

PASCAL MÉNORET. *GRAVEYARD OF CLERICS: EVERYDAY ACTIVISM IN SAUDI ARABIA.* STANFORD: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS 2020, 264 P. ISBN: 9781503612464

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In *Graveyard of clerics: everyday activism in Saudi Arabia*, French anthropologist Pascal Ménoret presents a bottom-up view of Islamic activists connected to the Islamic Awakening (*al-sahwa al-islamiyya*) movement, which emerged in Saudi Arabia in the 1960s and has faced mass repression since the 1970s. Ménoret conducted his ethnographic fieldwork between 2004 and 2007, with additional visits that inform his analysis in 2001 and 2016, in what he describes as a ‘graveyard of clerics’: a society in which clerics are jailed and tortured, or at least ‘buried alive in a bureaucratic maze’ (p. 8). In this graveyard, Ménoret encounters young men who lead and participate in Quranic memorization circles, Islamic awareness groups, summer camps and other group activities organized by either the Salafi or Muslim Brotherhood branches of the Islamic Awakening. Decisively going against common Western narratives of Islamists as the ‘evil Muslims’, Ménoret honestly and sympathetically engages with these young men as exactly that: teens and young guys who want to engage in fun leisure activities, take part in meaningful group discussions about politics and religion, and who are searching for glimpses of freedom in a repressive social and political environment. With this focus on the ‘daily lives of ordinary activists’ (p. 11), Ménoret also departs from influential works by Talal Asad (2009) and Charles Hirschkind (2006), among others, who focus on doctrinal tradition and how Muslims cultivate themselves within this tradition.

The monograph’s twenty-four chapters are loosely chronological, tracing both the emergence and subsequent repression of the Islamic Awakening in the context of transformations in the post-oil Saudi state, as well as Ménoret’s subjects’ experience of entering, being in, and leaving Islamic activism. Some chapters have a more explicit argument than others but overall, the chapters lack clear organization. However, the fluid manner in which Ménoret paints a vivid painting of Islamic activism through conversations, historical developments, verbal portraits of individual activists, and self-aware anecdotes of his own experiences as a Western researcher in Saudi Arabia in the 2000s, is fitting for the book’s subject matter: the Islamic Awakening is messy and ‘lacks stable leaders, a known ideology, a defined program, or regular slogans’ (p. 27). A general sense of disorganization also comes through in Ménoret’s descriptions of the chaotic summer camps, tumultuous and often confused bureaucratic processes, and disorderly interviews with interlocutors. Rather than losing the reader in this chaos, Ménoret succeeds in demonstrating the messiness and inconsistency of ordinary humans engaging with great ideas and ideologies, as well as the messy reality of conducting ethnographic fieldwork.

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As a result of this diverse collection of descriptions and analyses, *Graveyard of clerics* offers insights into much more than just Islamic activism. The book is full of small but fascinating observations on other aspects of life in contemporary Saudi Arabia, such as citizenship, racism, American imperialism, class difference, urbanism, homosexuality, intergenerational struggles, and the central role of cars (which echoes Ménoret's earlier work *Joyriding in Riyadh*). Ménoret also dedicates large parts of the book to the analysis of Saudi suburbs, from their Western-influenced development to the role of suburban sprawl in deterring politicization and pacifying society. It is these suburbs, which were supposed to turn Saudis into 'responsible homeowners, repaying their loans and living quiet, dull, controlled lives' (p. 65), that have both enabled the Islamic Awakening to flourish and have shaped its fragmented organizational form. While Riyadh's suburbs and long avenues make it difficult to organize demonstrations or other politicized events, the endless suburbs are also hard to monitor, making them ideal spaces for recruitment. The Islamic activists, Ménoret argues, have 'an ambiguous relationship with the suburbs' (p. 205): they warned against the individualization of society and the perils of free time that the suburbs brought, yet they used suburban resources to combat these risks. For example, suburban schools and mosques were key in organizing events that familiarized youth with Islamic Awakening teaching, and the organization's smallest unit was the car.

Further highlighting the key role of suburban sprawl, Ménoret also argues that the popularity of Awakening-run groups was contingent on the widespread ennui youth felt in the spiritless suburbs, which drew them to the football clubs and discussion groups used for recruitment. One of Ménoret's most interesting anthropological contributions is this concept of apathy felt by youth that, rather than leading them to inaction, leads them to resist the repressive government. For his subjects, apathy (*lamubala* in Arabic) paradoxically spurred action, as it was this absolute lack of caring that led the young activists to political action. The 'suburban condition' (p. 206) of *lamubala* would benefit from further exploration, especially in the context of post-2016 Saudi Arabian policies on leisure, which promote entertainment at the expense of political awareness through the General Entertainment Authority.

Graveyard of clerics provides valuable insights into Islamist organizing from a grassroots perspective that foregoes dramatic top-down narratives and renders the activists human, almost relatable. Unfortunately, due to the author's gender in a highly gender-segregated environment, what is missing is the perspective of the female Islamic activists, whose experiences undoubtedly would have provided different perspectives on the Islamic Awakening and Islamic activism in Saudi Arabia. Despite this, *Graveyard of clerics* is a must-read for those interested in the anthropology of Saudi Arabia and ethnographies of Islamic activism in and beyond the Middle East.

Bibliography

Asad, Talal 2009. The idea of an anthropology of Islam, *Qui Parle*, 17/2, 1-30.

Hirschkind, Charles 2006. *The ethical soundscape: cassette sermons and Islamic counterpublics*, New York: Columbia University Press.

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