

Islamic Myths and Memories: Mediators of Globalization

Edited by

Itzchack Weismann, Mark Sedgwick, Ulrika Mårtensson

Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014

ISBN 978-1-4724-1149-5

Bianca Scoti (University of Glasgow)

In today's tense political and social climate in which the word Islam is too often, in the Western world, synonymous with fundamentalism, this collection of essays dispels prejudices and misconceptions while providing a deeper understanding of a rich and fascinating culture. The editors Weismann, Sedgwick and Mårtensson, have gathered together a collection of excellent essays that encompass a variety of topics, places and historical periods.

Despite this heterogeneity, the editors have created a volume that maintains its integrity throughout. The project engages with a wealth of literature on Islam and globalization and aims to fill the current gap relating to issues of myth and memory, two elements that recent studies have recognised as essential components and tools of globalization. In the introduction the editors explain that myth-making and memory have always been essential tools in the constitution and preservation of societies by anchoring them to specific times and places. In today's 'globalized' world we might be tempted to think that these mechanisms have been replaced by 'impersonal market forces, ubiquitous media signs, [and] mass consumption' (p. 3).

However, the editors argue that myth and memory are very much alive and are essential mechanism in communities' struggles for identity. In the Islamic world, myth and memory have been revived and reshaped to protect and reclaim a Muslim identity whose existence is threatened by globalization. The study frames Islamic myths (epic stories either dealing with past characters and places, or apocalyptic myths) and memories in the larger context of globalization in an attempt

to explain some of the recent events in the Islamic world, such as for instance, the recent wave of Islamic resurgence.

It is clear from the treatment of the subject and the employment of a vast array of sources, that we are reading a well-researched scholarly work. In approaching and defining the concepts of myth and memory, the project engages with established studies such as Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957), according to which myth, being beyond time and space, is regarded as unchallengeable and god-given. Another foundation source is Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) in which the authors analyse how the past is manipulated to suit particular agendas. Other essential notions for the theoretical framing of the study, in particular with regard to the definition of memory, are Maurice Halbwachs' *On Collective Memory* (1992), that highlights the social element in the process of remembering and Jan Assmann's *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies* (2006), which stresses the importance of tradition in shaping the collective memory. The editors deploy these sources to claim that history is a living tool with which communities and individuals constantly interact by remembering and re-elaborating myths and memories.

The structure reflects the scope of the project and the creativity of the editors. The volume is divided into three sections that address myth and memory in the context of globalization from a different perspective: 'The Past in the Present', 'Sacred Places and Persons' and 'Preaching, New and Old'. The introduction to the volume sets the tone for the whole project as it begins with a quote from Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, (1988). Many will recall the death sentence that Iranian religious leader Khomeini issued against the author in February 1989. In the novel, the protagonist Mahound receives revelations from Satan. Since Mahound is described in the novel with characteristics that echo the Prophet Mohammed, the novel was considered blasphemous and the controversy that followed has become a myth in itself.

The Satanic Verses is also analysed in Ulrika Mårtensson's chapter 'Satan and the Temptation of State Power: Medieval Islamic Myth in Global Society' (pp. 71-95). Mårtensson

challenges the public myth of the novel's blasphemy by highlighting the universalism of Rushdie's message, embodied by the individual's right to doubt as the sign of true faith, as opposed to the public myth around the controversy that frames the novel in terms of civilized West versus fundamentalist Islam. Defining myth as something 'not factually true' (p. 71), Mårtensson claims that Rushdie did not invent the story but commented on a report on Mohammed's satanic temptation that was also present in a medieval text, al Tabari's *History of the Messengers and the Kings* (d. AD 923) (p. 71). Mårtensson also compares Rushdie's case with the controversy around the Danish cartoonists in 2005, which is particularly relevant after the recent tragic events in Paris. However, in Rushdie's case there is not an intention to doubt Muslims' faith into the Prophet. Rather, he wished to highlight the fact that Western prejudices against Islam found expression in the authoritarian Islamic reformers who sought power and replaced doubt, pre-requisite of true faith, with certainty.

Perhaps because of the subject's relevance today, one of the most captivating essays is Anne Birgitta Nilsen's 'Shaykh Osama Bin Laden: An Evolving Global Myth' (pp. 139- 159), which provides a deeper understanding of Bin Laden's positive reception amongst several Islamic fundamentalist groups. Western media has portrayed Bin Laden as the personification of evil. Interestingly, Nilsen decides not to focus on the Western media's treatment of Bin Laden but rather on al-Qaeda's media organization's role in the creation of his image. The author analyses the three stages the Bin Laden's image underwent: holy warrior, statesman and mythical hero. Globalization is central to the evolution to this third stage, as the author argues that Bin Laden's staging has influenced his perception as a mythical figure beyond the circle of al-Qaeda. Readers with a specific interest in visual studies will appreciate Nilsen's analysis of images portraying Bin Laden, which the author deploys in support of her thesis.

The breadth of the topics covered makes this an ambitious volume. The jacket commentary claims that its 'accessibility' makes the book suitable for a 'wide range of audiences'. While it is true that most authors provide a comprehensive background to the issues they cover and offer a translation of Arabic terms, some sections may appear obscure to those who do not have any

expertise in Islamic studies. One example could be Martin Riexinger's 'The Ottoman Empire as Harmonious Utopia: A Historical Myth and its Function' (pp. 35-52), which explores Turkey's Ottoman past as myth. Another instance is Xiaofei Tu's 'From a Red Guard to a Jahriyya: A Chinese Author's Return to Islam' (pp. 53-70), a study of Sinophone Muslim author Zhang Chengzhui and his employment of religious and political symbols from the past. While interesting and well researched, these two dense essays engage with topics that are likely to be less accessible to a reader without specific knowledge of the subject.

However, this variety of historical figures, events and places is further proof of the validity of the thesis that the editors outline in the volume's introduction: different communities across the Islamic world, despite their specific culture, actively create, resurrect and re-elaborate myths and memories in order to overcome the threats that globalization poses to their identity. The editors skilfully bring together such heterogeneous contributions into a volume that represents an invaluable endeavour that highlights the depth of a culture, one that goes far beyond the simplistic representations that we too often witness in Western media.

Bibliography

Assmann, Jan, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006)

Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies* (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1957)

Halbwachs, Maurice, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992),

Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger (eds.) *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983)

Rushdie, Salman, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988)