

Shari'a Scripts: A Historical Anthropology

Brinkley Messick

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While the Yemen seems to be stumbling from one disaster into the next, it is good to see how some of the best experts in Yemeni studies continue their work in ways that will be useful in the country's future. The present volume is not only bound to become recognized soon as the *magnum opus* by Brinkley Messick, professor of anthropology and Middle Eastern, South Asian and African studies at Columbia University and one of the world's leading experts in Yemeni studies today. More importantly still, *Shari'a Scripts* features all the qualities required for a true academic milestone in Yemen-related scholarship for decades to come, with potential ramifications for the historical and legal anthropology of the Middle East at large. This volume is based on half a lifetime of analytical and comparative studies that began during the author's first fieldwork period in the central and southern highlands of northern Yemen during the 1970s. Messick meticulously examines the structures of jurisprudence (the "library" in his terms) with the methodologies and techniques of textual scholarship, while relating it to the "archive" of records concerning everyday interactions in legal life as embedded within the practical interplay of fields between orality and scriptural statements.

The temporal and socio-spatial contexts of Messick's inquiry already provide for a unique qualitative setting distinguishing his source materials and local experts. Northern Yemen was never colonized by a European power, thus displaying a fairly uninterrupted continuity of sequences in Islamic legal practices, interpretations, and authorship. Some of the author's main interlocutors were distinguished local representatives of these legal traditions, within the networks of regional scholarship in the provinces to the south of the capital. In terms of temporal specificity, the author focuses on the first half of the twentieth century, thereby highlighting a historical period when these parts of the Yemen were largely governed by Imamic rule in its post-Ottoman dimension. Regionally, the author's expert hosts and main field site areas provide the additional quality of also highlighting important intersections between the Zaydi versions of Shi'ite traditions, Shāfi'i legacies in the Sunni realms, as well as traces of local 'urf legacies. Messick's competence in interpreting and analyzing classic legal works

(such as *Kitāb al-Azhār* or *Sayl al-jarrār*) against these regional sources are decisive for the wider relevance of the entire scholarly enterprise.

What emerges from these textual and ethnographic analyses is an anthropology of Islamic juridical traditions, rooted in detailed regional historical analyses yet simultaneously representing paradigmatic relevance for a topically-focused historical anthropology at large. This is substantiated by Messick's ability in relating the legal focus of his study to wider socio-economic contexts, such as regional economy, sequences of power relations in the area and beyond, or to wider discourses and practices in the region.

Between his introduction and postscript, Messick organizes the book's main text according to his core methodological approach into two parts, focusing on "Library" and "Archive" respectively. The "Library" part comprises five chapters on "Books", "Pre-text", "Commentaries", "Opinions", and "Practice with Writing". The "Archive" part includes five chapters on "Intermission", "Judgments", "Minutes", "Moral Stipulations", and "Contracts". Anthropologists, historians, legal studies experts, and other specialists of the Middle East are likely to benefit in different ways from the book's ten chapters, but each of them will find new and unexpected insights. For socio-cultural anthropological interests, I found chapter ten on "contracts" particularly rewarding and exciting. It addresses the formalized results of legal disputes, dealing with topics such as "sale", "lease", or "marriage". The marriage contracts accessed by Messick specify procedural details and rituals, and distinguish contracts for cousin marriage from others. This may serve as merely one among many other possible examples that *Sharī'a Scripts* is not only a brilliant conceptual, analytical, and methodological work, but also contains ethnographic gems of rare quality.

I have tried very hard to come up with one or the other mild critical remark that is expected from a fair academic review. I am sorry about having to report that I was not successful in this regard.

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