

Finding the object of study: Islamic studies in practice

Jonas Otterbeck¹

Abstract

This article argues that, to understand where to find the study object 'Islam' and how to address it, researchers in Islamic studies need to be theoretically and methodologically aware of the importance and implications of power practices. By discussing enunciations associated with Islam, the problems with reification, the importance of power, the cognitive power of naming, and the semiotic resources mobilised by enunciations, the article proposes ways to operationalise grand scale theories by Talal Asad and Michel Foucault, with an especial focus on the understanding of semiotic resources. It also provides an account of the personal journey of the author while trying to relate constructively to the field for the last 30 years.

Keywords: *Islamic studies; theory; methodology; research; power*

Introduction

Professor of Islamic Studies. That is how I introduce myself, professionally. At that very moment, the misunderstandings about my primary interest begin (no, I am not a Quran expert), and possibly even about my faith (no, you don't have to be Muslim, it is no hindrance but, personally, I'm not). 'Islamic' raises questions and is regularly paired with tiresome stereotypes but also, at times, with interesting, bothersome and inspiring concerns about social, economic, political, theological and ethical developments and configurations in history and in contemporary societies.

In fact, it has taken time to form – and formulate – a comprehensive understanding of what Islamic studies imply to me. Many in the field may disagree. Good. We should disagree for the sake of betterment. Losing a discussion means winning new knowledge and I still want to learn.

I consider the central field of interest for Islamic studies to be what individuals, groups or states (etc.) do – in writing, speech or other deeds – with that which we call Islam. This is probably only clear to me. Allow me to elaborate in this article. First, I examine the question of reification of Islam versus seeing Islam as a result of a flow of enunciations; next, the importance of power. Third, I suggest an approach to words like Muslim and Islamic; fourth, a way to understand that which we call Islam through enunciations of its components. Finally, I discuss what all this means for the methodology of studying Islam.

Reification versus a flow of enunciations

Islamic scholars and scholars of Islamic studies generally should diverge in ambition. While true Islam – or at least an interpretation of Islam that is hopefully acceptable to Allah – is, ideally, the subject matter for Islamic scholars, Islamic studies scholars should start from the point of methodological agnosticism (Porpora, 2006), like any humanist and social scientists, regardless of subject. This does

¹ Jonas Otterbeck, Aga Khan University; United Kingdom. E-mail: Jonas.Otterbeck@aku.edu.



not imply that Islamic studies scholars must be critical of Islam in the sense of aiming to deconstruct Islamic worldviews. It simply means that scholars of Islamic studies should study the immanent production of Islam, not an assumed, reified, transcendent Islam (Hjärpe, 1997; Waardenburg, 1998). Yet, as critics such as Aaron Hughes (2007) have made abundantly clear, Islamic studies scholars in North America have repeatedly failed to uphold this difference, hence my insertion of 'should' above. I am aware that some scholars consciously, and at times successfully, slide between roles, being both critics and caretakers (Kersten forthcoming). However, I maintain that the roles are different.

Still, some scholars of Islamic studies unintentionally promote a reified Islam as a by-product of failed linguistic logic – or due to insufficient theoretical awareness. Typically, Islam is assigned agency as the grammatical subject of a sentence (Islam considers...). At best, this is an efficient shorthand, but the construction hides the acts of real people that produce that which we call Islam. It further effaces the plurality of competing interpretations. I return to the theoretical considerations below.

From a believer's point of view, the above (and what will follow) may sound as if it demeans Islam, but it does not, either in intention or consequence. In fact I dare say, according to most Islamic scholars Allah is thought to exist outside our linguistic and cognitive frameworks. Allah creates, through revelations, an idea of Allah and a message for people to understand and follow (and gives continuous guidance, according to, for example, Sufis). However, when this message takes form in the immanent, it will have to be communicated through language, texts and acts, becoming subject to the limitations of these. Scholars of Islamic studies cannot research possible transcendent realities, only immanent claims about them.

Islamic scholars have the aim – and the right – to express what Islam is as a reified category, as truth, but both they and scholars of Islamic studies (should) understand that these verbalisations happen in time and space in competition with other verbalisations. Indeed, we have no alternative but to study what *individuals, groups, states (etc.)* do with that which we call Islam.

Does this suggest that Islam is best studied as a mere abstraction of what people say and do in the name of Islam? No. It implies that that which we call Islam is a discourse consisting of a multitude of power practices – enunciations in words, deeds, texts, symbols, even emotions – backing up or challenging what is taken to be Islam. These power practices give rise to multiple interpretations of Islam that can both be studied as overlapping discourses with their own internal logics or as one highly diverse super-discourse – a discursive tradition, see below – containing all interpretations living in compliance, competition or ignorance of each other. Consequently, we need to understand how discourses order enunciations and set up scripts that are difficult to challenge. We need to reflect on power.

Power practices at the heart

A Foucauldian take on power and discourse (Foucault, 1990, 1998) is productive for Islamic studies. If discourses may be studied as the constantly (re)created outcome of enunciations, how do we approach these enunciations? First, we must acknowledge that enunciations are made from different social positions and group formations, giving actors different possibilities of influencing others. A fictive example. A Saudi Arabian boy sits at his beloved grandmother's side as she recounts a visit to Medina. She claims that the gout that had long troubled her disappeared after praying at the Prophet's tomb. The intimate moment may stick in the memory and imagination of the boy. Her enunciation is a power practice in a specific, private situation. Obviously, she might express her beliefs to others, and the boy might repeat her words. Later, the boy is so surprised by his teacher's assertion that the



prophet did not perform miracles (apart from splitting the moon and receiving the Quran), and that visiting tombs to ask for aid against ailments is *shirk* (idolatry), that he dares question the teacher, repeating his grandmother's claim. The teacher, wanting to maintain authority, snaps at the boy, saying that such stories are old women's tales and should not be trusted, and certainly should not be taken as an example of Islam, rather the contrary. This is then spoken from another power position, that of a teacher, heard in class and backed up by previously earned (or not) authority. But so was the boy's comment and, in a fuller analysis, so was the assumed silence or possible gestures of the pupils. In some situation, silence is a form of enunciation, to be interpreted, for example, as support or fear.

The related discourse is larger than the actors. None of them have invented the enunciated ideas. Rather, the teacher represents the discourse of the Wahhabi school of thought propagated in the Saudi school system, backed up by Islamic scholars appointed and financed by the Saudi state apparatus. The grandmother represents an orientation that is less institutionalised in Saudi Arabia (see Doumato, 2000), a Sufi-oriented, popular understanding much more prone to accept an enchanted world where tombs carry *baraka* (blessings, i.e., a spiritual force operating in the world not least channelled through a *wali Allah*, a friend of Allah – a Sufi sheikh, for example).

Thus, we can study this situation from a power practice-oriented Islamic studies perspective, observing how different understandings of that which we associate with Islam are narrated, propagated and negotiated. Islam is produced in the situation in relation to discourses and power practices, including those not generally thought of as Islamic, such as the school as an institution, the (possible) authority of a grown-up and teacher, emotional socialisation and intimacy in relation to an elder, gendered hierarchies in society, and so on. Further, we can quickly conjure up a situation where the teacher has a grandmother with similar views, or where the teacher actually agrees with the boy but is afraid of critique for not following the curriculum if he does not scold him. That is, in every enunciation in relation to that which we call Islam there might be other orders to consider (see Gilseman, 1982).

When analysing that which we call Islam, Islamic studies scholars need to consider the social position of those who enunciate. This includes acknowledging that leading, employed Islamic scholars contribute with systematic, intellectual, institutionalised Islam-interpretations. Such interpretations represent a part of that which we call Islam that is systematically developed in relation to methods (established or argued for), expressed in typical forms for intellectual work (texts, lectures) and is institutionalised in the sense that they are produced within the walls of institutions that are backed up by organisations or states able to pay for scholars to engage for years in figuring out and providing interpretations (see Siavoshi, 2017 for Iran; Al-Rasheed, 2009 for Saudi Arabia). In the system of enunciations, these scholars act from positions of authority.

Still, connecting to Foucault's work on speech and silence (see Carrette, 2000), most scholars are not at liberty to disseminate whatever they consider true as they too are affected by the disciplinary power of institutions. To deviate from the official line might result in terrible grades for students, lead to the loss of position, income and freedom for junior dissenting scholars, and even constitute severe risk-taking for senior scholars. Note the word 'might'. They might get away with it, if the timing is right. They might initiate a change. But they might also be humiliated, thrown into jail, exiled or worse.

Saudi Arabian Sheikh Adel ibn Salam al-Kalbani disseminated a *fatwa* on music (20 June 2010) claiming that there is no problem with music apart from when lyrics and performance are indecent (Otterbeck, 2012). Up until then, al-Kalbani was a respected colleague in mid-career; he was a former

imam at the main mosque of Mecca and had earned appreciation as a skilled Quran reciter. As his *fatwa* contradicted the official Wahhabi line and went viral, al-Kalbani found himself in trouble. His personal webpage was hacked, and he was publicly character assassinated by respectable senior scholars while he desperately tried to defend his position in the media. In fact, senior scholars called for a centralisation of *fatwas* to stop *fatwas* by individual scholars; this also materialised through a decree by the king during the autumn. At the same time, the acceptance of music as not inherently evil was spreading world-wide among Islamic scholars and also affecting the situation in Saudi Arabia. In fact, al-Kalbani drew inspiration for his *fatwa* from a book about the legality of music authored by world-renowned Sheikh Abdullah Al Judai', based in Leeds (Otterbeck, 2021). However, al-Kalbani's timing was bad and he had to suffer the consequences. He retracted his *fatwa* to save his career, but has lately (2019) repeated his more permissive viewpoint on music.

Jeremy Carrette (2000) ambitiously followed the leads laid down by Foucault in an attempt to create, theoretically, the project on religion (especially Catholicism) that Foucault had in mind but was never fully able to achieve. In his chapter on silence, Carrette stresses the non-binary character of speech and silence. Mastering the systems of exclusion operating in any discourse is a crucial skill. Experienced participants will know when to speak, what to say, when to stay quiet and what to keep silent about, how to deal with being silenced in spite of having spoken, and how to speak and confess and yet tactically keep silent about some things (Foucault, 1981; Carrette, 2000: Chapter 4). The less skilled risk being disciplined. Depending on the level of transgression and its conflation with other orders, disciplining might be kind admonition, but could be much harsher. Thus, the history of enunciations about that which we call Islam is also a history of silences and disciplining, something rather difficult to study, although the case of al-Kalbani mentioned above indicates some possibilities.

It is crucial to acknowledge the discourse produced by Islamic scholars for what it is: diverse, continuous enunciation of clever (or at times not so clever) commentaries on that which we call Islam. Frequently, these enunciations are seen as declaring what Islam is, despite their sum being contradictory, often even regarding central doctrines. Should Islamic studies scholars privilege the enunciations of Islamic scholars? Informed by anthropology and with a respect for people at large, we need to position the interpretations of Islamic scholars as a type of expression of that which we call Islam, albeit at times very influential. There are other, often locally grounded interpretations that have their own religious specialists, among them wise – or at least older – men and women, wandering specialists in herbs and exorcism, and Sufi leaders and orders. At times, religious studies scholars use the concepts 'great' and 'little tradition' (See McGuire, 2002). Unsurprisingly, scholars have reserved 'great' for productions of Islam by elites and scholars, while traditions much greater in volume – those of the people – have to settle with 'little'. This critique is commonplace. As a pedagogical tool, the dichotomy serves classrooms or introductory books well. In reality, especially after the introduction of mass education in most societies, and mass urbanisation, such division renders complex situations too crudely (Gilsenan, 1982). It is more fruitful to ask, every single time we approach the enunciations of anything associated with that which we call Islam: Who said or did what, using what form of communication? From what social position? Who did this reach? What kind of Islam was produced? What did it connect to and why? How well did it spread? What was the impact? In that way, that which we call Islam is not presumed but researched, and agency is attributed to actual people who act in history in relation to discourse and social positions.

Discourses are abstract sums of individual enunciations but at the same time may be described as causing enunciations. A discourse can be powerful and not only order (as in sort) but seemingly order (as in command). A fine example is provided by anthropologist Abdellah Hammoudi (2006). As a



self-proclaimed secular Muslim, he undertakes the *hajj* (pilgrimage) as fieldwork but soon finds himself having to confront the faith into which he was socialised as a boy in Morocco. He reflects on his and other participants' inability to resist the orders of the ancient pilgrimage rituals. The rituals were writing themselves into his life and body, issuing orders, producing emotions and future social roles (being *hajj* commands traditional respect). The perpetually ongoing rituals at Ka'ba – backed up by well-circulated rules and regulations – seemingly reproduce themselves, with the pilgrims as pawns. It is a very compelling argument that advances Hammoudi's analysis. Yet there is a problem in that rituals would stop if it were not for the manifold actions of a large number of individuals: narrators of past pilgrimages, teachers informing about the five pillars, the decision to go, the studying of ritual manuals, the conformism once there, and so on.

Further, some acts violate protocol. For example, women have attested to being groped by men in the crowds around Ka'ba (Buitelaar, 2020). Some men obviously do not only perform the rituals and follow discursive orders. Moreover, there is a constant battle over what comprises appropriate rituals between Saudi Arabian Wahhabi authorities overseeing the *hajj* and devotees, especially Shiites and Sufis (Hammoudi, 2006). Certain groups are not even welcome, like the Ahmadiyya Muslims. They are officially not considered Muslims by Saudi Arabia, despite their insistence on being so and their attachment to the Hanafi law school (Nielsen and Otterbeck, 2016). Hence, the current head of the Ahmadiyya has never visited Mecca (personal communication).

Thus, we need to consider the powers of discourses, and while, for analytical purposes, we might see them as giving orders, we must also acknowledge that even when discourses are as powerful as the *hajj* rituals, the upholding of rituals and discourses are the acts of individuals. In doubt? I offer any once powerful discourse ordering public rituals from Roman, Egyptian, Hittite or Aztec religions as proof. These are not upheld anymore. Despite the discourses being known to us, at least in part, they fail to order action.

What do we mean by Muslim and Islamic?

If that which we call Islam can be studied as the enunciations of innumerable people, in different social positions and constellations, over centuries, all over the world; are at least those people Muslims? The simple answer is no. The study of Muslims and the study of the production of Islam are not the same study field, albeit overlapping.

When I started my PhD studies in 1992, I soon adopted the well-spread idea in my field that I was studying what Muslims claim is Islam (see for example Smith, 1980). I thought it clever and accurate, which it was, to a certain degree. Certainly, it was an accurate description of what I researched at the time. My PhD thesis was a study of the totality of the overlapping and contradicting claims about Islam made in print by Muslims in Sweden (Otterbeck, 2000). I had no intention to state what Islam was or was not; that was the task of Muslims. To me, it was a solution to an age-old problem and intellectual lapsus in Islamic studies. Some researchers had trusted their own reading of historical texts (the classics) to be more authentic enunciations of Islam than Muslims' contemporary expressions – an erroneous and insensitive idea connected to colonial political dominance, elitism and notions of intellectual superiority (e.g. Said, 1979). My solution was to read what Muslims in a marginal situation – in Sweden – wrote, and to listen to what they had to say about it when meeting some of them. However, there were flaws in my argument.

To start with, Muslims are of course not the only ones to make enunciations producing Islam. I do too. Further, European politicians, Chinese government spokespersons and the Pope occasionally

produce Islam. In some contexts where Muslims make up a small minority, as in Denmark, self-proclaimed experts among the non-Muslim population sometimes provide more influential understanding of that which we call Islam than Muslim scholars are able to do (Petersen, 2020). Non-Muslims venturing to interpret Islam might claim to know more about Islam than Muslims, whom they consider to lie about, or live in denial or ignorance of, the actual meaning of Islam. This particular agenda is so strong and well-represented in the media that when Muslims find the opportunity to express themselves in public they have to take the enunciations of non-Muslims about Islam into account to come across as authentic and believable, or even graspable. The agenda is set and affects Muslims' discourse (and silence) about that which we call Islam. In Islamic studies we need to take this into consideration.

Thus, it is not correct to claim that we are studying what Muslims say that Islam is. Rather, we are studying what anyone enunciates about that which we call Islam: not regardless of their background – on the contrary; rather, specifically taking their background and social positions into account, and not ignoring the fact that people other than those who self-identify as Muslims produce enunciations about Islam, albeit likely motivated by other purposes, for example promoting a career as politician or public expert. Yet, while it is legitimate, common and crucial to study what Muslims claim that Islam is, in some contexts and in some discourses non-Muslim enunciations about that which we call Islam cast crucial light on why certain enunciations among Muslims become plausible and are made. In doubt? I suggest a surf session on 'Islam' and any of the following: veganism, gay marriages, ecology, FGM, democracy. You will find a fascinating mix of Muslim and non-Muslim voices making claims about what Islam is, entangled in each other, defending, attacking and elucidating, together forming discourse.

This further leads to the question: who is Muslim or non-Muslim? A standard solution within Islamic studies is to assert that we study those who self-identify as Muslims. Many Sunni Muslims will consider Ahmadiyyas outside the fold of Islam, however, yet they are self-proclaimed Muslims. For example, the Pakistani state makes it illegal for Ahmadiyyas to call themselves Muslims, a powerful disciplinary tool with which to silence the Other (Valentine, 2008). Researchers in Islamic studies need simply to note that identities are contested before studying Ahmadiyya enunciations: contextualising them, problematising them, still seeing them as related to that which we call Islam. Ahmadiyya Muslims were the first to commission the constructions of buildings called mosques in both Denmark (1967) and Sweden (1976). The first translation of the Quran into Danish (1967) by a self-identifying Muslim was by a Danish Ahmadi convert called Abdus Salam Madsen (1928–2007) and the first into Swedish (1988) was by another Ahmadi convert, Qanita Sadiqa (Christina Gustavsson) (b. 1944). These are powerful and influential symbols of that which we call Islam. Indeed, the mosques built and the translations of the Quran mentioned here can be understood in relation to the severe conditions under which Ahmadiyyas live in many Muslim majority countries, making them prone to migration to countries without a Muslim majority population.

Yet others live a faith that is related to Islam without self-identifying as Muslims. There are Sufis following Inayat Khan (d. 1927) who do not identify as Muslims, yet many of his followers do (Rawlinson, 1997: 20, 543); and most members of the Nation of Gods and Earths do not generally identify as Muslims as they do not practice submission to Islam (Ackfeldt, 2019). They live the Islam that is their birth right as Gods and Earths. That is, they decree they have an Islamic understanding, but not as Muslims (Knight, 2009). If our interest is in that which we call Islam and how it is produced, these groups fall within our interest; if we are interested in Muslims, they might not.



Islamic studies scholars should approach being Muslim as a research question and not a given relation. Muslim is a multifunctional identifier, and all identifiers are discursive and subject to identification processes. We might like to be able to control how others identify us, but must settle for identifying with what we believe are comprehensible identifiers ordered in discourses. Others might reject our attempts (e.g. Jenkins, 2008). An example from my research: Shazia is eighteen, the daughter of immigrants from Pakistan who have lived in Copenhagen a long time. She identifies as Muslim, but a few years ago being Muslim was not much fun as it set her apart from the majority of friends at school who were non-Muslim majority Danes. Now, she is proud to be Muslim. However, she does not mark her Muslim identity with, for example, a *dupatta* (Pakistani shawl), nor does she pray regularly, although she fasts. Instead of simply naming Shazia a Muslim in my research, I described her as a young adult with a Muslim family background, thus keeping open her identification with the category Muslim – as she understood it. Researching her enunciations about Islam and being Muslim (Otterbeck, 2010, 2015), I ascertained that her understanding of her Muslimness and her Muslim subjectification were produced in relation to several groups of people, primarily her family, her relatives, her friends at school, Copenhagen's cultures of public spaces, and, admittedly, her discussions with me. According to Shazia, she was identified in a wide variety of ways and from the perspectives of a number of different understandings of what Muslim means. She had experienced being verbally harassed and even spat at for being assumed to be Muslim. She had felt pressure from her extended family to abide by norms associated with Muslim gendered lives that she ignores in her daily life. Further, she had had to navigate the internal battle taking place as she matured from child to young adult concerning her own expectations of what being Muslim meant, or even required.

By simply naming Shazia Muslim, I would have diminished the extent and gravity of her ongoing attempts to identify with the category of Muslim in a way that would come across as genuine to other people identifying with the category, and respectable among those who do not identify as Muslims, but still produce ideas about what Islam is or should be. It would not have been very fine-tuned scholarship simply to slap such a label on her.

In Europe, people who have Muslim family backgrounds are frequently referred to as Muslims, without distinctions being made between various interpretations of Islam or different configurations of being Muslim. This creates expectations that Muslims share culture, religious needs and wishes. In fact, the frequent use of the term 'Muslim' in Europe produces a neo-ethnicity (Roy, 2004); an imaginary community is fashioned out of a vast diversity sharing a single trait – the possibility of identifying as Muslim. Yet the actual diversity of subject positions, ethnic and national backgrounds, theological adherences and so forth of those who self-identify as Muslims are staggering (Nielsen and Otterbeck, 2016). When the diversity of Muslims is converted into a neo-ethnicity with an assumed shared culture, it also tends to emerge as a racialised category signalling non-whiteness. These cognitive operations lie at the heart of what is called cultural racism (Jakku, 2019), which has direct political consequences: the far-right groups in Europe make maximum use of the assumed homogeneity and Otherness of Muslims (Taras 2012), while the idea of 'the Muslim group' makes politicians search for 'the Muslim voice' that can represent 'the group'. People with a Muslim family background and political ambitions may take on the challenge, but it has proven very tricky to navigate due to expectations (Cato and Otterbeck, 2014; Jakku, 2019).

Yet another common use of Muslim suggests a difference between Islamic and Muslim. Not long ago, I would have considered it clarifying to state that both Tunisia and Iran are Muslim countries, but of these only Iran is Islamic. Islamic is then used as an adjective signalling an active relation to the discourse on Islam. I do not object to this use of 'Islamic'. In fact, this is how I think it should

be used. I am not at all in favour of its use as a broad catch-all adjective to add to art, history, philosophy or medical development just because an activity happened to take place in lands that in one way or other have relations with Islamic discourse. But that is an old critique that made Hodgson (1974) invent the concept Islamicate.

It is the use of Muslim that is more problematic. Muslim becomes a category based on supposed religious belonging but without actual religious implications. Again, this works as shorthand in general communication; however, it is not sufficiently nuanced for research. There is power in naming. I am aware that words are sometimes used for convenience and that intellectualising etymology or lexical meaning is rather pointless. But researchers need to be cautious and, furthermore, be aware of the opportunities that arise out of opposing established use. By calling Tunisia a Muslim country, we stress that the country's population, regardless of its diversity, is best described with a word denoting religious adherence: why? It exoticises and produces notions of a 'Muslim world' that suggests that Tunisia and Pakistan have something essentially in common, while implying an ontological difference between Tunisia and Italy, one of its closest neighbours and sharing millennia of history. Pushing the argument, the enunciation risks producing political positioning: reproducing a postcolonial Orientalism but also an age-old division of the Mediterranean territories as either under Muslim or Christian control. In terms of research we should rather ask people in Tunisia how they relate to and understand the concept Muslim, investigate how social institutes relate to Muslimness and how self-identifying non-Muslims are treated or seen, and so on. The growing trend of atheism in the Middle East already observed by Schielke (2012) makes this pertinent.

What Islam is made of

In pursuit of the study of Islam as sketched out above, I was seduced by anthropologist Talal Asad's (1986) suggestion that we study Islam as an Islamic discursive tradition. Asad is famous for his anthropology of concepts, not least the anthropology of secularism, and one of his first attempts at such a project is a literature review published as a working paper in 1986. In it, he criticised two trends in the anthropology of Islam (note that he was not discussing an anthropology of Muslims), one homogenised and essentialised Islam, the other fragmented Islam and created disconnected satellites of Islams. Asad uses a charmingly naïve argument – which I like – claiming that everyone can tell the difference between what is Jewish and what is Islamic through simple common sense. Thus, there *is* something holding Islam together that separates it from Judaism, but that something is not an essence. His solution was to see Islam as a discursive tradition. 'Tradition' was borrowed from Alistair McIntyre to underscore the longevity of the discourse, the discursive part was clearly lifted from Foucault, but not grounded through references. After the working paper, Asad did not use the concept much although he maintained an interest in McIntyre's tradition concept for a while and developed his understanding of Foucault substantially in later writing. Unfortunately, Asad did not include a revision of the working paper in the collection of articles that formed the next book he published, *Genealogies of Religion* (1993). However, it is widely circulated as an important discursive intervention in the study of Islam (Kreinath, 2011).

Yet the paper is puzzling. As a literature review, it is rather harsh, somewhat in the rhetorical style of Edward Said. As an inspired paper pioneering a new idea it is brilliant, but the theoretical suggestion is haphazard, contradictory and in need of revision. At my first reading, I only saw opportunities. Here was a concept allowing me to say what I already thought. There is something called Islam, it is discursive but on a very large scale. It contains all kinds of contradictions caused by being subjected to continuous enunciations for more than 1,400 years. The anthropological element refuted the idea



that Islam is mainly (or only) produced in books by intellectual Muslims and in Islamic arts by master craftspeople. Soon, however, I encountered critique of this work by Asad and decided to re-read it, whereupon I found that the idea was fundamentally impossible to operationalise in the way Asad had launched it. It needed to be amended or abandoned.

To operationalise the study of a discursive tradition one needs to focus on the enunciations of individuals, groups, states and so on, and the way that these enunciations tie into the discursive tradition by mobilising semiotic resources – such as words, symbols, signs, gestures – that are associated with that which we call Islam. These are ordered by discourse (or semiotic regimes in social semiotic language, see van Leeuwen, 2005; Ackfeldt, 2019).

Semiotic resources help us make meaning when communicating. We draw on shared resources when we make enunciations. Calling them semiotic *resources* intentionally stresses their non-fixed meaning. A semiotic resource receives its meaning through repeated use and the process of anchorage (Barthes, 1977), that is, by combining one semiotic resource with other resources. Meaning-making operates through systems of associations that are more or less shared by, and more or less comprehensible to, an in-group or an out-group. There is no essence in a resource, only more or less frequent use.

Some semiotic resources, like the Quran, are almost exclusively connected to that which we call Islam. Still, both the Druze and the Bahai consider the Quran a revealed holy text without calling themselves Muslims or following Islam. The competent participant in a social group can, with tone of voice, choice of words, a combination of associations – with the manipulation of semiotic resources – make people laugh, listen and learn. Comedians, politicians, teachers and preachers all know that. Still, people often reproduce the expected in communication; they make use of the semiotic resources in accordance with dominant discourses and, when it comes to that which we call Islam, in relation to the Islamic discursive tradition.

Notably, the assemblage of semiotic resources associated with Islam is not a closed system, rather it is a woven basket into which new resources may be added. Some semiotic resources might lie unused for decades in the bottom of the basket or actually fall out of it, never to be heard of again (metaphor from Hjärpe, 1997). Not all semiotic resources that are associated with Islam existed at the time of Muhammad. For example, many of the architectural features associated with mosques, like the minaret, are additions along the way.

Further, semiotic resources that have not been associated with the discursive tradition of Islam in the past may be enunciated with the intent of including them. My latest research analysed popular music made with the ambition that it be regarded as an acceptable expression within that which we call Islam. Artists like superstar Maher Zain anchor their music in the Islamic discursive tradition by singing lyrics containing phrases associated with Islam and, on stage, in videos and in songs, they present an ethical Muslim persona. These artists consciously produce songs connected to holidays like *mawlid al-nabi* (Muhammad's birthday) or Ramadan, or acts like entering into marriage. To some extent, their songs are the equivalent of Christmas music and Christian pop. The genre provokes angry rants by some identifying as Muslims, but most seem to enjoy it. It would not surprise me if Ramadan pop music were normalised in many families when today's teenagers start their own families. The most successful of these songs will probably become sonar semiotic resources associated with Islam, evoking emotions and nostalgia when played (Otterbeck, 2021).

Thus, at the heart of Islamic studies are the enunciations made from a variety of social positions by individuals, groups, states (etc.) when these enunciations relate to the semiotic resources of the

Islamic discursive tradition or that which we call Islam, regardless of whether Muslims or non-Muslims make the enunciations.

A methodology for Islamic studies

Islamic studies – part of area studies – finds its methods, methodology and theories elsewhere. Generally, it is seen as part of the humanities, but in practice it is greatly informed by the social sciences and even political science. In this article, I have drawn from anthropology, cultural studies and Foucauldian ideas but I am trained in the humanities.

Humanists tend to value empirical knowledge and insist on the possibility of one individual empathically and intellectually understanding another, regardless of structural differences such as class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religious preferences. I am not suggesting a full understanding; we are not in a position to fully understand ourselves, let alone another. Rather, like a fine novelist, a decent humanist offers nuance, in-depth understanding and complexity.

The role is not one of defending different behaviour or beliefs, but of explaining and interpreting. In one of his last articles, Edward Said (2004) insisted on being identified as a humanist, a perspective he understood as a radical political theory as it insisted on seeing and acknowledging the individual first, before ordering people in groups. This is radical precisely because it refuses to reduce the complex lives of individuals to simple tags like ‘Muslim’. The humanities move away from polarising binaries and thrive on complexities without denying the importance of collective identifications.

When grappling with how that which we call Islam is formed, a humanist perspective is one of understanding the role of individual human agency in relation to power, social structure and discourse. The critical gaze should also be turned towards oneself. Like everyone else, humanists are situated as knowledge producers; intersecting identifications and socio-economic positions indicate their perspectives (Frankenberg, 2005). Yet individuals have unique experiences, knowledge and opportunities, making them difficult to pigeon hole. I may be white, male, middle-class, but I am also formed by my embodied and mental experiences from work, travels, relationships and emotions.

In the final part, I provide glimpses of my latest project and how the discussion above has informed it (Otterbeck, 2021), reusing the headings above to reconnect thematically.

Reification versus a flow of enunciations

My most recent research revolves around the ‘faith-driven’ popular music of the media company Awakening. Many with a Muslim family background favour Awakening’s artists and their songs as they are seen to affirm Islam. I was interested in what the company and its artists were doing in relation to that which we call Islam. Instead of only listening to songs and looking at videos – which is also part of my research – I managed to participate in two of their tours which gave me opportunities for in-depth discussion, attending concerts, being part of after-concert conversations and more (Otterbeck, 2021).

It is essential to engage in dialogue, to take people you study seriously and preferably submerge yourself in their everyday to be able to analyse the content and context of their enunciations. Instead of assuming that my informed reading of their songs and videos was sufficient, I sought their own perceptions of their creative expressions, not because they hold the key to the correct understanding, but because of the possibility of a fuller understanding.



Power practices at the heart

When recorded popular music emerged in the first half of the 20th century, Islamic scholars tended to keep their distance, either branding popular music and listening to it as *haram* (forbidden) or complaining about its corruptive and foreign elements. Studying the enunciations of Islamic scholars over time, we can see changes. In Egypt, starting from the 1960s, some scholars started to embrace certain modern artistic expressions, primarily the novel, as long as they abided by Islamic sensibilities. From this, a broader discussion on *al-fann al-hadif*, purposeful art, surfaced. From the 1990s and onwards, scholars began to address purposeful music; some gave it their blessing. The age-old negative attitude to stringed instruments, and the rather anti-westernization critique of the guitar, were renegotiated in the enunciations of some very influential Islamic scholars, notably Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Abdullah Al Judai' (Otterbeck, 2021).

While the scholarly debate was taking place, musicians pushed ahead and created a new genre, the pop-nashid. The Arabic word *nashid* simply means song, but in relation to the Islamic discursive tradition the association was with poetic, vocals-only hymns celebrating love for Muhammad and Allah. A fair guess is that the global wave of pop-nashid songs has affected the way the word is perceived. The spread of pop-nashids is stunning. Awakening has produced music videos since 2014 and by early 2019, the videos on its official YouTube channel had reached 3 billion views; two years later it has more than doubled. Awakening is one of the largest companies, but there are many more (Otterbeck, 2021).

Seen as power practices, these Islam-affirming enunciations within the pop-nashid genre do something as they are consumed. They normalise the expression, putting it within the Islamic discursive tradition where it once did not exist. The issue of Islamic views on music, which has a long history, has been given a new dimension through the enunciations of musicians, much to the anger and despair of the Wahhabi and Salafi-inspired, and to the joy of, not least, teenage girls with Muslim family backgrounds. By keeping an open mind, it is possible to observe that the changed role of music and popular culture globally has also affected enunciations related to that which we call Islam. Such enunciations have had impact on what is considered to be valid expressions for the Islamic discursive tradition.

What do we mean with Muslim and Islamic?

When starting to write about pop-nashid, it was simple to call the music Islamic pop, and I still do, as a shorthand. I discussed the naming at length with informants. The artist Raef was uncomfortable with 'Islamic pop'; he found it pretentious. CEO Sharif Banna's preferred phrase was faith-driven music. In my view, Awakening artists produce music that they hope will come across as affirmative of Islam. That is, they do music in relation to audiences. They gently push discursive limits as they create new expressions. To them, claiming that the music *is* Islamic – appropriating a word that they consider deeply meaningful – becomes arrogant and problematic. Still, the Awakening people accepted 'Islamic pop' as a shorthand in discussions. To me, their relations with the category Islamic became a research question, meaning that I discussed their enunciations instead of sticking to my first labelling. Eventually, I created a new taxonomy and made up the concept pop-nashid, although fans simply call it nasheed.

I further tried to discover what being Muslim meant to them in relation to their music careers and found an individual and collective engagement in ethics informed by that which we call Islam. They were especially engaged with how to present a consistent ethical persona as a male singer and

musician, well aware of both modern celebrity culture and historical mistrust of male singers. To come across as authentic, the company and the artists needed to control the artists' ethical selves (Foucault 1990; Otterbeck, 2021).

What Islam is made of

In my research, I describe lyrics, videos, music, production styles, concerts and promotion material in detail, exploring the semiotic resources mobilised. The Awakening people are very conscious about their enunciations and for good reason. Not least in the Gulf, there are listeners who consider instruments to be disallowed in Islam, but some would still like to listen to the artists. To meet the demand, Awakening produces two versions of their most popular songs, one with full instrumentation, one vocals-only using digital techniques to produce a rich sound. The semiotic resources in the lyrics and on covers celebrating Allah, Muhammad or a Muslim lifestyle can then be consumed, while problematic (or downright *haram*) semiotic resources (sounds created by guitars, keyboards, etc.) are removed. Most fans settle for the instrument version, while hardcore fans seek out both (Otterbeck and Skjelbo, 2020).

Demands for purified versions illustrate that semiotic resources commonly associated with the Islamic discursive tradition can coexist unproblematically with many semiotic resources that, in the eyes of the many, are not part of Islam. Discourses are only seemingly closed. In fact they are open, but not without the power practices of individuals who, through their enunciations, may start to incorporate semiotic resources into a discourse where they have not existed before. Interestingly, quite a few musicians, producers and songwriters involved in creating pop-nashid do not self-identify as Muslims. They are professionals helping artists to express themselves, yet, in doing so, they add to the expressions.

Final words

There is much more to say. For example, the importance of genealogy has not been addressed, only implied (see Foucault, 1998). But I trust the main point has come across: researchers in Islamic studies have a responsibility to explain complexity. To do so we need to question established ways of approaching and addressing that which we call Islam, many of which are sedimented and hidden in our most common concepts. Foucauldian perspectives might not be news, but they are productive in the field of Islamic studies. However, both Asad's and Foucault's ideas require strategies to enable their operationalisation. At the time of writing, focusing on the enunciations of social semiotics seems productive and methodologically sound. I am curious about the faults I will eventually find with this model.

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