ANTHROPOLOGISTS: ISLAMIC AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract
In this paper we would argue that it is important for Islamic and western 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. Anthropology is a child of Western imperialism. It has roots in the humanist visions of the Enlightenment, but as a university discipline and a modern science it came into its own in the last decades of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. This was the period in which the Western nations were making their final push to bring practically the whole pre-industrial, non-Western world under their political and economic control.

Keywords: Anthropologists, Islam, Western

INTRODUCTION
It is striking that professional anthropologists who conducted fieldwork in many colonial settings in centuries tended to ignore Islam and Muslim societies or simply left the study of Islam and Muslims to historians and/or those trained as Orientalists. Some anthropologists did, however, write about Islam and Muslims at the height of European colonial rule, notably E.E. Evans-Pritchard. His study of the Sanusiyya – a Sufi order – in Libya (Evans-Pritchard 1949) was perhaps the first anthropological study focused on Islam and Muslim society per se (Soares and Osella, 2009). There are several contending varieties of Islamic anthropology, set out in at least four books and numerous articles published during the 1980s.

It 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

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publications on the theme by Akbar Ahmed (Toward Islamic Anthropology and Discovering Islam); and the book by Merrylyn 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 (Ardener 1985). 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. 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. 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, in this peeper we would argue that it is important for Islamic and western 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.

ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology is the study of humans, past and present. To understand the full sweep and complexity of cultures across all of human history, anthropology draws and builds upon knowledge from the social and biological sciences as well as the humanities and physical sciences. A central concern of anthropologists is the application of knowledge to the solution of human problems (Vermeulen, 2006).

Historically, anthropologists in the United States have been trained in one of four areas: sociocultural anthropology, biological/physical anthropology, archaeology, and linguistics. Anthropologists often integrate the perspectives of several of these areas into their research, teaching, and professional lives.

Sociocultural Anthropology - Cultural anthropology is more akin to philosophy, literature and the arts, while social anthropology to sociology and history. In sociocultural anthropology is guided in part by cultural relativism, the attempt to understand other societies in terms of their own cultural symbols and values (Ingold, 1994). Sociocultural anthropologists examine social patterns and practices across cultures, with a special interest in how people live in particular places and how they organize, govern, and create meaning. A hallmark of sociocultural anthropology is its concern with similarities and differences, both within and among societies, and its attention to race, sexuality, class, gender, and nationality. Research in sociocultural anthropology is distinguished by its emphasis on participant observation, which involves placing oneself in the research context for extended periods of time to gain a first-hand sense of how local knowledge is put to work in grappling with practical problems of everyday life and with basic philosophical problems of knowledge, truth, power, and justice. Topics of concern to sociocultural anthropologists include such areas as health, work, ecology and environment, education, agriculture and development, and social change (Rapport and Overing, 2007).

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Biological (or Physical) Anthropology - Biological Anthropology and Physical Anthropology are synonymous terms to describe anthropological research focused on the study of humans and non-human primates in their biological, evolutionary, and demographic dimensions. It examines the biological and social factors that have affected the evolution of humans and other primates, and that generate, maintain or change contemporary genetic and physiological variation (Lewis, 2005). In other hands, biological anthropologists seek to understand how humans adapt to diverse environments, how biological and cultural processes work together to shape growth, development and behavior, and what causes disease and early death. In addition, they are interested in human biological origins, evolution and variation. They give primary attention to investigating questions having to do with evolutionary theory, our place in nature, adaptation and human biological variation. To understand these processes, biological anthropologists study other primates (primatology), the fossil record (paleoanthropology), prehistoric people (bioarchaeology), and the biology (e.g., health, cognition, hormones, growth and development) and genetics of living populations (Robbins & Larkin, 2007).

Archaeology - Archaeologists study past peoples and cultures, from the deepest prehistory to the recent past, through the analysis of material remains, ranging from artifacts and evidence of past environments to architecture and landscapes. Material evidence, such as pottery, stone tools, animal bone, and remains of structures, is examined within the context of theoretical paradigms, to address such topics as the formation of social groupings, ideologies, subsistence patterns, and interaction with the environment. Like other areas of anthropology, archaeology is a comparative discipline; it assumes basic human continuities over time and place, but also recognizes that every society is the product of its own particular history and that within every society there are commonalities as well as variation ((Robbins & Larkin, 2007; Kehoe, 1998).

Linguistic Anthropology - Linguistic anthropology (also called anthropological linguistics) is the comparative study of ways in which language reflects and influences social life. Linguistic anthropology seeks to understand the processes of human communications, verbal and non-verbal, variation in language across time and space, the social uses of language, and the relationship between language and culture. It is the branch of anthropology that brings linguistic methods to bear on anthropological problems, linking the analysis of linguistic forms and processes to the interpretation of sociocultural processes. Linguistic anthropologists often draw on related fields including sociolinguistics, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, semiotics, discourse analysis, and narrative analysis (Salzmann, 1993).

DISCUSSION
The anthropology of religion involves the study of religious institutions in relation to other social institutions, and the comparison of religious beliefs and practices across cultures. Modern anthropology assumes that there is complete continuity between magical thinking and religion, (Cassirer, 1944) and that every religion is a cultural product, created by the human community that worships it (Braun, McCutcheon, 2000). 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. (Ba-
Yunus and Ahmad 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 (Ba-Yunus and Ahmad 1985:
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 (Wyn Davies 1988: 82, 113).

The Western anthropology of Islam is a historical: 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 viceregentship), 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” (Wyn Davies 1988). 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 (Wyn Davies 1988: 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. (Wyn Davies 1988:129)

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” (Wyn Davies 1988: 142). Distinct also are its boundaries with other disciplines; unlike Western anthropology, Islamic anthropology is basic social science.

CONCLUSION
In a recent essay entitled ‘The Christianity of Anthropology’, Fenella Cannell (2005) asserts that an uncomfortable gap exists between many Christians’ explanations for their own religious practices and anthropological assumptions about Christianity. Cannell marshals her discussion on the Christianity of anthropology in reference to her fieldwork amongst American Mormons, a Christian tradition that well suits her heretical purposes. One enduring anthropological construction of Christianity is of its spirit / flesh distinction, the conviction of its asceticism and other-worldliness. Another has been the assumption, following Weber, that ‘Christianity was important mainly or only as a harbinger of secular modernity’ (Cannell 2005: 340). For Cannell, the ascetic currents in Christianity privileged in anthropological models constitute just one powerful theological orthodoxy, an orthodoxy that evolved ‘intension with contrasting strands of Christian thinking on the physical’ (Cannell2005: 341), those of the Mormons among them.

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).

Recently a number of anthropologists, and of students, have complained that cultural and social anthropology is failing to tackle significant problems of the modern world. Anthropology is a child of Western imperialism. It has roots in the humanist visions of the Enlightenment, but as a university discipline and a modern science it came into its own in the last decades of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

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