



A meeting of the Mangochi Muslim Students' Association in a school hall in Mangochi, Malawi. The woman in the white veil is a secondary school student and is addressing an audience of students about some aspect of Islamic practice, using a Wahhabi text as her

source. She is speaking under the supervision of the male leaders of the Students' Association.



A newly built mosque in a lakeshore Yao village towers above the village homes and granaries. Like most new mosques in Malawi, this one was constructed with money from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to a standardized design, and bears no resemblance to the Sufi

mosques, constructed by local builders, that are found in most villages. Often these new mosques stand empty, as villagers return to the Sufi mosques where their religious practice is not constrained by fundamentalist pressures.

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How should anthropologists deal with the challenge of fundamentalism? To the extent that anthropology slides towards cultural relativism, I would contend that there is a risk of becoming blind to the dangers of fundamentalism. However, if we keep a focus on our practice as anthropologists, and on the importance of fieldwork in particular, and retain our historical commitment to hearing and representing the voices of the oppressed and marginalized in their unique contexts of change, I believe that we may be able to feel our way through the paradox that fundamentalism presents us with.

\* \* \*

The first thing we learn as anthropologists is to see things from the other's point of view. This special perspective is nourished by the practice of fieldwork, the core ritual for the practitioners of anthropology – indeed, its principal rite of passage. Malinowski's discovery of the significance of this method is on a par with Freud's pioneering work in psychoanalysis. Both were recognized as breakthroughs and practitioners who had direct experience of their methods made them central to teaching of their disciplines. In both cases too, though perhaps more clearly with Freud, subsequent attempts to theorize the object of their study (culture, on the one hand, and the unconscious, on the other) ended in disappointment for their followers and possibly for themselves. But that does not matter – the magic is in the method.

This is our truth – a method that makes us open to a panoply of different points of view. We listen, respect and try to represent with as much understanding and empathy as possible. This is how Evans-Pritchard, a believer (like me, one of the 'devout opposition'), was able to write with such insight and clarity about witchcraft and magic among the Azande. He had to leave his spiritual space and inhabit theirs for a while, not by becoming one of them but by making the effort to learn how to understand the meaning of the world in their terms.

Our method also opens us up to the diversity of viewpoints within a community. We cannot help but become aware that it is unusual to find a closed and homogeneous view held by all. There is diversity between and within communities and we are never able to represent its extent fully, thereby exposing again and again the fragility and inadequacy of our theoretical constructs (including, of course, the notion of community itself).

But what happens to this method when it encounters a community that holds that there is only one point of view, one truth, and is utterly convinced not only of that truth but also of its own duty to erase diversity by converting everyone else? What happens when anthropologists encounter a community of believers who think not only that they are special (for most people think they have a special point of view – and indeed they do), but that this gives them the right and obligation to impose their view on all people?

This is the challenge posed by fundamentalisms of various sorts (Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Fascist, Marxist and so on) to anthropologists. We have discovered a method that opens us up to other truths, while fundamentalists believe that they have been given a truth so complete and powerful that it must obliterate all others. Whereas anthropologists should recognize that their recorded knowledge is provisional and incomplete, fundamentalists have a Book that represents absolute truth.

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The Book needs no additions; it can bear no competition; it must simply be read and understood as the final arbiter of all knowledge.

\* \* \*

I would like to say a few words about my own encounter with fundamentalism during fieldwork. I went to Malawi in the mid-1980s to work with the Yao Muslims in the south. I stayed first in the town of Mangochi, at the southern tip of the great lake, and had the chance to teach for a while at the local high school. There I got to know some of the Muslim student leaders and spent time with them in their work of organizing and proselytizing around local schools. I found them to be interesting, articulate and very passionate in their religious zeal.

We debated at length and they gave me books and pamphlets (many of a strong Wahhabi tendency) to read. It was easy to communicate with them – they spoke my language and it took no great effort on my part to feel that we had established a good measure of mutual understanding. Reading back through my fieldwork diary, I realize that there was a point when I felt close to converting to Islam. Their belief seemed so powerful, coherent and persuasive.

All the time I was in Mangochi my supervisor was telling me to follow my original plan of fieldwork and get out of the town into a village. I resisted for some time, but eventually I did start moving out of the town – mainly in the company of the young men that I had met in the Muslim Students' Association. Occasionally we were invited into village mosques and Qur'anic schools and I began to observe a very different kind of Islamic practice – that of the Sufi-influenced villagers. I generally had to rely on the students from the town to explain much of what I was seeing. They were often critical of the loosely Sufist version of Muslim practice that we observed out of town.

One day, as we headed back toward Mangochi, I saw a group of people dancing in a circle in the distance and was told it was the core ritual of the Sufis – the Dhikhr. It occurred to me then both that Sufism was more deeply entrenched in the villages than I had imagined, and that the only way to study it would be to stay in the villages.

So I did, moving up the lakeshore first to Malindi and then to a more remote spot. My time in the villages was an eye-opening experience. The variety and vitality of religious practices and the multitude of interacting cultural currents, rituals and beliefs changed my view of the Yao Muslims entirely. This would never have happened had I relied on my friends in the town to be my interpreters of Islam in the region. After all, theirs was the straightforward fundamentalist agenda of converting and reforming, whereas my agenda was to understand and describe.

So I left the field with a sense that I understood the reformist religion of the town pretty well, but had only scratched the surface of the kaleidoscopic mixture of African and Sufi traditions practised in the villages. Twenty years later I now know that ethnographers usually feel this way when they try to describe the richness of the field on the basis of just memory and fragmentary notebooks, images and diaries. I have since argued that the reformist or fundamentalist Islam that I found in the town would inevitably erode the Sufi-influenced version of the villages. The resources and strategy of reformers appeared so formidable, and the Sufis so vulnerable and divided, that it could only be a question of time before the fundamentalists triumphed.

My analysis was influenced by Ernest Gellner's theory of the unhinged pendulum. He claimed that the conditions of modernity tip what was once the fairly stable swing of religious sentiment between Protestant (or reformist) and Catholic (or Sufist) poles so heavily towards the former that there is no proper swing back. In this view fundamentalism seems almost unstoppable.

I did not return to Malawi for many years. Then, about 18 months ago, I was given the opportunity to return with a crew to help make a film about Islam in Malawi for a Dutch Muslim television channel. The trip was full of surprises, but the greatest and most delightful of them was the discovery that Sufism was alive and well, not just in the villages but also in the towns, and more than holding its own against the fundamentalists. Without further extensive fieldwork I cannot say with any confidence whether this is temporary or is indeed what I hope it is – the pendulum rehinged.

\* \* \*

Keith Hart, in his 'Letter from Europe' (AT 21[1]), took us through some of the debates about the French ban on the veil in public places, and ended up by supporting the ban for reasons that he describes as intuitive rather than rational. An important consideration for him in this is that his daughter will go to school in France. I am not sure that I would make the same choice – my daughters go to a school in Melbourne where Muslim students wear the veil over their uniform and I have no reason to object to this. However, I believe there is a more fundamental choice that I need to make with some urgency.

As an anthropologist I need to define where my allegiance lies in the battle of religious tendencies that is shaping the world today. I feel called upon to lend my support to religious movements that counter and neutralize the real threat of unbridled fundamentalism. Anthropology has always been something of a marginal discipline, not least because of its critical edge and its tendency to nibble at the prevailing orthodoxies. But above all it has historically been biased towards marginal people – the poor, the illiterate, the vulnerable, those who find it hard to make their voices heard in the strident clamour of the modern world. Fundamentalists are not interested in hearing those voices – they want to convert them and shut them up.

So the relativists and multiculturalists who would have us tiptoe around the threat of fundamentalism have got it wrong. Its voice is not merely one among many. Rather it disrespects otherness, and this should make it unacceptable to anthropologists. We should be clear that fundamentalism threatens not just us but also the multitude of people that we have tried, however inadequately, to represent in our ethnographies. We need to do this for our own children but also for anthropology itself.

At the end of *The Golden Bough* – the book that Malinowski claimed was the inspiration for his anthropology – Frazer conjures up a vision of history as a great tapestry. As it unfurls, the many-coloured threads of magic, religion and science weave together and a pattern begins to appear. Surely it is one of the tasks of anthropology to support the colourful diversity that gives vitality and meaning to that pattern, and to sound a warning about the monochrome certainties of fundamentalism. But then I am a paid-up member of the 'devout opposition'. ●

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