

**CONTESTING RITUALS:
ISLAM AND PRACTICES OF
IDENTITY-MAKING**

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edited by Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern

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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

As General Series Editors for the Ritual Studies Monograph Series we are very pleased to have this collection of essays, that we worked to bring together, published as the fourth title in this Series. The first volume in the Ritual Studies Monograph Series was *'The Spirit is Coming!' A Photographic-Textual Exposition of the Female Spirit Cult Performance in Mt. Hagen* (Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart), 1999, Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh. The next two volumes in the Series were *Fragments From Forests and Libraries, Essays by Valerio Valeri* (Janet Hoskins, ed.), 2001; and *The Third Bagre. A Myth Revisited* (Jack Goody and S.W.D.K. (Kum) Gandah), 2002, both by Carolina Academic Press.

A number of interesting themes stand out in this set of essays on Islamic ritual practices that intersect with various forms of identity constructions in general. A significant theme here is how various forms of expressive genres, e.g., such as chant, song, dance, formal recitation, and ritualized speech/action, play significant roles in constructing and defining senses of self within groups. This is a theme that relates to examples from many different contexts both inside and outside of the Islamic realm.

Expressive genres often reveal the inner sensibilities of people and their associated forms of cultural continuity and connectedness (see Stewart and Strathern 2002a, 2005). These sensibilities may be expressed in overt or in covert manners and over time they are impacted by historical changes and are thus reshaped and altered. In general, expressive genres take on roles that are ingrained in, and profoundly influence, social/cultural processes of interaction. These processes can include: critical commentary, creative reformulation, forms of resistance to state power or authority, reappraisals of gender relations, the making of aesthetic domains, and fundamental assertions of human agency and feelings, including religious and secular ones.

Expressive genres are particularly relevant in linking the unseen, as in visions of religious import, with a "concrete" perception and construction of the image. Here we see the capacities of human imagination to go beyond the

immediate and the here-and-now character of moment by moment experience to provide a realm, through expression, where ideals, as well as fears, play their part in influencing people's beliefs and behavior.

A further aspect of the identity of those involved in the ritual practices described in this collection is emplacement. We have previously argued that "expressions of identity are not reified or locked in time but are historically positioned in the dynamics of temporal space" (Stewart and Strathern 2003: 1) and we further noted that "in terms of identity...two crucial elements are at work: notions of *memory* and notions of *place* [emplacement]" (p. 2). The important point here is how historical consciousness intersects with, and is expressed through, the modalities of place (e.g. shrine or country, for example).

In addition to these themes, that of embodiment (i.e., the body as a medium of cultural experience) is highly significant (see Csordas 1994 and Damasio 1999) as is that of bodily substances in relation to notions of ritual purity and religious/cosmological codes of morality. Interesting parallels from Papua New Guinea on these themes can be found, especially when considering blood, milk, and menstrual fluids which are frequently seen as holding particular powers which can be dangerous or harmful if handled incorrectly. Thus, the power of bodily substances can be diverted into various pathways of action depending on the moral agency of the actors involved (see Stewart and Strathern 2001, 2002b).

In terms of these themes the essays presented in this collection will be meaningful to scholars from a number of different research areas of religious and cultural expertise. In relation to Islamic studies, these essays make a timely and significant contribution to a growing field of research that explores the multiple modalities of expressiveness in Islamic rituals, modalities that go beyond narrower issues of political identity and conflict and that take the reader into the existential and philosophical realms of religious experience.

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September 27, 2004
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INTRODUCTION

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Our idea for this edited volume on Islamic ritual practices developed out of the growing interest in Islamic Studies nowadays. We wanted to bring together a collection of essays that would highlight less often considered aspects of Islam, centered on the cross-cultural study of ritual practices rather than simply on ideological tenets. We also had a particular interest in Sufism, because of its somewhat contested place within Islamic traditions and because of its use of aesthetic forms such as music and dance. Further, we sought contributions to this edited collection that would explore gendered dimensions of action in Islamic rituals and would give a nuanced account of the often conflicting and contradictory roles attributed to women in the religious sphere. There is an overlap between an interest in Sufism and an interest in gender issues because the studies presented here by Kelly Pemberton and Alaine S. Hutson indicate clearly the potentials for exceptionally able women to achieve prominence in popular Sufi ritual contexts in South Asia and Africa. Finally, while not ignoring or denying the violent potentials present in many fundamentalist religious regimes that sharply separate what they define as “good” or “evil” and identify others as “the evil enemies”, we also were looking for essays that would exemplify the plasticity and versatility of Islamic rituals, making them adaptable to various social and political contexts, for example as supports for state-sponsored religious institutions or per contra as vehicles for resistance against complex transnational influences on the part of peoples who do not, as yet, have a region that they can claim as a state of their own.

The essays that we have gathered together here fulfill these aims admirably, and we thank all of our contributors for agreeing to participate in the project as we conceived of it. All of the essays show rituals as practices of identity-making. We see identity as a process in history rather than as an unchanging

feature of a person or group (Stewart and Strathern 2000). Of course, people themselves may project an image of their “unchanging” identity, as a means of asserting their contemporary solidarity and their continuity with the past; but adaptation to change is the signature feature of human social behavior. There is an ongoing dialectic between fluidity and fixity, in which we see efforts at making identities operating in contexts of rapid change that threaten these identities. Some ritual practices become the vehicles for large-scale change; others operate at a more private level to assert continuity. Or the relationship may be reversed: public rituals may be constructed to intensify existing affiliations and the status quo, while private rituals may accommodate more innovation, variation, and flexibility.

Our interests as explained above, and as skillfully explored by the authors in this collection, coincide with those of many scholars who have been concerned to inform the world adequately about the complexities of Islamic religion and thereby to conceptualize it better against the backdrop of emphases on fundamentalism, patriarchy, and violence. Prominent among these scholarly commentators has been Bruce Lawrence, notably in his well-known book *Shattering the Myth: Islam Beyond Violence* (1998). Lawrence points out that what we call “Islam” is not something singular or monolithic (even though, we may add, monotheistic religions tend to present themselves at some level as unitary, for example in the aphorism “There is no other God but God”). Instead it is, he argues from the outset of this book “a major and complex religious system, shaped as much by its own metaphysical postulates and ethical demands as by the circumstances of Muslim politics in the modern world” (1998: 3). The essays in the present collection pursue that same analytical viewpoint, anchoring it to ritual practices (see also Gregorian 2003 with his survey account of “Islam: a Mosaic, not a Monolith”).

Ritual practices as a focus tend to imply a stress on action, experience, behavioral patterns, and popular consciousness. Such a stress often turns up a contrast between formal ideologies, centralizing norms, and elitist reform on one hand and popular, local, and “tribal” preferences on the other. This contrast does appear in the accounts we have here in these essays, especially with regard to gender ideology, since the essays by Pemberton, Hutson, and Rasmussen all show in different but analogous modalities how at local levels, in connection with shrines to the dead, women may attain prominence in ways that centralizing or so-called “Islamicizing” forces oppose. Reformist ideologies tend to restrict women’s power; popular consciousness tends to give women greater scope to achieve influence, exercised uneasily and in contested contexts. This point is the main reason for our title for this collection: “Con-

tested Rituals". It is significant, we suggest, that Sufi practices come to the fore here. Pemberton and Hutson both center their argument on popular practices at Sufi shrines. Rasmussen depicts an analogous dialectic between specialists "in a dialogue over power: female herbal medicine women and male Islamic scholar healers" (this volume, Ch. 3). Bruce Lawrence, in the work we have cited above, argues "that the experience of Muslim women, above all, calls for a more nuanced approach to Islam and global change" (1998: 3). Pnina Werbner, in an account of the social dramas in Manchester, England, emerging from the protests by Pakistani immigrants mobilized against Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses*, notes how in the course of these protests the ritualized activities of clubs, societies, and festivals gave women opportunities to play more prominent roles and to issue challenges to the authority of male elders (Werbner 2003: back cover text). All of these studies deal with circumstances and pressures of historical change in which balances and imbalances of power are dynamically altering in response to diverse influences.

Warren Fusfeld, in a chapter appearing in a volume edited by Bruce Lawrence, points out that too sharp a dichotomy should not be made pitting "reform against tradition" in the Islamic world (Fusfeld 1984: 89). He cites the ideas of Ernest Gellner and Clifford Geertz in this context. Gellner saw "literate and scholarly urban Muslims" as pursuing a "'scripturalist' or 'puritan' style of religiosity", while on the other hand he saw "illiterate Muslims of the tribal country-side find[ing] their Islam in the tombs and descendants of local saints. Change consists essentially of large-scale cyclical shifts up and back between a puritanical, urban vision of Islam and a visionary 'maraboutic' Islam of the tribal countryside" (p. 90). Gellner's contrast is paralleled by Geertz's dichotomy of "scripturalists" (urban reformists) and "the classical traditions", emerging in "a more abstract and universal interpretation of Islam" which entailed rejecting local traditions and seeing them as innovations that degraded the original Islam of Muhammad" (p. 90). Leaving aside the historicity of such claims, it is evident that urban/rural and elite/popularist power struggles are at work here, and are likely to operate whenever an educated elite operating from urban centers and aiming to homogenize practices under its own control meets the results of the heterogeneous adaptations, accretions, and variations that have proliferated locally over longish periods of time. Yet it is these same adaptations that give ritual practices the ability to transform themselves and become over time "traditions".

Fusfeld does not entirely dispute these suggestions of Gellner and Geertz, and the essays presented in the collection here (e.g. by Rasmussen) well illustrate their general validity. Fusfeld wishes, however, to point out that changes do not only occur because of reformist zeal or popular inclinations "but also

within the institutions which are part of the mainstream of local Islamic culture” (p. 90). Fusfeld notes that Sufism is not, as he says Gellner depicts it, “purely a rural phenomenon” (p. 91), and he proceeds to discuss the ideology of the formal Sufi orders, seeing this as “a core element of Islamic society” (p. 91), and continuing with an account of the life of the Sufi shaikh, Mirza Mazher, born in the late seventeenth century “into a family with strong ties to the Mughal aristocracy” (p. 92).

If Fusfeld’s assertion is correct, this gives greater significance to the themes of Sufi practices revealed in the essays by Pemberton and Hutson. Sufism operates both from major, recognized shrines, and from numerous, less well-known local ones, as Pemberton notes. The great shrine to Chishti at Ajmer, in India, has been described by Qamar-ul Huda (2003). Carl W. Ernst and Bruce Lawrence have devoted a volume to *The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond* (2002). Ernst and Lawrence recognize the contested features of women’s pilgrimages to the shrines of “saints” such as Chishti at Ajmer. They quote the words of a critic of the fourteenth century CE who complained about women traveling on pilgrimages outside of Delhi “to visit the tombs of saints, where (he believed) they were exposed to the lascivious attentions of rogues and profligates” (2002: 85). The Sultan who made this criticism issued a decree “forbidding women to perform pilgrimages to these tombs” (ibid.). Hagiography excludes any accounts of saintly women in their own right in relation to holy shrines, although the visit by a Royal Princess to Ajmer in the seventeenth century is recorded (p. 87). Pemberton’s account corrects these hagiographic writings by showing how in ritual practices women can attain status. The complexities of Sufism in general are well shown by Ernst and Lawrence’s book and in a further major study of Sufi pilgrimage activity connected with a Sufi Naqshbandi order (the order written about by Fusfeld) which was founded by a shaikh, Zindapir, who died in 1999, and whose worship spread from Pakistan to Britain. Spiritual love for the saint or *pir* is a prime feature of Sufi practice, in which women as followers of a male saint often figure prominently (Werbner 2003). As we have seen, in certain contexts women may also themselves attain holy status.

Although Lawrence argued that Islam has to be considered in its metaphysical complexities, he also recognized clearly its contemporary articulation with versions of nationalism, suggesting that “it is the relationship of Islam to nationalism that is at once pivotal and understudied” (1998: 9). Two essays in our present collection neatly illustrate this point in different ways. Anna Gade’s study of national Qu’ran recitation competitions in Indonesia, a part of a global movement of “Islamic awakening”, shows how these competitions mo-

bilize people's religious motivation to excel in piety, but also begin to take on "distinctive characteristics in the Muslim public culture of Suharto's New Order" (Gade, this volume, Ch. 2). In the 1990s this involvement with the state was stepped up so as to bring "the full political, nationalist, and developmentalistic rhetoric of the state to bear" (p. 31). Religious revitalization was thus harnessed to the state and its projects (p. 37). Sean Roberts, in his study of "Toasting Uyghurstan", is dealing with a complex historical and cultural situation in which the people who identify themselves as Uyghurs in the Kazakhstan-China border area make claims to their distinctiveness and sovereignty partly with reference to the practice of Muslim rituals. Senses of Muslim identity are counterposed against residual senses of Soviet identity and also emergent senses of identification with capitalist trends: a contested terrain. Roberts analyzes *toi* parties as occasions in which sometimes contradictory elements of ritualized conduct are brought together and expressed "while simultaneously retaining a sense of unity in their representation of the nation" (p. 95). He concludes that "ritual space is one place where this yet unrealized sovereign nation can exist at least in theory and where the hopes for a better future that it represents can be reaffirmed" (p. 103).

The two further essays in our collection play off the others in terms of analytical issues to do with gender and to do with the complexities of Islamic traditions, two major themes we have noted above. Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjoy Mazumdar write perceptively of how rituals help to maintain a sense of Muslim identity in immigrant homes in America. These rituals are very much family-based activities, involving "the desire to create an aesthetically appropriate and expressive Muslim home" (this volume, Ch. 5). Ritual purity is a major focus. While the whole family is engaged in the work of ritual, women play special roles in maintaining purity, the proper arrangement of objects in space, and the preparation of foods. The authors conclude that while women have few roles in public mosques "home is their ritual domain" (p. 82), one in which they play a creative and leading, not a passive, part.

Liyakat Takim's essay on visits to the shrines of *imams* in Shi'a contexts is explicitly constructed to highlight contrasts with Sufi practices. These contrasts emerge against a background of considerable similarity with regard to ideas concerning the living power of dead Shi'a *imams* and *pir* (saints) in Sufism. Takim points out that differences exist in terms of aesthetic tone. The celebrations for an *imam* are "far more somber and structured" than those for a Sufi *pir*. There is no music or dance, and instead the pilgrim recites the *imam's* achievements from a book, stressing the sufferings and oppression he endured in lifetime. The pilgrim renews the covenant with the *imam* and re-

cites Shi'i doctrines. The emphasis here is scripturalist: but an experiential element enters with flagellations, designed to show grief for the suffering of Husayn and the *imam* who followed his path. These are some of the subtle differences Takim insightfully points to. We see in his essay the multiplicity of Islam, along with certain aspects of unity; and, as in all of these chapters, we see how this dialectic of multiplicity and unity is played out continuously through history and its changes.

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