

CHAPTER I

Introduction

*ELENCHOS*¹

STUDENT: What is Islam?

ANTHROPOLOGIST: Lots of things, of course.

STU: Yeah, but I mean, is Islam its holy books or what Muslims do?

ANT: Neither, I suppose.

STU: Well, it should be one or the other for sure!

ANT: Why should it be so?

STU: I think that the Qur'an and *hadiths*, and the other texts, tell Muslims how to be Muslims and this guides their actions.

ANT: OK, we can try an experiment. Get that copy of the Qur'an on my desk. So, tell me what this is.

STU: A book; a holy book, at least for Muslims.

ANT: What makes it holy?

STU: The fact that Muslims consider it so.

ANT: OK, but if you were a Muslim why would you have insisted that this particular book is the holiest?

STU: That's simple Doc! Because, I would believe the book to be God's words.

ANT: You see, Islam is not just what is written in its books.

STU: Why not? I don't follow you.

ANT: Well, it's very simple. You just said that this book, the Qur'an, is holy because at least one Muslim believes that God revealed it. Now you can agree with me that Muslims, each of them, have to perform cognitive operations to form a cognitive map of what for them is Islam. There is no Islam without mind.

STU: Certainly, you need Muslims to have Islam. Yet I still think that what is written in the sources of Islam shapes how Muslims are. Though there are some cultural differences, I am not sure about your point. I think that something called Islam actually exists.

ANT: OK, we will proceed point by point. Not only do we have different cultures among Muslims but also different interpretations. Which is the most basic element that you need to form interpretations?

STU: First, you need to know at least the language in which the text has been transmitted or trust a translation; but there are also other elements, like personal views and social conditions that surely influence one's interpretation.

- ANT: You are discussing a second order of elements. I asked about the basic element without which we cannot have interpretations, or any other mental process, since interpretations are complex mental processes.
- STU: Well ... the most basic is that you should be able to think. To have mental processes, like thoughts, we need a mind.
- ANT: Yes, because for the 'thing' we call Islam to exist, we need a mind that can conceive of it, making it part of a mental process.
- STU: Why refer to Islam as 'the thing' now?
- ANT: You have just agreed that Islam exists because of the mental processes allowing some people to make sense of certain texts and practices. Are mental processes 'real' things?
- STU: Well, I would say that they are exactly that, processes. We make sense of what is around us through mental processes.
- ANT: Exactly, we, as human beings, through mental processes form what we can call maps.
- STU: I can see that. So you are saying that Islam is just a map.
- ANT: Well, more than one, for sure. It's like one of those maps formed by many other different small maps, which, when put together, represent a vast territory.
- STU: And, as you have reminded us many times, the map is not the territory.
- ANT: But in this case, we can only know the map, since the territory consists of an endless ensemble of mental processes.
- STU: At this point, I do not see the difference between a Muslim and non-Muslim forming mental processes about Islam. What makes them different?
- ANT: Nothing, indeed, if we speak of the cognitive processes involved. You know, I have the impression that the most important thing that has been forgotten while studying Muslims is the otherwise obvious fact that they are human beings like me and you.
- STU: But, I mean, doesn't the fact that they believe in Islam make their mind different? Sometimes, in some articles, I come across the expression 'Muslim mind'.
- ANT: Some scholars, and unfortunately some anthropologists among them, have even suggested that a Muslim mind can exist. But how can a mind, which means cognitive processes allowed through neurological activities, be Muslim? Think if we extend this reasoning to other adjectives: Christian minds, Conservative minds, Jewish minds, Scientology minds, Jedi minds and Flying Spaghetti Monster minds.²
- STU: So, what makes a person a Muslim? I thought that the fact that a person believes in the Qur'an and the sunna and in the *shahāda*, the profession of faith, makes a person a Muslim.
- ANT: You are suggesting that it is the person's act of believing that makes him a Muslim. Let me see ... do you believe that Juan Carlos I is the king of Spain?
- STU: Yes, Doc.
- ANT: Are you Spanish?
- STU: Of course not. You know I'm Scottish!

- ANT: Why are you Scottish and not Spanish, though you believe that Juan Carlos I is the king of Spain?
- STU: First, I was not born in Spain, I do not have Spanish parents and, by the way, I do not feel Spanish at all. I am not emotionally attached to the idea of being Spanish. Like during the World Cup, if Scotland is not playing, I can support another team, but when Scotland is playing, I am excited and feel something ... a particular attachment that tells me that I'm Scottish.
- ANT: Indeed, what matters here is that you *feel* to be Scottish.
- STU: Are you suggesting that Muslims are Muslims because they consider themselves Muslim?
- ANT: Does it sound so strange?
- STU: Well, if you are right it means that the most important aspect is neither what the Islamic texts read, nor what Muslims believe, nor how they act, but rather whether or not they believe themselves to be Muslims, and here emotions play a very important role, as in my case of feeling to be Scottish.
- ANT: Yes, this is correct. We need to restart our research, as anthropologists, from that 'feeling to be', in this case, Muslim.

DE-TITLING THE TITLE

The Anthropology of Islam is a title that raises questions and certainly expectations. What is the anthropology of Islam? Why anthropology instead of theology or history? Why use the term Islam instead of Islams or Islam(s)? Why focus on Islam instead of Muslims? Is there only *one* anthropology of Islam or can we speak of anthropologies of Islam, or even anthropologies of Islams? How does the anthropology of Islam differ from, say, any other anthropology of religion? How does the anthropology of Islam differ from the sociology of Islam, or Islamic studies, or Islamic anthropology? Of course, I can add many other questions to those I have collected in the two years I worked on *The Anthropology of Islam* – some derived from genuine curiosity, others from healthy academic criticism and yet others from simple sceptical reactions. All these questions have shaped, transformed and re-transformed the book itself. Many of these questions will find answers in the chapters that will follow, in particular Chapter 3. Nonetheless, I want to introduce some relevant points behind the reason for this book. To do so, I need to explain the phylogeny of this project.

When I was a university student in anthropology, with an interest in Muslim cultures, I found myself disoriented by the enormous amount of research and references on the topic of Islam and Muslims produced in the last twenty-five years. Very soon, I discovered that these studies spread among different disciplines with different methodologies, aims, scopes and sometimes, indeed, political affiliations and agendas. My anthropological vocation brought me to focus on the social scientific side of these studies, though I also enthusiastically read and studied historical and traditional Islamic studies works. Although it was not difficult to find ethnographic studies of Muslim communities, in particular devoted to the Middle

Eastern societies, I became aware that an epistemological discussion on what the anthropology of Islam might be never fully developed, despite some reflexive attempts such as those provided by el-Zein (1977) and Asad (1986a). Other scholars have offered critical reviews of the available anthropological approaches to Islam; yet these review articles, such as those written by Fernea and Malarkey (1975), Eickelman (1981b), Abu-Lughod (1989) and Gilson (1990), have focused mainly on the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA). It is not difficult to see how Said, though inexplicably appreciating Geertz's work, suggested that anthropology, despite its 'supposedly disinterested universality' (1985: 95) had not overcome its connections with colonialism and Orientalist views. With Asad (1986a) and Abu-Lughod (1989), I consider Said's observation unfair – without wishing to deny the historical collusions that anthropology as a discipline, and single anthropologists as scholars, had with colonial powers (see Chapter 3 in this book). Indeed, Said superficially ignored the contribution that anthropology has provided to the understanding of North African Muslims and the Middle East through anthropologists such as Eickelman.

Time has since passed, and I find myself on the other side of the desk, teaching students what the university course catalogue calls the anthropology of Islam. If in other anthropological fields, and in religious studies, we can find collections of articles, textbooks and the increasingly successful short introduction (see for instance Bowie 2000; Kunin 2002; Ney 2003; Segal 2006), this is not the case for anthropological approaches to Muslims and their religion. If then we turn to the most widely used anthologies and introductory books on religious studies or anthropology, we can observe a lack – with rare exceptions, such as Morris's *Anthropology and Religion: A Critical Introduction* (2005) – of any reference to Islam or to anthropological research on Muslims. Why? Anthropologists researching topics related to Islam have been, with the notable exception of Geertz, unsuccessful in reaching a wide audience outside their own subdiscipline. Yet there are also other more complex, I would say structural, reasons. Sociological and anthropological research on Islam has developed through specific studies and ethnographies, but without real coherence or discussion among the scholars. During the 1970s, anthropological research on Islam was at its dawn, and el-Zein's challenging article (1977) attempted to reopen a debate, but remained unexplored beyond the scholarly diatribe on one Islam versus many Islams (see Chapter 3, this book). While el-Zein's efforts seemed to fail, the short essays of Geertz's *Islam Observed* seemed to succeed. But it remained an isolated case and certainly did not aim to shape or clarify what the anthropology of Islam might have been. Geertz was just 'observing Islam', and could not forecast the impact that some lectures and a few pages would have produced years later. Finally, in 1986, Asad consciously, rather than by chance as in the case of Geertz's extended essay, offered a challenging reflection on the anthropology of Islam in an attempt to continue the debate that el-Zein started nearly ten years before (Asad 1986b). Asad's effort remained largely ignored, producing response and reflections only after decades had passed (see Lukens-Bull 1999). Hence, nearly thirty years on from el-Zein's intellectual engagement on the definition of the anthropology, we can still say

with Asad, 'no coherent anthropology of Islam can be found on the notion of a determinate social blueprint' (1986b: 16). But, do you need a blueprint? I will try to discuss this in the chapters that follow.

The lack of self-reflection on what the anthropology of Islam is or should be, and the lack of a phylogenesis of this anthropological field, can also explain more recent events. Varisco (2005) in his provocative title *Islam Obscured*, has rightly highlighted a certain fossilization of how the anthropology of Islam has been, and still is thought of within university,

Textual truths engendered and far too often engineered in representing Islam find their way unscrutinized and insufficiently digested into an endless stream of introductory and general texts, even solidly scholarly works. Seminal texts, once canonized as theoretically innovative or simply authoritative by default, have a library shelf life far beyond their usefulness and freshness in the disciplines that generate them. (2005: 3)

Today, after political and social events that have marked the beginning of the new millennium with an increased tension between the stereotyped representation of Islam and the no-less-stereotyped image of a civilizing West, we must reconsider how we have approached Islam from an anthropological perspective.

Anthropologists, as we shall observe in this book (Chapter 4), have preferred focusing their attention on the 'Other' in exotic contexts. Anthropologists researching Muslim societies have for a long time studied Muslim societies within Islamic countries, and often the Muslim was the Sufi or the Bedouin (Eickelman 1981a; Abu-Lughod 1989; Varisco 2005). The west, understood often as a monolithic social and cultural expression, was considered the domain of sociology. The new flux of migrations from Muslim countries changed disinterest, blurring the boundaries between sociology and anthropology, particularly in the case of Europe. As I shall explain later in this book, I strongly believe that we need to observe the methodology employed instead of classical academic divisions. In fact, an increasing number of contemporary sociologists use fieldwork and participant observation as part of their studies. In these cases, I consider their studies as part of the social and anthropological approach to Islam. Nonetheless, even in recent publications, the anthropology of Islam seems still rooted in a nostalgic exoticism. Clearly, as also Varisco has recognized, the anthropology of Islam, today, cannot be other than global. We cannot study, for example, Muslims in Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Algeria, Morocco and Libya, without taking into consideration the transnational and global networks they are part of. Similarly, we cannot study Muslim communities in the west without paying attention to their connections with other Muslims in Islamic countries and other communities, both Muslim and non-Muslim. One clear example of the multisided interaction that Muslims living in the west partake in is the campaigns against the Afghan and Iraqi Wars, as well as the recent Israeli-Lebanese conflict. In all these occasions, Muslims have not only shared their activities with other fellow coreligionists, but also with non-Muslim organizations such as the Stop the War Coalition, the No-Global organization and traditional political parties (Yaqoob 2003).

Nonetheless, essentialism affects both academic and popular discourse on Muslims. I tend to call this essentialism the fallacy of the 'Muslim mind theory'. As we shall see in the chapters of this book, surprisingly some sociologists and anthropologists have not been immune to it.³ This fallacy argues that religion induces Muslims to believe, behave, act, think, argue and develop their identity *as Muslims* despite their disparate heritages, ethnicities, nationalities, experiences, gender, sexual orientations and, last but not least, mind. In other words, their believing in Islam makes them a sort of cloned CPU: different styles, different colours, same process. Sometimes this fallacy is the result of generalizations, some of which are difficult to avoid. At other times, however, it is more ideological and the by-product of an extreme culturalist position. In all cases, the root of it is the, latent or manifest, unrecognized fact that a Muslim person is primarily a human being. In *The Anthropology of Islam*, I shall suggest that emotions and feelings should be at the centre of our studies of Islam. This means reconsidering the relationship between nature and culture – as we shall discuss in Chapter 6.

Participant observation, at least since Malinowski, has been the main methodology within anthropological studies. Fieldwork should have been the main antidote to essentialism. However, fieldwork in itself cannot protect the anthropologist from embracing essentialism. We need to understand that we cannot conduct anthropological fieldwork within Muslim societies and communities as, for example, Geertz (1968) or Rabinow (1977) did about thirty years ago. We have to face, for instance, new challenges, some of which are the product of new technologies. I encountered evidence recently of how the expanding easy accessibility of the Internet in all countries can modify the experience of fieldwork. My PhD supervisor used to tell me about her experience of fieldwork in Africa, and the positive and negative side of leaving the field to start analysis.⁴ The anthropologist writing about his or her experience had in the past a certain power in representing the Other. Certainly, the studied community and the anthropologist's informants had less power in publicly presenting their experience of the research. In the case of incidents within the field, there was only one authoritative voice: the anthropologist's voice. Today things are very different. In the era of 'blogging', the informants can tell their story about the research and the anthropologist, as I have recently discovered.⁵ Fieldwork, I shall suggest, should incorporate an analysis of the emotional context within which we operate as anthropologists. This means refocusing our attention to how human beings make sense of the 'map' that we call Islam. To do so, we need to observe interpretations of Islam as part of networks of shared meanings; to observe concepts, which we may meet in our interviews (such as *jihad*, *jāhillyya* and *tawhīd*) as the result of interpretations affected by personal identity, emotions, feelings and the environment, rather than simply a rational textual determinism, or orthodoxy versus orthopraxy.

This also means reconsidering the impact that the anthropology of Islam may have on contemporary issues. Anthropology appears to be the least influential of all the disciplines studying topics related to Islam and Muslims in inspiring policy-making or attracting the attention of the political world and mass media. As I shall discuss in Chapter 4, even an event such as September 11, with its social, political and global consequences, has seen few, scattered influential ethnographic studies,

as compared to other disciplines such as Middle East Studies, political studies and even Islamic studies. Why? The anthropologist Hannerz (2003) has rightly answered that the main reason can be found in an inability of anthropologists to reach a wider audience and provide interpretations and future scenarios. This does not mean ‘popularizing’ the anthropology of Islam but contributing to the debate towards a more accessible engagement with the non-academic world as well as the mass media. Recently, as we shall discuss in Chapter 4, some anthropologists have tried to engage more in the debate surrounding the war on terrorism and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. González’s edited book *Anthropologists in the Public Sphere* (2004, in particular see parts IV to VI inclusive) presents a good example of the contributions that anthropologists have offered to the current political and social debate concerning the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and on terrorism. These short articles, mostly written for newspapers and magazines with a wide readership, differ from other political commentaries because they start from the experience of fieldwork and contact with ‘the Other’. Other anthropologists have used their methodology to provide new viewpoints on issues such as radicalization, identity, intra-community networks, relations between the state and Muslim communities, and the effects of anti-terrorism policies and legislation on local Muslims, which previously were very much the domain of political sciences (see, for instance, Abbas 2005). The contribution that anthropologists can provide to the current political and general debate on Islam and the Muslim world is extremely important exactly because of the characteristics of anthropology as well as sociology. The anthropologist of Islam can highlight the complexity existing beyond the simplification of the mass media and the populist views of certain politics, and de-orientalize the current debate.

In his research for an anthropology of Islam, Talal Asad, as others after him (see Lukens-Bull 1999), insisted on focusing on Islam as religion. Asad made the fascinating suggestion that anthropologists interested in Islam should rethink their ‘object of study’ (1986b: 17) as a tradition, which includes, as part of it (and not as part of customs or culture) the Qur’an and the ḥadīths. I certainly can appreciate Asad’s viewpoint as a progression from the epistemology – developed, for instance by Geertz (1968) and Gellner (1981) – that affected, and largely still affects, sociological and anthropological studies of Islam. Yet I disagree with his idea of the anthropology of Islam. I think that today we have the possibility of overcoming a pernicious essentialism⁶ affecting many social scientific studies of Islam (see chapters 3, 6, 7 and 8 of this book).

We should start from Muslims, rather than Islam. As I have argued above, the main thing that Muslims share among themselves and others is certainly not Islam, but rather the fact that they are human beings. Hence, they communicate, act, interact, change, exchange, with both other humans as well as the environment. These relationships are marked by emotions – which as Damasio has suggested (1999 and 2000) are a reaction to stimuli – that produce feelings. I argue in Chapter 5 that this process has a fundamental impact on how identities are formed. Yet a person defines himself or herself as Muslim because, in one way or another, ‘Muslim’ has a particular value attached. The value can certainly be explained rationally, but it is not rationally driven. For many people professing their credo

in Islam, 'Muslim' has an emotional component attached to it. They *feel* to be Muslims. Then, and only then, the 'feeling to be' is rationalized, rhetoricized, and symbolized, exchanged, discussed, ritualized, orthodoxized or orthopraxized. Of course, people feel to be Muslim in different ways, which are unique to each of them, and they express this feeling in the form of discourse. Some anthropologists, such as el-Zein (1977), have observed that it is impossible to speak of one Islam and we have to move to recognize the existence of Islam(s). Others, such as Asad (1986b), affirm that Islam is something that exists in itself, as, for instance, a tradition. In *The Anthropology of Islam*, I have avoided entering into this diatribe since it inevitably ends in theology. Rather I have suggested that we may understand Islam as a *map* of discourses on how to 'feel Muslim'.

This suggestion has some relevant implications for how we study Muslim societies, also at a methodological level. As I shall explain in Chapter 5, to focus on Muslims as human beings is to acknowledge the role that emotions and feelings have on the informant's discourse of Islam as well as the power that the surrounding environment has in its definitions. In other words, successful fieldwork is based on the capacity of the fieldworker to develop an emotional empathy with his or her studied community. Indeed, if we focus only on the 'object' Islam, we'll miss the relevant processes, existing in identity formation as well as community identification, which can disclose the dynamics of Muslim lives. These dynamics – in other words, the way in which the 'feeling to be Muslim' is expressed, modified by events and environment, established and re-established – are at the centre of what I suggest is a contemporary anthropology of Islam.

I have planned *The Anthropology of Islam* as a multifunctional book. On the one hand, I have tried to offer an unprecedented critical review of studies on Islam and fieldwork among Muslim societies, and on the other, a provocative attempt to reopen a debate that has long been neglected among sociologists and anthropologists studying Muslims. Though my review cannot be exhaustive, and is rather purposely selective, I have embarked on an extended critical analysis of classic and recent social anthropological studies on Muslims. This may provide us with some idea of what forty years of socio-scientific study of Islam have contributed to the understanding of Muslims and their societies. *The Anthropology of Islam* does include, probably for the first time, a dedicated section on studying Muslims in western contexts.⁷ In this section I have included some sociologists' studies, since I reject, as sterile and anachronistic, the geo-led division that identifies western-based research as 'sociological' and non-western as 'anthropological' by default. Rather, I have discriminated by methodology, viewing participant observation as a crucial element of an effective approach to the field. Through this extended review, I have tried to highlight two main aspects. The first is the effect that essentialist approaches and analyses have on the overall representation of Islam and Muslims – often bordering on new forms of Orientalism. The second aspect is the lack of socio-scientific, and in particular anthropological, research in some important fields, such as the development and transformation of Islamic and non-Islamic concepts, Muslim aesthetic, the family as a unit, social issues and non-heterosexuality.

The second characteristic of *The Anthropology of Islam*, and perhaps the most challenging for the author, is the attempt to provoke a new discussion within the field. There are many ways of starting a discussion. One of the commonest within academia is criticism, more or less constructive; another is presenting a set of new ideas or views open to debate. In each chapter of this book, I have tried to provide both. I see my suggestions more as an open project, to which improvement and new elements can be added, than a solution. However, I am strongly convinced that we need to move on from conjectural hermeneutics and overcome the idea that symbols can shape human beings, or make them different from the rest of nature. On the contrary, we need to reconsider the relationship between scientific disciplines and anthropology. For this reason, I have based my theory of identity on recent cognitive neuroscientific research on consciousness (Damasio 2000). Although it would be reductive to think that genes, neurons and biology can explain the complex creature that is the human being, it would be obscurantist and rationally blind to reject all scientific studies and research on humans and their minds as not relevant to anthropology.

The culturalist or symbolic approaches to the study of Islam and Muslims cannot be decontextualized from the social and historical context of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, as we shall see, a perseverance in viewing culture as a special feature, essential to the definition of the human being, may invite us to consider, as Wikan (1999, 2002) has questioned, whether or not culture is irremediably essentialist in itself (see also Grillo 2003). Thus, there is importance in recognizing what we call 'culture' as a natural feature of our being human. In conclusion, I wrote *The Anthropology of Islam* as an appeal to reflect on years of sociological and anthropological studies, which, because they have focused on Muslims as products of Islam, have overlooked the human beings who felt to be Muslims.

THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

In Chapter 2, I share two encounters, one from my childhood and another from my early anthropological studies, with Islam through the practice and views of two Muslims, Abd al-Kader, a door-to-door salesman, and Abd al Hādī, an imam. I have shown the differences between the two Muslims' interpretations of Islam and compared them with the scholarly presentation of Islam in basic introductions. None of these, however, could be defined as the 'real' Islam. Yet it is helpful, also in this book, to present some of the main aspects of Islam on which most Muslims agree, as far as doctrine and practice is concerned. Similarly, I have presented in this chapter a short history of the beginning of the Muslim community. However, I have stressed that the scholarly representation of Islam should be understood not as Islam itself, but as a map that can help orientate us in a very variegated and confusing territory.

In Chapter 3, I discuss how the study of Islam and Muslim societies did not attract the first anthropologists, who preferred to focus on Native American, African and Polynesian societies. Indeed, they considered Islam and Muslim societies a

field pertinent to the so-called Oriental Studies. I present the criticism that Said has advanced in his masterpiece *Orientalism* (1978) and the challenge that, some years later, it presented for anthropologists. In fact, anthropological studies of Islam were not immune from interest-based relationships with colonial powers. The first studies of Muslim societies developed within the French *Ethnologie*, which mainly focused on the French colonies, such as Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco (also called Maghreb). These studies concentrated on the village, since the cities and their orthodox Islam were beyond the aims of the French *Ethnologie*, which focused in particular on kinships, marriages, local tribal Islam and folklore. We shall follow the experience of Gilsenan (1990) and the first reactions to anthropologists who ventured into the studies of the Middle East. Something changed, of course, when for the first time the word *Islam* appeared in the title of Geertz's book. I provide in this chapter a critical analysis of the three main works that have been identified with the anthropology of Islam: Geertz's *Islam Observed* (1968), Gellner's *Muslim Society* (1981) and Gilsenan's *Recognizing Islam* (1982). All these studies focus on the Middle East and North Africa, and together with others, are based on what Abu-Lughod has discussed in her article (1989) as 'zones of theorizing'. I then offer a discussion of the debate regarding the anthropology of Islam as a field of study, which el-Zein (1977) started, Asad answered (1986b) and recently, Lukens-Bull (1999) and, through sharp but necessary criticism, Varisco (2005) re-enhanced. Nonetheless, I suggest that five years since the crumbling of the Twin Towers and in spite of the loss of thousands of lives around the world, Muslims and non-Muslims have still not reflected adequately upon what it means to study Islam from an anthropological perspective in this new era.

In Chapter 5, I move the discussion to study Muslim communities and Islam within Western contexts. At first, anthropologists of Islam privileged exotic villages and cities in which to study local Muslim societies. Today we have to face, even within the local, the challenge of an unprecedented global dimension. From the 1970s until the mid-1980s anthropologists and sociologists focused on the national and ethnic identities of Muslim migrants, suggesting complex processes of integration and assimilation. Yet in the 1980s, thanks to the growing number of the Muslim communities and their new social political activism, Islam, seen as a cultural identity marker, seemed to substitute the previous anthropological interest in nationalism and ethnicity. The concept of identity became central to the understanding of how the Muslim communities would reconcile their religion with Western values. Some influential studies have suggested that Muslim migrants were living 'between two cultures', so that their children could be seen as a product of this 'in-betweenness' possessing fluid, hybrid, multiple identities controlled and shaped by cultural processes. I compare these studies with some of my fieldwork and research experiences suggesting that we should be suspicious of these monolithic culturalist models of identity. I finally discuss the use of the Internet, and the new anthropological studies of the virtual *ummah* that have developed in recent years. In this chapter, I also discuss how the events of September 11 and the war on terror have changed research on Muslims in the west as well as the role of the anthropologists, whose voice is now present within the mass media. I conclude

that to study Muslims and Islam within a western context means also to turn the magnifier toward our cultures, our categorizations, and the mechanism in which we make sense of what it means to be a human being in a new dimension that invites the contemplation of the macro within an increasingly shifting micro.

Chapter 6 is devoted to the increasing debate concerning Muslim identity. After summarizing the anthropological approach to identity, I review some anthropological studies focusing on Muslims. In some of these studies, difference and differentiation are presented as the primary reason for the formation of Muslim identities. I also argue that the strong culturalist stand of some research on identity has led some anthropologists to describe western-born Muslims in terms of pathology. Notwithstanding the relevance that difference and differentiation as well as boundary marking processes have in social interaction, I suggest that they may not be prominent in the formation of personal identity. Rather, following recent neuroscientific theories (Damasio 2002), I have argued that, while the self and the autobiographical self are real, identity is a machinery of personal imagination allowing vital coherence between the individual and his or her environment. Hence, emotions and feelings are central to the development of personal identities.

My explanation of personal identity suggests that to the question 'what is a Muslim?' we cannot answer merely by highlighting cultural symbolic elements of reference to Islam as codified religion (a very common practice even in recent anthropological studies). Rather, to the question 'what is a Muslim?' we need to answer 'a human being'. In other words, 'I'm Muslim' means 'I feel to be Muslim'. I conclude that it is by focusing on that 'feel to be' more than on the symbolic 'Muslim' that we can understand how Muslims express, form and develop their identity beyond the imposed stereotypes.

In Chapter 7, I raise some questions about two terms often used within both the mass media and academic studies, Muslim community and ummah (community of believers). I suggest that we need to resolve what I call the ummah paradox. Despite the general use of the terms Muslim community and ummah, the reality is that Muslims are divided into many factions and groups, and what is indicated as one ummah is in reality affected by sectarianism, theological disputes, racism and political divisions. Though Muslims acknowledge the existence of divisions and sectarianism, the majority do not see in this a denial of the ummah. At the same time, social scientists have increasingly employed the keyword 'Muslim community' because of evidence of a sense of belonging among Muslims, in particular during times of crisis, such as the Rushdie Affair or more recently, the global uprising prompted by the Danish Cartoons Affair. I suggest that to avoid essentialism, but at the same time be able to explain the trans-national, trans-ethnic, and often trans-sectarian (Sunni versus Shi'a) sense of belonging among Muslims, we should reconsider the central role that emotions and feelings play, as Maffesoli has argued (1996). Starting from the theory of identity I presented in the previous chapter, I reconsider Hetherington's re-examination of the concept of Bund (1998).

Chapter 8 addresses what Abu-Lughod has called the most investigated of the 'zones of theorizing': the harem. The study of gender in Islam is the field of studies

that has suffered the highest level of essentialization. In this chapter I follow the development of the study of gender in Islam, from the silence of the first main studies on Islam to the first feminist viewpoints. I argue that an overemphasis on the debate of women's dress code, and in particular the so-called veil, or *hijāb*, has prevented a real study of gender, which in the case of studies concerning Muslims, became synonymous with a study of femininity. Only recently, under the influence of gender studies, have anthropologists started to include masculinity in the study of gender (Lahoucine 2006). As in the case of Muslim women, these studies have focused primarily on the Middle East and other Muslim societies. I suggest that more research should be conducted on masculinity and migration. Nonetheless, I argue that the most overlooked topic within gender studies in Islam has certainly been the study of non-heterosexual Muslims. Only at the end of the 1990s have anthropologists started researching and conducting extensive fieldwork on non-heterosexual communities. Nonetheless, topics such as the relationship between non-heterosexual Muslims and the mainstream non-heterosexual community are still at a pioneering level. I conclude by observing that for a contemporary anthropological approach to Muslims and Islam we need to observe the *dynamics* of gender. This means to focus on femininity and masculinity, more than man and woman, and, in contrast to the more traditional approaches, the role that these dynamics of genders have in Islam, seen as a map of identity discourses.

NOTES

1. The word 'Elenchos' derives from the ancient Greek ἔλεγχος, which refers to question-answer dialogue that aims to clarify a topic through deconstructing other arguments (May 1997).
2. The Jedi religion, derived from the famous Star Wars series, is now growing and in 2001 was recognized as religion in the UK official Census. The Flying Spaghetti Monster Church started as a humorous initiative, but is now enjoying unexpected success. For more information and possible savoury conversions, you can visit the Church website: <http://www.venganza.org/>
3. For other examples of criticism concerning essentialist views of Islam and culture see Modood 1998; Donan 2002; Grillo 2003; Matin-Asgari 2004; Geaves 2005.
4. Kay Milton, personal communications.
5. My informant and friend Hasrizal posted his memories of my research and our meetings on his personal blog: <http://www.saifulislam.com/>
6. Of course, for certain political and ideological positions concerning Islam, essentialism is a positive element in the study of it. Allow me to suggest, however, that even for those who wish to maintain ideological, either apologetic or critical, stands on Islam, essentialism can only lead toward flawed reasoning.
7. I prefer to use the expression 'western context' since even Muslims living outside western countries can have links with the west, understood as a geopolitical dimension, or the West, understood as imagined, often stereotyped, ethnic, moral and political entity.

CHAPTER 2

Islam: Beliefs, History and Rituals

WHAT IS ISLAM?

I knew very little about Islam. As a student at the University of Bologna, I discovered my interest in studying cultural phenomena, and among these, religion intrigued me the most. Since my childhood, I had found ‘exotic’ religions interesting. In my childish mental cinema, Islam projected fantasies of minarets, the *Thousand and One Nights*, Crusaders and Saladins, my colonialist – he fought in Libya – grandfather’s stories, and the mysterious garage-mosque in Florence. Beyond fantasies and conspiracies, Abd al-Kader’s face, accent and mannerisms made Islam a flesh and bone presence. Abd al-Kader, a Berber door-to-door salesman, used to knock on our door each month or so. As soon as my mother opened the door, he greeted us with his thirty-two-teeth *salām*¹ smile hoping, as usual, that my mother would buy his colourful children’s socks. Month after month, Abd al-Kader became a known, and sometimes expected visitor. Soon, the bargains did not take place on the doorstep, but rather in front of coffee, which my mother had prepared for the occasion. Not only was Abd al-Kader a master of bargaining, but also of hypnotic storytelling.

During the winter, when the rain showered outside, he liked spending some time in our kitchen, and entertained us with bright descriptions of his faraway home. Abd al-Kader knew that his stories sold more than his merchandise, and he also knew the effect that his arabesque narration had on my imagination. One day, after he had finished his socks and tablecloths, and probably spent more time with us than he realized, a bip-bip-bip alarm sound abruptly ended the flow of his narratives. At this sound, Abd al-Kader checked his watch and shyly asked my mother, ‘May I pray to my God in your home?’ She, who has always been curious about religion and tested a good number of them, invited him into the living room. I was very curious and asked if I could stay in the room. Abd al-Kader smiled and showed me how to find the direction for the Muslim prayer; then opened his sports bag, in which he kept his merchandise, and a prayer mat materialized with its colourful design of a black cube in the middle of a mosque building. Abd al-Kader pointed to the cube and told me, ‘This is the centre of the universe; this is the Ka’ba, the house of Allah, God’. Then, he stepped, without shoes, onto the prayer mat, raised his hands to his ears and exclaimed ‘Allāhu Akbar’ and recited the Qur’an. An unknown melody filled our living room. To be honest, the prayer in itself appeared to me, a young curious