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Anthropology of the Middle East: An Overview

Review by Solaiman M. Fazel

A Companion to the Anthropology of the Middle East

by Soraya Altorki, ed.

Wiley, 2015

Soraya Altorki's edited volume advances our understanding of a number of issues setting at the core of the Anthropology of the Middle East. Given the vast size of the region and the diversity of topics presented by the scholars, this volume is neither an exhaustive country profile nor solely an account of where ethnographic research stands nowadays with respect to each topic. According to Altorki, *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Middle East* (2015) focuses on three interrelated points: (1) the main theoretical and methodological questions that anthropologists have asked about their topic in recent decades, (2) the existing gaps or "silences" in the academic literature, and (3) the future direction of anthropological research in a region that is undergoing socio-economic and demographic changes (Altorki, xxi). The contributors of this volume effectively demonstrate that the Middle East is not a dormant region. It is rather a dynamic region composed of old and new urbanites living in stratified societies who are also engaged in the global flow of ideals and materials in the existing Information Age (Kozma et. al 2015).

The volume, wherever applicable, weaves local topics or microhistories into broader trends that transcends the parochial narrative of the nation-states and the compartmentalized view of area studies professionals. The contributors successfully navigate the boundaries of the nation-states by situating their study within the wider anthropological themes. By focusing on the interrelated cultures, histories, and identities of the peoples in the overland archipelago we call the Middle East, it makes this volume useful for other social scientists and historians who have an academic interest in the theoretical and

methodological questions. Integrating the Middle East as part and parcel of the global developments also breakdowns the outdated Occidental/Oriental binary (Lockman 2004).

A Companion to the Anthropology of the Middle East comprises twenty-five chapters arranged into five units. Twenty-four chapters are written by a range of reputable scholars (including native or/and “halfie” academics), a research fellow, a post-doctoral fellow, and one chapter is written by a capable doctoral candidate. The objective of the five units under the headings of “Introduction: Theoretical and Conceptual,” “Culture and Everyday Life,” “Social Relations and Social Movements,” “Law, Politics, and the State,” and “Pop Culture and New Media” are as follows:

The four chapters in unit one addresses the overall theoretical and methodological questions facing the anthropology of the Middle East. Kandiyoti’s chapter highlights the troubled legacies of Oriental Studies and Colonial Age knowledge production, which lasted until the end of the Second World War. The decolonization period coincided with the Cold War, 1945-92. Cold War rivalries led to the creation of area studies in the U.S., which at times treated the entire “Muslim world” region as an island by itself without giving their internal aspirations much thought. Deniz Kandiyoti argues that the field of post-colonial studies that gained prominence in the 1970s produced a more nuanced analysis than what the proponents of linear modernity and staged development had offered. Post-colonial studies has had a deep impact on the anthropology of the Middle East before the start of the unipolar world order in 1992, which gave rise to the recent paradigm of globalization (p 7). For Kandiyoti, the anthropology of the Middle East is currently faced with polarized discourses of the past and deteriorating fieldwork access now facing parts of the region. This bleak landscape raises the risk of ethno-nationalist biases that tries to homogenize the nation with a primordial past at the expense of silencing the minority populations (Anderson 2006, Appadurai 1996).

Suad Joseph in chapter two, acknowledges the gaps and silences in the anthropology of the Middle East, but argues that since the 1970s the field has become less of an area studies project (p 17). She supports her claim by bringing some of the newer publications into the discussion. Altorki’s chapter centers on structure/agency debate in the context of the Mideast. She draws our attention to two key theoretical developments that occurred in the 1970s: First, attention is placed on macro-systems with stress on the importance of uneven power relations, and second, attention is placed on the importance of post-structuralism (p 41-2). In the final chapter of unit one, Steven C. Caton agrees with Saud Joseph

that “Middle East studies has become a global undertaking” (p 75). Apart from the notable theoretical developments of the 1970s, Caton reminds us of another significant event - the OPEC oil embargo in 1973-74, which generated a tsunami of studies.

Unit two of the volume consists of six chapters that focus on day-to-day cultural practices. Martin Stokes in chapter five tells us of the lack of studies on “aesthetics” in anthropology since the 1960s. He argues that beauty has a central place in the day-to-day life of the Muslims. Stokes refers to the role of “religious pop” music that has accompanied the Islamists rise to power in Turkey (p 92). In chapter six, Amira Mittermaier says that the Arab Spring of 2011 brought with it not only a powerful eruption of “street politics,” but also of dream talk (p 107). For Amira, dream is used metaphorically to indicate the aspirations of the Egyptian youth before their civil protest in Tahrir Square was hijacked by the better organized and financed Islamists. The youth’s dream encompasses personal freedoms, social justice, human dignity, democratization, employment opportunities, and a higher standard of living for all and not just for the well-connected.

Another key academic development in the late-1970s was the emergence of anthropology of Islam. Nada Moumtaz’s chapter, “Refiguring Islam,” argues for approaching Islam as a discursive tradition and not ascribing “everything Muslims do and say to Islam” (p 125). For Moumtaz, scholars should also take into account the consequences of the capitalistic market economy on the Muslim majority societies. Moumtaz agrees with Talal Asad of the need to understand Islam historically – within the context of its political economies, and not equating Islam with previous social structures and dynastic rule. For Moumtaz, the risk of not applying the discursive approach to Middle Eastern societies would further complicate the encounter of Islamic tradition(s) with Modernity. The new discursive approach is understood to create space for Sunni, Shi’a, and Sufi opinions to coexist in a future-oriented society.

Moving to another topic, Shahla Haeri in chapter eight states that unlike sex, sexuality is a cultural production. For Haeri, understanding sexuality in today’s cosmopolitan areas requires more than an analysis of the legal and sociopolitical structures that regulate sexuality and gender relation (p 151). For Haeri, the *hudud* or the frontiers of sexuality and gender relations are laid out in the Qur’an, and have been elaborated upon and codified into different schools of Islamic law by the earlier jurists during Islam’s expansion (p 152). Muslim feminists and scholars are now challenging the old patriarchal and doctrinal monopoly of sacred knowledge by previous jurists. Livia Wick’s chapter defies the Orientalist

view of the Muslim women as symbols of oppression and eroticization by showing the ways in which Muslim nurses and midwives participate in today's labor market (p 184). The final chapter in unit two is by J. Andrew Bush, which brings into the conversation the question of what counts as politics in poetry? Bush argues that the dominant cultural paradigms are renewed through poetry recitation since poetry applies obligation and attachment across a set of relationships that pluralizes the subject (p 201). To support his argument, Bush focuses on several works and parses out the political messages in these poems.

Chapters eleven to seventeen makeup the third unit. Jessica Newman and Marcia C. Inhorn's chapter is asserting that medical anthropology is now a vibrant field from Afghanistan to Morocco and nearly 10% of the published books in the last five decades focuses on pertinent medical issues. One reason for this surge in public health studies is war. Violence causes displacement of people and wealth, underdevelopment, and scarcity of clean water, especially among the lower economic strata (p 208). At the same time for Newman and Inhorn, missing are in-depth ethnographies on the social impact of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, and the absence of sex education. The unaccountability of the states in relation to wealth distribution/generation, sidelining of women and minorities, and unsustainable development are mentioned by Nicholas S. Hopkins in chapter twelve (p 234).

Dawn Chatty's chapter brings to light the groups of people who have been forced to relocate over the past 150 years in various parts of the Middle East. Chatty argues that anthropology can play a role in studying the immigrant experiences that are mostly left out of the nationalist accounts. Ilana Feldman raises the key question about the ethics of intervention. Feldman asks, is intervention led by principles of neutrality and impartiality, known as "humanitarianism" or is intervention grounded on the basis of geopolitics and political calculation (p 264)? Chapter fifteen authored by Paul A. Silverman fits nicely with the prior two chapters. For Silverman, family genealogies, *nisba*, links communities of people across space (p 282). Thus, historical anthropology (also known as ethnohistory, an established sub-field in anthropology) is a suitable research method to record fragmented histories and preserve cultures of people who have relocated and are now divided by political borders (Fazel 2017).

Ella Shohat's work is divided into two shorter chapters centered on different aspects of the Mizrahi people living in Israel. She discusses the paradox of Arab-Jewish identity. Shohat writes in Israel the "official Israeli/Zionist policy denies the Arabness of the Arab Jews" by coercing the non-European

Jews to realign their identity according to the Euro-Israeli paradigm (p 317). Shohat's next chapter contextualizes the development of pan-Oriental communities within Israel. She also defines what the term Mizrahi actually means. The final chapter in unit three is by Zeina Zaatari. It engages with a timely theoretical topic: what constitutes a social movement in the region. Zaatari's section is also a nice transition to topics of law, politics, and the state that are discussed in unit four.

Unit four consists of six chapters and the contributors examine the themes of religion, courts, and secularism as a result of interaction with capitalism. Hussein Ali Agrama offers insights on the relationship between Sharia and Liberal law within Egypt. Agrama's research shows that Sharia law is "not much" used, but Qur'an verses are applied in cases dealing with theft, homicide, assault, fraud, contract, inheritance, and criminal and civil procedures (p 363). Agrama also points out that Asab al-nuzul, which give historical context to the Qur'anic verses must be taken into consideration in cases where Sharia is used as part of the case arguments (p 364).

Chapter nineteen talks about the different NGOs that operate in the coastal city of Aqaba. The Education for Employment Foundation (EFE) program that was established after 9/11 was an effort to train, find jobs, and alleviate poverty for the growing youth population in Jordan through microcredit (p 391). The lack of ethnographies centered on political economies of the Middle East is stated by Julia Elyachar. The consequences of neoliberal economics on the peoples of the region remains largely understudied. Elyachar claims that Arab Spring was in part a movement against the outrageous thievery of public goods, national wealth, and dignity itself by the local crony-capitalists (p 411).

Michelle Obedi's chapter echoes part of Elyachar's arguments. Obedi tells us that masses in the Middle East "region are seeking radical change that is fundamentally about social, economic, and political justice, and one that is articulated through the vocabulary of dignity and rights" (p 434). Al-Rustam in chapter twenty-two examines the experiences of Anatolian Armenians who remained in the Anatolian plateau. Al-Rustam suggests that many cultural traits (folk songs, culinary practices, vocabularies, and memories) transcends the boundaries between the Balkans and the ethno-sectarian states that materialized out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire (p 452). The last chapter of unit four is written by Kamran Asdar Ali. Ali focuses on the vast demographic shift toward urban living in the broader Middle East region. He states that unlike the urban studies of the past, which focused on the topics of globalizing metropolis and popular neighborhoods, recent studies in the emergent field of Middle East

urban studies has taken on the task of studying small or medium size cities. For Ali, cities are vibrant hubs where various histories, cultures, and worldviews collide, coexist, and coalesce to overcome differences and create trust (and at times mistrust) (p 480-6).

The final unit of Soraya Al-Torki's edited volume consists of two chapters. Unit five draws our attention the themes of music, pop culture, and social media. In chapter twenty-four, Schaefer argues that music retains a central place in Middle Eastern societies despite the shortage of attention given to it by scholars. He claims that more than any other cultural feature music offers a unifying synergy (p 496). Schaefer's chapter offers a description of Middle Eastern music and popular culture and explores the crucial role that music plays in the revolutions and uprisings (p 496). The concluding chapter of this volume discusses the uses of social media during the Arab uprisings in 2011. Mark A. Peterson discusses the positive and negative roles of the new media in non-democratic societies of the Middle East. The non-democratic states apply technologies to record and monitor a person's digital footprint, which then enables them to arrest dissenters. Hence, the cycle of oppression and silencing continues.

The writing throughout is clear and engaging. Graduate sociocultural anthropology students, advanced undergraduates, and specialists will find this survey book valuable. Parts of this volume are also essential for policymakers since some of discussed anthropological themes are now at the core of contemporary world affairs. The extensive bibliographies at the end of each chapter include new publications, which are convenient sources for researchers and students as this volume is not an in-depth discussion of the array of topics, themes, and approaches characterizing the anthropology of the Middle East.

A Companion to the Anthropology of the Middle East also has some minor shortcomings. Absent are timelines, images, maps, tables, and illustrations to help the non-specialist readers. Missing are case-studies focused on Christians, Indus, and Zoroastrians living in the region. Lacking are studies on environmental anthropology. Needed are ethnographic discussions of 1979, a turning point year in Afghanistan and Iran.

In conclusion, many of raised issues in this compilation point to the ongoing efforts of state-formation and nation-building at a time when the anthropological studies of the state remains fairly small. Without ethnographies focused on state-formation, key issues like minorities and the state relations,

ethnic and sectarian identity formation at the expense of an inclusive national identity, and what Eric Foner calls “who owns history” will remain at the core of social turmoil. The question of how to respond to the aspirations of the people remains unanswered at a time when politics seems to be moving in favor of strongmen and dictators.

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