

Abu-Zahra, Nadia. *The pure And Powerful: Studies In Contemporary Muslim Society*. xx, 320pp., bibliogr. Reading: Ithaca Press, 1997.

This book was written in an attempt to challenge prevailing anthropological notions about religious rituals in “Muslim societies”, particularly the perception of women’s roles in so-called folk religion. The author advocates the consideration of Islamic texts (Qu’ran and *hadith*), and takes issue with notions of women’s religious practices being “inferior” to those of men thereby stressing similarities between women and men from the same social class. Another point contested by the author is the alleged gap between the *ulama* (religious scholars), the Sufis and ordinary people. Abu-Zahra certainly provides new and in-depth ethnographic material of women’s participation in religious rituals in Tunisia and Egypt. However, her theoretical stipulations can easily be contested and are not entirely convincing.

In the first part of the book, the author describes rain rituals in the village of Sidi Ameer in the Sahel of Tunisia. She analyses rain prayers and rituals in terms of themes, concepts and vocabulary derived from the Qu’ran, but also points to non-Islamic local beliefs. A similar approach can be detected in her comparative analysis of mortuary rites in Tunisia and Egypt.

Her rather sketchy and generalizing ethnography in Part 1 starkly contrasts her detailed “thick description” of religious rituals in the shrine of al-Sayyida Zaynab, the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad, which presents the main bulk of this book (Part 2). The author’s in-depth fieldwork, carried out over a number of years (1986-88), provides a fascinating account of the performance of every -day rituals at the shrine in Cairo as well as on specific rituals associated with the celebration of al-Sayyida Zaynab’s anniversary.

The numerous case studies presented shed light on women’s social and material backgrounds, their life stories, the reasons for their visits to the shrine, their hopes and fears, their relationship to the saint, and their consultations with a shaykh (religious scholar) at the shrine. The case studies are complemented by descriptions of the various rituals performed, especially those associated with the saint’s *mawalid* (anniversaries of birth or death).

In the final part of the book, the author presents a brief account of rituals related to the fasting month of Ramadan and spring rites (*Shamm el-Nesim*) in Cairo. No case studies are provided in the last part, instead the author paints a rather rough picture of rites associated with both occasions.

It is particularly in the last part that one becomes aware of the inconsistent style of anthropological writing throughout the book. One cannot help but wonder why the author chose to incorporate three different genres with totally different levels of analysis into one study. One might argue that Abu-Zahra’s book would have gained strength if she would have restricted herself to the study on rituals associated with al-Sayyida Zaynab.

More significantly, however, the author’s fierce rebuttal of those anthropologists who have carried out research in “contemporary Muslim Societies” seems largely unfair, exaggerated and sometimes even misinterpreted. Comparative studies on “Muslim societies”, the author argues, need to focus on the interaction between society and Islam, which is best revealed “through the study of actual performances of Islamic actions” (p.35). Throughout her own analysis she repeatedly makes reference to Islamic texts, but her ethnography also points to religious practices which are rooted outside of religious prescriptions. Paradoxically, some elements of her

ethnography contradict her own theoretical stipulations, while the non-religious realm of culture and tradition remains somewhat fuzzy and unexplored.

Another flaw is her idealised view on women's and men's equality what knowledge of religious texts and participation in religious rituals is concerned. It is not sufficient to merely point to women's similar knowledge and practices. A gender perspective might shed light on the possibility that women experience and interpret Islamic texts and rituals in a different way.