

Doing Fieldwork in Revolutionary Times

Mina Ibrahim

International Graduate Centre of the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Contact: mina.ibrahim@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

In her second monograph, *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times*, anthropologist Amira Mittermaier illustrates the complex meanings and definitions of doing fieldwork in times when Egyptians witnessed a glimpse of change or at least heard about it. She analyzes completely overlooked charitable spaces and life stories that also exist at the center of Egyptians' aspirations and anxieties. Beyond exploring the Tahrir Square of the revolutionaries and the mega-architectural projects that embody the counterrevolutionary agenda, Mittermaier meets with donors and recipients of different Islamic modes, ethics, and temporalities of giving. Her book chapters "invite a rethinking and open up our political-ethical imagination" (p. 16) of what anthropology can and cannot do in a "profoundly unequal world" (p. 17).

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Mittermaier, Amira: *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019. 248 pages, 29.95 USD. ISBN: 978-0-520-30083-5.

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In her second monograph, *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times*, anthropologist Amira Mittermaier illustrates the complex meanings and definitions of doing fieldwork in times when Egyptians witnessed a glimpse of change or at least heard about it. She analyzes completely overlooked charitable spaces and life stories that also exist at the center of Egyptians' aspirations and anxieties. Beyond exploring the Tahrir Square of the revolutionaries and the mega-architectural projects that embody the counterrevolutionary agenda, Mittermaier meets with donors and recipients of different Islamic modes, ethics, and temporalities of giving. Her book chapters "invite a rethinking and open up our political-ethical imagination" (p. 16) of what anthropology can and cannot do in a "profoundly unequal world" (p. 17).

What are the roles and the limits of anthropology and anthropologists in an Egyptian society that witnessed a glimpse of change in 2011? What are the meanings and the purposes of doing fieldwork and/or charity in such revolutionary times? In her second monograph, *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times*, anthropologist Amira Mittermaier seems to respond to these inquiries through investigating and experiencing three interrelated clusters of relationships.

First, Mittermaier extensively talks about the positioning of God with respect to people's needs and demands in a "profoundly unequal world" (p.17). Anthropology, as Mittermaier writes, is the discipline of imagination. It is about other modes "of being in the world" (p.16). It goes beyond what people hear, see, and touch. Anthropology does not stop when people sleep or die; it is the discipline of the unseen and the "otherwise" (p. 15). In this regard, Mittermaier's "insistence on taking God seriously runs counter to a commonly proposed solution: the idea that it is best to approach structural inequality and injustice through the register of [the universal secular] political economy" (p.5). By understanding the relationship between the donor and the recipient of the Islamic charitable giving

as triadic, where God always plays a role, the recipient is not always inferior to the donor. Because even though the latter depends on the gifts of God, and because he/she just acts as a messenger from God when giving to the needy and the poor, Mittermaier reflects that in this case all the gratitude belongs to God.

The second cluster of relationships is between the anthropologists and their interlocutors. In many contexts, anthropologists should be aware of what is placed at the center of people's interests, especially during revolutionary times. During the 2011 uprisings in Egypt, when protestors occupied Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo, Mittermaier's fieldwork took place with people who did not join the demonstrations. In a country that has more than a hundred million inhabitants, it is important to keep an ethnographic eye on the "otherwise" (p.15) of everyday struggles. Especially with the brutal crackdown on street protests following the 2013 coup, Mittermaier's interlocutors provide us with alternative temporalities and spaces of "social justice" (p. 29).

It should be noted that the temporalities and spaces of Mittermaier's interlocutors are not completely isolated from the ones at Tahrir Square. The author is aware of the overlaps and the crossings between these two nodes. But she is also aware and always seeks to illustrate her limits as a researcher as well as the contradictions of her interlocutors. Some of Mittermaier's interlocutors, who help the poor, claim that they "do not care about the poor" (p. 1). They just give to them because of God. Ethnography is an intersubjective practice that depends on the disruption and the challenging of the hegemonic logic [of the researcher]. In the case of our book, giving without compassion or taking without gratitude, respectively, are ways of thinking differently about the order of the world we are living in, and that all people have agencies to produce different understandings of the self and the other.

While anthropology can influence new ways of debating and thinking about the world, it cannot change the world. This is important to mention because what anthropologists write at the end of the day is a book that has a few tens or hundreds of readers. As Mittermaier writes, "what I offer is not a programmatic plan for fighting poverty; I am not sure such a plan exists" (p. 17). This is the third and last cluster I wish talk about; that is, the one that anthropologists develop with the academic world. In Egypt, as the last chapter of Mittermaier's book emphasizes, the current regime of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi uses bulldozers to destroy "parts of Cairo that did not fit in its vision of future, [...] seeking out some kind of standardized and regulated form life" (p. 177). The repressive and autocratic regime of el-Sisi also adopts economic policies that crush the lives of the poor for the sake of its mega projects. Accordingly, anthropologists should always remember that they are part of this world with all its cruelty and brutality. Together with their interlocutors, they should make sense of the weakened and

overlooked moments and contexts of “otherwise” (p. 15) that accompany and follow revolutionary times.

In conclusion, *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times* provides a discourse of charity that challenges and disrupts dominant secular and liberal notions of humanitarian aid. The book is recommended not only to anthropology and sociology students and scholars but also to ones of economics, theology, and religious studies. It suggests that in revolutionary and counterrevolutionary times, we might need to look at the invisible and silenced voices that are not given a platform to present their ethics of giving. “Unlike the future tied to el-Sisi’s megaprojects, [...] present-orientedness of giving to God runs counter to an ideology of new-ness, growth, and improvement” (p. 158). The three clusters of relationships mentioned above might be useful for rethinking and reimagining not only the motivations of the donors but also the possible dynamic ways by which the impoverished and the marginalized deal with the deprivation and violence they encounter on regular basis.

German Abstract:

Feldforschung in revolutionären Zeiten

In ihrer zweiten Monographie *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times* illustriert die Anthropologin Amira Mittermaier die komplexen Bedeutungen und Definitionen der Feldarbeit in Zeiten, in denen die Ägypter einen Blick auf Veränderungen erblickten oder zumindest davon hörten. Sie analysiert völlig übersehene karitative Räume und Lebensgeschichten, die auch im Zentrum der Sehnsüchte und Ängste der Ägypter stehen. Neben der Erkundung des Tahrir-Platzes der Revolutionäre und der Mega-Architekturprojekte, die die konterrevolutionäre Agenda verkörpern, trifft Mittermaier auf Spender und Empfänger verschiedener islamischer Modi, Ethiken und Zeitlichkeiten des Gebens. Ihre Buchkapitel “invite a rethinking and open up our political-ethical imagination” (S. 16) und zeigen so auf, was Anthropologie in einer „zutiefst ungleichen Welt“ tun kann und was nicht (S. 17).

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