

REVIEW ARTICLE

LAWRENCE OF MOROCCO:  
ADVENTURES WITH AN ARABIC DICTIONARY

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LAWRENCE ROSEN, *The Anthropology of Justice: Law as Culture in Islamic Society* [Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures 1985], Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press 1989. xvi, 90 pp., Bibliography, Index, Plates. £22.50/£7.50.

THIS slim volume (yet another in the current mode with more entries in the bibliography than pages of text) represents the Morgan Lectures given at the University of Rochester, New York in 1985. The list of past lecturers is distinguished, and Rosen now joins the list with distinctions of his own: a Ph.D. from Chicago, a law degree, a senior position in the anthropology department at Princeton, Guggenheim awards, and, not least, an award from the MacArthur foundation in support of 'young genius'. As such games are played, this is prestige indeed. But we are getting to a point where people will look up 'prestige' in the dictionary and laugh at its etymology.

Rosen's earlier work primarily comprised articles that derived from research in Morocco organized by Clifford Geertz. He has since published pieces on Islamic law and a book entitled *Bargaining for Reality* (1984). For those awaiting the ethnographic detail on which the articles rested, this last book was a disappointment,<sup>1</sup> but the present work is a greater disappointment still.

The embeddedness of Moroccan legal practice in everyday life, as compared with the separation of law in our own, is Rosen's main theme. The first chapter

1. See Gilsenan 1986; Peters 1987; Dresch 1988. What a long time it can take for dissenting comment to see print!

begins with Rosen in an American law court wondering what the judge will do (most readers will find this overwritten, few would want Rosen representing them) and provides oddly little substance; the second chapter, beginning with an extraordinary pastiche of Geertzian prose (thirty-four words in a subordinate clause, all to make a negative, and pretty obvious, point), deals with 'Determining the Indeterminable'; the third addresses concepts of reason and intent; the fourth at last comes around to judicial discretion and state power. Starting with this last point might have provoked more interesting comparisons; 'the state and the law are two aspects of the same thing' said Vinogradoff, which one could not say of Islamic law. As it is, we are given, in effect, more bargaining for reality, decked out in quotations from Edward Coke and Justice Felix Frankfurter.

Ten pages into the piece - after a lengthy quote from Benjamin Cardozo, a passing reference to Samuel Butler and Coleridge, a tip to television law-cum-lore, and a Malinowskian invocation of fieldwork which should grace some anthology ('during the course of many months, stretching over nearly two decades, I have observed the proceedings and pored over the documents') - after all this, we have a slurry of authenticating Arabic terms. Every one of them misspelled or mispointed. Transliteration makes proof-reading a misery, and we all make mistakes; but the mistakes here are of a kind to suggest Rosen either never got Arabic straight in the first place or, having forgotten it, thought too little of his readers to bother checking a dictionary (e.g., *muqqadem* for *muqaddem*, p.10; cf. *muddafī* for *mudafī*, p.33).

Yet as in the last book, Hans Wehr's dictionary of modern Arabic (1966) seems to be the source of much 'ethnography'. Readers of Rosen's earlier work will meet several old friends: *'aqel/nafs* (intelligence vs. the unbridled self), *as'el* (origin, genealogical worth), and *haqq* (truth, right), all presented in dictionary style. Here is an example:

The key word here in Arabic is *hāl* - a richly varied concept from whose root is [*sic*] generated such meanings as 'context', 'situation', 'weather', 'state', and 'condition'. When, as they constantly do, Moroccans enquire of another's *hāl* they are not just idiomatically asking about one's state of health or well-being but the condition or context within which the other was acting. (p.14)

Richly varied concept. Anyone who has been to the Middle East will have had people ask them not 'How are you?' but 'How is your condition?' (mis translating *kayf hāl-ak?*). Rosen's point (quite an elaborate one, actually) rests on jokes of the Hercule Poirot type. Yet readers of this journal will also, one trusts, spot in such misuse of the dictionary a whole theory of 'symbolism' and 'interpretation' which deserves thinking through. As a reduction to absurdity of certain strands in Geertz's programme, *The Anthropology of Justice* is worth a look.

Where the dictionary displaces ethnography, the specificities of fieldwork are all lost. Some of the implications emerge more clearly from the present book than from most:

The central analogy, the key metaphor [note the word 'key' again], that may prove helpful when thinking about the social life of Morocco - and, for that matter, of much of the Middle East -...is an image of the bazaar market place writ large.... (p.6)

Bazaar? Bizarre? Who knows? And later: 'Arabs believe in individuals, not institutions' (p. 14; from T.E. Lawrence, what a person to quote!); 'the metaphor of bargaining and contract goes right to the heart of Arab social life' (p.16); Moroccans make 'a clear distinction between statements made in the course of establishing a relationship and the truth or falseness that can be said to match any utterance' (p. 22 - which explains, does it, why they're such a shifty lot); 'Moroccans, indeed Arabs generally...' (p. 54). But enough. One always has to generalize. One has to recognize social facts for what they are. Call them 'culture' by all means. But one must not slip into this sort of nonsense, which deserves, I'm afraid, to be called racist. There is little to be learned about Islamic law from such work, and less about the Middle East.

Why bother with the book, then, or why bother with a long review? Partly for the revealing light it throws on a whole style of anthropology, a style which claims more adherents in this country than hitherto and for years has been a curse on our American colleagues. Partly, also, because Rosen happens to be dealing (I think, too clumsily) with some important issues. To take just one case, I would fully agree that constructions of time are an important area where Middle Eastern and Western individualism may be distinguished: 'time itself is seen, not in terms of space or progression, but as clusters of obligation' (p. 54). The invocation of parallels in story-telling and music (ibid.) I think is apt. But one cannot in the midst of this blithely say that is why 'for Arabs history is biography' (ibid.): it is not, it is also chronicles and shared chronology. And Rosen's rendering of local concepts of time (see also pp. 14-15) makes Moroccans sound too much like De Certeau's post-moderns to be convincing ethnography. The detailed argument is simply not there to support his several interesting contentions, never mind those many other contentions which are wrong or just plain confused. A great chance has been missed, with sad implications for anthropology. This too deserves noting.

Rosen himself mentions several people's work on Islamic law which deserves to be read by any anthropologist, whether interested in the Middle East or not: that of Jeanette Wakin, Abraham Udovitch and Brink Messick, for instance. The field is thriving. Similarly, American anthropology in general is probably in better shape than ever, with more ethnography of higher standard coming out year by year. Unfortunately, the public tone of the subject is not set by these able fieldworkers but by grant-winning 'stars' and 'theoreticians' whose point of reference one might guess to be the *New York Review of Books*. The present work is a good example. It will be read, and perhaps widely cited in other disciplines, if only on account of its distinguished pedigree. It is far too conspicuous to be ignored by the rest of us, and too much the product of anthropology's current organization to be disowned by us easily. Yet something has gone badly wrong.

The author owes his colleagues what is long overdue - a substantial piece of work we can all build on. But that in turn requires a different view of the subject's worth and of its responsibilities. For the moment, the most striking thing about *The Anthropology of Justice* is what it suggests about the politics and sociology of knowledge not in Morocco so much as in academia, an issue raised on occasion by Rosen's erstwhile colleague Paul Rabinow (1985), but more usually passed over in discrete silence.

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