'Literacy, religious renaissance and the 'morality system''

Date: 2013-04-04 20:00:23+02:00

This is a cross-post from ethics.CRASSH.

Felicitas Becker on Islamic reformism and Sufi traditionalism in Tanzania

I've just read two fascinating papers by Felicitas Becker on moral conflict in East Africa. Both papers describe the relationship between Islamist reformers and Sufi-influenced traditionalists in rural Tanzania. Broadly speaking, the Islamists are young, have international connections (though these are limited), and their leaders claim legitimacy as a result of their scriptural scholarship. The traditionalists are drawn from the older generations and derive their authority from their descent from founders of local mosques, or from their place in a chain of transmission of oral knowledge. Most local people, Becker notes, consider themselves Muslims, but observe the debates between the two groups without feeling the need to declare themselves partisans of either side.

One of the papers, 'Islamic Reform and Historical Change in the Care of the Dead' (2009) focuses on disagreements between the two parties around funerary practices, which take on great importance in this context. Traditionalists have elaborate funerals in which prayers and the Quran are recited over the funeral procession and the deceased is read instructions on how to meet the angels after the burial is complete. To the elders who represent this tradition, these measures show that they are more punctilious in caring for the dead than their nomadic forebears who, before the adoption of Islamic usages, would abandon settlements along with the corpses of the dead. To the reformists, the intercessions on behalf of, and interaction with, the deceased are accretions that are not justified by Quran or Hadith and must therefore be relinquished.

The other paper, 'Rural Islamism during the "War on Terror"' (2006) considers a wider range of disagreements over practice, and also addresses the question of how far the reformers, who are nicknamed by other 'Al Qaeda', are in fact part of a coherent 'international terror' movement. Becker's admirably nuanced conclusion, if I understand it correctly, is that although they are politically activist in theory, and in a way that could potentially lead to violent conflict, the political plank of their programme finds no traction with local concerns and is therefore barely a live part of their practice, while the international connections are tenuous. Meanwhile, the other aspect of their programme, the claim that scriptural scholarship is the sole source of religious legitimacy has found great support among the population, and even grudging assent among those who find themselves on the opposite side of debates about specific practices. This aspect of Becker's material makes it interesting in terms of the CRASSH Speaking Ethically Across Borders Project.

The 'morality system' and literacy

In the 2006 paper, Becker notes:

> …the opinions expounded by *Ansaar* [the reformists/Islamists] consistently tend towards the imposition of stricter rules. They are more concerned than others about the loss of ritual purity through contact with the opposite sex; they support a ban on alcohol and have suggested that smoking, too, is *haram*, religiously prohibited. … They have also introduced new forms of veiling to Rwangwa, have changed standards for *halal* (religiously correct) slaughter and have questioned the acceptability of established ways of dealing with witchcraft. (Becker 2006: 594)

This made me think about the relation of literacy and forms of ethics. Much recent anthropological work on ethics has taken on a distinction from philosophy between virtue ethics and what Bernard Williams calls the 'morality system'. The morality system is about judgment of acts against legalistic codes of behaviour, lists of obligations and taboos, and it leads to a concern with the refinement of rules for particular circumstances, and with moral dilemmas. Virtue ethics is about the judgment of character against models of excellence, and leads to a concern with the identification of exemplars, and with pedagogical techniques that lead to the cultivation of particular virtues (including what Foucault calls 'techniques of the self').

A lot of anthropological work on Islamic reformists has emphasised the way in which their reforms are connected to virtue ethical programmes of character development, but I wonder if there's a general relationship between reformist movements that base legitimacy on scriptural sources and the importance of the 'morality system'. Character-based ethics requires a good deal of interpretation in order to work out how an exemplar would act in the current situation (see Humphrey 1997 on this). Virtues that are partly or mainly about embodied dispositions are apt to be expressed in imagistic forms that underdetermine their expression (Carrithers 1990). Is it difficult to combine this interpretative flexibility and the autonomy it implies with an insistence on submission to scripture as a sole source of authority?

In Becker's Tanzanian case study, the traditionalist elders apply this kind of reasoning to the conduct of funerals. The reformists argue from scripture that,

> The Prophet, peace be upon him, prohibits the corpse [to be sung to], that is to say, when we get up to go to the graveyard to bury someone, we are required to be quiet and to ponder that our fellow Muslim has died and we will die too. Therefore we must be quiet. And the Prophet says don't follow the hearse with any sort of noise, let people be quiet and reflect. (Becker 2006: 592)

The Sufis' riposte is that:

> In the days of the prophet, the graves were situated very close to the houses of the liv- ing. But our graves are far from our villages. Moreover, our faith is not as strong as that of the first Muslims. Were we to go to the graveyard in silence, our thoughts might start to wander and some might start to discuss, say, football on the way to the grave! So our elders decided we had better recite the shahada on the way to the grave, to keep our minds focused.

This could, I think, be interpreted as a more character-based approach to ethics. Though the traditionalists accept the idea that scripture, and not established custom, is the proper arbiter of practice, they maintain enough autonomy from it to interpret it in the light of specific local and personal conditions. Perhaps this shows that they are more concerned with emulating the underlying character expressed by the Prophet's actions, something that can never be entirely captured in words, because it is always contextual, rather than reproducing the actions, which can be more precisely described in the text, themselves.

It's difficult to reach a conclusion on this question on the basis of this material alone, but perhaps a comparative approach would turn up a regular association between text-based revival movements (i.e. renaissances — Goody 2009), and a shift away from a concern with character and towards a concern with moral rules. Or the shift might be away from a complex character approach, with multiple, perhaps mutually incompatible, virtues or exemplars available to the moral subject, towards a simpler character approach which focuses all effort on the single virtue of perfect submission to the authority of the text.

Any thoughts?

Main texts

Becker, F., 2006. Rural Islamism during the "war on terror": A Tanzanian case study. *African Affairs*, 105(421), pp.583–603.

Becker, F., 2011. Islamic Reform and Historical Change in the Care of the Dead: Conflicts Over Funerary Practice Among Tanzanian Muslims. *Africa*, 79(03), pp.416–434.

Further reading

Carrithers, M., 1990. Jainism and Buddhism as enduring historical streams. *JASO (Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford)*, 21(2), pp.141–163.

Faubion, J.D., 2001. Toward an Anthropology of Ethics: Foucault and the Pedagogies of Autopoiesis. *Representations*, (74), pp.83–104. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rep.2001.74.1.83.

Foucault, M., 1990. *The history of sexuality volume 3: the care of the self*, London: Penguin.

Goody, J., 2009. *Renaissances*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Humphrey, C. 1997. Exemplars and rules: aspects of the discourse of moralities in Mongolia. In Howell, S. (ed). *The ethnography of moralities*. London: Routledge.

Laidlaw, J., 2002. For An Anthropology Of Ethics And Freedom. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 8(2), pp.311–332.

Williams, B.A.O., 1985. *Ethics and the limits of philosophy*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.