

Conference Paper

The Story of Polish “Orientalness” – Researching Islam in Poland

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Abstract

Polish academia has a long tradition of studies on the Middle East, Islam and its heritage. Oriental studies have been part of university curricula in Kraków, Lvov (today in Ukraine) and Vilno (today Vilnius is the capital of Lithuania), later expanding also in such cities as today’s capital Warsaw [1]. The Oriental studies concentrated on the Middle East due to contacts Poland has had with the region. One of the most interesting ideas brought up by researchers is based on the observations of cultural encounters throughout the turbulent history of the country leading some to coin terms such as Polish “Orientalness”. This term denotes a set of identity and cultural characteristics and can be opposed to the widely debated “Orientalism”, as defined by the renowned Palestinian intellectual and academic Edward Said in his seminal book from 1979, due to different experiences of relations with Muslim communities. Today’s Poland due to several, mainly historical factors, is one of the most homogenous nations of the entire world so it seems crucial to look upon patterns of multicultural existence which were once experienced on a daily basis.

Keywords: Orientalness, Islam, Poland, borderland

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Received: 21 May 2019
Accepted: 26 June 2019
Published: 7 July 2019

Publishing services provided by
Knowledge E

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the UICRIC Conference Committee.

1. The Trouble with “Orientalism” and the Colonial Encounter

In his widely acclaimed and thoroughly debated work *Orientalism*, Edward Said presents broadly the discourse of knowledge and power as two elements being at the core of the colonial encounter. At one point Said highlights the main characteristic of this discourse by quoting a fragment of the speech given by Lord Balfour in the House of Commons, who, referring to the problems encountered by the United Kingdom in Egypt, referred to the question posed to him about the right to exalt the people of the Orient. Here, the mechanism of the Orientalist imperial discourse seems particularly visible and can be put in a simple way - The vast knowledge that the British have about Egypt gives them a basis for power over the Egyptians. Said goes further, suggesting that for the Empire the Egyptians existed to the extent that the British knew them. In this way, Said wanted to show the superiority of Orientalism towards the Orient, which consequently

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led to the belief that "We" (understood broadly as the West) must represent "Them (the Orient and its peoples)" because "They" cannot do it, mainly because "Our" knowledge of "Them" is greater than "Their" knowledge about themselves [2].

Different factors influenced this approach. Said assumed that Orientalism is based on the assumption of the positional superiority presented by Westerners, entangling them in their numerous relations with the Orient. Said distinguished this idea of the supremacy of one group in relation to the second and emerging hegemon-subject relationship, in the case of Western Orientalism and the orientalist corpus behind it. In *Covering Islam* [3], a book presenting the problem of biased media coverage he described the already mentioned assumption that the world of Islam, and above all the Arab world is in a state of stagnation, nor that there is no scientific or political development or any other development in it.

In his work Edward Said decided not deal with Russian and German orientalism, considering them to be lacking certain negative connotations and assumptions, which constituted a set of characteristics of British and French, and later on the American policy towards the East [4]. Said assumed that Orientalism in these last three cases was driven by colonialism and imperial policy led by the superpowers and that it assumed a peculiar domination over the Orient. Said writes that in his opinion, European and American interest in the Orient was political. Said recognizes France and Great Britain as pioneers of orientalist research, which resulted from their role as the greatest colonial powers.

1.1. The case of Polish "Orientalness"

According to Edward Said's notion of what Orientalism meant in the West, especially within European colonization powers, it is a style of domination, restructuring and the eventual authority over the Orient whereas in Poland Orientalism was restricted mostly to questions of its reception. The "Orientalness" as presented by a prominent Polish historian Jan Kieniewicz would denote elements and relations in Polish culture, borrowed from the East or Orient. At the same time the Polish author stressed a need for a more thorough and exact division between "orientalness" and "easterness", the later used to connote the relations with Russia [5]. Orientalness embraces a range of certain phenomena, which throughout ages have moulded a complicated Polish identity, especially with regards to the Polish gentry (szlachta) but there was a longstanding disregard for a specific term in historiography [6].

The idea of “Orientalness” is an interesting proposition of describing characteristics of a culture, which has evolved through different kinds of contacts with the Orient. Jan Kieniewicz traces a set of behaviours and relations towards different cultural ideals. If we can speak about a form of a Polish Orientalism it definitively was not presenting an inclination towards changing in a manner of a local culture, hence “Orientalness” can be understood more as a fragment of an identity, a way of facing different cultural sets and patterns and an attitude of reception of Eastern cultures in a broader sense [7]. The cultural experience of the Orient was so visible that at some point of Polish history the local gentry dressed more like the Ottoman Turks than their European counterparts [8].

One of the key concepts with regards to this particular social group is the idea of Sarmatism – understood as the culture and ideology of the Polish nobility, during the period of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth since the 16th up to the 18th century, with the Sarmatians having a whole culture code, interestingly with aspects similar to those within a Bedouin code of virtue – such as equality, invincibility in front of an enemy, provincial lifestyle, martial skills, horseback riding etc. There is (...) **Orientalism** in a sense of the totality of interest in, knowledge of, and research on the Orient and at the most **Orientalization** is mentioned as the reorganization of the reception of Eastern cultures by the gentry culture [8]. One has to keep in mind that the Polish attitude towards Orient was different from the Western, **Orientalism in Poland and the Orientalization of the Polish gentry’s style of life were...phenomena connected with Orientalness as the distinguishing feature of the Polish social system** [9].

2. Stories from the Borderland – Count Wacław Seweryn-Rzewuski and Muhammad Asad

There is a specific place of borderland in Poland known historically as Kresy [10]. This space was a conglomerate of people with different ethnic, religious backgrounds – here Jan Kieniewicz strongly points to another factor – the need for a more scrupulous defining of the relations drawn between them, based on existence **next** to each other (rather than coexisting), building a meeting point with deep respect and acknowledgement of their constitutive differences. Within these borderland experiences a set of biographical stories can be retold, which showcase a strong sense of consciousness of the “Other”, with a strong yearning of defining one’s identity outside of the rigid patterns of birth, ancestry and tradition. Those stories retold for the general Polish public can be a visible testimony of an open-minded interest in Islam, the history of Islamic heritage and the richness of cultural exchange built upon such biographical experiences.

2.1. The story of a Count – an adventurer turned anthropologist

Count WaławSewerynRzewuski (1784-1831) was a colourful figure within the Polish gentry. Known as an expert horse breeder, he developed his interests in the East and its inhabitants, whose freedom attracted him. He was the co-founder of the first journal dedicated to Middle East and Islamic studies 'Mines de l'Orient' [11] magazine. Influenced by his relative Jan Potocki (1761-1815) he undertook a daring trip to the Middle East, studying Arabic and Turkish. While in Syria he acquired a particular interest in "cochicles" - purebred Arabian horses.

This Middle Eastern journey gave Rzewuski the opportunity to get to know many other places, especially on the Arabian Peninsula during which he noted down local customs, traditions becoming part of the tribal circles. Being a keen observer of the surrounding reality, equipped with linguistic skills and an outgoing personality Rzewuski gained not only trust but utmost respect and was treated like an ally. By acquiring the rituals and customs observed within the tribal life he got to comprehend the Bedouin way of life far more than other travellers of European descent present in this time period in the region. He travelled around Naǧd as one of the first Europeans. During his sojourn in the East he gained the title Tāǧ al-Fahr (Crown of glory).

After returning to the country, Count Rzewuski dressed in oriental attire, set up a Bedouin tent in his estate and celebrated Bedouin customs. His passionate figure inspired some great figures in Polish literature, with the country's most acclaimed poet Adam Mickiewicz at front, who made him the hero of his romantic poem entitled *Farys* (The Horserider).

Count WaławSewerynRzewuski left an impressive work in three volumes entitled *Sur les Chevaux Orientaux et provenants des Races Orientales*. In addition to very precise and detailed information about horses, their characteristics and a very informative breeding manual, the work contains descriptions of Rzewuski's wanderings, descriptions of the Bedouin tribes with whom he made a covenant or maintained contact or whose leaders he knew. It is also a source of poems, songs and notes of Bedouin music from centuries ago, information about cuisine traditions, folk stories and dress style of the time. More importantly he presented an attitude of openness towards the new cultural setting in which he found himself, presenting its characteristics with great interest and breaking the stereotypical European imaginary of who the Bedouin are. His seminal work has just recently been introduced in Qatar, where a collaborative project of Qatar Museums and the Polish National Library to prepare an English and Polish version edition was completed [12]. It is worth noting that due to the scarcity of written Arabic

materials and accounts on the anthropological history of the region such works are perceived as possibility to build knowledge about the heritage of the Peninsula for the new generations.

2.2. The story of a Convert – a spiritual journey

MuhammadAsad (1900-1992), a Muslim intellectual of Jewish origin, is one of the most interesting voices in the modern discourse of religious renewal. In the West, he is sometimes called a mediator between cultures. His work was addressed both to Muslims whom he called for a religious and intellectual awakening as well as to Western readers, to whom wanted to explain the richness of Islam and its heritage.

MuhammadAsad's biography, which partly has been presented by his autobiographical account "The Road to Mecca", considered to be one of the most influential spiritual books of the XXth century, is a grasping, full of adventure and narrative twists story which could easily be turned into a blockbuster film script. Asad was born Leopold Weiss in Lviv in 1900 [13]. He came from a family with a rabbinical tradition and had a great knowledge of Torah and Talmud. However, dissatisfied with Judaism and its special emphasis on the idea of one chosen nation and struck by a materialistic pursuit of money in the European societies, which it seemed did not give any satisfaction or joy, he embarked on a spiritual journey of his own.

A typical youngster from Galicia, he first moved to Vienna, where he mingled with such personalities as Sigmund Freud and quickly became part of the vivacious social circles, he then moved to Berlin, yet at the very first possibility of change he found himself at his uncle's in Jerusalem. Traveling through the Middle East and reaching to Afghanistan, he watching the life and traditions of local residents, he became more and more fascinated by Islam, which he believed was an ideal synthesis of spiritual and bodily needs. Weiss converted to Islam in Berlin in 1926 and changed his name to MuhammadAsad, referring to his previous name [14]. He wrote in *The Road to Mecca* about this new stage in his life: *Without any warning, the old world was coming to an end: the world of Western ideas and feelings, endeavours and imageries. door was silently closing behind me, so silently that I was not aware of it; I thought it would be a journey like all the earlier journeys, when one wandered through foreign lands, always to return to one's past: but the days were to be changed entirely, and with them the direction of all desire* [15].

From then on, he tied his life to the Muslim world, except for a few years in the United States, when he served as the ambassador of Pakistan to the United Nations. Then he

lived longer on the Arabian Peninsula, where he famously became friend and confidant of Ibn Sa'ūd, who valued the young man's openness towards the local culture. Together with MuhammadIqbāl, Asad is considered to be one of the founders of the state in Pakistan. He came back to Europe a few years before his death. He died in the Spanish town of Mijas in 1992. He was the author of several publications devoted to Islam, the idea of a modern Muslim state and mode of governance, as well as a renowned yet controversial translator of the Holy Koran.Asad, identifying with this new world, whom he became an active member, presented a thorough and interesting picture of issues related to the Middle East from several perspectives: a traveller open to differences, an insightful observer of social, religious and political life, but also a person, who under the influence of the new environment underwent spiritual transformation, which constituted his lifelong attachment to the case of spreading Islam in a thoughtful and engaging manner.

3. Summary

Building on the role of such historical figures as Count WaclawSewerynRzewuski, whose manuscript is considered to be an ethnographic treasure of knowledge of the Arabian Peninsula, may raise awareness of the once great figures whose biographies, set at the borderlands of different cultures, where immersed in a larger experience, granting depth of research and understanding.MuhammadAsad on the other hand wrote about his life asan exemplary story of the discovery of Islam by a European and his integration within the Muslim community. His work is partly a spiritual autobiography, in part a summary of the author's intuitive views on Islam and the Arabs, and in part an impressive travel record which gives the reader better recognition and appreciation of Islam. Thanks to his books, Asad quickly became an ambassador of Islam in the West, as well as for the alienated intellectuals and young people in Muslim countries [16].

It seems extremely important to highlight voices once lost and in many cases unknown in the modernPolish academic curricula while creating a ground for a more thorough research on Islam in a non-Muslim country.

References

- [1] The Oriental languages program began expanding at Jagiellonian University since the XIX century, although the history of teaching e.g. Hebrew was much longer
- [2] Said, E. (1979), *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, p. 31-35

- [3] The full title of the book is *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine how We See the Rest of the World*. It was first published in 1981
- [4] Later also *American Orientalism*
- [5] Kieniewicz, J. (1984), *Polish Orientalness*, *Acta Poloniae Historica*, vol. 49, p. 67-68
- [6] *Ibid.*, p. 67
- [7] *Ibid.* 77
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 67
- [9] *Ibid.*, p. 68
- [10] The other name used is *Kresy Wschodnie* (Eastern Borderland)
- [11] *Sources for Oriental Studies*. The other founder was Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, one of the foremost Austrian orientalists, more in: Reychman J. (1972). *Podróźnicy polscy na Bliskim Wschodzie w XIX wieku* (Polish travellers in the Middle East in the XIXth century), Warsaw: PIW, p. 95
- [12] The English translation: *Concerning the Horses of the Orient and Those Originating from Oriental Breeds*
- [13] Today Lviv is one of Ukraine's largest cities. At the time of his birth Lviv was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, before the partition it was part of Polish territories
- [14] *Asad* in Arabic means lion
- [15] Asad, M. (reprint 2004), *The Road to Mecca*, New Delhi, p. 306
- [16] Nawwāb, I. (2002), *Berlin to Makkah*, *Saudi Aramco World*, vol. 53, nr. 1/02, p. 11