

The Anthropology of Islam Reader, edited by Jens Kreinath, London, Routledge, 2011, x + 420 pp., £27.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0415-78025-4

This thoughtfully prepared anthology of anthropological literature is the brainchild of Jens Kreinath. Elucidating the differences – and indeed the dimensions – of fastidious dramaturgical meta-narratives, tangential textual and verbal constructions, and tendentious eclecticism within various Muslim societies is a challenge that many would shy away from. The essential aim of the editor here is to “give original glimpses of the diversity of Islam through different anthropological accounts by showing how studying existing discourses and practices can contribute to a refined understanding of Muslims, their religion, and their practice” (p. 18) and in this he is largely successful. The received wisdom is that modern anthropology (indeed modern academia) owes a great deal to the late Edward Said and his magnum opus *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978). Since then, whilst continuing to stress the importance of interlocutory fieldwork, scholars have consciously moved away from traditional ethnocentric orientalism and towards a more carefully nuanced comprehension of the phenomenology and methodology and the accompanying theory. Contemporary anthropologists are more likely to quote Michel Foucault than Lord Cromer. This throws up periodic conundrums and controversies, naturally. Can earlier anthropological studies be relied upon? Conversely, if they cannot, where and how does the continuum of research root itself?

This *Reader* is divided into three main parts: anthropological approaches to Islam, religious practices of Islam, and methodological reflections upon the anthropology of Islam. Each section starts with a thematic outline by Kreinath with a helpful list of “suggested readings”, and the book itself contains 18 chapters by as many authors. The editor's précis can be a little verbose at times and these interpolations might have benefited from further editing themselves. Naturally most of the entries are by highly respected anthropologists or sociologists, such as Akbar S. Ahmed and Michael Gilson, for example, and Kreinath presents a very broad range of opposing theoretical perspectives from Clifford Geertz to Daniel M. Varisco. There are also articles by Barbara M. Cooper of Rutgers University, Holger Weiss of Åbo Akademi University in Finland, and Edward Said himself. For this reviewer, the 1999 essay by Cooper, a prominent American historian, entitled “The Strength in the Song: Muslim Personhood, Audible Capital, and Hausa Women's Performance of the *Hajj*” is certainly one of the high points of the book. Her insight is often cuttlingly lucid: “Two hackneyed phrases in English capture a certain impatient and impersonal sensibility regarding capital in the West: time is money, and talk is cheap. These phrases make little or no sense in Hausa-speaking Niger” (p. 198). Cooper's thought-provoking article explores the poetics of hegemonic culture to the medium of colonial resistance, the counter-hegemonic poetics of popular performance, feminine variants of the pilgrimage to Mecca, and issues of globalization, multiple modernities, and Muslim personhood.

Qualitative research, which Geertz and others recommend, is the art of putting the voices of the subjects into the writing and allowing those voices to represent themselves so that the traditional style of “writing from nowhere” that characterizes Western norms of objective knowledge simply vanishes – ideally so the reader discerns no prejudice, judgements or bias. Instead, the scholar picks comments made by his or her subjects and utilizes them to represent the subject's position – in order to avoid distortion – and trusts the intelligence of both the subject's material and the reader to draw a sensible conclusion and gain a better comprehension of all the issues. In a roundabout sense of things, this is what Kreinath is undertaking with this fine book – allowing students of Anthropology to witness the polyvocality of scholarship surrounding Islam and the Muslim world.

Editing other scholars' work is often difficult, and demarcating significant material for publication in a Reader equally so. Overall, two or three noteworthy omissions spring to mind here. Erich Kolig, author of *New Zealand's Muslims and Multiculturalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), might very well have contributed a useful Pacific perspective. An article by Ali Mazrui, Tone Bringa and/or Elizabeth Tonkin could also have been very instructive and helped to outline the hermetic personal trajectories and sociological contours of communal identity. Curiously, there is little discussion of the teleological ramifications of several decades of anthropology on or within the socio-politics of the Islamic world itself. I might also add that a few maps or images could have aided in the illustration of some of the more obscure intellectual allusions and subjects under discussion. Otherwise this is a fine collection. There are excellent notes and really useful bibliographical references that will provide first-rate guidance for scholars, students, teachers and future researchers. The two glossaries cover 65 pages and are helpfully divided into Anthropological and Islamic terms.

Books about anthropology have proliferated enormously over the past few decades, with mixed results and varying measures of methodological quality in the area of Islam. *The Anthropology of Islam Reader* can be heavy going at times, with profoundly in-depth discussions on the efficacy of formalized rituals and *Qudratihi*, for example, on-going fluid dialectical interactions, ambiguous centrifugal and structural functionalism, the paradox of incoherent moral subjectivity and soteriological fragmentation. Other such juxtaposed discursive frameworks and obdurate adjectives will leave the novice reader repeatedly flicking to the glossary or frequently reaching for a dictionary. However, this cognitive and vernacular dissonance does not overly distract from the editor's primary objective of providing a wide overview of the social projects (and indeed projections) of Islam and the available literature in this field. As a selection of highly analytical essays and paradigmatic case studies, it certainly covers all the basic aspects of Muslim life from Salat to Ramadan and the Hajj, and includes a healthy myriad of contrary academic opinions presented in a complimentary tone. This ambitious volume contains a lot of familiar material and in the final analysis will be a very useful pedagogical tool. It will appeal particularly to upper-level undergraduate and graduate students of both Anthropology and Sociology. Kreinath's cumulative tome makes compelling reading for anyone wanting to expand their personal knowledge of Islamic societies, and will be a useful and valued asset to any library.