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The New Middle Eastern Ethnography

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THE NEW MIDDLE EASTERN ETHNOGRAPHY

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Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute

1: 805-202 1995.

Abu-Lughod, Lila 1993. Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Bowen, Donna Lee & Evelyn Early (eds). 1993. Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
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Moral and theoretical challenges to traditional modes of study and to the notion of culture itself have led to a deep crisis in Middle Eastern ethnography. The six books under review are taken to be exemplary of recent responses to this crisis. Recourse to personal narrative and biography humanizes the Middle Eastern Other, but at the expense of any possibility of theory building or comparative work. More promising avenues of approach aim at reconceptualizing the manner in which power relations are instated, maintained and challenged in a cultural milieu that is ideologically committed to egalitarian individualism.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Hastings Donnan and Cherry Lindholm for their thoughtful and useful editorial suggestions. Because of them, this review is much better than it would have been. Of course, the point of view taken is my own.

The six books under review all represent new attempts to grapple with a deep crisis that has shaken Middle Eastern anthropology to its roots. To understand the sources of this crisis, and the nature of the various responses, we need first to consider the history and context of the discipline.

In terms of square miles, the Middle East is the largest `culture area' of any of those that generally are included in the anthropological division of the world. Although the area is home of the world's most ancient civilizations, anthropologists traditionally did their fieldwork with independent herdsmen in the remote deserts or tribal farmers in the rugged mountains. In these areas the ethos of Islam and the austerity of social life seemed to limit the elaboration of complex symbol systems, intricate ritual performances, or the efflorescence of myth so dear to ethnographers. Instead, fieldworkers concentrated on the public matters which their subjects talked about most: honourable behaviour, the techniques of survival in harsh circumstances, the making of political and marital alliances, efforts to gain respect and authority, and the social structure of the patriline.

The latter seemed especially crucial, since the political organization of the tribes, as described by informants themselves, was said to be based on balanced relations of complementary opposition between patrilineal segmentary lineages. According to local ideology, this social world lacked ascribed status hierarchies for individuals, lineages or social groups; inside the egalitarian yet communal framework men and women alike valued individual initiative and autonomy, shared strong notions of personal honour, and competed vigorously with one another to achieve ephemeral positions of rank and respect within the tribal organization. The tribal system, with its structured rivalries among equals, was replicated, with variations, everywhere in the region; its most unusual feature was a preference for marriage within the patriline, to the father's brother's daughter. Anthropological discourse centred on topics such as the function of this marriage form, the degree to which the indigenous egalitarian tribal segmentary model actually worked (or did not work) in practice, and the manner in which authority was organized, accepted or

resisted by the egalitarian tribesmen - debates which aroused sound and fury among Middle Eastern ethnographers but signified nothing much to outsiders.

Meanwhile, long before anthropologists began living with tribal people and theorizing about lineage organization, acephalous social structures, and parallel cousin marriage, generations of Orientalist scholars had immersed themselves in the historical study of cosmopolitan culture and in recovering and translating the great literature of Islam. For them, these books contained the essential truth about the region, and the hierarchical urban and courtly world of the Medieval Muslim scholar-administrator-cleric was the necessary locus of any worthwhile Middle Eastern culture.

Anthropologists rarely referred to these Orientalist authors, nor did Orientalists usually deem it necessary to consult their anthropological colleagues. Scholarship on the Middle East remained divided between these two approaches: one ethnographic, current, peripheral and egalitarian, the other textual, historical, central and status-conscious. This comfortable division of labour allowed each to continue engaging in academic debates that were often obscure and confined to their respective disciplines.

This was all to change. Under the withering and hugely influential attacks of Edward Said, both these approaches were jolted from their complacency and rendered morally suspect. Said's famous manifesto was that Western scholarship on the Middle East was an act of imperialistic imagination serving a colonial project of repression. According to him, both empirical and textual studies by Westerners denied humanity to Middle Eastern people by turning them into exotic `Others' to be gazed at and objectified. The effect of Said's attack was especially devastating for the discipline of textual scholarship, making the very term `Orientalist' into an insult, and causing a deep and as yet unhealed rift in the field.

Said's critique had serious consequences for anthropology too. Especially challenging to anthropological practice was his radical debunking of culture and of the practice of cross-cultural comparison as twin sources of "ethnocentricism, racial theory

and economic oppression.... whose use historically and actually has been to press the importance of the distinction between some men and some other men, usually towards not especially admirable ends" (Said 1979: 45, 146). Ironically, Said's principled refusal to commit the sins of essentialism or reification led him to portray the Middle East as nothing more than a pale and distorted reflection of European stereotypes, without substance of its own. As he writes: "Insofar as one can make a sweeping generalization, the felt tendencies of contemporary culture in the Near East are guided by European and American models" leading to the "paradox of an Arab regarding himself as an `Arab' of the sort put out by Hollywood" (Said 1979: 323).

Surprisingly, there was no great outcry by anthropologists against Said's sceptical vision of culture as merely "hegemonic and disciplinary" (Clifford 1988: 263). This was partially because his indictment fit within and logically extended to its ultimate conclusion the anti-comparativist and anti-essentialist message that had already been championed in anthropology in general (and Middle Eastern anthropology in particular) by Clifford Geertz and Pierre Bourdieu. As head of a multi-member investigation of the market town of Sefrou, in Morocco, Geertz had been especially influential in turning Middle Eastern anthropology away from its fixation on tribal kinship organizations and the study of egalitarian social structures and toward the study of the indigenous construction of meaning systems in more complex urban environments.

According to Geertz and his school, and to Bourdieu as well, earlier ethnographers had erroneously taken kinship organization, egalitarianism, and patterns of marriage exchange as normative structures generating practice; a mistake that resulted from anthropologists naively taking native ideology as reality. For Geertz, Bourdieu, and their followers, what was actually occurring in the Middle East had little to do with the much-reiterated native discourse of complementary opposition and acephalous segmentary lineage organization. Rather, dyadic relationships were being negotiated between self-interested individuals, and study should be concerned with the strategies used by these

individuals to accomplish their particular ends in a contingent world - though it was reluctantly admitted that underlying cultural assumptions served to orient and constrain these strategies and goals. But these basic motivating principles remained conceptually vague. Geertz, for instance, portrayed Middle Easterners as animated by a mixture of "restlessness, practicality, contentiousness, eloquence, inclemency and moralism", constantly shifting their contingent identities in pursuit of useful ties with other maximizing entrepreneurs in a teeming and confusing marketplace (Geertz 1979: 235). The contradiction between the interpretivists' own credo giving priority to local knowledge as the basis for understanding culture and their simultaneous depreciation of the importance of pervasive local dogmas of social organization seemed to bother almost no one. This new concern with `negotiated realities' was preadapted to accomodate itself to Said's attack on all forms of cultural constraint, since it was a small logical step from arguing that the traditional anthropological-native categories were a disguise for the reality of maximizing individuals manipulating for advantage within culturally-constructed webs of meaning to arguing that all categories whatsoever were merely reflections in the colonializing eye of the Western onlooker.

Because of the subverting and challenging influences from both inside and outside the discipline, Middle Eastern anthropology, more so than anthropology elsewhere in the world, began to doubt its essential understanding of itself and its task. These challenges did not go uncontested by some fieldworkers who supported a more traditional manner of doing anthropology. A number of writers, most notably Ernest Gellner (1980), argued that the fluid world the new theorists were describing was a modern phenomenon, a result of the recently-found power of the state to erode and obscure the crucial importance of the old tribal and neighbourhood social organization, leaving individuals floating free in a chaotic world where meaning had been largely lost. For Gellner and his allies, the concentration on maximization and strategy fostered by Geertz and Bourdieu led inevitably

to an ahistorical vision of the Middle East as a society populated by self-aggrandizing schemers, without any significant cultural content or continuity.

Gellner has continued to sound the alarm while refining his sophisticated analysis of Middle Eastern traditional society, and the controversy over the salience of native categories of patrilineal organization, political authority and marriage exchange has, in fact, never been definitively settled - skirmishes are still hotly fought in professional journals. However, anthropology often progresses not by resolving issues, but by deciding that some problems have ceased to be interesting. For many younger practitioners, Bourdieu's concern with understanding the tactics of social manipulation, the Geertzian call for an anthropology concerned with the negotiated construction of meaning, and the space these allowed for Said's politicized refutation of culture as a concept, were welcome escapes from the grip of a theoretical framework that seemed to have little new left to offer except a rehashing of functionalist and structural cliches.

With the old premises abandoned, there was an opening for the production of a new synthetic theory of Middle Eastern social life. Unfortunately, Said's rhetoric of opposition, though emotionally powerful, had nothing to offer in the way of a model useful for positive analysis. Bourdieu abdicated theoretical leadership when he left the Middle East to observe French status seekers. This left the field to the Geertzian school. But, though dynamic and very productive, they were unable or disinclined to produce a paradigm for study that was compelling or widely influential. Geertz's portrait of Middle Eastern character seemed too close to the disreputable discourse of culture and personality, while Dale Eickelman's concept of `closeness' (1981) and Lawrence Rosen's assertion of the importance of origin, locality and relatedness as central Middle Eastern values (1979) were interesting, but too vague to be of much help.

Without a basic paradigm to stabilize their research agendas, Middle Eastern ethnographers tended to become increasingly and sometimes cripplingly self-conscious about their work. This anxious state-of-being was intensified by the guilt occasioned by

Said's critique. Seeking to avoid essentialism and typologizing, but hoping to give positive properties to the people they worked among, many students began to believe that the best thing they could do would be to allow their subjects to speak in their own words, and began including native narratives as an intrinsic part of their work - a return, one might say, to earlier days of Boasian ethnography, but with personal accounts given a priority they never had had before. As examples, I refer the reader to innovative works by Friedel (1991) and Munson (1984). Other well-known experiments with narrative and dialogue in the Middle East include Dwyer (1982), Crapanzano (1980), Rabinow (1977), and Fischer and Abedi (1990). [i]

Some of these books, especially Crapanzano's psychoanalytically-inspired meditation on his complicated emotional relationship with his informant, excited considerable controversy, and all of them helped bring a wider anthropological and general audience to Middle Eastern anthropology. A recent work in the same vein, Writing Women's Worlds (1993), is also destined for a wide readership. Expertly and intelligently written, it is a direct attempt to respond to and go beyond Said's negation of culture.
The author is Lila Abu-Lughod, who has already written a very well-received volume and a large number of articles based on her fieldwork in a household of the small tribe of `Awlad Ali Bedouin in Egypt's western desert. In these earlier works, Abu-Lughod championed the study of previously ignored aspects of ordinary lives; she herself has become known for her documentation of the discourse of emotion among women. Her interest in `women's worlds' follows a research pathway that was opened up in the nineteen seventies, with the publication of the fine collection edited by Beck and Keddie (1978; for other writing on this area see Dorsky 1986; Makhlouf 1979; Dwyer 1978).

In this most recent book, Abu-Lughod wishes to push her agenda further, calling for the `undoing' of old Middle Eastern anthropological categories, a project she has strongly favoured in previous articles (c.f. Abu-Lughod 1990). But here her polemic assumes a more strident moral tone, as she follows Said in asserting that any categorization whatsoever is

an evil principle which serves to "make these `Others' seem simultaneously more coherent, self-contained and different from ourselves than they might be.... This in turn allows for the fixing of boundaries between self and other." Abu-Lughod goes on to argue that "the difference between self and other will always be hierarchical because the self is sensed as primary, self-formed, active, and complex, if not positive. At the very least, the self is always the interpreter and the other the interpreted" (Abu-Lughod 1993: 7, 13). It follows that to typify the Middle East as a cultural region, or to understand Middle Easterners as having a particular cultural heritage, or even, it seems, to imagine others as separate from ourselves, is an act of aggression, and that all forms of distinction should be refuted as a fundamental moral evil.

Abu-Lughod's polemic, like Said's, has serious problems in its reasoning and implications. I leave the reader to consider the logical, linguistic and ethical quandaries that follow if we take seriously her call for an active effort to disintegrate all boundaries, including the boundary between self and other. We might also wonder how any moral position whatsoever - including Abu-Lughod's own which finds all categorization and distinctions objectionable - can be imagined if the typologies that must necessarily precede comparison are to be somehow disposed of. And, of course, if comparison itself is reprehensible, it can only be so in comparison to something commendable. Aside from problems of paradox and incoherence, by adopting the negating rhetoric favored by Said, Abu-Lughod also is obliged to credit Western intellectual discourse as the active creator of local realities and she must consequently downplay or ignore the history and tradition that Middle Eastern people continually refer to in identifying themselves and marking out the course of their lives.

But where his disintegrative reasoning led Said to view Middle Easterners as shadowy reflections in a colonizing Western mirror, Abu-Lughod has a more affirmative project in mind. Her ambition is to give positive content to her subjects through "a narrative ethnography" consisting of "wonderfully complex stories" that "challenge the

capacity of anthropological generalizations to render lives, theirs or others', adequately". These stories are purportedly tales of everyday reality as lived and related by the people themselves (Abu-Lughod 1993: xvi).

Abu-Lughod's attempt at a narrative ethnography is part of a postmodernist literary-anthropological genre that self-consciously seeks to subvert cultural stereotypes. For her this means that the author must strive to give the reader a sense of the particular and plural voices of the `Others' - an effort that is taken to be a morally noble thing, as the portrayal of uniqueness is thought automatically to awaken the empathy of the reader (generalization is bad because it turns individuals into abstractions and is therefore a discourse of hegemony). The desired pluralistic particularity can be achieved through utilization of what the author calls `the languages of everyday life' (as opposed to the alienating conceptual languages of social science) which the anthropologist, as a `tactical humanist', translates more or less skilfully, convincingly, and movingly in order to make the narratives and experiences of those being studied come alive to the reader. Such polished narratives also happen to be relatively easy to publish, since stylish reportage written in the first person and revealing the lives of exotic peoples involves the reader in an adventure that is far more marketable than traditional ethnography, which is now extremely difficult to put into print, especially if one wishes to reach a larger audience than the population of specialists.

Abu-Lughod's novelistic approach allows her to write an ethnographic account that will be widely read, and yet contains very little usable data; in fact, she warns the reader not to expect any conclusions or to formulate any hypotheses based on her work - all we are meant to achieve is a recognition that the Others she writes about share our humanity - a laudable goal, but a limiting one. Theory too is limited to considering the most appropriate ways to present and experience the Other - a topic that occupies the first forty pages of the book. Beyond this, nothing more is demanded, or can even be attempted, if one wishes to keep to the moral highground.

Certain ethical difficulties must necessarily arise as a result of laying such weight on the author's artistic ability to give the reader a dramatic sense of real people talking. For one thing, a concern with retelling the narratives of specific persons means that one identifies individuals and tells tales that the people themselves may find embarrassing. Abu-Lughod herself expresses qualms on this matter. She uses pseudonyms (but she also acknowledges that local people have had access to her previous writings and know whom she has written about). She admits too that a conventional impersonal or anonymous ethnography might have been "more innocuous" and acceptable to her subjects, who dislike candid snapshots of themselves and prefer to pose carefully for their portraits. However, being innocuous makes for less engrossing writing, which is to be avoided, since only involving and highly personalized narrative can draw in the uncommitted reader and accomplish the moral task of humanizing the Other.

Her stance also does not permit detachment, abstraction and generalization, which are considered to be alienating. And because Abu-Lughod is a skilled writer who can manipulate the readers' feelings by her virtuosity, she is able to use emotionally loaded language that persuades the reader to perceive the scene as she perceives it - which may or may not be the perception of the participants. For example: "He sat fuming in Gateefa's room.... He lamely offered as his final excuse ...." (Abu-lughod 1993: 103). Even more worrisome is the fact that the author's emphasis on subjective perception can lead to judgmental and prejudicial writing. For example, When Abu-Lughod visits some newly arrived middle-class neighbours, she describes their house and manners as follows:

> "To me the Italian lacquered bedroom set, the shiny mirrors, and the gleaming red porcelain bathroom fixtures looked grotesque. Was it because our mirrors back at the camp were plastic framed, hand held, and usually chipped in the corners?.... I felt caught in between: I knew how to live in such a house and they did not, but I also knew how to read such a house as the

tasteless display of people who have suddenly acquired too much money" (Abu-Lughod 1993: 120).

The author has no reservations about `reading' and describing her tasteless neighbours, but how will these bourgeois (and literate) neighbours feel when they eventually read this negative portrait of themselves? Perhaps the discipline needs to consider more clearly the ethical dangers involved in anthropological-novelistic-reportorial invasions of the personal space of "Others".

In spite of ethical and theoretical questions raised by the approach she has sponsored, Abu-Lughod's work has its considerable virtues: she gives unfamiliar readers an amiable view of a foreign world; her attention to personal stories and to the pleasures and travails of daily life is humane, and her concern with narrative translation is a worthwhile caution against overly abstract theorizing. These virtues have attracted many others to the cause of a more literary and biographical Middle Eastern anthropology. The foregrounding of experience and personal voice at the expense of generalization, comparison or theory building is now the discourse of choice among a great many younger Middle Eastern specialists, who aim, like Abu-Lughod, to show how local people "strategize, feel pain, contest interpretations of what is happening - in short, live their lives" (Abu-Lughod 1993: 14).

For example, an emphasis on ordinary life informs a new introductory textbook for Middle Eastern studies edited by Donna Lee Bowen (a political scientist) and Evelyn A. Early (a medical anthropologist) which is revealingly entitled Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East (1993). In it, there is nothing about any of the boring old anthropological controversies over segmentation, feud, authority, or the structure of parallel cousin marriage; abstract theorizing in general is rejected in favour of `praxis', which is taken to mean the manner in which actual persons undertake "the daily, simple acts that are performed by all people", juggle `cultural codes' and explain their routine experiences (Bowen and Early 1993:1).

By focusing on description, biography and narrative, Bowen and Early do a valuable service to teachers trying to introduce students to the Middle East. The writing in their book makes few intellectual demands and is generally involving and colourful, placing exotic locations and practices in a comforting context of ordinary life worlds and individual life stories. This is all very worthwhile. But the authors get in difficulties when they make a more ambitious claim that the accounts in the book will give the reader a way of `understanding distinctions' and discovering `meaning' in broad topical domains such as `life passages'; gender relations; home, community and work; religious expression; performance and entertainment.

I did not find this to be the case. The essays successfully conjured up the aroma, the variety, the humanity, and even some of the history of the Middle East, but out of the thirty-four that were included, only a few offered anything more (Gilsenan's well-known piece on honour and Betteridge's essay on women and shrines in Shiraz are especially notable exceptions). After reading some of the essays in this book, the student might well ask why Middle Easterners remain so linked to their families and communities despite processes of modernization? Why is the rhetoric of honour still compelling? Why are tears the appropriate response to recitation of the Quran? But questions about cause and effect cannot be answered from the text, and from the point of view of praxis theory as it is reported here, ought not even be asked.

Similarly, but with a more advanced audience in mind, the edited collection Struggle and Survival in the Modern Middle East (1993) is an attempt by Edmund Burke III, the well-respected historian of colonial Morocco, to refocus Middle Eastern scholarship upon biographical and literary presentations of the experiences of the Other. [ii] In his introduction (appropriately entitled "Middle Eastern Societies and Ordinary People's Lives"), Burke follows an anti-essentialist line, denouncing cultural typifications which "enable us to attain a misleading mastery" over the people being studied, and reproving Orientalists for "privileging certain texts as the sole authoritative sources of religious and

cultural norms and neglecting others that qualify or contradict them" (Burke 1993: 8, 7). Theory, Burke argues in postmodern fashion, is interpretive; science is inextricably connected to rhetoric, and "there is no easily discoverable distinction between literature and social science. The facts are not separable from their literary embodiment. Rather, their very `factness' derives from the way in which they are related" (Burke 1993: 6). Does this mean that an awkward style would be a sufficient basis for Burke to assert that there are `good reasons' for distrusting a particular historical source?

As in Bowen and Early's collection, Burke's biographical-literary approach leads to results that are almost always evocative, colourful, and humane, but that are rarely of much theoretical interest. The best piece, from my point of view, is by Sherry Vatter. It seeks to stretch the editor's constraints by giving a `collective biography' of nineteenth century textile weavers in Damascus. This device permits the author to make general statements about the cultural mechanisms and relations of production that maintained a sense of solidarity and equity between the traditional journeyman and master, despite their differences in rank. Other interesting essays include those by Schliefer, Burke, Oehler, and Beck. These are mainly historical and descriptive, though Oehler manages, in a covert and tentative manner, to generate some theses about women's power, alliances, and relations with the state that might well be of use for understanding patrilineal communities elsewhere.

But in general an unwillingness to accept responsibility for theorizing or abstraction limits the value of the essays for the development of any useful premises or hypotheses - a limit the editor welcomes. For him, successful works "locate their subjects in particular sociological and cultural, as well as historical, contexts, and do not invoke broad psychological or cultural traits in explanation. They are social biographies in their commitment to change and complexity, as well as to the individuality of their subjects" (Burke 1993: 8). We are left wondering about change from what and to what, and whether

we can say anything about the Middle East except that it is full of complicated individuals with varied life histories who live in very different historical and cultural contexts. However, social biography, novelistic narrative and personal accounts are not the only routes taken to escape from the constraints of traditional ethnography. Some anthropologists have trespassed into the formerly sacrosanct urban, learned and courtly domain of the Orientalists to study how relationships of domination and subordination have been instituted and maintained within the Middle Eastern milieu. Combining anthropological methods, textual exegesis and historical study, these authors seek to explicate the interrelationship between Islamic law, state authority, religious education and preaching in Muslim mosques and madrasas (see, for example, Rosen 1989; Eickelman 1985; Fischer 1980; Antoun 1989, for examples). A recent work within this school is Brinkley Messick's valuable new book on Yemen, enigmatically entitled The Calligraphic State (1993).[iii]

Messick begins his book with a quote from Talal Asad, who has long argued that "if one wants to write an anthropology of Islam one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Quran and the hadith" (Asad 1986: 14). Following Asad's advice, Messick tries to `balance the colloquial with the doctrinal' by moving away from the study of tribal custom and social organization and concentrating his attention on the historical production, control and transformation of the encompassing Islamic law codes (the shari`a) as it was interpreted by Muslim jurists, transcribed in various manuals and commentaries, taught to aspiring lawyers, mediators and judges, enacted in local law courts, and accepted as authoritative by the populace. Of special interest to him is the way this discourse was used to legitimate the power of the Yemeni state.

In this book, Messick remains firmly within the interpretivist school; he is unwilling to accept any `essentialism' and is primarily concerned with the social production of meaning. But he avoids the fuzziness that is often found in this type of analysis by focusing

most of his attention on actual indigenous texts explicating the theory and practice of law. By staying close to the written word, Messick can lead the reader through a jungle of suggestive historical and contemporary material about the education of clerics and judges, the intricacies of court procedure, the priority of oral over written transmission of knowledge, the privileged place of personality and moral biography in Muslim jurisprudence, the justifications and contradictions of hierarchies of learning in an egalitarian society, the relationship between reliability and conformity, the social construction of legal documentation, and other important topics. If there is a lack of protein in the recounting of personal narratives, Messick's work, in contrast, offers the reader plenty to chew on.

Unfortunately, Messick too is infected by the postmodern assertion of the priority of the text, which can lead him to ponderous language and rhetorical excess, as when he writes that "semen and words are the associated ejaculations of potent male maturity" or that "humans are entextualized and texts are physically embodied" (Messick 1993: 79, 80). The book's conclusion is also a let-down, as the author, following convention, unnecessarily `problematizes' everything he has so carefully established about Yemen: "The `calligraphic state' is itself a construct, referring neither to a specific polity and its dissolution nor to a particular discursive moment and its transformation. It is instead a composite of historical materials and must finally give way to the phenomenon out of which it was built" (Messick 1993: 255). How this desirable `giving way' might occur is left to our imaginations. But in general jargon does not get in the way of the material, and Messick's analysis is rigorous, thorough and admirable.

Messick's focus on the courtly and literary concerns of the Orientalists gives the book a political agenda that stands athwart the old anthropological interest in peripheral tribesmen ruled lightly by elected shaikhs. Instead, he tries to show how the traditional legal process was used in Yemen to validate a long-standing centralized state. The Foucaultian and Gramscian political thesis, as emblazoned in its title, is that the legitimacy

of the Yemeni state [iv] was primarily a matter of the control of knowledge, and rested in the first instance on the capacity of scholars associated with the government to establish cultural hegemony and thereby `appropriate' resistance and silence protest against the government. Messick writes: "The shari`a understanding of the social order was anchored in the distinction between knowledge and ignorance, a distinction that concerned, not differences of intelligence, but rather control of the cultural capital acquired in advanced instruction" (Messick 1993: 166).

From this perspective, knowledgeable and educated religious jurists, allied with the state, gave it the legitimacy it needed to maintain itself. This thesis, so flattering to intellectuals, is partially contradicted by Messick's own data, which show a combination of scholarly anxiety and popular defiance that point to a more complex attitude toward authority. For instance, he documents the intense debates in the Muslim scholarly community over the logical and ethical difficulties of claiming rank within the band of believers, and he notes as well the "unvoiced resistance" felt by the populace whenever they were obliged to recognize domination, citing the Yemeni proverb that "a kiss on the hand means hatred of it" (Messick 1993: 166).

Rather than considering the causes and effects of this strongly held cultural value of anti-authoritarianism and equality, Messick makes a `false consciousness' argument that is parallel to the argument made by Geertz and Bourdieu against the importance of native categories of kinship and lineage. For him, the "egalitarian-individualistic principles... worked to mask, and indirectly support, actual inequalities" (Messick 1993: 160). In other words, the poor natives are duped, and the cultural and religious faith in the equality of human beings has no effect on the social world aside from covertly supporting the power structure. But Messick's book in fact tells a far more complicated story than this, revealing a world where the religious justification of oppression was hotly debated and where authority itself was always problematic and contested. [v]

Because he focuses on scholar-jurists as vehicles of domination, Messick also shortchanges the importance of local level, non-clerical, non-governmental `tribal' law, where compromise arranged by the unobtrusive arbitration of respected co-equals was the rule. Here, as he documents, there were no authoritative judges interpreting laws to determine right and wrong, victory and defeat. Rather, there was a slow process of `studying hearts' and establishing acceptable reciprocal agreements within a co-operative community. These local procedures, with the context of kinship, neighbourhood and shared experience, stood as self-conscious counters to the worlds of power represented by jurisconsults and bureaucrats - worlds which local people viewed as morally suspect.
In fact, in the traditional Middle East, and today as well, a cleric employed by the state was automatically discredited among the public and his colleagues, who saw him as servant of Mammon. The general ethical disjuncture between scholarship and the state is captured by Muhammad al-Ghazali, great Muslim cleric and legal theorist of the eleventh century, who concludes that "it is a religious obligation to avoid the authorities.... The scholar should neither see, nor be seen by them" (quoted in Goitein 1966: 206). Other theologians argued that even walking in the shade of the Prince's palace was a sin, since this would mean taking shelter from the sun in the shade of a building erected from the proceeds of injustice. To an extent, the Yemeni traditional world was an exception to this pattern, since the ruler was also a respected religious figure; but as I have noted, Messick's data show that even in this case serving the state was an act fraught with moral ambivalence.

It is unfortunate that Messick's concern with the control over meaning exercized by intellectuals in hegemonic alliance with the state never allows him to tell us why or how the apparently well-integrated system of traditional authority ever fell into such disrepute that it was violently overturned. For him, it is enough to say that "alteration in the form of the shari`a has changed the nature not only of interpretation, but also of government" (Messick 1993: 253). This is a claim that uncritically reproduces the Muslim scholar's own high evaluation of his influence, and reflects a characteristic overestimation among

interpretivist scholars of the importance of knowledge-producing institutions in cultural change: a view that unnecessarily downplays the deep cultural faith in human equality among the masses, who are dubious of a positive account of the state and suspicious of any form of hierarchy whatsoever.

The wide-spread distrust of government and of authority of all types is the starting point for another book under review. This recent work, Religion and Power in Morocco is by Henry Munson (1993) who, like Abu-Lughod, has a strong interest in biography (he wrote a pioneering account of a Moroccan family), and who, like Messick, is also deeply concerned with the relationship between Muslim dogma and political life. But Munson strongly denies any sacral quality to rulership in the Middle East, and says the effect of legitimizing intellectuals and jurists is minimal. Rather, pure coercive power, not cultural capital, maintains state domination in the Middle East.

In his book, Munson takes special aim at Geertz (1968) and Coombs-Schilling (1989), who have both made much of the symbolic authority held by the Moroccan sultan, whose family comprises the most ancient ruling dynasty extant in the Middle East. Munson concedes that the Sultan in Morocco, like the Zaidi Imam of Messick's Yemen, is a religious figure who, by virtue of his descent from the Prophet, partakes of the spiritual purity that Muslims attribute to Muhammad's lineage. But Munson argues that this factor has been grossly overstated by interpretivist analysis which considers the validation of power from the perspective of the `meaning-generating' symbolic apparatus controlled by the central state.

He argues instead that brute force has had a far greater role in keeping the king in command than has popular faith in his authority, as a resigned Moroccan public accepts the Sultan's oppression while lacking any faith in his intrinsic right to rule. In emphasizing the illegitimacy and tyranny of the longest-lived and perhaps most liberal of Middle Eastern realms, Munson is making a valuable point, as well as taking a courageous political stance. However, he does not develop his thesis further, and is content to account for the ingrained

passivity of the Moroccan public by saying that in Morocco "all forms of hierarchy are seen as involving hitting and being hit" (Munson 1993: 144). Ordinary folk therefore perceive nothing much wrong in the Sultan doing to them what all those in power do, and what they also will do to their inferiors whenever they get an opportunity. It seems Moroccans view the insolence of the strong and meekness of the weak as natural human traits.

But this cannot be all there is to it. I would argue that the Moroccan ideology of force reflects the inherent difficulty of asserting legitimate power in a world where people are putative equals. Under such circumstances, where the authenticity of secular authority is non-existant or fragile, then it follows that, as my own informants told me, "the sound of a blow means respect". Despite persistent efforts by secular leaders to convince the populace that they are deserving of authority, in actual fact their power rests on their naked capacity to punish, and vanishes when that capacity is lost.

Munson also reverses Messick in another respect. Rather than stressing the role of the learned cleric in supporting and maintaining central rule, Munson's emphasis is on the importance of sacred figures as centres of resistance, articulating the grievances and resentments of the people in religious terms. [vi] Munson shows us that any Muslims claiming to have a right to hold positions of leadership are likely to be contested by clerics who represent the passionately held ideals of the egalitarian community. For example, one such cleric rebukes the Sultan for "eating the flesh, drinking the blood and sucking the marrow of the bones and the brains of the people" (Munson 1993: 29).

These oppositional figures proclaiming the tribal and Islamic ideals of equality and justice often are charismatic sufi saints of the hinterlands whom many anthropologists have contrasted to the scholarly bureaucratic urban ulema. According to this perspective, such saints serve the necessary purpose of providing mediation, safe haven, and moral authority to the rivalrous tribesmen, while also leading popular uprisings against the corrupt centre and in favour of a renewed community of equal brothers bound together beneath a messenger of God [vii]. Yet there is a paradox here, as the leaders of these

movements present themselves as infallible vehicles of truth, whose word cannot be challenged. Unhappily, it seems that the only alternative to the coercive Sultan is a zealot claiming to be the mouthpiece of God. Munson does not say why this should be, but perhaps Middle Easterners believe personal tyranny is best combatted by one who has no interests, because he has lost himself in obedience to God.

Munson's debunking of an overly centrist viewpoint leads him to downplay the symbolic and psychological means by which power is maintained. However, combined with the rich material offered by Messick and others, Munson's data offers possibilities for the development of more general theory about the complex relationship between the ethic of egalitarian individualism and the assertion of power in secular and sacred contexts. But because his task is mainly critical, Munson does not attempt this synthesis.

A more substantial effort at theorizing is made in the final book under review here, which is a return to a past that many American and English scholars have repressed, but that remains very much alive in France. This is Abdellah Hammoudi's unusual and dense analysis in The Victim and Its Masks: As Essay on Sacrifice and Masquerade in the Maghreb (Hammoudi 1993 - published originally in France in 1988). Hammoudi works within as well as against the theoretical paradigm once made popular by Levi-Strauss, Leach, Douglas and Turner, wherein a combination of extremely detailed analysis and theoretical daring was still possible. His basic premise is that the anxiety aroused by fundamental cultural contradictions is expressed, transformed, and released in the multiplex imagery of ritual action and myth. It follows that the analysis of myth and ritual provides a royal route for the discovery of the deepest and most motivating cultural tensions of a society.

Of course, in Islamic society, myth and ritual are highly conventionalized expressions of orthodox texts and practices. But Hammoudi has managed to unearth a complex (and rapidly disappearing) ritual cycle practiced by some highland Berbers of his native Morocco. The cycle begins with the orthodox commemoration of Abraham's sacrifice as celebrated by Muslims everywhere on the tenth day of the last month of the

lunar year. In his two field sites, this celebration is followed by a period of parody and sexually explicit farce. Male elders are kept out of the villages during the burlesque, as the young men masquerade as Jews, black slaves and, most extraordinarily, as Bilmawn, a shambling androgenous beast dressed in the skin of the sacrificial sheep.

Hammoudi finds a `religion of the weak' hidden in this sacrificial ritual, as the mute and shambling figure of the bisexual and protean Bilmawn represents promiscuity and fecundity. Those in command of the masquerade are the figures of the Jew and the black slave, archetypical of subordination and impurity, but also granted special powers of healing and sexual prowess. They are portrayed with licentious and scatological brio by the young men, who express their repressed and subversive desires in pantomimes, satires and parodies. They tease and seduce the women of the village, act out giddy dramas of resistance to the dominance of their fathers, their bosses and their rulers, satirically comment on current events, and perform a joking myth cycle of creation, with the androgenous Bilmawn creating civilization out of chaos, As one exclaims: "For these two days, it's democracy!" (quoted in Hammoudi 1993: 62). But it is a democracy that must be overturned, as the masquerade ends, the fathers return, and order is restored. [viii]

What is especially interesting is the connection Hammoudi makes between the masked figures and women, who are symbolically conflated in shared opposition to the ideal of the unified, pure and free adult male Muslim community. For Hammoudi, the contrast between men and women is the crucial factor for understanding the tensions that are expressed in the ritual performance, where "everything transpires as if in response to a wish to transcend the structural contradiction between a patriarchal system and the physical reproduction of lineages" (Hammoudi 1993: 8). In the masquerade, those excluded from the dominant structure (non-Muslims, blacks, slaves, the youth, the worker, the servant, the ruled) are granted access to the special powers that women are thought to control, and, like women, are both feared and held in contempt.

In his analysis, Hammoudi makes claims for deep `tensions and solutions' that motivate belief and action in his field sites. He leaves the reader to decide whether these patterns may be of use for understanding general patterns in Middle Eastern culture, but certainly he hopes that he has something to say of relevance beyond two tiny villages of highland Morocco. I believe he is right. He has attempted a broad analysis of the symbolic expression of and resistance to inferiority within the overtly egalitarian patrilineal ideology characteristic of the Middle East. He has also emphasized the crucial contradictions that underlie that ideology, and has shown a correlation between an ideal of equality and community with the attribution of effeminacy to inferiors. From my point of view, it is an exemplary piece of work, and may help to repair the rupture that severed English and American anthropologists from the lively, and often very high quality, work that is still being done by structuralist researchers in Europe, whose ethnographic authority has not been undermined by the corrosive critiques made by Said.

In conclusion, the books under review show us a field where the challenge to old paradigms has stimulated considerable worry, some opposition, and the development of new approaches. Inspired by Foucault, an emphasis on textual analysis and on the manner in which state authority has been validated is a valuable balance to the traditional anthropological focus on illiterate peripheral peoples. But this point of view should be leavened by some scepticism about the extent of the centre's capacity to legitimate itself, and by an increased theoretical grasp of the deep anxieties and ambiguities that arise when authority is asserted in a world characterized by pervasive values of egalitarianism and individualism.

However, most writers have been unwilling and morally disinclined to take up the challenge of developing new theory. Rather, the most prevalent response to the challenges offered by Said and others has been a retreat toward biography and narrative. This too has its virtues. It has usefully reoriented researchers toward more detailed study of individuals, greater linguistic competence and more literate writing. But it is also clear that

the recourse to narrative has very problematic consequences, both in terms of the future of anthropological theory and in terms of the ethical perspective taken by the writers. The deficits of this new approach make it painfully evident that despite the problems of establishing an adequate viewpoint and definitional stance, we "cannot yet do without" the notion of culture, which, as Clifford reluctantly admits, is required to preserve and locate the differentiations of identity we actually discover existing between peoples (Clifford 1988: 10). And once culture is admitted, then it is possible to establish the grounds for generalization and comparison.

But what can this culture consist of? It seems to me that the more theoretically oriented of the books here reviewed try to recapture the meaning of culture by focusing on precisely the existential human contradictions Abu-Lughod wishes to dissolve through her rhetorical obliteration of boundaries: these are the motivating tensions between self and other, autonomy and participation, unity and plurality, male and female, equality and subordination. As Von Grunebaum (1976: 177-8) writes, we study other cultures "for the aspirations that flickeringly manifest themselves in their stated thoughts and visible deeds, and for their attitudes, to being and man as such, to community, to the nature and accessibility of truth, to time and space, to death and change, and, not least, to the `other' - such as ourselves".

Endnotes:

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i My own pet theory is that this trend is not only a reaction to Said and to new models of anthropological research; it also is a response to powerful Middle Eastern expressions of emotion and sympathy which serve the functional purpose of binding individuals in relationships of friendship and patronage that are outside the rivalrous net of kin. Western ethnographers, coming from an equally competitive culture that, not coincidentally, also

greatly values intimacy and emotional warmth, feel motivated to write biographical narratives that give credit to the strong and compelling personalities of their Middle Eastern informants and friends.

[ii] The book title is misleading. Most of it is not about the modern Middle East at all, but is concerned with colonial and pre-colonial history.

[iii] Perhaps inspired by Tambiah's image of the galactic polity, this is another somewhat misleading title, since legitimate authority in Yemen is described throughout as correlated with personal moral character and knowledge of prophetic tradition, which is best if transmitted orally. Writing is mistrusted, though documents written in recognizable calligraphy by an individual known for probity are morally superior to impersonal typescripts stamped by a faceless bureaucrat.

[iv] The Zaidi regime of Upper Yemen was distinctive throughout the Middle East in combining scholarly expertise, interpretive capacity and saintly heritage with warrior prowess and kingly authority, and had greater popular legitimacy than almost any other Middle Eastern government. Yemen was also unusual in that almost all land in the country was alienable and individually held, placing a great deal of weight on contract, documentation, and bureaucratic expertise.

[v] An overriding insistence on a Foucaultian interpretation can lead to absurdities. For instance, Messick says the Quranic injunction permitting anyone (excepting slaves) to make a will is a disguise for hierarchy since the injunction assumes people have an estate. The fastidious efforts made in court to maintain the equality of the claimants, and even to favor the weak in any case, are also interpreted solely as efforts by judges to gain legitimacy for their authority.

[vi] Munson acknowledges that these oppositional figures are rare. Most religious practitioners support the state, and actively seek to suppress resistance.

[vii] Munson corrects Gellner's overly schematic distinction, showing that an absolute division between urban doctor and rural saint is not ancient, but is an indigenous response to colonialism and the experience of modernity. But although perhaps mistaken in making too clear a division between Sufi and doctor in terms of character and education, Gellner is surely right in asserting a division of the function of holy men in urban and rural contexts. Rural religious practitioners, whether `doctors' or `saints', acted as mediators and guardians of trade; urban scholar-sufis were bureaucrats and judges while urban ecstatic figures offered spiritual empowerment to the poor.

[viii] Following the old `rituals of rebellion' argument, Hammoudi remarks that these rituals function to validate norms and justify the status quo.

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