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Anthropological Quarterly, Vol. 68, No. 3, Anthropological Analysis and Islamic Texts. (Jul., 1995), pp. 185-193.

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“ISLAMIC ANTHROPOLOGY” AND THE “ANTHROPOLOGY OF ISLAM”

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This article reviews various proposals for an “Islamic anthropology” and their relation to the “anthropology of Islam.” Islamic anthropology approaches social and cultural phenomena on the basis of Islamic values/principles and with analytical techniques derived from Islamic texts and traditions. This approach has been disparaged on various grounds such as the academic unacceptability of a value-based study of values. All anthropologies, however, as has increasingly been appreciated in recent decades, are to some extent value-based and prisoners of their own assumptions and definitions of relevance and significance. This is most explicitly true of other “ideological” anthropologies such as marxist, feminist, or applied anthropologies. If this is the case, in what ways does an “Islamic anthropology” (whether of Muslim or of other societies and cultures) differ from other “anthropologies of Islam” (that is, studies of Muslim societies and cultures, or more specifically of Islamic traditions, beliefs and practices)? [Islam, ideology, critique, text, tradition]

Anthropology and the Islamic Middle East

The anthropology of Islam, as a sub-field of the anthropology of religion, is some decades old. I understand it to be the application of the methods of cultural/social anthropology to the study of Islam as a world religion and associated sets of social institutions. There has been a variety of approaches and a number of reviews of them (notably Asad 1986; Eickelman 1981, 1982, 1989; el-Zein 1977), and I do not intend to add another review here. I shall concentrate rather on one particular kind of approach that has recently come into prominence: so-called Islamic anthropology.

There are several contending varieties of Islamic anthropology, set out in at least four books and numerous articles published during the 1980s.¹ I shall concentrate on four works: the book by Ilyas Ba-Yunus and Farid Ahmad, which, despite its title *Islamic sociology*, is in essence a proposal for Islamic anthropology; the two main publications on the theme by Akbar Ahmed (*Toward Islamic anthropology* and *Discovering Islam*); and the book by Merryl Wyn Davies (*Knowing one another*). Proponents differ as to whether Islamic anthropology should confine its attention to Muslim societies or should have a universal(-ist) scope; in other words, Islamic anthropology is not necessarily intended as the anthropological study of Islam, analogous to economic or political anthropology, any more than marxist or feminist anthropology means the anthropology of marxism or feminism.² Rather it means, broadly, doing anthropology inspired by

methods drawn in some way from Islam. What the competing versions of Islamic anthropology share is a basis in Islamic texts—they are, in other words, Islamic approaches to the study of anthropological texts, rather than anthropological approaches to the study of Islamic texts.³

Previous writings on Islamic anthropology have been proposals and mutual criticism by Muslims; there has been little critical comment from non-Muslim anthropologists, who have mostly either chosen to ignore Islamic anthropology or welcomed it rather patronizingly, without serious discussion, as a promising new development.⁴ It should be said that most of the proposals have not apparently been addressed to anthropologists or other academics in the first place, but rather to a wider, non-academic, and primarily Muslim audience. Nonetheless, I would argue that it is important for Islamic anthropology to be seriously discussed by anthropologists and that something can be learned from such discussion whether or not it is found to be of positive value to the development of anthropological ideas generally.

The Problem

It is easy to sympathize with Akbar Ahmed's *cri de coeur*:

The Muslim intellectual confronting the world today is sometimes moved to despair. He is ill-equipped to face it, his vulnerability diminishes him in his own eyes. He wanders between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born. His wounds are largely self-inflicted. At

the root of his intellectual malaise lies his incapacity to come to terms with Islam in the twentieth century (1986: 61).

These sentiments are (pre-)echoed in numerous Muslim publications—and indeed are commonplace in Third World intellectual writings. The sub-text is articulated thoughtfully and at some length by Wyn Davies and others. Given the relation between knowledge and power (knowledge brings power, and power defines knowledge), dominated groups come to resent being studied and “known” by others. Third World intellectuals, emerging from a history of Western economic, political, cultural, and academic dominance, have come to reject these dominations and the way they are linked in “Orientalist” discourses and definitions of knowledge. For Muslims, Islam and Muslim identity, long damaged or threatened by Western and materialist values, must be reasserted at all levels, including that of knowledge. The issue raised by Islamic anthropology (as by other critical anthropologies) is the relation between anthropology and its subjects (traditionally, the West studying the rest; the orientalist gaze): objectification and explanation (science) or empathy and understanding (humanity). More precisely, Islamic anthropology poses the question: can Islam (and the culture and society of Muslims) be studied and understood by non-Muslims? In other words, what is the nature and possibility of an anthropology of Islam?

A Critique of Western Knowledge, Social Science, Anthropology

The proponents of Islamic anthropology offer a critique of Western (social) theory, to accompany their Islamist critique of Western society, culture, and values. Western social theory, anthropology included, is ethnocentric and tainted by its imperial history and connections. Anthropology is the child of Western colonialism; its subject-matter, assumptions, questions, and methods are dictated by imperial interests; and its practitioners come from imperial backgrounds and biases (through structures of funding, jobs, publication, readership) or Third-World (Western-oriented/supported) elites. The traditional subjects of Western anthropology are the primitives. In the post-colonial era, as the number of unstudied primitives has diminished, anthropology has entered crisis and terminal decline. Since Third World countries gained independence,

the peoples studied have insisted on doing their own anthropology, defining their own approaches, and studying and criticizing the cultures and theories of the West.

In his booklet for the International Institute of Islamic Thought (1986), Ahmed's critique is confined largely to unsupported statements about “the notorious ethnocentricity of Western anthropology” and to the invidious polemical trick of comparing the ideals of one society (the Muslim world) with the evils of another (AIDS, drugs, and crime in the West). His prescription seems to be: if only they would become Muslim, all these problems would go away. But are there no social problems in Islamic societies?*

Ba-Yunus and Ahmad, writing for the Cambridge (UK)-based Islamic Academy, offer a more sustained criticism of what they see as the three major approaches in Western social theory, finding them divergent and in need of reconciliation, and all flawed by their commitment to positivism, objectivity, and scientific detachment. Structural-functionalism ignores conflict and produces ethnocentric modernization-Westernization theory. Marxian and conflict-based approaches overstress economic processes and larger structures. Symbolic interactionism and “self-theory” focus vainly on the unpredictable individual. Sociology is supposedly universal, but the sociology of the Third World does not take account of Third World perceptions and social realities, for example, those of Muslims; its ethnocentrism typically underrates the role of religious experience. Further, sociology is commonly too theoretical and pretends to be value-free; rather, it should be practical and applied and acknowledge the necessity of values.

Wyn Davies conducts a rather broader review of Western scientific thought in general and anthropology in particular, emphasizing how anthropology lacks unity (except as regards its basis in Western civilization) and rigor. She invokes Thomas Kuhn's and Michel Foucault's contributions to the understanding of how knowledge is produced. Western paradigms of knowledge have shifted, but on a background of continuity—Fernand Braudel's *longue durée*. The non-Europeans studied by anthropologists have had no say in how anthropological discourse has developed and how it has constructed reality. Western discourse is secular and sees religion as a human creation; this Western view, and the original Christian view of Islam, means the West cannot understand

Muslim civilization. Typical reactions by Muslim apologists, she says, divert energies from the creation of a proper Muslim agenda. The central tradition of anthropology is fieldwork: participant-observation of the primitive (a fundamental concept). The point of the conventional criticism of the link with colonialism was anthropology's failure to observe and criticize the colonial center; and despite its new awareness of all these epistemological problems, modern anthropology still fails to comment effectively on Western society and international relations.

The major elements in this critique of Western theory are entirely conventional.⁶ A response must begin by admitting that there is, or was, some truth in every point; but they are failings that characterize few anthropological studies of Islam and Muslim societies over the last couple of decades or so. The critics (as with other critical anthropologies) too often resort to misrepresentation and selectivity, the depiction of outdated stereotypes, and the erection of straw men. This is not the place for a point by point rebuttal, but it is worth marking some central issues, particularly those which affect the plausibility of the proposals for an Islamic anthropology to be discussed below.

Thus, Ahmed uses Beattie's 1964 *Other cultures* as a source book for current Western anthropology,⁷ while Wyn Davies, even if her version is more considered and up-to-date, can still refer to Raymond Firth's 1951 *Elements of social organization* as a standard text. Small wonder then that they present such caricatures of a discipline "in crisis and decline," in which the only anthropologists are Westerners; in which anthropologists study only non-Western societies or only primitive societies; in which anthropology is necessarily ethnocentric, using Western categories and assumptions to study cultures to which they do not apply; in which anthropology is functionalist, arid scientism, concerned only with objective analysis and explanation, and opposed to both subjectivism and application; and in which this atheist functionalism puts religion on the same level of analysis as economics, politics, and kinship. In fact, in the last two decades anthropology has thankfully moved beyond reacting to such tired criticisms and has established new conventions of ethnographic reflexivity and theoretical self-awareness. This is not so say such conventions are unassailable in their turn, but there is no apparent awareness of them among the propo-

nents of Islamic anthropology.

Nor are they free from the contradictions of those who both berate Orientalists for homogenizing "the Orient" (as against "the West") without recognizing cultural and other differences, and then accuse those such as anthropologists, who do recognize and study differences, of dividing in order to rule. Such native critics, moreover, usually come from an educated elite, whose authority to speak for or about all their co-nationals or co-religionists is as debatable as that of any outsider. Some Orientalists are justifiably accused of "exoticizing" their subjects, over-emphasizing the cultural distance between a Christian West and a Muslim East; yet modern Muslim radicals such as Wyn Davies appear to be doing just the same in their desire to claim the study of the Muslim world for Muslims alone.⁸

As many have pointed out, European and Middle Eastern cultures have common roots and orientations and have developed in dialogue with each other. Even if modern Western world views were molded by renaissance/enlightenment/colonial heritages, they are still very firmly grounded in the traditions of Greco-Roman philosophy and Semitic-monotheistic religions that they share with the Islamic Middle East. Differences are variations on a theme. More liberal Muslim apologists point to the role of medieval Islam in preserving and developing this heritage during the European Dark Ages, and to the important contributions of earlier Muslim scientists, ethnographers, and social theorists. Mutual misunderstandings between the Muslim world and the West through the centuries have arisen in contexts of political competition, from the Crusades to the spread of European commercial and political dominance in the nineteenth century. Despite diverging paradigm shifts in European and Muslim thought, there are still basic continuities and possibilities of dialogue and mutual understanding. Indeed, I would venture to suggest that the Muslim world as such, which inevitably shares many of its traditions with the West, cannot produce a truly radical critique of it. This would appear to be evident if we contrast both traditions with more distant Indian, Chinese, or Japanese, or radically different Native American, Australian, or African traditions, where any elements of common heritage with the West are comparatively recent and shallow-rooted.

Defining Islamic Anthropology

Even if a distinctive radical critique of Western society and social science is not to be expected—and certainly has not yet appeared—from Islamic quarters, Muslims from Middle Eastern countries are among the non-Westerners best able to respond with alternatives to Western representations of their cultures. Their economic and political power is now often such that they can at least set the terms of what is to be studied and by whom. Their dilemma is: whose terms, with what questions? If anthropology, then should it be through categories derived from Western training and literature, or from Muslim or other indigenous sources? Or should anthropology be rejected altogether as a Western product?

One important Muslim response since the 1960s has been the attempt to *Islamize* the social sciences, including anthropology, that is, to appropriate them for Islam, by insisting that Muslim societies can only be studied by Islamic anthropology or by those conversant with Islamic textual sources.

There are common themes to the several different versions of Islamic anthropology: for example, the proposal to construct the ideal society, and social theory, from a particular reading of Koran/*sunna* values and principles; the affirmation of the eternal validity of this Islam; and the presentation of Islam as the middle way between Western extremes. But there are radically different and conflicting assumptions among the versions.

Ba-Yunus and Ahmad propose Islamic sociology as an activist Islamic program for sociologists:

seeking the principles of human nature, human behaviour and human organization [it] must not be allowed to become an end in itself. It has to be applied for the sake of the promotion of Islam within individuals, around them in their societies, and between and among societies (1985: 35-36).

The approach must be based on Koranic assumptions: that God created nature; that Man is made of opposites, with free-will, the ability to learn, and superiority to the rest of nature; that society is based on the family, divine laws, an instituted authority, and economic activity; and that history is a dialectical process of conflict and consensus resulting in the Prophet. It also should be a comprehensive sociological approach which will encompass and reconcile the extremes of other contemporary approaches. Further,

Islamic sociology would be comparative and critical, i.e., it must accept, as a preoccupation, the task of comparing human societies—Muslim as well as non-Muslim—with [the ideal] and discovering the degrees of departure of these societies from this model (p. xiii).

The ideal picture of Islamic social structure must be constructed, with Islam as ideology, culture, or way of life, a process of deliberate obedience to God's laws, the only alternative to capitalist democracy and socialism, one that is midway between, but not a mixture. Islamic ethnography then examines actual variations; the reference point is the ideal Islamic middle path of customs relating to family and marriage (contract, choice, sex, polygyny, gender, tribes), economy (property, wealth, market, inheritance, gambling, interest, poor tax, nationalization), and polity (state, authority, justice, consultation). Capitalism, democracy, and socialism as social systems and associated social theories failed because they had no mechanism of commitment; commitment in Islam is ensured by prayer and fasting rituals. The overall picture is of an openly ideological Islamic sociology; theory and comparison (of present Muslim societies, and also of/with present Western societies, ideologies, and sociologies) refer to an ideal Islamic society, and practice concerns how to achieve it.

For Akbar Ahmed, Islamic anthropology is

the study of Muslim groups by scholars committed to the universalistic principles of Islam—humanity, knowledge, tolerance—relating micro village tribal studies in particular to the larger historical and ideological frames of Islam. Islam is here understood not as theology but sociology. The definition thus does not preclude non-Muslims (Ahmed 1986: 56).

Wyn Davies' proposals are, to me, the most articulate, sustained and radical. For her, Islamic anthropology is

the study of mankind in society from the premises and according to the conceptual orientations of Islam. . . . [It is] a social science, concerned with studying mankind in its social communal relations in the diversity of social and cultural settings that exist around the world today and have existed in the past. The focus of its attention is human action, its diversity of form and institutionalization; it seeks to understand the principles that order, organize and give it meaning (1988: 82, 113).

The Western anthropology of Islam is ahistorical: it sees Islam as an abstracted ideal and ignores literary traditions and spiritual hierarchy; but one object of Islamic anthropology is to produce alternative categories and concepts and then enter a

dialogue with Western anthropology. What are the relevant Islamic concepts, their history, and their context? *Tawhid* (unity) is central, and dichotomy alien. Drawing from the Sunna (*hadith*, *fiqh*, *shariah*), Wyn Davies proposes *ulema* (the learned) and *ummah* (community, society) as central elements. Man is *nafs* (living entity), with *fitrah* (natural, God-given disposition), *khilafah* (status of vice-regentship), and *din* (religion as way of life). God created human diversity, with two referents: *shariah* (laws) and *minhaj* (way of life). The shariah defines parameters within which many ways of life are possible. The Islamic frame is universal; European ethnography failed to come to terms with diversity from the start, and created the notion of "primitive." The Islamic perspective cannot start with despising other ways. There is no room for "otherness," nor for either relativist or rationalist extremes, but it calls for a distinctive synthesis between them. Concepts and values to form the basis of Islamic anthropology must be worked out carefully in order to avoid submission to the intellectual premises of Western scholarship:

Unless we are clear about the context in which the categories of Islamic anthropology and social analysis are to be operated and investigated, a discussion of the categories themselves will have little significance and there will be plenty of space for mental inertia and force of habit to regard what is offered as merely a gloss upon conventional Western anthropology. It is not just the categories but the entire way of thinking about them and manipulating them that must be Islamic (p. 128).

The first concept is *ummah*: communities at all levels. Every *ummah* has a *din* (religion as way of life). The purpose of investigation is to ascertain the function of community

as a system that facilitates the harmonious embodiment of moral values as a constructive environment for right action, or hinders or deforms the purposive intent of moral values within a way of life and therefore impairs the ability or opportunity for right action (p. 129).

Next come *shariah*, *minhaj*, and institutionalization—all these are the foundation of ethnography in Islamic anthropology. Wyn Davies outlines the practice of an Islamic ethnographer in the field: to seek to identify the *shariah* and *minhaj*, and then a variety of values; then to ask practical questions relating to development and response to crisis. Participant observation and other methods will be used, along with dialogue with the subjects, study of their history, and classification and comparison.

Islamic anthropology's concepts of man and of community with their entailments make it "a distinct and different discourse of knowledge from western anthropology" (p. 142). Distinct also are its boundaries with other disciplines; unlike Western anthropology, Islamic anthropology is basic social science.

Wyn Davies comments on earlier proponents of Islamic anthropology. Nadia Abu-Zahra is commended for bringing the interpretation of the Koran to the interpretation of Muslims' actual behavior. Akbar Ahmed is castigated for including Nur Yalman's study of Sri Lanka under the rubric of Islamic anthropology. Talal Asad is praised for criticizing the conceptual premises of Western anthropology and their application to Islam, and for noting the different focuses of knowledge: Islam on the moral person, the West on the nature of society. Others merely provide an addendum to Western anthropology, as a response to colonialism, but accept the basic Western approach as universal; or promote the indigenous social scientist with his/her special access and insights (Soraya Altorki, Akbar Ahmed). Even the more radical have only partial approaches; Ali Shariati, for example, uses familiar terminology in a new way. Wyn Davies herself starts with a new set of terms, to avoid confusion, and to deny the presumed universality of dominant Western terms and their usage. But the new terms should not be geared only to Muslims and Muslim society, like those of Ba-Yunus and Ahmad. For Islamic anthropology, she proposes borrowing Ibn Khaldun's term *'ilm al-'umran*, with complex historical and geographical resonances which she examines in detail.

Problems with Islamic Anthropology

In my view, there is little to object to in the methods of research proposed for Islamic anthropology; they replicate traditional anthropological practice. The main difficulties for an anthropological reading of the Islamic anthropology program have to do with its acknowledged ideological commitment, and, in the case of Wyn Davies, her proposed terminology; and the question why, if the program has in fact nothing substantively new to offer, the proponents feel it necessary to indulge in this particular exercise of appropriation and relabeling.

Thus Ba-Yunus and Ahmad's program for ethnographic research is an entirely conventional—indeed outdated—investigation of the top-

ics of kinship and family, economics, and politics. It seems, however, that religion and ritual, the fourth topic of the old structural-functional quartet, are not to receive the same attention: religion (Islam or other) is equated with the system as a whole, or at least the rules and ideals that define it. One has to add that the Koranic assumptions on which their Islamic sociology is to be based parallel closely those of Christian creationism.

As for Ahmed's Islamic anthropology, while the teachings and ideals he outlines as relevant to the study of society are admirable, though highly generalized, when he comes to specific prescriptions for a new view of Muslim societies, he offers a taxonomy whose debt to Islamic ideals is far from clear, plus a set of "models" whose inadequacies I have demonstrated elsewhere.⁹ In his objections to Western writings on Islam he lays himself open to criticism in his own terms. In effect, the Islamic anthropology he proposes constitutes another "Orientalism"; the only difference from the original is that his ideological commitment is made explicit. It is significant that in his view some of the best Islamic anthropology is produced by Western non-Muslims (Gellner, Geertz, Gaborieau) and one Japanese (Nakamura); those Muslims he praises for their Islamic anthropology include the modern Yalman as well as the medieval al-Biruni and Ibn Khaldun,¹⁰ but as Wyn Davies points out, the former's Islamic background (if any) is not evident in his work, while the latter two hardly constitute anthropologists in the conventional sense accepted by Ahmed.

Wyn Davies herself is to be congratulated for recognizing the epistemological problems with anthropology and its heritage, and for attempting to make her own assumptions explicit. Her own proposals are disappointing, however, consisting largely of a new terminology of Koranic/Islamic Arabic terms which simply translate standard English social science analytical categories. The guiding concepts and assumptions listed, for example, *tauhid*, the unity of God extended to the unity of mankind (surely a basic assumption of all anthropology), are ideals and eternal values. The central analytical concepts *ummah*, *din*, *shariah*, *minhaj* translate directly into community, culture, norms, customs; the new concept of "consonance" is hardly clarified or elaborated. The concepts of "society" or "relationship," for which there are plentiful Arabic (Koranic?) translations, are oddly omitted. Following her own logic, in fact, Islamic

anthropology should be conducted only in Arabic, and avoid not only all Western terms but all ways of relating them in syntax and semantics.

Despite claims for the distinctiveness of an Islamic anthropology, the methods Wyn Davies proposes, though more contemporary than those of Ba-Yunus and Ahmad, are strictly conventional to modern anthropology: use of participant observation, dialogue, text, statistics, indigenous language, etc. Islamic anthropology is a holistic (that is, functionalist) study of all levels, including international relations and boundaries (that is, ethnicity). Disciplinary boundaries with sociology and history are to be torn down, but significantly there is no mention of anthropology's relations with psychology and philosophy. The reader is subjected to long passages of preaching on the superiority of the Islamic approach, which to a non-Muslim anthropologist appears as a closed and circular system; and there is no mention of problematic areas such as gender or Koranic punishments. The concept of ideal type is acknowledged as a basic principle, with the problem that comparison of empirical cases with the ideal is to be based in ideology. Islamic anthropology slips from a concern with variation within the *shariah*, to allowance and tolerance for all ways, but in effect we are offered Islamic ethnocentrism disguised as universalist relativism. The empirical study of values is even vitiated by predetermining the categories of analysis to be used, rather than attempting to understand subjects in their own terms. In her book Wyn Davies adduces no cases where these approaches and methods have been tested in practice.

Thus there seem to be three broad approaches, though proponents do not necessarily stick to one of them. In the first, Western anthropology is to be adopted, but under the guidance of Muslim ideals; who, though, is to decide what those ideals are? The second is associated with Muslim apologists who point out that Islam too has produced anthropologists and that the roots of the best Western concepts and ideals are to be found in the Koran and the Sunna. The third approach is radical: Islamic anthropology should reject Western anthropology and start afresh with a distinctive Islamic approach; the Sunna is the basis for a distinct set of (purified) values, ideals, and analytical concepts.

In all versions Islamic anthropology sets up an ideal and compares societies with it. But there is disagreement on whether Islamic anthropology can be the study of Islamic societies only or of all socie-

ties. For some, Islamic anthropology is explicitly a way of analysing permissible Islamic forms of society and culture, and of comparing non-Islamic forms with them.

A prime argument of Islamic anthropology is that, because of its basis in Islam, it is logically, theoretically, and morally superior to other approaches. Sometimes it seems to be no more than a slogan; or at best a *vade mecum* for anthropologists who happen to be Muslim, to guide their values and choices in practical and ethical decisions, for example, in the issues such as ethnocentrism versus cultural relativism, the application of anthropology in practice and development, and the various dilemmas to be faced during field research. Being addressed to Muslims, can Islamic anthropology be seriously discussed by those not committed to it? It would be too easy to dismiss Islamic anthropology as incapable of a serious contribution to the field of anthropology and not worth study except as a distinct indigenous perception.¹¹ However, it is difficult for non-Muslims to comment except to point to flaws and similarities with what it is supposed to replace.

Any ideological version of anthropology clearly plays on the ambiguity between the notions of anthropology as a view, whether personal or ideological, of human nature, society, and values, and as a comparative and theoretical academic discipline whose practitioners attempt to detach themselves from or reflect upon personal or ideological biases. In many ways Islam (as religion, theology, sociology, theodicy, philosophy) is an anthropology; it can appeal only to those who accept its basic tenets. Is the notion of Islamic anthropology thus a tautology or a contradiction in terms?

The proposals for an Islamic anthropology which we have outlined have the virtue of being explicit in their values and ideological commitments. Anthropologies which claim to be non-ideological are constantly subject, internally and externally—at least in the current postmodernist atmosphere—to debate over basic assumptions. Any ideological anthropology, by contrast, tends to be dogmatic and allows little debate, except internally; it can neither ask the most interesting questions asked by other anthropologies, nor can it itself ask any interesting new questions—it can only provide answers. At present these answers fall short of a thorough, unequivocally Islamic anthropological study of either Muslim or non-Muslim society which can be demonstrated as a significant advance

on non-Muslim anthropological studies of Islamic societies.

Islamic anthropology is no more easily dismissed than any other "-ism"; it should be taken seriously because it addresses a wide audience, avows its ideological base, and invites critical discussion. At the same time the motivations of its proponents should be questioned. As noted above, the authors are primarily addressing a Muslim non-academic audience, presumably even less familiar with recent developments in anthropology than they seem to be themselves. They would appear to be mainly interested in furthering their own positions, as anthropologists, within the world of Islamic intellectuals, and not in promoting their appropriation of the discipline for Islam within the world of anthropologists. It has to be said that, if they did attempt the latter, their arguments would carry no weight. They can no more claim universality for a non-believer than can any other explicitly ideological anthropology or "-ism."

Islamic intellectuals with different origins and backgrounds (Pakistani, Turkish, Iranian, Arab, British) have produced different anthropologies and emphasized different Islamic concepts. What of non-intellectual Muslims—is their Islam and their approach to the analysis of society less valid as an anthropology? Wyn Davies' Koranic prescription for Islamic anthropology—"know one another," seeing fieldwork as a dialogue and exchange of understandings—is to be preferred to other approaches in which the tyranny of a Great Tradition approach predominates.

The challenge of Islamic anthropology to non-Muslim anthropologists is essentially a continuing warning to keep under review basic concepts and assumptions and any tendencies to -ism or ideology; but it does also raise the perennial question of whether a critical anthropology, that can stand outside all these -isms, is possible.

The Anthropology of Islam: A Personal View

Some of the most incisive critiques of Western anthropological writings on Islam, the best and most persuasive reflections and suggestions, have come from scholars originating in the Muslim world but trained in the West, such as Abdul Hamid el-Zein (1977) and Talal Asad (1986). Whether or not they are Muslim, they have not intruded their beliefs into their anthropology, any more than did Evans-Pritchard or the other "Oxford Catholics." The

anthropological study of religion is not theology. It is not necessarily against either theology or religion. But good anthropology does have subversive potential; it asks awkward questions about the political and economic interests and the personal connections of powerful ideologues at all levels of society; it also asks how ideologies are constructed and how language and other systems of symbols are manipulated. The best anthropological studies of Islam, by Muslims as well as non-Muslims, have resisted the tyranny of those (whether Orientalist outsiders, or center-based *ulama*) who propose a scripturalist (Great Tradition) approach to the culture and religion of the periphery; they aim to understand how life (Islam) is lived and perceived by ordinary Muslims, and to appreciate local customs and cultures (systems of symbols and their meanings) as worthy of study and recognition in their social contexts, rather than as "pre-Islamic survivals" or as error and deviation from a scriptural (Great Tradition) norm.

The anthropology of Islam involves translating and humanizing ordinary believers' cultures, as well as analyzing the production and use of Islamic "texts." The elements of the Great Tradition (formal duties and beliefs, texts, and the officials and others who produce them) have also been subject to study in their social and cultural contexts, allowing the relevance of political manipulations, economic constraints, and tribal/kinship/ethnic allegiances and rivalries. All these matters can be investigated only by extended and intensive participant observation; and it is debatable whether they are best studied by an *insider* (one who is from the community studied, who shares its culture and religion, but

may not have the skills or indeed the inclination to bring to the surface what is taken for granted); by a *compatriot* (one who may be separated from the subjects by language, culture, class, and associations, but who may be reluctant to acknowledge this distance); or by a complete *outsider* (one who may have to start from scratch in language and the rest, and take much longer, but who at least brings a fresh eye and "stranger value" to the field).

The anthropology of Islam studies how Muslims (individuals, groups, societies, nations) present/construct themselves as Muslims (as a major constituent of their identity), for example, through markers of various kinds: diet (proscription of pork and alcohol), myth and genealogy (holy descent), reverence for the prophet (*mevluds* in Turkey), conflict (Shi'a/Sunni), and discursive traditions.¹² Some of these markers are clearly textual, though all of them could be seen as texts in a broad sense, and hence matter for discussion within the context of anthropological approaches to the study of Islamic texts. This observation clearly also re-introduces the problem of what is the "Islam" that anthropologists study, on which there has been a continuing debate. Is it a unity or a diversity? Is it what professing Muslims say and do? Is it a Koran-based set of ideals, identified by theologians or by sociologists—that is, a Great Tradition? Is the anthropology of Islam the study of Muslim societies; or of Islam as a religion (texts, practice, beliefs, history)? These may be hackneyed problems, but they certainly have not yet been resolved, and I would maintain that consideration of the recent writings on Islamic anthropology throws some fresh light on them.¹³

NOTES

Acknowledgments This is a revised version of a paper delivered at the Middle East Studies Association Annual Meetings in Washington, November 1991, and at a public lecture for the Centre of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, London in December; a later version was presented to a panel at the American Anthropological Association meetings in Washington in November 1993. It has benefited from comments received on those and other occasions, especially from Dale Eickelman, the panel discussant at MESA, from readings by Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Ali Tayfun Atay, and from two anonymous readers for *Anthropological Quarterly*. Faults and misconceptions remain mine. I am grateful to Daniel Martin Varisco and Greg Starrett for inviting me to participate in the MESA and AAA panels respectively, and to SOAS for giving me time and financial support for my visits to Washington.

¹The books are Ba-Yunus and Ahmad 1985; Ahmed 1986, 1988a; Wyn Davies 1988. Articles include Mauroof 1981; Elkholy 1984; Ahmed 1984; Wyn Davies 1985; Maruf 1986,

1987; Momin 1989; see also some chapters in Shariati 1979.

²See Shirley Ardener's distinction between "feminist anthropology" and the "anthropology of women" (1985).

³To avoid confusion, Islamic anthropology should perhaps be called "Islamist" anthropology, by analogy with, for instance, marxist anthropology, and with the contemporary usage of "Islamist" for political and intellectual movements inspired by Islam. A related issue, which will not be dealt with here, is whether anthropologists studying Muslim societies must be capable of reading and understanding the Arabic texts on which Islam is based. Those who insist on this necessity are sometimes guilty of a common Arab and Arabist presumption that Islam(ic) = Arab(ic). Its opponents also point to the irrelevance of studying Arabic texts for the study of that still large majority of Muslims who cannot read or understand those texts themselves.

⁴See for example Hart 1988; Young 1988; and favourable reviews cited by Ahmed 1988b. Exceptions include Maruf 1987; Sulani 1988; Eickelman 1990.

⁸See R. Tapper 1988; and the exchange of letters with Ahmed in *Man* 24: 682-684 (1989). In his foreword to the booklet the late President of the Institute, Ismail al-Faruqi, outdoes Ahmed in his misrepresentation of "Western anthropology." In his later book (1988a) Ahmed does recognize that all is not well with Islamdom either.

⁹See Hymes 1972; Asad 1973; Diamond 1974; Said 1978.

¹⁰Otherwise, his representation of Western anthropology consists of dropping some arbitrarily chosen names in a manner which indicates he has either not read their works or not understood them; see reviews by Maruf 1987; R. Tapper 1988; Momin 1989.

¹¹For comments on the critique of Orientalism, see, for example, Eickelman 1989: Chapter 2; 153, 374, 392-395.

¹²Reviews in *Asian Affairs* 12: 328-330 (1981); *Man* 20: 562-563 (1985). For comments on these reviews, see Street 1991.

¹³See also Mauroof 1981.

¹⁴As Ahmed observed of Crone and Cook's *Hagarism*, "For Muslims it is easy to dismiss the book as nonsense. I disagree. With its academic pretension (written by

Professors of London University and published by Cambridge University Press) Islamic scholars would do well to prepare a reply. If not, their silence will be taken as an incapacity to prepare a suitable answer (Ahmed 1986: 51).

¹⁵See Asad 1986. One virtue of Ahmed's "theory of history" (in *Discovering Islam*) is his suggestion always to look at the "other" which each leader/group/movement faces (and in terms of which it defines and redefines itself): the Ottomans and Christian Europe, Shi'i Safavids and their Sunni rivals, Pakistan and India, though he refrains from proceeding with Islam and Christianity; Judaism and the others; modern Islamic fundamentalists and the West, nineteenth-century nationalists versus the imperialists. See also R. Tapper 1984 and N. Tapper and R. Tapper 1987.

¹⁶I wrote this article with the hope of engaging proponents of Islamic anthropology in the debate which they professed to desire. Some of the responses I have had to an earlier version of the article have unfortunately confirmed my fears that it would be both misread and misrepresented, and that serious academic debate might not be possible.

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⁴ **Review: [Untitled]**

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⁵ **Islamic Anthropology**

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⁶ **Review: [Untitled]**

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⁹ **Review: [Untitled]**

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¹² **The Birth of the Prophet: Ritual and Gender in Turkish Islam**

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