

BOOK REVIEW

Title: The Sacred Meadows. A Structural Analysis of Religious Symbolism in an East African Town

Author: El Zein, Abdul Hamid M. (1974)

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The ethnography of El Zein is based on Islam and its world of symbolism in the East African Island community of Lamu. The Island by the 1962 census of Kenya is a community of about 6,000 people and 93 per cent of the Island are Muslims. Lamu is said to be one of the oldest inhabited towns of Kenya. Among the Muslim population, about 68 per cent claimed to be Arabs and the remaining 32 per cent said to be Africans. Their strong link to the Middle East and the Indian Ocean is attributed to their non-isolation to the Islamic network that gave value to their religious symbolism. But they consider themselves as "the leaders of the Islamic world" (El Zein 1974, p.9) through their direct descent from the Prophet Mohammed. The religious manifestations among the different segments of the societies notwithstanding, the people of Lamu still maintain their network of relations with the Muslim world, with its centrality in city of Mecca.

The book is structured into two parts. Part one dwells on the diachronic dimension of the Lamu traditional society. It is diachronic because of the historical narratives of the town that link the past to the present in relational differences. In Part two, El Zein tries to redefine the Lamu traditional society based on the synchronic dimension of current religious symbolisms of myths and rituals. In the author's analysis, he attempts to conjecture the dialectical relation between myth, ritual and symbol, and how their smallest meaningful units could be identified on a deep structural level (p. 168). This was the author's effort on structural analysis of religious symbolism. In fact, he was influenced by the notion of 'deep structure' as a description of syntax of natural language according to Chomsky, as well as Turner's treatment of symbols and hermeneutical method of Ricoeur.

El Zein's major objective is to determine how religious symbols are used in everyday life and how they engage with the social reality in a dialectical relation. By applying Chomsky's notion of 'deep structure' of religious symbols, he aims to explore "the structure of a religious system and the relation between its constituent parts and

everyday life" (p. xix). In that sense, he focuses on the importance of rituals and their social forms.

His major argument is based on how the lived-world is in the process of becoming, because of the changing character of life-forces such as myth, rituals and symbols. This is because of the dialectical nature of religious symbols that are 'structured' and at the same time 'restructured' by everyday social actions.

The implication of his argument is that there are different meanings of religious components such as myths, rituals and magic for different categories of people, and as such tend to influence social relations (p. 197). For instance, the difference of meaning is seen from the passage of one relation to the other; that is, the one built on hierarchy and stratification (the *wangwana* system), to the decline and weakness of such hierarchy by a religious phenomenon introduced by a new system of *Ba'Alwi* (as championed by Habib Saleh and the Jamalilil sharifs). Thus the balance of distribution between *hishima* and *kutunga* formed the ideological basis of the *wangwana* system and the main principle of stratification. El Zein notes that it is the

hishima that stabilizes the society by ensuring the maintenance of positions and in turn makes whole by the *kutunga's* services without recourse to their positions (p. 65).

Nevertheless, through the new system established by *Ba'Alwi*, the decision of authority was challenged, which rather changed the emphasis from being completely subjects to Mohammed to being subjects to God. That implies that the hierarchical functions could then be explained as something determined by God, but at the same time the people still ought to maintain a relation of love with Mohammed (pp. 94-96). The new system of relation introduces the concept of 'mutual brotherhood' that cuts across the old system of stratification in the society (p. 127).

On the other hand, the concepts of purity and impurity were used by the author to show a relational construct and an important aspect of Lamu religious ideology. These concepts also emphasized the changing notion of hierarchy from ethnic relation to divine relation. The emphasis placed on purity and impurity was elaborated with some mythical explanations. As the descendants of

Mohammed, the *wangwana* system makes purity the centre of its cosmological interpretation. That means that any person outside its domain is regarded as impure or rather put 'infidel.'

The concept of purity and impurity were also derivatives that constituted different meanings to the masters and slaves respectively (p. 139). This is understood, based on the relation of culture to nature, as well as heaven to earth. From the narrative, the slaves were seen as inherently impure. On the other hand, the masters (such as the *sharifs* who claimed to be the descendants of Mohammed (p. 35) or the *qutb* who were regarded as the local saints and the light of Mohammed (pp. 93-94)) were seen as the custodian of the culture and therefore 'pure', because of their closeness to Mohammed and by extension to divine (pp. 143-151). However, this idea was questioned not only on religious basis, but also on social grounds by the new system of *Ba'Alwi*. From the social relations, it was evidence that the *sharifs*, who claimed to be pure and infallible, were not different from other members of the society (p. 107).

Purity was later seen from the perspective of conversion and the love of God and his

prophet. El Zein notes that "the more love you have, the more purity attributed to you" (p. 217). In that sense, a slave can achieve purity if he can keep frequently to the services in the mosque. S(he) can also surpass the *wangwana* in purity, or the *Wa Yumbili Pembe* aristocrat who do not keep to the dictates of religion (pp. 139-151). The implication is that purity can change over time if one grows older and moves closer to nature against the culture that offers the absolute knowledge of purity (p. 253). But the purity in this movement can only be sustained through the help of Mohammed. The Prophet Mohammed is seen as "the logical solution to an existential contradiction" between nature and culture, because he never sinned (p. 324). It is on this account that Mohammed intervenes and hence changes impurity into purity (p. 345). He offers light to his people not only to his descendants but also to all those who show love to him and God.

Therefore, el Zein's ethnography is an important tool in understanding the interpretation of meanings and their desirability as redefined through the structures they impose. The ideological changes in the concepts of myths, symbols and rituals are part of the religious order

that constitute social relations in the society. El Zein's efforts in analysing the deeper structure of Lamu society, especially with its long history of Islam, still remain quite informative today in understanding the current situation of Lamu society and in the wider sense the Islamic states. It is on this note that one may conclude that the recent terror attacks in the regions may not be farfetched from the action of some people trying to revitalize and reconnect themselves to the original pattern of their cosmological ideology.