Title

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Editor’s Note

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Citation


Issue Date

2013-03

URL

https://doi.org/10.14989/173297

Type

Departmental Bulletin Paper

Textversion

publisher
Special Feature “Narrating the Narratives of Saints”

Editor’s Note

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JRSS (The Joint Research on Sufism and Saint Veneration) based on SIAS (Center for Islamic Studies, Sophia University, Japan) and KIAS (Center for Islamic Area Studies, Kyoto University, Japan) and GSRL (Groupe Sociétés, Religions, Laïcités), CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, France) have collaborated with each other for more than ten years. Together we have developed research on Sufism, saint veneration and tariqas.

The following are some examples of the outcome of our collaboration.

Panel Discussions:

Special Features for the Magazines:

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Based on these cooperative activities over a decade, JRSS-SIAS/KIAS and GSRL-CNRS have agreed to hold annual joint seminars from 2012 onward. We had the first seminar on November 3rd, 2012 at Kyoto University.

This special feature is based on this first seminar entitled “Narrating the Narratives of Sufis.” To edit this special feature, I changed the title to “Narrating the Narratives of Saints” because all the papers deal with saints rather than Sufis.

In this feature we would like to investigate how to narrate or describe what saints, Sufis, or shaykhs narrate(d) or describe(d). Both how we narrate and how they narrate(d) are to be examined in the following papers. In this feature we concentrated on the modern period, especially the 20th Century, although ZARCONÉ’s paper also includes the pre-history since the 14th Century.

This special feature is composed of four articles.

The first is Tsuyoshi SAITO’s “Narrating the Life of a Man Known as a Śūfi: An Anthropological Reflection on Narratives on al-Ḥājj ‘Alī al-Darqāwī by His Son al-Mukhtar al-Sūsī and Others.” First, he traces the immanent problems of writing ethnographies in anthropology and reviews the works of and on experimental ethnography. In this article, he focuses on the problem of authority. Taking the case of the biography of al-Ḥājj ‘Alī al-Darqāwī’s by his son al-Mukhtar al-Sūsī in Morocco as an example, the author asks to whom the problem of authority makes sense. He concludes that because the writer of the biography himself had a tendency towards salafī way rather than Sufism, and yet he described his father from the Sufi perspective, this ambiguity enriches the narratives.

The second paper is Masahiko TOGAWA’s “Sharing the Narratives: An Anthropologist among the Local People at the Mausoleum of Fakir Lalon Shah in Bangladesh.” Based on his own experience, he asks what the relationship between fieldworkers and local society should be in a postcolonial context. During his fieldwork, the author by chance became one of the main participants of the opposition movement against the construction of tourist facilities at the mausoleum of Fakir Lalon Shah in the town of Kushtia, Bangladesh. He points out the close relationship between the dilemmas of representation experienced by local people and their representation by fieldworkers.

The third paper is Pierre-Jean Luizard’s “Héros de l’Islam, A Secularized Hagiography of a Muslim Saint or How Political Commitment Leads to Sainthood for an Iraqi Shia Religious Leader.” He has already published the translation of Batal al-Islam written by Shaykh Muḥammad al-Khâlīsī, one of the highest ranking Shia leaders of Iraqi origin, under the title of La vie de l’ayatollah Mahdî al-Khâlīsî par son fils (Batal al-islâm). Based on this precious translation, he traces the description of this person and depicts the transition of his
image from that of a political leader to a saint.

The last article is Thierry Zarcone’s “Western Visual Representations of Dervishes from the 14th Century to Early 20th.” Since Western representations were severely attacked in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, they have been looked upon only with bias. The author attempts to re-evaluate them through their use of visual materials. He introduces the brief but remarkable history of Western visual representations. Although some of them are nothing other than so-called *Orientalistic* representations, we can find many others which have an ethnographic value because they give us rich information which Eastern description and visual materials do not provide. He draws our attention to the importance of such kinds of material as a complementary tool for research.