

Culture Never Dies

Anthropology at Abu Ghraib

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[For many of the Iraqi inmates at Abu Ghraib] living conditions now are better in prison than at home. At one point we were concerned that they wouldn't want to leave . . .

—General Janis Karpinski, Dec 2003

[T]he reorganization of the prisons has rendered them so comfortable that the [peasant] has no longer any fear of imprisonment, and makes no secret of saying that he is better treated in prison than at home, and the only privation he has to put up with is the temporary separation from his harem

—Spencer Carr, British Consul in the Nile Delta, 1884

Official confidence that Western institutions of social control are more humane than Middle Eastern institutions of social support is an element of the long-standing use of the region as a mirror in which the West seeks its own inverted image.

Prison/Home

If prison and home are analogues, the home looks worse in comparison because of a gendered division of misery in which men suffer material want, while women and children suffer from patriarchy. Nineteenth century reformers lamented that "A great difficulty meets the legislator [in the Middle East] . . . namely, the complete exclusion of more than half the community from the action of the laws. . . . There is no power to penetrate into the harem, and whatever misdeeds are practiced there, neither police, nor laws, nor public opinion can reach. . . . No doubt fearful crimes and horrible abuses are perpetrated in those recesses which exclude all inspection, all interference, all control. The very organization of society thus stands in the way of justice" (John Bowring, 1840).

Family tradition is a prison, the world of policy is freedom. But since last spring the fearful crimes and horrible abuses from the recesses of Abu Ghraib reflect the analogy of



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prison and harem in a way none too flattering to policy. The homoerotic posing and piles of naked bodies are twisted contemporary versions of Victorian-era harem art. But the female slaves bathing the odalisque and the eunuchs guarding her virtue are now grinning American soldiers in blue latex gloves. The new odalisque is a feminized and humiliated male, the adult version of the boy in Gerome's familiar 1880 painting *The Snake Charmer*, facing the leers of soldiers participating in a complex system of war and expropriation. (See www.humboldt.edu/~rmj5/e465oart.html and www.orientalist-art.org.uk/harem.html for these images.)

Politics of Representation

In mid-May journalist Seymour Hersch identified anthropologist Raphael Patai's 1973 book *The Arab Mind* as one source of our government's understanding of the psychological vulnerabilities of Arabs, including the notion that Arab men are particularly subject to sexual shame. The book's posthumous 2002 edition bears a forward by retired Army Colonel Norvell B De Atkine, who assigns Patai to the officers he trains at the John F Kennedy Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, NC. "It has been about 30 years," he writes, "since the majority of *The Arab Mind* was written . . . [but] it has not aged at all.

were pegged as hateful smears rather than observations.

But many of the "Arab stereotypes" Patai outlines differ little from the characterizations Arab leaders and intellectuals articulate about their own cultures. What is at issue is the practical contexts in which they are deployed as strategies. Anthropology lies at a tense juncture of two public discursive fields, one entreating, "Are they exactly like us?" and the other demanding, "Or are they completely different?" Culture becomes the stuff of travel-guide advice on gift-giving or corporate seminars on managing multicultural workforces. And the stuff of the applied field of war. The military's interest in "cultural intelligence" began with heavy anthropological lobbying during WWII, extended through the Cold War and Vietnam, and currently enters the "global war on terror." Even before 9/11, the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory at Quantico, VA solicited input from anthropologists: "Cultural nuances that are of greatest significance in military operations—questions of loyalty, honor, and obligation, for example—are areas in which there is no substitute for very specific knowledge. . . . Due appreciation of . . . cultural intelligence will enable forces to 'operate smarter' and avoid the costly mistakes that can result from cultural ignorance."

Abu Ghraib reminds us of the costly mistakes made in trying to be too clever with cultural knowledge.

The analysis is just as prescient and on-the-mark now as on the day it was written," particularly insofar as it illuminates "the social and cultural environment . . . and the modal personality traits that made [the 9/11 hijackers] susceptible to engaging in terrorist actions."

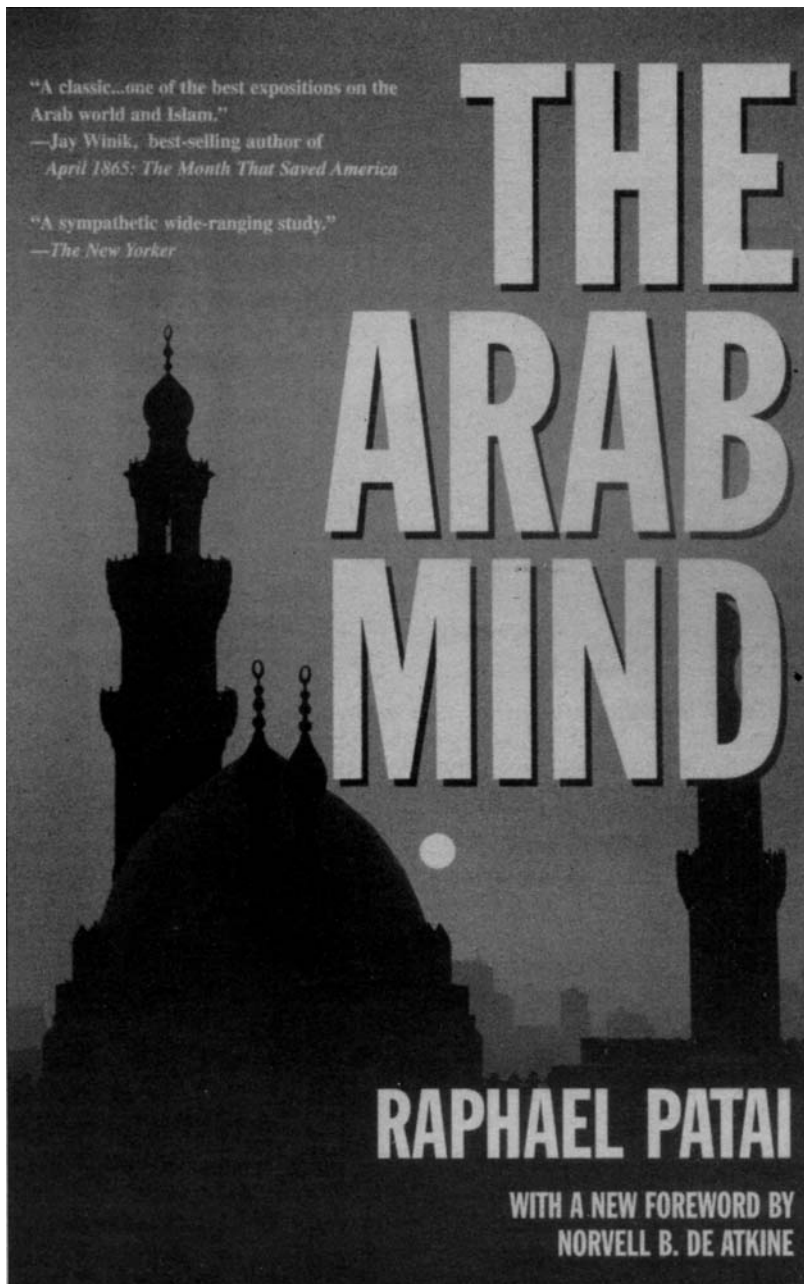
Denunciation of Patai's book by scholars and journalists was swift and fierce. It was also largely pointless, a writer's game of *cherchez le livre*. Manning Marable (Harvard) called on the Bush administration

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to publicly repudiate the book and stop using it as a source of information. Others belittled its methodology. Brian Whitaker of *The Guardian* scoffed at Patai's claim that there is homosexual behavior in Egypt. Ann Marlow of *Salon.com* dismissed his report of normative infant genital massage by mothers in some areas, which she interpreted as an accusation of maternal pathology. Evidence of both cultural commonality and difference

Are Arabs ashamed by nudity? Maybe. But as Laurie King-Irani points out, anyone might be shamed when their rectum is being torn by a lightstick or they're being threatened by a snarling German shepherd. Could one seriously suggest that the ritual impurity of dogs is the key to understanding why naked Muslim prisoners are frightened by their snarling?

Scholars have distanced themselves from Patai's book by noting to journalists that "Its methodology



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... not to mention much of its content, was considerably behind the times even when it first appeared." This is either poor memory or face-saving in a field where the psychodynamics of sex and family are staples. In 1973 Robert Levy published the now-classic psychological ethnography *Tahitians*, and the *American Anthropologist* treated us to Evans-Pritchard's 40-year old description of Zande copulation technique. Psychological anthropology was revitalizing itself in its new journal *Ethos*, whose second issue contained Robert Levine's survey of "Patterns of Personality in Africa." Levine argued that traditional black Africans tend to blame and fear

others when under stress, and display a relative "concreteness of thought." Whatever its quality, Patai's approach did not stand out as abnormal. The few area specialists who reviewed *The Arab Mind*—from conservative historian Nadav Safran to radical sociologist Elaine Hagopian—dismissed it as a failure. The reviewer for *American Anthropologist*, on the other hand, called it outstanding, sympathetic and objective. Given the venue it's no comfort that the reviewer, Carroll Quigley, was not an anthropologist. (He was a wildly popular historian at Georgetown who inspired both Samuel Huntington and Bill Clinton).

Significantly, Patai's early work showed little of the psychologizing of cultural difference so common among American anthropologists working for the US government during the same period. In ethnographic work from the 1940s he showed how Palestinians' attitudes changed with the transformation of land tenure systems and political conditions. Economic self-interest rather than culture or mind drove interactions between Jews and Arabs. Tradition was a flexible inventory of symbols and practices to which ordinary people often had less attachment than their leaders, who manipulated them in response to internal and external conflicts. But Patai's approach changed as time went on, in ways that linked him first institutionally and then intellectually with the US political, military and cultural establishments.

In 1956 the Human Relations Area Files, with Army funding, contracted him to prepare its country guides for Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. He was one of only two contract scholars without a university affiliation at the time. The other was Donald Wilber, an archaeologist charged with the volumes for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Two years previously Wilber had been the chief US planner for the CIA-sponsored coup in Iran.

It is right to be troubled about how anthropological work can be harnessed in the service of violence and humiliation. But are hands on the genitalia worse than electrodes there? Far more interesting than anything Patai wrote is the issue of why military officers would use a book painting Arabs as fatalistic, unorganized and ineffectual to frame a devastating series of attacks that required years of careful planning and preparation. It should be clear to anthropologists that anything we say can and will be used in ways outside our control. To borrow the terms of Hermann Goering' famous quip, in contemporary conflicts any mention of culture may mask the sound of a revolver being drawn. ■

Gregory Starrett is Contributing Editor to AN for the Middle East Section.

Gregory Bateson @ 100



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