

Book Reviews:

**MOROCCAN SOCIETY: SACRED PERFORMANCE, FASTING
AND FEASTING**

Ghulam Shams-ur-Rehman*

I-Sacred Performance: Islam, Sexuality, and Sacrifice by M. E. Combs-Schilling

Published form: Columbia University Press, USA, 1989

Pages: 377

Islam is a religion and a civilization as well. It has multidimensional and complex phenomena of variety of cultures. From Morocco to Indonesia, it is unified with a common fabric of faith but manifested in different forms of ritual and cultural diversification. Morocco has its unique identity and historical background and it produced many scholars and historians from the early time of Islam. The Orientalists conducted systematic studies to express the diversity of its culture and civilization from different perspectives.

M. E. Combs-Schilling is a renowned anthropologist and scholar in the field of Moroccan studies. He tries to study and analyses the role of rituals and customs in the reconstruction of the Moroccan monarchy. He perceives that the Moroccan caliphate is a great expression of Moroccan culture and identity. The Moroccan society is a good example of both tradition and dynamism. The monarch King Hasan II is blood descendent of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). His personality seems with paradox. He did PhD in Law from Bordeaux, France and dressed western suits and loved golf, architecture, women and Islam and Moroccans adore their monarch as American adhere their presidency.

Combs-Schilling analyses this behaviour from the historical perspectives. He gleans the facts from the history and examines them in the light of modern anthropological principles. He explains the reasons of the veneration and respect of the monarch and how

* Associate Professor/ Chairman, Department of Islamic Studies and Arabic, Government College University Faisalabad

the monarchy sustains itself for more than five hundred years. According to his argument the monarchy is based on the sacredness and holiness of the monarch's blood lineage from the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The local rituals are fundamental for the reconstruction and sustainability of the monarchy. Mainly there are three rituals in this respect: the Prophet's birthday, the popular celebrations of first marriage and the Great sacrifice. He writes: "Innovations in the Prophet's birthday made the monarch the definition of the nation. Innovations in popular marriage practices made the ruler the definition of the man and the link to successful reproduction. And innovation in the Great Sacrifice made the ruler the collective hope for transcendence—formidable foundation for a formidable institution". (p. xii)

He presents the methodology and literature review in the preface. He divided the book into five sections and seventeen chapters. First three sections contain of six chapters in which he states the historical perspectives and fundamental debates of the subject. In first two chapters, he describes the role and importance of the rituals and explains different approaches to the Moroccan monarchy carried out by John Waterbury, an American political scientist; Remy Leveau, a French political scientist; Ernest Gellner (d. 1995), a British anthropologist; formidable anthropologist Clifford Geertz (d. 2006).

The third and forth chapters are consisted of the historical discourses of Islam. The author states the life of the Prophet Muhammad, his achievements, the basic principle of Islamic system, the importance and role of culture in the expansion of Islam, early battles of Islamic history and their impact on the subsequent Muslim civilization. He also describes the male and female behaviour toward sexuality and state. The author states: "While Jesus took twelve disciples, Muhammad took from nine to thirteen wives". (p.70) Then he explains the reason of these marriages and its detail. According to his analysis these marriages were partly for the political purpose and partly for the desire to have a male heir. He further comments: "a desire that was probably heightened like that of Henry VII- by his political success" (p.71). The comparison of Jesus Christ's disciples with waives of the Prophet of Islam is unrealistic. Moreover, the argument about the marriages of the

Prophet is not impressive because it is based on a supposition without any written or solid evidence. On contrary, in Islamic tradition, there is no concept of succession of the Prophet in the worldly properties and there is great debate among the Shi'i and Sunni school of thoughts in this respect. The language that was used by the author is not impressive and Muslim reader may take wrong impression from this kind of writing because Muslims never compare any one with the Prophet and believe that this kind of comparison is a heresy and unacceptable. Being an anthropologist, the author should be well aware from the Islamic tradition in this respect.

Chapter fifth is about historical success and crisis. This chapter reveals the process of the expansion of Islam from Arabian Peninsula to Morocco. He describes the land and its inhabitants and how Islam encountered with the inhabitant of these countries. Islamic forces influenced the native Barbar tribes and Islamic tradition emerged in this area with a unique manifestation. Islam reshaped the different aspects of the Barbar. The author describes the early political development and emergence of the Idrisi dynasty in the eight century (approximately 187 AH/803 AD) and how tomb of the founder of this dynasty influenced the political powers even after six centuries in the era of Wattasid.

Sixth chapter is about the historic bubonic plague. The author states that one third to one half populations of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East died in this plague but as contrast to Europe, North Africa reconstructed their socio-economical institutions very fast. He gives the detail of this plague and its aftermath. Chapter seventh to chapter seventeenth are related to the core topics of the book. The author describes in the seventh chapter about the Sharifian revolution of Morocco. After the discovery of the grave of Sayyadi Idris, Sharifian gained very much veneration among the masses. The disintegration of Marinid Dynasty gave the raise to the Sharifian power and latter in Wattasid era they were respected on state level as a monarch of Morocco. The author gives the detail of their contribution in this respect.

Eighth chapter describes the celebration of the prophet's birth day. This day is celebrated on public and state level and on this occasion the decedent of the Prophet is honoured everywhere. The author

analyses that the significance of this event and its impact on the restoration of the Sharifian monarch. Ninth chapter elaborate the second blood descendent dynasty of Alawids and their role. Next two chapters examine the first marriage ceremonies and their Moroccan ritual and how these events play the vital role in the lives of the masses. Next two chapters evaluate the ritual of Great Sacrifice and its effect on the individuals and how it helps monarch to uphold his status.

Chapter sixteenth and seventeenth reveal the contemporary situation of the Moroccan society from the beginning of the twentieth century to 1989 (the date when this research was published). The author describes how the Moroccan monarch survived under the French occupation and after the end of colonial era how this monarch created the sense of nationalism among the natives. According to the author, the distinctive socio-cultural rituals of the country are playing a pivotal role in the unification of the country- a great amalgamation of body and spirit. The author composed very useful appendix at the end of the book. Appendix A is about prophetic blood links while the second appendix is about the practical genealogy of Alawi family showing dynastic succession. The author fixed very useful notes and index in the end.

This book is a good example of the study of Moroccan society anthropologically. The author devotes almost half of this book to explain the introductory and historical details. Thus, he gives more space to the introductory and historical perspective rather than the core topic and this is the weak aspect of the book.

II-Fasting and Feasting in Morocco: Women's Participation in Ramadan

Author: Marjo Buitelaar

Published form: Burg Publishers, Oxford, 1993

Pages: 203

Islam has a multidimensional civilization. It is a unique amalgamation of unity of essence and diversity of form. It has a complex phenomenon of variety of cultures. From Morocco to Indonesia, it is unified with a common fabric of faith but manifested

in different forms of ritual and cultural diversification. Morocco has its unique identity and historical background. It produced many scholars and historians from the early time of Islam. Orientalists organized many serious studies to express the diversity of its culture and civilization from different perspectives. Geertz, C., Hofmann, N., and Buskens, L. produced significant works on anthropological aspects of Morocco and North Africa. However, *Fasting and Feasting in Morocco* is considered one of the most important and comprehensive ethnography of fasting in the Muslim society of Morocco. Marjo Buitelaar- the author of *Fasting and Feasting in Morocco*- worked at various institutions such as the institute for Cultural Anthropology and the Centre for Women Studies at the Catholic University of Nijmegen.

Marjo Buitelaar adopts the methodology of *thick description* in this study which is according to Clifford Geertz is a good mixture of description, argument and analysis. The research deals mainly with the anthropological study of the ritual of Ramadan, gender, power, and identity of Moroccan Muslims. The author stayed three consecutive months of Ramadan in Morocco in three families to observe and collect first hand data. Therefore this research is a kind of subjective empathy with objective analysis which provides deep understanding of Moroccan culture and civilization and their particular religiosity. Therefore this research has a great significance for different disciplines. Henk Driessen rightly says that '*Fasting and Feasting in Morocco* will be of interest not only to anthropologists, but also to Arabists, theologians, feminists and people outside academia who work with Muslims'. (p. viii)

Ramadan has great effects on the life of Muslims more than any other month. People give special attention on the purification of heart. Fasting during Ramadan is obligatory in which people abstain from food, drink and sexual relation from dawn to dusk. Besides fasting, there are many other rituals associated with this month. Marjo Buitelaar analyses the effects and significance of these rituals in the daily life of common people and how do these rituals effect on national and international levels in Muslim communities. She divides this book into eight chapters and then draws the conclusions. First chapter records the obligatory position of fasting in Islamic law. The author describes legal position of fasting during

Ramadan in the light of Quran and Hadith. Maliki jurisprudence is the dominated school of law in Morocco. Therefore, the author explains the Maliki rules and interpretation of different matters of fasting and Ramadan rituals. According to the author, the teachings of Imam al-Ghazali are very popular in Morocco. Therefore, she includes *the secrets of fasting* from al-Ghazali's *The Revitalisation of the Sciences of Religion* in this chapter.

The second chapter is related to Shaban, the month before Ramadan. The author states that Shaban is a month to prepare oneself for Ramadan. She describes the activities of Shaban. She reveals that Shaban marks the opening of the Wedding season. She also explains about the preliminary fasting and voluntary fasting. She also describes that how people engage themselves in the preparation and purification of houses and bodies and how they celebrate Shaban's rituals at the advent of Ramadan. She links all these activities with the concept of purity.

In my humble opinion, the author gives some unnecessary information in first chapter. She should briefly explain the importance and obligation of Ramadan and all contents of the second chapter should be explained in the first chapter. She should focus on the anthropological issues of Ramadan rather than conducting the theological and theoretical debates regarding the fasting in Ramadan.

The author explains socio-religious activities of people in Ramadan in the third chapter. She observes that mostly people sleep in daytime and remain busy in worshipping and chatting in night. She explains the importance of preferred days: the fifteenth and twenty seventh of Ramadan. She writes about the night of pre-eminence (*laylat al-qadr*). She also describes the children's first fast and the encouragement of their elders on it. She writes about the prayer of *tarawih* and recitation of Quran in this month. She also observes that people go to the cemetery to visit of their deceased relatives on twenty seventh of Ramadan. After twenty seventh, all attention is focused on the preparation of the feast *'Id al-fitr*. The author observes that *zakat al-fitr* and sharing the first breakfast with family and other members are two central activates of the *'Id* day.

Forth chapter is devoted to explain the role of Ramadan in the unification of the Muslim community. She elaborates the concept of

ummah and writes: 'Ramadan is the time *par excellence* in which the appeal to the unification of the *ummah* can be given shape'. (p. 82). The author observes that Moroccan Muslims organise the *umra* trip in Ramadan which enhance the concept of unification of *ummah*. Ramadan has significance in their national unification and solidarity. The people affirm the authority of their king in Ramadan. On the tenth of Ramadan, King Muhammad Khamis died. Therefore, he is commemorated on this day. Muhammad Khamis is considered a powerful symbol of Moroccan nationalism. Being a descendent of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), the King is paid special homage from the people. The author elaborates that 'the *baraka* possessed by the *Alawites* is the main source of legitimacy for the king's dual authority as *amir al-mumineen*'.

The author explains the meaning of purity and its Moroccan concept in fifth chapter. She describes her different experience and behaviour of common people in this respect. She elaborates the relation of fasting and purification. She observes that people remain away even from permissible sex relations in this month for spiritual elevation and purification. She also writes about the concept that fasting enhances the moral, physical and societal health. She also observes that women perceive themselves as impure due to menstruation. Therefore, they try to purify themselves more than males.

The author describes Ramadan as a pathway to paradise. She explains the concept of *ajr* in Islamic doctrine in Islamic legal system then compares it with the Moroccan view of *ajr*. The author relates *ajr* with alms-giving for religious merit and concept of *baraka* and *sabr*. The author writes that *ajr* is closely related to the notion of the Islamic community. Earning religious merit is associated with living up to high moral standards, which according to Moroccans are Islamic principles rather than universal human values' (p. 122). The author should explain this topic in the chapter five and there is no need to establish a new chapter on it. Chapter seven is about the Islamic celebrations. She writes about the feast of immolation, the *Ashura*, the feast of the birth of the Prophet (peace be upon him). She compares the method of Moroccan celebrations with the rest of Islamic world. In the final chapter, the author explains the meaning of liminality and its implications. She sees Ramadan as a ritual

complex. She explains the difference of concept of Moroccan Muslims from the rest of Islamic world. She also explains the complexities of the Ramadan rituals and their importance for the coherence of the Moroccan nation. The theme of this book is indeed very innovative and this is a good contribution for understanding the Moroccan culture and civilization. However, this work might have gained more appreciation if more space had been devoted to the anthropological debates.