Islam in local contexts: Localised Islam in Northern Pakistan

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As Clifford Geertz remarked in his Islam Observed (1968), the idea of a ‘changing’ religion is a contradiction in terms, as religion is fundamentally concerned with what is permanent and eternal. Still, one way to come to terms with religious change is to consider the many ways that religion is interpreted, by laymen and scholars alike. Social anthropologists like myself have naturally found a niche for themselves in local studies of religion, especially in what is often referred to as ‘local Islam’. This article discusses the role of ‘local Islam’ among the tribesmen living in the Palas valley, a remote and inaccessible mountain valley located in the Kohistan District of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), Northern Pakistan. ‘Violence and Belonging. Land, Love and Lethal Conflict in the North-West Province of Pakistan’ is a new title published by NIAS Press and available shortly.

The inhabitants of Kohistan, the Kohistanis (‘mountainiers’), belong, almost without exception, to the Deobandi school of Sunni Islam. However, because of the area’s isolation they converted to Islam later than their neighbouring ethno-linguistic groups. For this reason, the Kohistanis have been stereotyped as ‘lax Muslims’ (Keiser 1991: 31). Eager to prove the stereotype wrong, the Kohistanis have embraced new forms of Islam with more religious fervour and more puritan zeal than neighbouring ethno-linguistic groups. Additionally, most of the adult men in Kohistan lack formal education and, more often than not, are illiterate. This makes them dependant on the textual authority of the preachers and charismatic mullahs trying to advance their own brand of Islam. However, Kohistanis have also resisted elements of literate Islam. Therefore, there is as Michael Gilsenan (1990: 34) has pointed out, a continuation of ‘beliefs and practices that …[the “ulema”]… might consider un-Islamic but …[are]… regarded as perfectly Islamic by their practitioners and constantly blended into popular cultural tradition.’ But we might ask, is this new and sometimes ‘hybrid’ form of Islam best described as ‘local’? And more fundamentally, is there anything such as a ‘local Islam’? In particular, given the diversity of history and society in Kohistan, can we speak of one ‘local Islam’ or many? In recognition of this problem Eickelman (1982) mentions the possibility of there being many ‘Islams’ – a plurality of different Islamic creeds and interpretations.

The problem with a ‘local Islam’ is that it is to some degree a contradiction in terms, because Islam is fundamentally linked to the notion of a religious and geographical centre, namely Mecca. What we can talk of, however, is a localised Islam, understood as local expressions of Islam that are linked to processes on a larger scale, some of them global, others national and others still, regional or local. Beginning with the former, the global rise of political Islam and Islamic militancy has perhaps been the most widely publicised phenomenon as well as the one to attract most scholarly attention. In Pakistan, Islamic militancy has been on the rise throughout the 1990s, and has increased the tensions between the country’s Sunni and Shia communities. There has also been a rapid growth of Islamic political parties, some of them with a militant agenda. One reason for this is that on the national level, the Pakistani state has promoted Islam in an attempt to forge a national identity. Contrary to its intention, the state-sponsored Islamisation drive had a divisive rather than unifying effect on the society. Together with
this Islamisation drive, there was a process of political integration, made possible by extending roads to remote areas. Strung along these roads, a number of Islamic seminaries (madrasa) grew up, with most of the students coming from rural backgrounds (Malik 1999). (In rural areas, being a religious scholar – a Maulvi or a Maulana – is an honorific title and not only poor people, but also local dignitaries, send their sons for religious education). The majority of the madrasas belonged to the Deobandi sect of Islam, and many of their students returned to Kohistan as Islamic missionaries and village mullahs. The completion of the Karakoram Highway in Indus Kohistan in the 1970s opened the area to new economic, political and religious influences. In its wake, the Deobandi emissaries followed and as their influence grew, they pushed back the original Sufi influence that until then had been common throughout Kohistan. The building of the Karakoram Highway also increased emigration from Kohistan, and led to the formation of Kohistani diasporas that are now spread over the Northern Punjab and the North-West Frontier Provinces. These diasporas and the local grapevine that unites them, provide a channel for news and gossip, but also for long-term cultural and religious exchange between diasporas and their native area of Kohistan. In addition, Kohistanis travel widely and many spend the winter in urban areas doing menial labour or for educational purposes, including religious training in a madrasa. This means that even in the most isolated Kohistani communities, the men have for some part of their lives been residing outside their villages, where they have often learnt to speak but not always write Urdu, the Pakistani national language. As individuals and as members of local communities, many Kohistani men have therefore had broad exposure to non-local cultural and religious traditions, and have spent time learning these traditions as workers, friends, neighbours and students in rural and urban areas far from home.

Given this fact, it is understandable that there are methodological problems attached to the question of a ‘local Islam’ and how to study it. While communities are always ‘local’ in a geographical sense, individuals are not. The same goes for ideas, news and information that travel by word of mouth or with the help of electronic media. Despite the non-local nature of these influences, every analysis has to be, at some level, grounded in local realities. So, to what degree can we pick up on these influences, if we move on to an analysis at the ‘local level’? In other words, how different does this picture become if we leave the region, and take a closer look at the Palas valley located on the east bank of the Indus? Is the ‘local Islam’ in the Palas valley in any important way different from the regional trend, and if so, why? Moreover, what can this tell us about the nature of a ‘local Islam’? Are the people of Palas concerned with other and more ‘local’ discourses of what is Islamic practise and what isn’t?

Unlike the situation in the more accessible areas of Kohistan, in Palas, there are no modern mosques with blaring loudspeakers. There is a spiritual tranquillity, which is both deep and profound. The old wooden mosques contain unique stylistic elements that bear testimony to an indigenous and localised form of Islam (Frembgen 1999). Nevertheless, this form of Islam was initially also an alien one, and was brought to Palas by emissaries from Swat during the seventeenth century. Islam, therefore, was a foreign import.

In the 1970s, following completion of the Karakoram Highway, the Palas valley was subject to a growing religious orthodoxy of Deobandi Islam spread by itinerant preachers. A few years later the Tablighi Jamā‘at, a proselytising Islamic movement with roots in pre-partition India, became established in the valley. The combined Deobandi and Tablighi influence made villagers change mortuary rites and abandon keeping wake at graves, and put an end to the women’s ritual wailing during funerals. The villagers also abandoned
saint cults, and the professional musicians (Dom) were forced to leave the valley because their singing was considered un-Islamic. Does this mean that Islam in Palas was purged of its local character and that religious orthodoxy had eradicated local practices of Islam? The question is not easy to answer; it depends on which practices we single out for study. In the following, I will give some examples from Palas to illustrate the complexity of the situation. As will become evident, Islam, (and to Palas villagers there is only one Islam), often comes in opposition to what is considered 'local tradition.'

Despite the Tablighi Jama'at’s influence in Palas and its criticism of lavish hospitality, hospitality is in many cases still beyond people’s economic means. In defiance of the Maulvis’ ban on singing, men and women still sing in private fora. There is a retreat from the public to the private sphere where these traditions survive. Although singing is subdued, it has not been eradicated. The belief in magic, and the use of amulets and charms, are anathema to Deobandi Islam and considered un-Islamic (Alawi 1987: 31). Still, men in Palas carry charms meant to help them entice village women, or render enemy bullets harmless. This practise is not seen as opposed to ‘Islam,’ but in a strong sense embedded within it: the charms will only work their magic if those who wear them pray regularly.

Another example from Palas can be used to take this argument a step further. In my forthcoming book I describe the prevalence of romantic love affairs in Palas. Despite the fact that adultery is sinful according to Islam, something all villagers are highly aware of, love affairs are still a common practice in Palas. Local poetry abound with themes of romantic love and longing for the beloved, as described by Lila Abu-Lughod in her book Veiled Sentiments (1986), suggests that poetry

A Palas elder displaying his early-19th-century muzzle-loading rifle and bandoleer. Photo by A. Knudsen
is an acceptable medium for expressing these sentiments that otherwise run counter to Islamic injunctions against adultery as sinful and reprehensible. This, again, underlines the duality of the Islamic prohibition of love affairs and the villagers’ tacit approval of them. The villagers are, I have suggested, operating on two discursive levels at the same time. Still, there is some evidence that Palas villagers are now more concerned with defending personal honour, that women charged with adultery are more often murdered, and that men more often killed or mutilated for similar accusations than earlier.

The problem of reconciling ‘tradition’ with ‘religion’ is a central concern for Palas villagers. Is, for example, the ‘banning of cultivation’ – i.e. preventing an adversary from growing crops – a legitimate or illegitimate practise? Here, the villagers’ perception differs, and those who suffer from such bans are by necessity the strongest critics of them, arguing that the practice is opposed both to religion and tradition. Since the banning of cultivation is a foreign import – it was adopted from a neighbouring valley – is it a part of Palas tradition? And, in an egalitarian society, who is to decide? In many cases there is no clear answer, meaning that neither the Quran nor local traditions provide a ready answer. This therefore points to the possibility of more forceful individuals or groups trying to ‘invent tradition.’ To understand such processes, I have in this article argued for greater attention to ‘localised Islam’ in order to understand cultural formations and traditions that contribute to religious heterogeneity.

References

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