no. 1, April 2007, pp. 107-30; Lee, Victoria “The mosque and black Islam: towards an ethnographic study of Islam in the inner city”, *Ethnography*, vol. 11, no. 1, January 2010, pp. 145-63.
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11. Tugal, Cihan “The appeal of Islamic politics: ritual and dialogue in a poor district of Turkey”, *Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 2, April 2006, pp. 245-73; White, Jenny *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002.
12. Antoun, Richard “Fundamentalism, bureaucratization and the state's co-optation of religion: a Jordanian case study”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 38, no. 3, August 2006, pp. 369-93.