

universalizing theory with examples rarely originating outside Great Britain. I had hoped that her postscript, "Cultural Relativity and Joking Structures," would address the ethnocentrism of her argument, but four of these final six pages are involved, instead, with a diachronic move, detailing the changes in European (primarily British) perceptions of comedy since the Middle Ages. Though this text can be geographically and ideologically confining, I do see why University of Toronto Press imported it as part of their Theory/Culture series; its engaging focus on joking as discursive exchange will surely prompt further explorations of, and arguments about, the dynamics of comedy.

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### GENDER AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: WOMEN AND POLITICS IN MUSLIM SOCIETIES

Valentine M. Moghadam, ed. London: Zed Books and Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1994.

by *Jacqueline M. Portugese*

The principle aim of this collection of essays is to illustrate the ways in which nationalism, national liberation movements, and the politics of identity are linked to social constructions of gender and gender relations in various Muslim societies. These include: Algeria, Bangladesh, Af-

ghanistan, Iran, and Palestine. Despite the book's promising and exciting subject matter, its actual content failed to meet this reader's expectations. The book opens on a high note with Moghadam's comprehensive and succinct overview of the central themes and issues at hand. For example, she describes how notions of femininity and women themselves become invested with national symbolic significance during times of political struggle and the consolidation of the state. Other themes include: the relationship between feminism, nationalism, and socialism; the connection between Islamic revivalism, notions of cultural imperialism, the symbolic value of women and their agency *versus* victimization; and finally, the connection between women's status and their participation in national liberation movements.

Unfortunately these themes are unevenly addressed and developed in the remainder of the book. Bouatta, for instance, in her chapter on Algerian women, analyses the psychological dimensions of the Algerian war of independence. Nowhere, however, does she link the implications of her study to the various themes mentioned above. The chapter is simply a description of women's participation in the war of independence and of their impressions and recollections thereafter. Also troubling is the fact that Bouatta bases her entire study on the testimonies of only two women. She herself acknowledges that the limited number of interviews "precludes any idea of generalization"; however, she maintains that they provide enough material "to determine and define some socio-psychological elements of this feminine participation."

Similar problems appear in Sobhan's article on the effect of religious fundamentalism on the Bangladeshi women's movement. The main problem with this chapter is its lack of a clear thesis. It too is primarily concerned with a description of Bangladesh's political history with little in the way of theoretical analysis. For instance, the first allusion to

any of the themes presented in the introduction occurs only at the halfway point in the chapter. This is a description of how Bengali women have been used to symbolize Bengali national identity during both its secular and religious stages. Interestingly, although the author claims to want to analyze the relationship between Islamic fundamentalism and the women's movement, it is only towards the end of the chapter that any mention is made of it. Moreover, when mention does occur, it is only to remark briefly upon the negative changes implemented by the Islamists and upon the lack of consensus within the women's movement as to their significance.

There are two additional weaknesses with this collection of essays. First, many of the points, analyses, and conclusions which the authors make have already been covered in various other publications. Thus, while the book may have some value to the uninitiated, it is relatively redundant for those who are familiar with either Middle Eastern women's studies, in particular, or the study of Third World gender relations, in general. Second, and more importantly, is the presentation of false or questionable data as fact. Tohidi, for instance, writes that women in Iran, "were prevented from conceptualizing their own answer [to imperialism, rising consumerism, and rapid socio-economic change], developing their own movement and defining their own identity independent of the national movement and the question of national identity" during the Pahlavi regime. This statement fails to account for the underground feminist network which came into existence following the Revolution, and for the massive women's rally which took place in response to Khomeini's decree that all women working for the government wear a headscarf.

Perhaps the most disturbing chapter is that written by Abdo concerning Palestinian women and the movement for national liberation. Anyone familiar with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will quickly realize that Abdo's

argument is grounded more in polemic than in fact. For instance, she claims that Israel has tried to encourage Palestinian women to reduce their birth rate by promoting abortion clinics and free contraception. Having written a PhD thesis on this exact topic, I can attest to the falsity of Abdo's claim. It is true that successive Israeli governments have resorted to a number of tactics to encourage Palestinian women to lower their fertility; however, according to my research and my interview with the Palestinian director of the Health Education Division of the Galilee Society for Health Research and Services, these have not included the promotion of either abortion or free contraceptives. This is just one example of how Abdo's proclivity towards polemic has affected her research abilities.

In short, this collection of essays, while not totally devoid of value, is plagued by a number of shortcomings. One cannot help but be left with the impression that had the editor paid a bit more attention to detail, the book's disjointed, uneven and, at times, debatable character might have been avoided.

## OUR STRENGTH IS IN OUR FIELDS: AFRICAN FAMILIES IN CHANGE

Raija Warkentin. Dubusque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1994.

by *Paul Tiyambe Zeleza*

Anthropology enjoys a bad name among African intellectuals, for it is seen as a handmaiden of colonialism, responsible for creating some of the most pernicious myths about African peoples and societies. In those ignoble days anthropologists focused their self-righteous gaze on small, closed "tribal" societies, among whom the peoples of Africa, the imperialists' "Dark Continent," constituted the quintessential non-western, primitive other. Now anthropologists claim to know better, to have

forsaken their structural-functional blinkers, ahistorical biases, and intellectual voyeurism. Some are even busy deconstructing the texts of their predecessors, and earnestly trying to reinvent their disciplinary mission, inspired by feminism and the various "posts" of contemporary avant-garde "post-something" western scholarship. But old habits die hard. This book shows why anthropology continues to be suspect in African intellectual circles.

It has all the hallmarks of a copious and ecstatic tourist's tale, punctuated by generalizations at appropriate moments, but unencumbered by the scholarly conventions of evidence. We cannot check any of the statements or interpretations made in the text, for the Fofu, Warkentin tells us, do not exist, or rather, she has invented the name, so that "if one looks for the term 'Fofu' in ethnic maps or lists of Africa, one will not find them." The reason? To protect their anonymity! This is a pathetic excuse even by the abysmal standards of colonial anthropology. One would have thought that the days when anthropologists invented their nice little "tribes" in Africa and then proceeded to painstakingly record their changeless "customs" was long gone. The places the author visits are similarly fictionalized, so that her travels are to and from "Africa," rather than specific locations in this huge continent that comprises over fifty states and nearly a quarter of the world's land area. This allows her to undergo a remarkable transformation from being "a lone Finn in Africa" into a typical "westerner" and to constitute Fofu customs as "African" and then contrast them with her "western" values and practices. And the names of the people she discusses are also fictionalized, yet their pictures liberally dot the text!

The book raises other troubling methodological and epistemological issues. The author claims an intimacy and fluency of conversation with her informants, whom she describes as personal friends, when she did not understand "Kikofu" as she admits at

one point, and only studied Swahili for three months, and relies on interpreters, as she concedes several times. No wonder when she quotes the local people speaking, they simply sound silly. One example will suffice:

"How are you doing with Suzana?" I dared to ask personal questions while driving back because the other men did not return with us.

"Fine," he said, "She is a good wife, a good wife."

"What makes a woman a good wife?" I inquired ignorantly.

"She obeys me, obeys me."

"Nothing else?" I persisted.

"I have a quick temper but she soothes me and calms me down, calms me down...."

With such stilted, unreal conversations who needs pulp fiction? How believable are such accounts when made by a researcher who, as is so common among western Africanists, has no competence in the language and modes of understanding of the people she is studying?

Predictably, despite all the fulminations made at the beginning of the book about cultural relativism and the need to respect other cultures, the Fofu are depicted as an exotic, backward, and poverty-stricken people, easily bamboozled by the magic of simple technology, from "western packaging" to the "white man's toilet." They live in a typical society of anthropological folklore, a world of mud "huts," constant hunger, illness, and death, where marriages are arranged, witchcraft, misogynist violence, and tribal clashes terrorize everyday life, and worldly pleasures are confined to all-night dances and sexual orgies. This is a society of overworked, abused women and lazy oversexed men, who demand "sexual intercourse every night and many times a night," so that the women are almost in a perpetual state of pregnancy and the men's greatest ambition is to marry several wives. The image of the African woman is as eternal victim. Into this Hobbesian,