

# Re-designing a Discipline

The modern discipline of Anthropology is informed with the western notions of 'man', 'society' and 'culture'. Islamic value system would require a different set of concepts if we are to produce a genuine science of man, argues **Merryl Wyn Davies**.

WHAT's in a name? Concern yourself with Islamic anthropology and you quickly learn that names matter immensely. Not least because the name 'anthropology' implies to most people a world of significance which is completely at odds with the intent and content of the subject one is trying to bring into Islamic education. Thus, for all the commonsense attractions of the argument that getting on and doing something is better than endless discussion of abstractions, names do hold a world of significance.

The word anthropology means 'the science of mankind'. A system of Islamic education, an organisation of Islamic knowledge would, thus, inevitably need to deploy and develop a discipline which concerns itself with the Islamic conception of mankind, which comprehends how this conception of human nature has operated, influenced and been affected by the actual experience of mankind in history, and how it informs in contemporary circumstances our discussion and consideration of concrete planning for the future of mankind.

Anthropology, the science of mankind, comes to us as a discipline conceived and developed within the context of the western intellectual tradition. It is the empirical, comparative study of human society which has conventionally concerned itself with 'small scale groupings' - the polite modern day rendition of the former 'savages'. This brand of euphemism should not hide the fact that anthropology originated as the enquiry seeking to prove empirically the qualities of human nature and thereby establishing the universal laws of its operation. However it sought to do so by close examination of 'primitive societies', implicitly and in time explicitly conceived as all societies not part of the western civilisation. Anthropology concerned itself with the 'primi-

tive' because this gave the clearest indication of the primal. Its intention was to prove the origins of human nature and human society and its genesis. An inescapable part of the definition of anthropology was the study of the stages of change and development of human nature and society in which the yardstick and end point was contemporary western civilisation. Centuries before the mechanism of biological evolution was openly propounded, Western social theory was already evolutionary and genetic, in the sense of genealogical. It is therefore obvious that anthropology is secular, materialistic, reductive and ethnocentric. It is also not in the least surprising that anthropology has been racist, imperialist, patronising and condescending in its attitude to the objects of its scrutiny. Despite the protestation of modern anthropologists and their disavowal of the history of the discipline, that history continues to exert an influence over the present day embodiment of the subject. It is part and parcel of the theoretical and conceptual storehouse from which its ideas are drawn.

In light of the above, we are justified to ask, what status the extant definitions and techniques actually have: an inescapable, unalterable totality which is anthropology? When one speaks of 'functionalist anthropology', 'structuralist anthropology', 'Marxist anthropology', or 'Islamic anthropology', what relationship do these terms have to each other? It is clear they imply something of a higher order of meaning than 'kinship studies', 'economic anthropology' or 'political anthropology'. Kinship, economic and political are mere descriptive terms of those parts of social life to which the definitional object, anthropology, is being applied. But this is certainly not the case with functionalism, structuralism and Marx-

ism, for these define the terms of reference of their own kind of anthropology. These terms provide the theoretical and conceptual framework which determine the sort of questions which may be posed. Obviously, the propositions contained in these terms give relevance to the facts of anthropology. Empirical reality is in fact first tested according to the predetermined assumptions of these theories, reality is translated into the language of functionalism, structuralism and Marxism. The same 'reality' considered by adherents of these schools would thus appear with distinctive differences of emphasis and significance.

Functionalism and the rest are the ideational paradigms within which current anthropology is pursued. Far from being an unambiguous entity displaying total consensus in its approach, anthropology is the dependent variable of the theoretical orientation of the anthropologist. Despite this, there are still higher order principles which inform anthropology, as it is understood and practised today. A good example of these may be found in Murray Leaf's history of anthropology (*Man, Mind and Science a History of Anthropology*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1979) in which he focuses on the concepts of man, mind and science which have informed the construction of theories. He proposes a distinction between two conceptual modes: dualism and monism. Ian Jarvie, in comparison, has concerned himself with another set of polarities: rationalism and relativism (*Rationality and Relativism, In Search of a Philosophy and History of Anthropology*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1984). What both studies make clear is that the theoretical parameters of anthropology derive from what is included in the concept of human nature and mind, and how this content is deployed within a particular conception of the nature and function of science.

Leaf and Jarvie are both concerned themselves with the malaise of anthropology and in their different ways argue that a great deal of the problem stems from conceptual myopia. There is much overlapping between current theories because they stem from the same conceptual base, and are rooted in the same intellectual tradition. They are, nonetheless, distinctive because they give different emphases to particular aspects of the common conceptual base. The problem is that these conceptual axioms are not an open part of debate in academic discourse or instruction. The concepts from

which everything else follows are treated as self-evident axioms; if theories create problems, these are taken for general difficulties within the disciplinary order of knowledge, rather than intellectual tangles which arise out of the inadequacy of the conceptual framework.

The one study which does place anthropology in its historical and intellectual context by starting from its inception is that of Margaret Hodgen. So important are her conclusions for the naming of things that they are worth quoting at length. "The Mind's Fidelity to the old has left its mark on anthropology as well as on other fields of thought. Modern cultural investigation has taken up its abode in a mansion of organising ideas already designed, built and richly furnished with traditional assumptions more closely related to the early levels of western theology and philosophy than to the data of human history. Nearly all the principles of inquiry employed by recent generations of scholars in Europe and elsewhere are of great age and authority. Were their genealogies consulted, it would become quickly apparent that their antecedents are to be found in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, in the classics or in the derivative Christian literature of the Middle Ages. Non European folk have had no part in their formulation. Buddhist ideas, Muslim ideas, East Indian or Chinese ideas on cultural problems are unrepresented". (*Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964).

For Jarvie anthropology is intent upon proving one of two propositions, the rational unity of mankind or the moral unity of mankind. For Leaf anthropology is caught in the grip of describing social and cultural diversity within the vice of non-negatable propositions. For both the intellectual problems of anthropology demand greater conceptual clarity so that good and bad theory can be distinguished and the nature of conceptual problems properly addressed. For Hodgen the genesis of the conceptual base of anthropology and the history of its theoretical convolutions and problems are an integral whole which has spun off various paradigms whose connections are historically traceable. What all these positions make clear is that what is called 'anthropology' should properly be named 'western anthropology', where the epithet western defines the conceptual framework of western civilisation which has shaped the nature of anthropology. Further,

this western anthropology is not identical with observed reality but is a mental construct, in fact only one of the many possible forms of anthropology.

Whatever the arguments for the naming of Islamic anthropology, the problem of names arises entirely due to the success of western intellectual imperialism. Western disciplines have looked at the world through their own particular and specific conceptual spectacles, and have translated other societies and cultures into their own scientific language, which is quite permissible indeed inevitable. However, westerners have convinced themselves and everyone else that what is specifically western is universal! However much one repeats the arguments there is a dreadful tendency on the part of Muslim intellectuals either to continue assuming that there is really only one sociology or anthropology or to slip back into defining the Islamic position and then relapse into western terms, definitions and categories for convenience sake. Hence the thought had been growing in my mind that there might be a term redolent of the Islamic world view and reflective of Muslim intellectual history which could circumvent some of these nomenclature problems.

Would not *ilm al umran*, the science of civilisation, not resolve all difficulties? The thought is still there but accompanied by confusion that comes from reading two studies of Ibn Khaldun by Aziz al Azmeh (*Ibn Khaldun in Modern Scholarship, a Study in Orientalism*, Third World Centre for Research and publishing, London 1981 and *Ibn Khaldun an Essay in Re-Interpretation*, Frank Cass, London, 1982). The trouble is that the books are densely written in a style which shows great labours with the English language, but is impossible to comprehend, I cannot, therefore, claim to have properly grasped the argument and must proceed cautiously. Azmeh's contention appears to be that *ilm al umran*, the science proposed by Ibn Khaldun, is history, as serial narrative. The author himself terms it consecution.

It is al Azmeh's contention that Orientalist studies of Ibn Khaldun have interpreted the Muslim thinkers work according to western categories of thought and western understandings. The orientalist readings of Ibn Khaldun are misinterpretations of Islam and the history of Muslim thought. To properly comprehend Ibn Khaldun his work must be contextualised within Muslim intellectual cate-

gories and history. So much can be easily acknowledged. But the argument appears to go further. We are being told that Ibn Khaldun did not write upon sociology, economics and social order in the way that is claimed. Even in the Muslim world of today, Azmeh contends, Ibn Khaldun's reputation as a thinker rests upon the Orientalist interpretation of his works. Ibn Khaldun could not properly contribute to the modern day disciplines because he viewed matters of the social order as dependent accidents lacking the notion of integrative system which inform all modern sociological thought. A true contextualisation of his work shows that a scheme for narrative history was his sole purpose and that his ideas had very little impact on his contemporaries.

All in all al Azmeh seems to offer us not so much the contextualisation of Khaldunic thought in order to resuscitate it for contemporary Islamic inquiry, but a deconstruction which seems intent on stopping the normal practice of intellectual growth in its tracks. While I am certain that Ibn Khaldun was not persuading, nor intending, modern western sociology, there is much in his thought which can contribute to our knowledge of 'sociology'. It will take a lot more struggling with the words on the page to appreciate and deal with the detail al Azmeh presents. But I certainly disagree with his conclusion that Ibn Khaldun must be left alone with history because he did not connect ideas about the nature of society which he deployed in the cause of the science of history. The tantalising evidence of the history of ideas is that unconnected ideas of one writer bear fruit by being connected in the minds of later generations. This is especially so with Ibn Khaldun. When al Azmeh himself gives a translation of the intent of the *Mugaddima* as: "a narrative of human aggregation which is the organised habitation (*umran*) of the world" it proves my point.

A study of human aggregation in organised habitation on a world wide scale seems to me exactly what an Islamic anthropology would be about. To arrive at that study requires setting out its conceptual base which must encompass the topics of man, mind and science. We draw our concepts from the Qur'an and Sunnah, just as we inform our understanding of them by the study of the writings of Muslims in the course of the history of Islamic civilisation. Both students today and the writers of our history stand in the same conceptual relationship to Qur'an and Sunnah. We

are able only to do our best according to the outlook of our own times, making use of the accumulated knowledge which is available to us but which is apprehended according to our own distinctive and specific situation, hence the purpose of any Islamic knowledge is to have perpetual dialogue with our conceptual roots and be always critical and questioning.

Science, in the form of cognitive knowledge, is an inevitable and neces-

Umran or development



sary part of religion, not a category in opposition to it, precisely because of this distinction between a conceptual level which is eternal and the one which is human and theoretical must always be borne in mind. The purpose of science is to expand our mentality by the use of reason to comprehend as much as we can of the meaning of the conceptual level. At a theoretical level, science can prove and disprove, at a conceptual level it can only unfold our comprehension of enduring relationships and order. Surely this is why we speak of religious sciences and science as a part of worship.

In order to organise Islamic anthropology we need to start with raw details drawn from the primary sources of our information about the

conceptual world the Qur'an and Sunnah, and then proceed to consider what this implies at a theoretical level. The theory becomes the means by which we formulate questions about temporal reality, it is the level at which we formulate the definitions which give shape to our observations of temporal reality.

The Islamic conception is that mankind is created by God and that his fitrah, created nature, has various qualities and capacities. Mankind is of a dual nature, both animal and spiritual. Within an Islamic science it is conceptually impossible to conceive of or study any of the actions of mankind in history as purely material phenomena in which human reason and choice are the only referents. To do so

would be to refute part of the premise with which we begin. Of the capacities of the fitrah Islam holds that it is created endowed with both knowledge and free will. Knowledge is the knowledge of relationships, of man to God, of the universe to God, and man to the universe and of the awareness the proper condition of mankind is that of submission to God and His Guidance. Its intent is the perfectability of human nature and potential in temporal existence. Free will entails the existence of reason and discernment which enables mankind either to follow and fulfill its created nature or turn away from it.

The concept of the fitrah is inseparable from *din*, religion as a way of life, for knowledge of *din*, is part of



Multitudes and tribes

the capacity of the *fitrah*, and the intention of *din* is to enable the *fitrah* to achieve its full potential. For Islam Adam was not merely the first man but also the first Prophet proclaiming the Message of Islam. As Naquib al Attas has pointed out in his exposition of *din* the concept entails the notion of society and culture. These points are both conceptual and temporal referents. An Islamic conception begins with human aggregation and organised habitation, mankind always exists in society. The kind of speculations which prompted Hobbes and Locke are mental concolutions, having to start with a blank sheet in order to explain the origins and developments of mankind in temporal conditions. It should be noted that it was the culture shock and style of description of the societies of the New World which gave force to this proposition. Amerindian society was seen as having no law, no religion, no property, no order, a negation of the conception of society as understood in Europe. It thus both required and made possible an argument for development from nothing to allow for the inclusion of the Amerindian within the conceptual unity of mankind. It was faulty ethnography, or more accurately ignorance, which provided the foundation of social theory in the western intellectual tradition.

Clifford Geertz in outlining his

approach to anthropology in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, New York, 1973) proposes that this original blank page, as a conceptual stage of western thought, should be dispensed with. All the investigations of anthropology have been able to do is show that wherever mankind exists or has existed geographically and temporally it has been in aggregation which demonstrates culture.

From an Islamic standpoint the matter looks entirely different. The concepts of *fitrah* and *din*, to which should be added *tawhid*, mean that our starting point is of a unitary creation of all mankind which is biological, rational and moral because it encompasses both the animal and spiritual nature of mankind. The locus in which this nature operates is human aggregation, which is again not conceptually conceivable as other than organised habitation. *Din* is part of the nature of mankind and entails the idea of rules and principles of organisation, that is culture and society.

Part of the problem for the European mind, in its encounter with new societies in the New World, was to understand a religious significance of unitary creation in connection with the diversity of society and culture. It was part of the western outlook that it historically perceived unity as the credal, doctrinal and dogmatic uniformity of a universal church and employed this notion in its conceptional scheme. After the break-up of the universal church, the notion of unity as uniformity was no longer tenable. In the end, it led to the secularisation of scientific and social thought.

From the standpoint of Islamic anthropology, one cannot be engaged in seeking to prove either the rational unity of mankind or the moral one. Both notions are part of our conceptual base. What one may investigate is how reason and moral order are enacted in human aggregation both in contemporary societies and through human history. This means that the prime focus of attention is understanding the diversity of social and cultural order. We start from the conceptual referents for human diversity in Islam. First, the Qur'an asserts that we have been created as tribes and nations that we may know one another, that the same message of Islam has been given to all societies but that it has interpreted it in different ways. The Qur'an also tells us that societies have risen and disappeared in history and that failure to adhere to *din* was the cause of their decay. To take the narratives in the Qur'an as purely temporal referents as literalist religion does, seems to me to be reductive of their conceptual import.

Conceptually they provide a further indication of the unity of creation, all of which as temporal existence relates to Islam. Diversity is part of the condition of mankind and the temporal reality. This is in keeping with other aspects of the conceptual base of Islam. Islam operates through the conceptual categories of *halal*, permissible praiseworthy beneficial, and *haram*, prescribed blameworthy harmful. Abd al Ati (*The Family Structure in Islam*, American Trust Publications 1977) has formulated this as implying that Islam is a system of permissible

structures in which enduring conceptual principles can be enacted in various forms of social organisation. *Sharia* as a concept is an adaptive system in which extant conditions can be organised in the light of local circumstance, which historically was the form of the development of Muslim society and culture. While Islam is founded on unity, it does not posit the notion of uniformity either conceptually or as a temporal referent of society. So the focus of our attention is on *diversity* and our aim is to find the consonance which can exist behind a diversity of form.

The *Sharia* is an adaptive system. It is a system because it pertains to all spheres of social existence, integrating all aspects of human life according to the conceptual principles it deploys. Totality and integration then are part of our conceptual referents for society as organised habitation in time. The *Sharia* is also a process, a problem solving methodology, and an approach to knowledge. To be consistent with this, our conception of society must also incorporate the notion of process and process allows for change. Society exists in history, change appears in history as an obvious fact; societies alter their internal form because of internal causes or as a result of influence from outside. Conceptually, change is a different matter because diversity of form can be consonant with conceptual and moral principles. Therefore social change in history need be no more than a change of form which does not have any implications at the conceptual level. What one is constantly inquiring about in studying society is not but the relationship of form to the conceptual level which is a moral order. So one is asking how society enacts *adl*, justice, how it corporates *istislah*, common good and so through all the concepts, because the end point of study is to gain a sense of system informing ourselves about how society achieves a balance of conceptual principles.

One thing which is clear about studying change from an Islamic perspective is that the change is not an evolutionary or developmental concept in the sense which has become familiar from western anthropology. Society is an organised habitation: it has institutional forms, it contains a political order, an economic order, rules of kinship and family organisation, religion, it has means of giving different status to individuals and various orders of group activity from social clubs to religious hierarchies, it has a system of education and a body of learning.

Society is defined by the existence of boundaries which mark it off from others, one type of society is defined by political boundaries. Culture is a more extensive notion, for it is the sum total of learned behaviour and may overlap the boundaries of more than one society, or one society may include a number of distinct cultures. But our interest in society and culture as diverse forms is not a matter of 'butterfly collecting', making typologies which ultimately rest on technological differences. Our interest is in how societies organise themselves to allow for the enactment of conceptual categories which are moral, normative and evaluative.

Formal difference, difference in scale or the complexity of organisation, are not part of the explanatory schemes for the progress of mankind or for ranking of superior or inferior societies. There is only one kind of progress which can be achieved by any society and it is a proper balance of the requirements for felicitous and harmonious existence of the *fitra*. Failure to achieve this state in organised habitation can as easily befall Muslim as non-Muslim society. Even a cursory glance at our history and our current predicament reveals this. Progress in the Islamic sense is a challenge which faces all societies and by studying all societies we can inform our understanding of the flexibility and possibilities of human organisation. We can ask, what kinds of social organisation are most conducive to the needs of the *fitra*, and the flowing of the *din*, and why so.

One of the criticisms of western anthropology is that in effect it does no more than translate other societies and cultures into abstract conventions based on ethnocentrism which is the technical terminology of western anthropology. In doing so, it does not actually approach the reality of the societies it studies. Obviously it entails a crucial problem. We apprehend order and significance through theory, and theory is rooted in concepts which are specific. The criticism which is levelled at western anthropology would therefore be equally applicable to Islamic anthropology. However, I do think the position would be rather different. Islamic anthropology must commence by seeking an empathic understanding of a society and culture as it appears to its members. For this good ethnography is essential.

Society is an organised habitation. It is our environment and how we utilise it. It is our political system and the rules by which people participate in

the decision making process. It is our economic system and how the exchange, control and distribution of goods is organised. It is the system by which family exists and the rules which decide the effective extent of kinship relations.

Organisations have functions. Certain aspects of social organisation are functionally necessary. The conceptual base of Islam has the function of attuning us to the best possible way of living in society. But because society is an interactive system which must be looked at holistically, because it is a process and capable of change, our notion of function is very different from functionalism as it has emerged in western social theory. From an Islamic conceptual base one can never maintain that whatever is right, that temporal existence is the realm of free will which can turn from the beneficial to the harmful, or vice versa, either consciously or in ignorance. That organisation has function does not mean that everything is functioning well. It is the object of the study of social reality to refine our discernment of such questions.

Having begun with the naming of things, we seem to have ended with naming almost everything into the orbit of Islamic anthropology. It is a social science, an umranic science which is concerned with the definitions of the broadest categories of social life, society, culture and ummah and how these operate as systems. As a discipline, then, it needs to be in a constant relationship with other branches of learning. As a discipline Islamic anthropology is divisible into particular areas of interest, but I do not believe there is a division between anthropology or sociology in any meaningful way. Whichever label one chooses, the subject concerns social theory and this can only be formulated by considering all societies. We are exhorted to travel to China in search of knowledge, but knowledge is constituted in different ways in China according to different social and cultural patterns. One can only fulfill the exhortation and make the exercise something more than merely acquiring exotic information by having a means of understanding the diversity which makes peoples distinct from one another. One must have a way of knowing one another, if information is to become knowledge. It is perceiving the relationship of information to, and its implications for, an enduring set of conceptual principles, that is the objective of Islamic anthropology. Call it by any name you will. ■