

The Anthropology of Islam

Gabriele Marranci

Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008. 182 pages.

Gabriele Marranci's latest book, *The Anthropology of Islam*, examines the history and current status of anthropological work focusing on Islam. Despite its title, this work seems less intended as an overview of the anthropology of Islam than as a critique of the field. Essentialism, Marranci argues, still marks prominent works of anthropology that focus on Muslims. Edward Said's critique of Orientalism and anthropology's post-1980s "crisis of representation" notwithstanding, Islam and Muslims are still represented in many anthropological texts as fixed and unchanging, tethered to an imagined, unitary tradition. Anthropological studies have not yet caught up with the impact of migration, the Internet, or other global processes, and thus they represent Muslims abroad as caught between cultures or locked in an inevitable crisis of identity in which a rigidly defined faith is found to be at odds with the pluralism of western life.

The approach Marranci advocates involves examining the diverse ways Muslims feel and experience their religion, as well as the complex networks and interactions in which they locate themselves, particularly in the West. "Muslim," he writes, "has an emotional component attached to it. They *feel* to be Muslim. Then, and only then, the 'feeling to be' is rationalized, rhetoricized, and symbolized, exchanged, discussed, ritualized, orthodoxized or orthopraxized" (p. 8). Drawing on cognitive neuroscience, the author advocates exploring identity practices through this "feeling to be" Muslim

rather than continuing to depict Islam as an object “out there” that somehow imposes itself on humans and forms them into Muslims.

Marranci peppers his discussion of anthropological texts with examples from his own fieldwork, suggesting how an anthropology of Islam that began with the lived and felt experience of Muslims might look. In the second chapter, his fieldwork serves as an introduction to Islam’s beliefs, texts, and rituals. The third chapter offers an overview of how anthropologists, working primarily in the Anglo-American traditions, have used Islam as an entry point into the lives of Muslims. He critiques key texts by such authors as Clifford Geertz, Michael Gilsenan, and Talal Asad, but here maintains a focus on the anthropology of Islam, rather than on the anthropology of Muslim societies more generally. In the fourth chapter, Marranci includes work that focuses on the Muslim world more generally, calling for greater attention to the situation of Muslims in the West, particularly since September 11. Even those works that do attempt to describe Muslims in diaspora, he asserts, fall prey to generalizations about the “Muslim experience” as unitary despite different backgrounds, beliefs, and circumstances. Other chapters look at anthropologists’ representations of their fieldwork, conceptualizations of identity, works on gender and the *ummah* as imagined community.

Throughout most of the book, but particularly in the chapter on identity formation, Marranci draws on the work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio to argue that identity processes allow individuals not only to make sense of a self, but also to express this self symbolically in the world. Symbols then communicate to the world what an individual “feels to be,” namely, a Muslim. One of the problems with past anthropological studies of Islam lies in the fact that they rely more on the religion as a deterministic structure that conditions identity formation, rather than on the emotional environment or individual agency. Referring to his own work as a useful example, Marranci suggests other ways of conceptualizing Muslim identities to get around this problem, in addition to the aforementioned issues of essentialism and static representations of Muslims.

Defining an anthropology of Islam is not an easy endeavor, and hence it is not surprising that the scope of this work is occasionally confusing. For instance, while in some parts of the book he seems concerned with a strict anthropology of Islam, in other places he expands his critique to include works written about Muslim communities that do not take Islam itself as their primary focus or works written by non-anthropologists (such as Leila Ahmed). He is critical about early ethnographic studies that ignored Islam in favor of social organization and argues that there is too much focus on the Middle East and not enough on Muslims in the West, in the context of migra-

tion, or on non-heterosexual identity. Yet, must the sense of “feels to be Muslim” necessarily be at the center of such studies? And there are numerous studies (e.g., Carolyn Rouse and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad) that do focus on Muslims in the West, particularly on African-American Muslims and the Muslim American experience. Some of the problems Marranci addresses also might be said to plague anthropology as a whole: the tendency since the 1970s to equate gender solely with women (which in recent years, anthropologists have moved away from), or the fact that anthropologists working with Muslims are only communicating with other anthropologists and not with a wider public in need of less media-centric essentialism.

In a fairly slender volume, Marranci tackles a number of significant issues in the field, although there are some notable omissions: one thinks of the French ethnological tradition, Moroccan anthropologist Abdellah Hammoudi’s ethnographies on sacrifice and the hajj, Gregory Starrett’s article on the anthropology of Islam, Katherine Ewing’s work on Islam and psychoanalysis in Pakistan, or Dale Eickelman’s anthropological survey of the Middle East and Central Asia. Nevertheless, this book makes a notable effort to bring up weaknesses in the field and draw attention to promising methodological frameworks as well as future arenas for much needed study.

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