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How to Study Religion in the Muslim World

Reflection on a Field Work Experience in the Middle of Morocco

From their very beginning up to now, the anthropological and sociological approaches to religion have disclosed two characteristics that may be pointed to as *sensitivity* and *complexity*.

Concerning the first characteristic, we notice that the anthropological and sociological study of religion was and still is creating a great deal of excitement and protest among religious people, especially those who are orthodox. The appearance of the anthropological approach to religion is a good case in point. When the pioneer anthropological studies appeared in the western culture, they were dismissed as studies of superstition which are farther afield from the advanced western religion, morality and civilization. That these studies have been considered as such has in itself contributed to making them objective and impartial analyses. In this vein, "one could ask searching questions about the historicity of myth among Polynesians; when asked in relation to Christianity, these same questions were, until quite recently, deeply threatening" (Geertz 1968: 398). The history of religious anthropology has recorded many victims of *sensitivity*, as an example we may refer to the case of the prominent Robertson Smith whose study of the ancient Sumerians resulted in his expulsion from Oxford University under the charge of atheism and heresy.

As for the second characteristic, *complexity*, it is concerned with the elusive nature of religion. The latter is a dimension that cannot be measured as easily as economic change. While theological and philosophical studies are concerned with religion relying upon contemplating religious texts, anthropological and sociological studies are concerned with religion as a reality relying upon how it exists in everyday life. That is why it is very difficult to delimit its boundaries. Religion is spread all over and combined with everything. The question, as Geertz maintains, is not to define religion but to find it (Geertz 1971: 1). If religion is restricted to particular institutions in western

societies on account of their laic historical experience, it seems to be predominant in the majority of Islamic societies to the extent that it becomes difficult to distinguish between what belongs to Allah and what to Caesar. And this is due to the particularity of each Islamic society and to the specificity of its historical experience.

*1. Tell Me How You Conduct Your Research, I Will Tell You
What You Will Come up with.*

Recently, sociologists and anthropologists have started avoiding methodological debates to the extent that most of them keep silent about the theoretical perspective that underpins/orientates their studies. Their silence now extends to include fieldwork with all its techniques and the difficulties it encounters — from the interviewer/interviewee relationship to data collection and categorization. It appears that their silence is due to their underestimation of the importance of fieldwork in determining the credibility of the study. But this is not true since fieldwork is fundamental to sociological analysis. Also it appears that this silence is due to the researcher's conceiving of fieldwork as his own private *cuisine* where no body else can trespass. Anyhow, the pretexts of this silence are not convincing at all, especially if we take into account the difficulties and risks which characterize fieldwork, let alone a fieldwork about a sensitive, elusive issue such as religion.

It is a common platitude among researchers that methodology plays an essential role in determining the importance and credibility of any study. The debate on methodology has taken a long time and considerable space in sociological and anthropological theorizing till it has approximately stopped with the end of the epoch of general theories, which has been substituted by the new epoch of the sectorial ones. This culminates in the emergence of what may be called eclectic methods. They are eclectic in the sense that they are a combination of diverse methodological constituents which belong to different theories. For example, the study of religion in the light of these eclectic methods no longer differs about whether to use the historical background information and analyze the social structures but vary only about how to make use of them.

My proposition in this paper is that there are some specific fieldwork techniques the researcher be it a foreigner or a native has to implement if s/he wants to overcome the difficulties and risks of field research which are associated with the status of religion, the area under investigation, in Islamic societies such as the Moroccan soci-

ety, for instance. This proposition is based on my fieldwork experience which can be summed up in three particular experiences. First experience: studying the role and status of saint shrines in Doukkala¹, Morocco. Second experience: studying Islamic books and their readers in the middle of Morocco. Third experience (a doctoral dissertation in progress): studying popular religiosity of the Moroccans in Doukkala. It is also based on other foreign researchers' fieldwork experiences in Morocco such as Eickelman's and others (Eickelman 1976; Eickelman 1981; Eickelman 1985; Rabinow 1977).

2. Tell Me How You Introduce the "Version" of Your Research, I Will Tell You How Your Informant's Reply Will Be.

The relationship between the researcher and the informant may be regarded as very complex, especially in communities where the degree of illiteracy is very high and where social sciences are newly established. Such communities exist in the Muslim World, communities like the Moroccan society where people, especially in the rural and remote regions, find it difficult to distinguish between the social researcher and the man of authority. They have been accustomed for a long time to see authority as the only apparatus which has the right to investigate in people's life affairs. Official investigators have always been doing censuses for the sake of tax-collection, an activity which has made people alert to any interviewer as well as reticent about their properties and belongings, choosing suitable answers for the occasion.

Also, these people do not apprehend the meaning and purport of academic research which has nothing to do with the authorities because such people do not have any idea about the majority of institutions that exist in their society and about their various functions. For these aforementioned reasons, it becomes a must for the sociologist/anthropologist to formulate a *version*/manner through which he introduces himself and what he does to his informant, a *version* that responds to the understanding of his informant and that is based on the researcher's pre-knowledge of his informant's mother tongue and his way of thought.

The necessity of formulating a *version* of dealing with one's informants becomes more impending while investigating a sensitive issue like religion which is very predominant in Islamic societies. Religion in such societies is a sacred topic of conversation to the extent that both researchers and informants are reluctant to talk about it, espe-

¹ Doukkala is a rural region in the middle of Morocco.

cially if the researcher is a foreigner ("nagrani"/ Christian)² who does not belong to Islam. This creates a double psychological barrier which first prevents people from talking about beliefs and customs they have been used to practicing more than talking about, and which secondly prevents them from talking to a stranger who neither believes nor practices their religion. Still, one of these so — called "nagara" has succeeded in formulating a *version* to deal with his informants in Morocco. Furthermore, he has established initial rapports with people built on mutual respect despite his difference from them in accent, colour and race, rapports which have lasted from the sixties up to the present time.³

3. Tell Me Where You conduct your research, I Will Tell You How You make your sampling.

One of the most prominent characteristics of sociological/anthropological research in religion is its study of religion in reality,

that is religion as it is conceived of and practiced in daily life. This study is based on the detection and analysis of the religious conceptions that determine people's existence. Max Weber has put it clearer when he says that it is impossible to understand individuals and communities alike if you do not understand their religious conceptions which are part of their cosmic conceptions of the world (Aron 1967: 530–99). Not only their religious conceptions the researcher has to investigate but also their religious practices which embody their conceptions and make them deep-rooted in reality (I use the word practices instead of rituals because the former is more comprehensive).

Therefore, the collection of these religious conceptions and practices necessitates direct contact with the informant. Also, the inclusive aspect of religion necessitates that the research sample should be open including all sex and age groups from all walks of life. But data collection about the religious conceptions and practices in Islamic societies such as the Moroccan society (especially the rural region and poor slums in cities) presupposes particular preparations (these preparations will be tackled later on) that take into account the nature of the relations between the different sex and age groups and to what extent the nature of these relations influences these groups' religious conceptions.

² The word "nagran" is used by Moroccans to refer to any foreign white skin.

³ I was present in a meeting that Dale F. Eickelman had with his ex-informants in Rabat, Morocco.

For instance, if we take the sample group of old-age people, we realize that they still preserve some religious beliefs which have become extinct or, at the very least, have undergone considerable change. I will take the example of my recent experience in fieldwork research when I was collecting data for my Ph.D. dissertation which is in progress. I found that there are forms of belief in *jinn* which have disappeared for a long time but have survived in the old people's mind. They still believe in what is termed in Moroccan dialect as "txraj" (apparition). This is a belief in the fact that *jinn*s haunt remote and unpeopled places. These *jinn*s usually appear at night and chase passers-by. *Jinn*s are usually described as strange or animal-like apparitions. What we deduce from this example is that it is necessary to have a glance at this category of old people among one's sample groups. Why? It enables the researcher to detect the changes and the transformations that have occurred in the society's forms of belief. Beliefs change, but believers are not necessarily aware of the change. (Geertz 1971). Old people are the time-marker of change. Thanks to them the researcher has access to the ancient religious beliefs which exist no more. Still, the researcher does not have to focus only on this category of people while investigating the present modes of belief, otherwise this will jeopardize the external validity of his research. A research based on the old-age sample group will be investigating the past rather than the present.

Also, we do not have to give much attention to the sample group of young bachelors/single people in our study of religion in such a society like the Moroccan one. From my fieldwork experience with male bachelors in Doukkala, Morocco, I have realized that the bachelor does not enter the world of sex, the world of the sacred and the world of responsibility until he gets married. As a single person, he is not part of the decision-making community, and his opinions are worthless. In this sense, he is less involved in the social values in general and in the religious values in particular. As for the female groups, there is a considerable difficulty in dealing with them, especially in rural regions. It is prohibited for a stranger there to have a face-to-face conversation with a female, especially with the young ones whether they are married or unmarried. In such cases, the male investigators have to use trained female interviewers to have access to women's religious beliefs and practices which are commonly described as sorcery and witchcraft while they are basically religious.

So far, we notice that the focus in the study of religion should be oriented towards a different group of people, a category that may be termed "the intermediate group". In the Moroccan society, this sample group is that of young married fathers whose age vary between

25 and 50 years old⁴. This group seems to bear the religious beliefs in their modern forms for a number of decades.

3. Tell Me to What Extent You Use The Technique of Participant Observation, I Will Tell You How You Will Recognize the Strategies of the Interviewer.

Participant observation is regarded as the most operative technique in the study of religion, especially in societies where religious beliefs are interwoven in the very structure of people's consciousness and daily interaction, and where the degree of illiteracy is very high (here I refer to the example of the Moroccan society). Participant observation fills in the gaps left by the elaborate and open interviews that one does with his informants. As for the questionnaire and short interviews (entretiens), there is no use for them in societies where the oral aspect of culture is very predominant.⁵

While collecting data on religious practices, the researcher has to observe these practices in reality. The description of these practices by his informants is not enough. Because of their limited awareness/recognition, they cannot follow the ritual scenes in their chronological order. They rather speak about various ritual flashes they have remembered hither and thither. The informants' language cannot convey all the details of rituals and religious practices.

Therefore, the researcher has to rely on his external focalization to describe the ritual, using the informants' background information as an ethnographic data to back up his participant observation findings.

As for the collection of data on religious conceptions, it appears to be very difficult. Usually the informant does not have the ability to recognize things in their abstract form of existence. From my field-work experience in one of the Moroccan rural regions, I have been confronted with informants who cannot convey their conception of Allah. Their recognition of existence does not allow them to do that. In this case the researcher's task is to piece up the conception of Allah from the informants' details which are scattered hither and thither. As an example, the meaning of Allah as a great power may be determined from the informants conceptions of how Allah interferes in the world's events. Allah interferes to recompense the devout

⁴ In the Moroccan society, marriage is related to procreation. The cases where the couple decide not to procreate are very rare. Researchers determine the rate of birth - giving age for women between 16 and 49.

⁵ The official census in Morocco determines the percentage of illiteracy at 67%. Also, what enhances this fact is the use of colors in voting.

believer, to test the faith of the believer in resisting the calamities that befall him. Also he interferes to punish the sinner who disobeys his orders. By collecting these details, the researcher can piece together an image of the meaning of Allah as it exists in the informant's mind, not as they express it in language. In short, the task of sociology in general, and religious sociology in particular, is to reconstruct the life experience with all its dimensions, an experience marked by ambiguity and confusion.

The use of participant observation to its largest extent enables the researcher to recognize some strategies that the informant uses in order to overcome the difficulties that result from the researcher's specific questions about topics that our current traditions prohibit us to speak about (Rabinow 1977: 132). Here, I will be contented with citing two of these strategies: The first one is what may be termed "attribution", the second is "overt lying". For the first strategy, the interviewee use the third-person mode to attribute his account of some practices to other particular people; he also uses expressions such as: there are people I know who do that / I know Mr so and so, he uses to do so and so or, he has told me about people he knows doing so and so. The informant resorts to this strategy to avoid the embarrassing questions he may be asked about things related to his intimate world such as the world of sexuality, religion or politics. Not wanting to involve himself, he uses the third-person pronoun. This, in fact, is but an impersonal version of speaking about one self. Once the researcher recognizes this fact he adopts the same strategy in asking questions to put his informant at ease.

As for the second strategy used by the informant — "overt lying" —, it is adopted in cases where the informant is reluctant to confirm his resort to some sort of behavior (such as the practice of witchcraft) despite the fact that everyone knows about it. When the informant practices something which is normatively disallowed, the researcher has to be content with learning about this fact, and not go on plaguing the informant with harassing questions that may mar the whole interview.

To learn about these practices and sorts of behavior, the researcher has to discover the general logic that governs his informant's behavior and way of thought. To discover this logic, he has to use participant observation to its largest extent.

In this modest paper, I have attempted to explain the difficulties of fieldwork research in the sociological/anthropological study of religious beliefs and practices in Moroccan society — or, perhaps, in other

Islamic societies. These difficulties may be summed up in the misunderstanding that results from hastiness and reduction.

I have given some alternatives to avoid these difficulties such as the researcher's version of introducing himself to his informants, the way he chooses his sample, and how he should understand his interviewee's strategies when asked sensitive and embarrassing questions.

My purpose has been to participate, though modestly in this discussion about the methodology of studying religion within the field of sociology/anthropology. Also I have intended to point to the importance of fieldwork experience in social sciences. It is high time that we have to expose our *cuisine* to the outside world. Silence about fieldwork experiences means that we will keep repeating the same mistakes, which jeopardizes the progress of the sociological work.

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