

Introduction to the 2009 Edition

Readers may find it curious that an anthropologist by training, devoted to the rethinking of the study of Islam and Muslims (Marranci 2008) could have accepted to write an introduction for a work of a prominent, or perhaps the most prominent, Russian Orientalist. Vasily Vladimirovich Bartold, as we shall see, differed greatly from Western European Orientalists, and his name and work have been seldom discussed among those who have debated about Orientalism since Said's seminal work (see Said 1978). The words 'Orientalism' and 'Orientalist' remain charged with a general negative aura even thirty years after Said's work. This has facilitated, especially within British academia, a certain disinterest, or even rejection, toward the history of Oriental studies in different countries and in particular of the work conducted during the 1900s.

Surely Said's *Orientalism* needs to be discussed again from a critical perspective. This is exactly what the anthropologist Daniel Varisco has done recently in his book *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid* (2007). Varisco has critically analysed the fallacies and weaknesses of *Orientalism*, not to justify, as others have done (see for instance Kramer 2001), European and American imperialisms or ethnocentric claims about the Middle East, Muslims and Islam, but rather to highlight that,

Said can be criticized along Derridian lines for embracing the very dichotomy he wishes to attack. A central problem with flawed Orientalist rendering of an essentialized East is the privileging of sameness of differences. Said's rhetorical representation of Orientalism as unified discourse buys into the very logic that it opposes. By building his counter-argument on the same fundamental distinction between two essentialized abstractions, Said does little more than replace one flawed scheme with another (Varisco 2007: 49).

Indeed Said's *Orientalism* is not a critical review of Orientalists' works and their flaws. As others have noticed (for instance Manzalaoi 1980: 838), Said has omitted from his work Orientalist Russian scholars (Gafurov and Gankovskii 1968, Brower and Lazzarini 1997, Mikoulski 1997) even when they indulged in abusive statements about Islam as religion (see Lewis 1993: 113). Likewise, you will not find the name of Vasily Vladimirovich Bartold mentioned in any diatribe involving Said's work. Furthermore, focusing on Bartold's research and work would have clearly pointed out how Said's view that, 'those who write about the Orient must be motivated by the absolute distinction between themselves and the Orient' (Varisco 2007: 48) is flawed.

Indeed, if Bartold can be defined as an Orientalist it is because in the 1900s this was the name of the field dealing with almost anything and everything that pertained to what was perceived as the 'East', and 'Oriental Studies' was accordingly the title of many departments that pursued such studies. Yet as we shall see, Bartold had an approach to the study of the Muslim world, and in particular Iran and Turkistan, which could be said to have pioneered social history, and in certain cases, anthropology.

Vasily Vladimirovich Bartold graduated from the Oriental Languages Faculty of Petersburg University in 1891, where he distinguished himself both as a student and then later as a lecturer. In 1901, he became professor at the University of Petersburg at the age of thirty-two. It is during this time that he devoted his efforts to finalising what was his thesis dissertation, and what would later become a very influential work, *Turkestan down to the Mongol Invasion* (1928). In this work, still cited today, he reviews the history of Turkestan (sic) from the late seventh century to the early thirteenth, providing the reader with something more than just an arid historical account. Bartold has provided descriptions and reconstructions of the social, cultural life of the people of that time and derived his observations not only from historical documents but also from his fieldwork in the regions: something innovative for his own time period. It is

through the combination of 'textual' studies with actual observation and a nearly ethnographic approach that Bartold is able to provide a very different picture of the Mongol invasions (Stewart 1970), considered by other European and Russian historians as a return of the Islamic world to the Dark Ages. By contrast, Bartold has shown how the Mongols have contributed to, more than destroyed, the culture and economy of the region.

In his research, Bartold rejected commonly held stereotypes of his time, and through doing so, he problematized what other scholars of the day tried to simplify. A good example of this is his strong refutation, which we shall find expressed also in this present book, *Mussulman Culture*, of the belief that historical events and changes can be explained through merely one factor: Islam. To appreciate how pioneering and farsighted his work was, we have to understand the historical timeframe in which Bartold was working in Russia, as well as the predominant views about Muslims and Islam. Brower (2003:110) has provided us with a glimpse into that discussion as follows:

General Dukhovskoi had set the tone in 1889 with his hysterical ranting against Muslim solidarity and Turkic cultural activities in the empire. They added up, he predicted, to the spread to Russia of 'the idea of pan-Islamism' and of Muslim 'revenge against European civilization.' The fear that he expressed found a new source of nourishment in the emergence in the late 1900s in Tehran and Istanbul of constitutional movements.

The Muslims are seen not only a potential enemy, but actually a religious enemy.

Bartold was clearly able to distance himself from prevalent fears, stereotypes and the discourse of a Western 'superior' civilization. His historiography and passionate research of connections and dynamics between history, geography, culture and interesting influential characters, provide the reader, yesterday as today, not only with an innovative view for the time period, but also a timeless methodology which is still valid in

contemporary research. Bartold has employed what today we call a 'multidisciplinary' approach to history and cultural history.

In 1900, the minister of finance started The Russian Society of Oriental Studies (*Vostokovedenii*), which aimed to facilitate contacts and knowledge between Russia and the eastern parts of the Russian Empire, as well as to promote Russian culture and products to 'eastern people' (Mikoulski 1997, Andreeva 2007). In 1911, Bartold accepted to be the editor of the Society's new publication, convinced as he was of the honest and non-biased scholarly intention of the Society, since

he sought to give their new publication a multi-cultural perspective. Bartold had devoted his career to archeological and historical studies of Muslims lands, especially Turkistan...He would strongly advocate that 'in the East people live and act under the influence of the same forces as in the West'. Of course, the principal ones were economic conditions (Brower 2003: 111).

By contrast, after the first issue of the journal, Bartold had to recognize that the The Russian Society of Oriental Studies, despite its announced aims, fell back upon that very same fear-inducing and politically constructed denigration of Islam advocated by General Dukhovskoi. Bartold, after three issues of the journal, in harmony with his own ideas and scholarly approach, resigned as editor. Despite his innovative ideas and personal approach to the study of Islam and Muslims, Bartold remained appreciated as a scholar both by the Russian government as well as Russian academia. Indeed, he was appointed, among other offices, to The Commission for the Study of the Tribal Composition of the Population of the Borderlands of Russia, which was started by Sergei Fedorovich O'denburg, a Russian Orientalist who specialized in Buddhism (Hirsch 2005). The commission's main task was to provide ethnographic knowledge and information during the war.

Bartold's academic and scientific reputation seemed to survive the Russian Revolution, and he was in 1918 appointed as director of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography;

a position which he held until 1921. The Marxist scholars surely recognized Bartold's expertise, particularly in the field of Iranian studies and his firsthand familiarity of Iranian territory, as being knowledge which was surely strategic for the new communist state. Yet Bartold's education and intellectual formation were perceived as the product of the Tsarist epoch. Furthermore, Bartold, even under the new Marxist regime and the accompanying application of equally new ideological methodologies to the human sciences, continued his multidisciplinary investigations as well as his preferred historical approach. However, it was not long before his reputation started to crumble and acrimonious personal attacks against him increase.

A clear example of how Bartold, even during the difficult years of the beginning of the communist era, remained an extremely independent intellectual can be provided by reading his article entitled 'On the Question of Feudalism in Iran'. In this article, Bartold has suggested that the rural aristocracy in Iran was an integrated part of the social economic system of Iran that was reinforced century after century, and which would not disappear soon, but would rather continue to permeate Iranian society despite possible political changes. As Rezun (1981: 59) has pointed out,

Bartold was promptly denounced by 'Iransky' [pseudonym of the Russian Orientalist Rothstein] as a bourgeois who lacked an objective method of approaching historical phenomena. Other Marxists, who had used his name disparagingly, now frequently branded him a typical 'necrologist,' a scholar excessively preoccupied with the past who refused to apply a correct dialectical method when studying the problems of Asian nations.

As time passed, Prof. Bartold became part of—although criticized by Marxist scholars—the important history of Muslim studies in Russian academia. He died in Leningrad in 1930, aged sixty-one years old.

In this short biography of Vasily Vladimirovich Bartold, above, we have all the elements to understand *Mussulman Culture*,

observations deriving from different disciplines; from archaeology, linguistic studies, social history and economy and, last but not least, anthropology. Through this multi-disciplinary effort, Bartold deconstructs some stereotypes while providing a chronological description of the beginning of the Caliphate. Let me provide an example from this chapter to show how Bartold is able to challenge 'assumptions' about the 'despotic', 'fearful' and 'mysterious' East so often reproduced in European travellers' diaries and also the scholarly booklets that were so popular among not only the aristocracy of the time but also the intellectual bourgeoisie. Explaining the urban development of the Arabs, Bartold has indeed observed,

some European travellers have attempted to explain the type of the co-called 'oriental' town as resulting from a fear of 'oriental' despotism, a town where the apartments of living are hidden in the interior courtyards and from the streets' except for the shops, you can only see the palisades. This presupposition is not quite correct since the excavations of Pompeii have proved that this was also the type of Roman town (p.16 in this book).

Once more, we can observe how Bartold was able to provide, through a very simple but effective comparative observation, a scientific reason (i.e. cross-cultural influences) which sought to overcome widespread views of an East closed to the outside and fearful of despotic domination. The chapter continues the journey through cultural influences and argues for the powerful impact that Persian cultural elements had on the development of the Muslim Caliphate.

In this chronological arrangement of *Mussulman Culture*, Bartold decides in Chapter 3 to focus particularly on the rise of Baghdad as a new cultural and economic centre and the strange relationship that the Caliphs had with it. Bartold has discussed the relevance, and consequences, of philosophical studies among the Arabs of the times and their issues in understanding the Greek authors, who often were confused because of their similar names. The chapter then shows the influence that Shiism had,

with varying degrees of success, on some regions. As in other chapters of this book, we can observe that Bartold has paid particular attention to the rise and fall of cities and their cultural and economic power and influence over the rest of the growing Islamic empire. Unsurprisingly, Bartold has observed the development of cultural influences while keeping 'Persia' and 'Persian history' as a point of reference. The chapter, though briefly, mentions, while presenting the region of North Africa at the end of the sixteenth century, the great Arab historian and sociologist Ibn-Khaldun. It is not surprising that Bartold, who has been the first to 'rehabilitate' the Mongol and the Turki from their reputation for being merely new barbarians who wrought only destruction and ultimately weakened the Islamic civilization, has decided to highlight that

the destruction of the Asiatic provinces by the Turkis and the Mongols, who are often considered in Europe to be the chief culprits responsible for the decline of Mussulman culture, appeared to him to be nothing more than the annihilation of particular towns preparing the passage for the transfer of cultural life to newer centres rather than the cause of the general decadence of Islamic culture (p. 38 in this book).

The chapter concludes with the fall of Granada to the Spanish Christian Reconquista, but also with an interesting observation on Arab nationalism, which, though it never really succeeded, at the time seemed to yield in favour of a more religious identity.

Chapter 5, which is in my opinion one of the most interesting sections of this short book, is where Bartold's expertise on Persia and Turkistan becomes especially visible. After a short introduction to the Mongol invasion of the 'Mussulman world', Bartold has addressed another of the main stereotypes that can be found in European literature of the time: the Mongol invasion was an apocalyptic event which pushed back the world of Islam into the Dark Ages. In reality, Bartold has explained, despite the brutality of the Mongols in many aspects of their lives and pre-Islamic religious beliefs, such as human sacrifices,

the results of the Mongol invasion were less annihilating than is supposed even if for the fact that the conquerors did not take up their adobe in the conquered countries. Beside a not numerous military contingent the Mongol Khans brought with them their cultured councillors who helped them to establish their rule and apply to the new country that harmonious and well-constructed governmental and military organisation which had been elaborated at the time of Chenghiz Khan himself (p. 64 in this book).

The chapter guides, as the others before, the reader through developments in the arts, sciences and humanistic studies, such as in the case of Rashid-ud-Din, a Jewish historian who converted to Islam, and who was commissioned by 'one of the Mongol Princes of Persia' to compile a universal history which could include the history of all people from the Chinese to the 'Franks' (i.e. Europeans).

Bartold then leaves the chronological order of the narration in favour of a geographical digression; indeed, he discusses the 'Turkestan', but this time it is through the literature that Bartold shows the links and cultural exchanges, which remain the essence of Mussulman culture. Again through linguistic observation together with architecture, Bartold has explained the web of cultural connections that have influenced and shaped political, religious and economic life. Sometimes Bartold, without entering directly in polemics with other scholars—particularly European, has corrected erroneous assumptions as in this example,

It was natural to expect that the Turkis, imbued, as they were, with fresh strength, would continue the cultural work of the Arabs and the Persians and breathe into Mussulman culture a new life. The Turkis both in Asia Minor and Turkestan succeeded in creating their own literary language and, though they followed foreign models, it was not in slavish imitation of foreign idioms or forms of thought (p. 69 in this book).

Bartold of course has recognized here that the Turkis followed foreign models, but he has rejected the quite often otherwise assumed claim that Turki language and literature were no more

than bland plagiarism. After a short passage about the origin and poetic style of 'Dervishism', we discover the reign of Timur (Tamerlane), a figure who became linked to mythologies and oriental fantasies, particularly in Europe. Bartold has also briefly reminded his readers of the cruelty of the sultan, but has preferred instead to concentrate on his role as a patron of arts and literature.

The last chapter of the book covers the history of the Muslim world from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. As may be expected, Bartold has here addressed the big question of the irremediable crisis of the Islamic empire. Through a rapid excursus of European achievements in the sciences, military machinery and techniques, the development of very well organised book printing and the parallel difficulties experienced by the 'Mussulmans', Bartold has been able to suggest an essential point: it was not just the lack of modern and new techniques or the slow process to acquire them that crippled the powerful empire, but rather the loss of cultural hegemony; the power to create connections and ideas and then spread them. Europe, increasingly less Christian and more secular, had taken the lead. Yet in an indirect polemic with some European, but also Russian, colleagues who used to argue about a new 'Dark Age' of the Muslim world, Bartold in this last chapter reminds us of the humanistic and scientific achievements of the Ottoman Empire and observed,

this shows that the picture often painted of the Mussulman world as plunged 'in deep sleep' till it was 'reawakened' by the Europeans in the nineteenth century is to a great extent exaggerated. What can be affirmed is that in recent times those favourable conditions under which Mussulman culture was created, are absent. The Islamic powers of that epoch were compelled to accord the first place to military affairs and support those elements of the pollution in whom they found military help even at the sacrifice of cultural interest (p. 81).

The sacrifice of cultural interest for the benefit of military necessity had also another effect. Bartold has rightly observed

that the Muslim states of the time, surrounded by belligerent and imperialistic European nations and an expansionist Russia, were forced to embrace militant religious views in the hope to appeal to those military families and powerful warlords who could counter the European penetration of the Ottoman Empire. This process facilitated also internal confrontations between Sunni and Shi'a which showed, as Bartold has noted, unprecedented levels of violence. In other words, Bartold has suggested in the last chapter that the decline of the Muslim empire was caused by a kind of 'militant Islam' in which religion loses its cultural elements to become solely inspiration for military, and often desperate violent actions.

Mussulman Culture is a brief and concise book but surely a relevant one not only at the time of its author, but also for us today. Indeed, we may wish to ask what we can learn from it and in particular from Bartold's approach. As a trained social anthropologist, I can appreciate the comparative approach and the multidisciplinary view of this work, its unbiased discussion of the Muslim world during a time in which 'Muslims' were seen as both the enemy within and outside of Russia's borders, and its rejection of cultural and religious supremacism, which was common at the time. There may be many ways of reading Bartold's work, but I think that today, in a world in which increasingly widespread stereotypes represent Islam, Muslim cultures and Muslims as backwards, violent, irrational and fanatic, *Mussulman Culture* reminds the academic world of the responsibility which we have in fighting such stereotypes. Bartold has written *Mussulman Culture* as part of a pedagogical mission to show how history should be addressed as a complex entity made through the actions of people, through their everyday lives and cultures. Today, more than ever, we need to rethink how we represent and describe what for Bartold was the 'Mussulman Culture'.

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