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AMSOM - WP - 2018 - 05 - 003 (For Admin only)

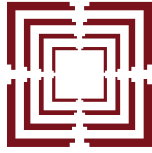
Understanding Islam: Towards a New Interpretative Approach

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Serial: AMSOM-WP-2018-05-003

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Abstract:

This article reviews some of the major works in sociology and social anthropology for a better understanding of Islam. Exploring the literature that addresses complexities involved in the textual and contextual making of Islam and 'Islamic', it discovers a conceptual way-out from the schematised understanding of Islam. This paper also delineates Islam as a constituted category, which emerges from its discursive engagement with modernity. Highlighting John Bowen's (2012) work on Islam, it suggests an interpretative approach to look at Islam's textual resources and practices in a socially informed as well as discursively conditioned manner.

Keywords:

Islam, lived Islam, Textual Islam, modernity, anthropology of Islam, interpretative approach

Introduction

Conceptualising religion/Islam is an unsettled question for the scholars of sociology and social anthropology. Contributing to this conundrum, Ernest Gellner (1981:1) defines Islam as 'the blueprint of a social order'. He details this definition as follows:

It [Islam] holds that a set of rules exists, eternal, divinely ordained, and independent of the will of men, which defines the proper ordering of society. This model [blueprint] is available in writing; it is equally and symmetrically available to all literate men, and to all those willing to heed to literate men. These rules are to be implemented throughout social life (*ibid.*:1).

At the outset, this definition facilitates Gellner's academic project, 'Sociology of Muslim community', which is designed to study the life and activities of Muslims, the followers of a 'single creed'. In his view, Islam primarily holds a set of divinely ordained written rules. These rules are available among the literate men and their allies for social execution. Moreover, he examines the dealings of this 'blueprint' among Muslims. The Islamic blueprint, however, is conditioned by social forces, including specific socio-cultural conundrums in which Islam is enacted. Furthermore, social history, critical events, ideological postulates, discursive practices, social processes, community discourses among others, shape Islam and its interpretations.ⁱ As against Gellnerian understanding of religion in terms of blueprints, this review paper accounts for the making of Islam at diverse crossroads. Suffice to say, the anthropological literature is used to discuss the blurring connections/reciprocities between the 'internalities' and 'externalities' of religion.

Clifford Geertz (1968) deals with the shaping forces of Islam in two 'civilizations', Indonesian and Moroccan. 'Illuminationism', a 'cultural style' derived from the Indic tradition, nurtures the classical Islam in Indonesia. Islam, at this point, is articulated in the form of 'illuminationism', which exhibits the Indic attributes such as 'inwardness, imperturbability, patience, poise, sensibility, aestheticism [and] elitism [...] (*ibid.*: 54)'. While, the innate 'maraboutism'—another 'cultural style'—determines classical Islam in Morocco with the features including 'activism, fervor, impetuosity, nerve, toughness, moralism, populism and an almost obsessive self-assertion [...] (*ibid.*: 54)'. Geertz depicts the contents as well as the meanings of Islam as special things in these two different

'civilizations'. Unlike Gellner, Geertz's study of Islam has the merit of exploring its distinct cultural attributes in diverse historical and geographical contexts. According to Abdul Hamid el-Zein (1977: 231), Geertz nevertheless understands Islam as a 'unified religious tradition'. Therefore, he uses the terms such as 'Islamic', 'Islamic consciousnesses' or 'Islamic reform'. In el-Zein's view, these kinds of unified and universal analytical usages in Geertz's study appear from his adopted theoretical notion of human existence that absorbs various cultural expressions into some fixed forms, such as 'Islamic' and 'Islamic reform' (*ibid.*: 231). His theoretical notion emphasises the 'subtle premise of the unity of religious meaning' in general and of Islam, in particular. Geertz's theoretical frame thus fails to address the immanent logic/attributes of both the cultures and their bearers that certainly shape Islam.

There are several approaches in social anthropology that go beyond the essentialist understandings of religion (Tambiah 1970; Singer 1972; Eickelman 1982). For example, el-Zein (1977) in his 'search for the anthropology of Islam [religion]' rejects the studies that illustrate universal, fixed and bounded nature of religion, and he conceptualises religion as an 'arbitrary category'. This move, unfortunately, dismisses the relevance of religion as an analytical category and dissolves its conceptual evaluation as well. In another analytical move, Michael Gilson (1982) depicts Islam as, that, what Muslims designate as 'Islam' and consider as 'Islamic'. He equalises the informants' account of Islam and Islamic with anthropologist's documentation of Islam (Asad 1986:2). Instead of this approach, Asad understands Muslim's and other's accounts of Islam, or Islamic, with regard to multifarious discursive social forces and discourses (*ibid.*:7).

Interrogating the 'Lived' and 'Textual' Islam Approach

As part of accounting for the shaping forces of Islam, the advocates of 'lived Islam' thesis discover the strong presence of indigenous traits in Islam, which follows minimal Islamic scriptural instructions. With and without Robert Redfield's conceptual tool for understanding society—the concept of 'little tradition' and 'great tradition'—a wide range of ethnographies explore distinctive formations of Islam through adaptation, accommodation and conflict with the local culture (see, e.g., Ahmad 1981; Gaborieu 1989; Waseem 2003; Ahmad & Reifeld 2004; Roy 2005). In these works, practicing Islam(s) is denoted as lived Islam, folk Islam, heteropraxy, Indian Islam, syncretism, composite Islam, liminal Islam, compatible Islam, and so on. On similar lines, Imtiaz Ahmad, the Indian

proponent of the 'lived Islam' thesis, in his edited volumes (Ahmad 1973; 1976; 1981) explores the diversity as well as local features of 'Indian Islam' that range from 'caste-like social stratification' to 'saint worship'. Ahmad (1981:81) states that the nature of Indian Islam is that it is 'heavily underlined by elements which are accretions from the local environment'.

Emphasising the local facets in the practice of Islam, Imtiaz Ahmad and his colleagues describe Islam as an 'indigenised' category. In their view, it has much to do with the local cultural practices but has hardly to do with Islamic textual traditions. Conceptually, they divide Islam into two analytical categories, namely, 'lived Islam' and 'textual Islam', and assign them as an exclusive subject matter for anthropologists and theologians, respectively.ⁱⁱ This division is invoked to place lived Islam in and around the indigenous religious and customary faiths as well as practices. Scriptural Islam, the other category, is perceived independently as a single entity that does not compromise with contextual practices, or with historical forces. The advocates of this schematised view of Islam disregard the enactments of Islamic scriptural theology in the practice of religion, or vice versa. Illustrating this point, Veena Das (1984) advocates for 'folk theology', and proposes 'folk theological anthropology', for studying the phenomenon of Islam. T.N. Madan (2007) explores the involvement of lived practices for building Islamic scripts and their varied understandings. Moreover, there are ethnographic and historical works which interrogate the schematisation of Islam. These works describe the complex interactions and 'blurring orientations' of the so-called textual and lived Islam (Metcalf 1982; Green 2005; Kresse 2007) through the cases of 'Sufi reformism' or 'reformist traditionalism'. These variants of Islam are constituted not by the above mentioned Islamic schema, but by responding to the powerful discourses and changing institutional relations of modernity.

Modernity and Making of Islam

The interrelationship between modernity and Islam has gained focus in a range of studies.ⁱⁱⁱ Contrary to the 'incompatibility thesis' of Islam and modernity (Lewis 1988; Huntington 1996), Gellner (1981:7) placed Islamic movements nearer to modernity due to their mutual sharing of 'obvious criteria [such as] universalism, scripturalism, spiritual egalitarianism, [...] and the rational systematization of social life [...]'. In other words, Gellner finds out the similar internal values in both Islam and modernity. But 'nothing

intrinsic to Islam – or, for that matter, to any other religion – makes it *inherently* democratic or undemocratic [by extension, compatible with the said ideals of modernity] (Bayat 2007:4: emphasis added)ʹ.

We, the social agent, determine the inclusive or authoritarian thrust of religion because, from this perspective, religion is nothing but a body of beliefs and ideas that invariably make claims to authentic meaning and a “higher truth”[of said modernity, here] (ibid.:4).

Bayat, in short, impedes the question of the compatibility or incompatibility of Islam and modernity, by directing the investigation towards *the conditions* in which Muslims (or other actors) make them compatible or incompatible. For instance, the colonial occupation of Libya conditioned Islam as ‘resistance’ amongst Sanusi, a Sufi order in Cyrenaica.^{iv} Geertz (1968) discusses modernity’s enactment as ‘scripturalist interlude’ that has produced a ‘counter–tradition’ against the ‘classical styles’. Further, it shaped ‘secular religiosity’ in Morocco and separated ‘personal piety’ from ‘public life’ in Indonesia (*ibid.*: 107). Afterward, this Indonesia–specific variant transcended to ‘civil Islam’ (Hefner 2000).

Through the administrative and disciplinary practices of colonial and postcolonial modernity, the communities in India were re–articulated on religious grounds as Hindus, Muslims, or Christians, and their connection with the state variously designed and practiced (van der Veer 2001, 2002). Contrary to the notion of a rational public sphere, the Indian public sphere was shaped by religious movements and their various articulations of resistance and accommodation with the conditions of modernity. Such movements, organisations, leaders and practitioners multifariously negotiated with modernity, and produced so–called varieties of reformism, revivalism, religious modernism, fundamentalism or communalism. Here, it is worthwhile to take note of Shail Mayaram’s work (1997) to illustrate some dimensions of modern religion. The Meos, a community situated between Hinduism and Islam, was forced to abandon their ‘liminality’ to an Islamic identity that has been circulated variously by both Indian state as well as Tablighi Jamaat (Society for Spreading Faith), a spiritual Islamic reformation movement founded by Muhammad Ilyas in 1926. Mayaram also illustrates how Meos creates their resistance, importantly through myths and memories.

Darul Uloom Deoband, Tablighi Jamaat, Aligarh Movement, Ahl al-Hadith and Jamaat-e-Islami are the major Indian variants of modern Islam. Contrary to the so-called Sufi-charismatic base of Indian Islam, the modern Islamic varieties developed notions of Islam by quoting and interpreting Islamic texts, primarily the Quran and *hadit*, through *ijtihad* ('critical thinking').^v Moreover, they dismiss the conventions of the *ulama*, namely, *taqlid* ('imitation').^{vi} These varieties of modern Islam constituted by means of dismissing 'lived' Islam(s) through certain Islamic textual claims and by negotiating with different manifestations of modernity. Indeed, these studies recognise the combination of 'modernisation' with 'Islamisation' (see Robinson 1983, 2000).

It is also important to trace how the political developments in post-Independence India conditioned Islam. Through Indian independence, Islam becomes a religion of 'minority community', whose religious and cultural rights were protected by the Indian Constitution. Indian secularism was articulated to defend the rights of, and to ensure justice for, the minorities (Mahajan 2003). It also conceptualised to protect their distinctive identity from majoritarian politics. The constitutional measures such as Muslim personal laws, minority rights or protective discrimination were implemented. Religious organisations consolidated in line with new arenas of politics, culture and economy (Hansen 2001; van der Veer 2002). Their notion of Islam was shaped by multifarious discursive developments, including the discourses and practices associated with Shah Bano/Muslim personal law. Needless to say, Hindu Right thoroughly reshuffled the nature of Islam and Islamic movement in India (see e.g., Simpson 2008; Ahmad 2009).

The Constitution of Islam and Islamic

Here it is noteworthy to discuss the basic tenets of Islam, or its 'constitutive practices and resources'. They consist the Quran, *hadit*, *sharia*, *ulama* and the five pillars of Islam, namely, the *shahada* (testimony), *salat* (five time prayer), *zakat* (alms giving), *saum* (fasting during the month of Ramadan) and *hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime). Sami Zubaida (1995) accounts for the emergence of those universal cultural items in Muslim lands from the common historical reference point. However, he explores different meanings and the roles of *ulama* in different socio-political contexts, hence he reflects upon the scholarly mistake of considering them as a sociological or political 'constants' (*ibid*: 152-53). The Quran and *hadit*—the primary texts of the Islamic articulations and the movements—are learned, read, recited, interpreted and practiced

variously (Sells 1999; Vatuk 2008; Huq 2008). *Sharia*, according to Talal Asad (1986), has a partial disciplinary power in the Muslim world when we compare it with that of the modern secular state. Highlighting this point, he writes: ‘the administrative and legal regulations of such secular states are far more pervasive and effective in controlling the details of people’s lives than anything to be found in Islamic history [such as *sharia*] (*ibid.*: 13)’. Drawing from this argument one could easily situate Muslim personal law—an Indian variant of *sharia*—in a variety of constitutive practices, including nation’s legacies of colonial legal system, the Constitutional Rights of the minorities, various court judgments and political mobilisations of Muslims, among others. The five pillars also have meanings and performativity in different settings.^{vii}

It is with reference to Talal Asad’s (1986) paper titled ‘*the Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*’ in general and his concept ‘discursive tradition’ in particular, many of the anthropological studies account for the ways in which Muslims make use of the textual traditions to inform social practices.^{viii} These studies underline religion as a category of negotiation within the contesting spheres of culture, politics and economy. Indeed, these accounts document the wide range of historically–situated specific social practices and their role in constituting Islam as a recognisable entity. Islamic transformation is also studied in relation to specific social practices which constitute it. It is by taking the issue of historically defined discourses and practices seriously, according to Asad (1986:7), one can appreciate Islam.

To conclude this discussion John R. Bowen’s (2012) recent study, ‘*A New Anthropology of Islam*’ shall be introduced. In this work, the author gives an operational approach to the religion/Islam and second, he dwells on the everyday production of Islam in relation to social processes. John R. Bowen (2012:3) states:

[...] Islam is best seen as a set of interpretative resources and practices. From Islam’s resources of texts, ideas, and methods comes the sense, that all Muslims participate in a long–term and worldwide tradition. From Islam’s practices of worshipping, judging and struggling comes the capacity to adapt, challenge, and diversify. [...] specific to what I am calling a “new anthropology of Islam” is the insistence that the analysis begins with individual’s efforts to grapple with those resources and shape those practices in meaningful ways[...]. Whether with respect

to politics, or purification, Muslims justify what they do by tracing contemporary understanding back to originating and authenticating acts.

Bowen dissolves operationalisation of Islam from the given textual tradition. Instead, he examines how people drawing on textual traditions to inform and engage with social practices. To understand this, he uses two complementary interpretative analytical strategies, namely, 'focusing inward' and 'opening outward' (*ibid.*:3–4). The former one focuses more on the 'intentions, understandings, and emotions' surrounded in religious practices. As a data set, here emphasis has been given to individual testimonies and histories. The second strategy is employed to explore 'the social significance of, and conditions for, these religious practices' (*ibid.*: 4). Through his analytical strategy, Bowen explores contingent and contextual nature of religious interpretation and action. Indeed, his notion of Islam 'increasingly seeks to understand how particular Muslims come to understand and use particular passages', in a socially informed or/and conditioned manner (*ibid.* 4).

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ⁱ See, for example, the notion of folk theology (Das 1984: 297–98) in this context.

ⁱⁱ Social anthropology has a tradition of dividing Islam into two substantial categories, based on either space (urban vs. tribal settlement) or human involvement (*ulama* vs. saint) or doctrines (*sharia* vs. charisma) (See, e.g., Geertz 1968; Gellner 1981).

ⁱⁱⁱ *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, Volume 5& 6 (Robinson ed. 2010; Hefner ed. 2010, respectively) discusses various facets of Islam against European modernity/colonialism. To understand the conceptual issues associated with this encounter, see, for example, Masud, Salvatore and Bruinessen (2009) and for an anthropological reader, see, Kreinath (2012).

^{iv} Evans–Pritchard’s study (1949[1999]) entitled, ‘*The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*’ is considered to be the *first* detailed anthropological account on Islam and Muslim society. In this study he uses social structural approach to study a Sufi order, namely, Sanusiya in Cyrenaica, Libya. It stresses the mechanism involved in the establishment of a Sufi order in the Trans–Saharan trade routes, and explores its role in an agitation against Italian occupation of Libya.

^v Addressing meaning of the term *ijtihad*, Jens Kreinath (2012: 385) writes, ‘the term refers to the rational and new interpretation of the Qur’an and the written Islamic tradition [...] by individual Muslims, but it stands in clear contrast to the complete innovation[...] in the form of ritual worship[...]’.

^{vi} This term has meanings such as acceptance, tradition or imitation. It, according to Jens Kreinath (2012: 404), ‘refers to the obedience of traditionally accepted values as the received way of doing things in human affairs and the willingness to follow the judgment of Islamic jurisprudence’.

^{vii} See, for example, Mahmood (2001) & Henkel (2005) on *salat*; Frankl (1996) & Schielke (2009) on *swam*; Scupin (1982) & Cooper (1999) on *hajj*; Werbner (1988) on the feast of sacrifice; Weiss (2002) & Benthall (1999) on *zakat*.

^{viii} See, for example, essays in the special issues of the *Modern Asian Studies* (2008: Volume 42) and the *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute* (2009: S1–S240).