

structure of the Tlingit language and/or patterns of discourse organization and other aspects of language. The editors are characteristically modest about their own contribution to the volume, emphasizing that they are merely trying to explain and interpret the words of the elders as they understand them (p. ix). The magnitude of their efforts, and the significance of their success, will be readily apparent to those who have attempted similar work; few have succeeded so well.

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### **Localizing Strategies: Regional Traditions of Ethnographic Writing**

Richard Fardon, ed.

Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990. x + 360 pp. \$39.95 (cloth)

*Reviewer:* Michael Levin

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Questioning the integrity of ethnography has become a mini-industry in our field. This collection offers a welcome change of tone, addressing the issues in a restrained way, from within anthropology, as it were. Using the convention of regionalism the papers discuss the presuppositions which have framed and shaped ethnographic writing: the common ethnographic experience, the specific representation of analytical problems, the contrasting of one region with another, even the presentation of one region as the negation of the representations of another.

From the fourth occasional conference in social anthropology at the University of St. Andrews in January 1987, introduced by Richard Fardon, the 13 papers cover Africa, Melanesia, Asia and include two "exemplars" of hunter-gatherer ethnography on Australia and "Eskimology." Conceived as examinations of "the dialectic between regional and theoretical factors in . . . monograph writing . . . sensitive to . . . both time and place," the papers focus on major ethnographic "regions." Many contributors, however, used the occasion of the conference to comment on the "new ethnographic criticism," in particular, the narrowing of the debate to discussion of the "simplified dichotomy between 'Self' and 'Other.'" Offering an antidote to the excesses of the new criticism this collection demonstrates convincingly the achievements and complexity of ethnographic writing.

No reader will be fully satisfied with this collection, but none will put the book aside in disinterest. The emphasis on "past British ethnographic concerns" is admitted in refreshingly frank terms in the Preface. Educational locality is one dimension overemphasized recently, but the papers here happily concentrate more on the literature than on "the schools" and the teachers. A specialist lucky enough to find a paper on her/his area will have a point of departure for reflection on, and perhaps critical reconstruction of, the political history of that regional ethnography. But all anthropologists who open this collection will, I am sure, find a permanent place for it on their shelves. One can skip quickly through ethnographic regions, across continents and inter-continentially. . . . The very best papers are those whose authors avoided indulging themselves too deeply in the debates of the new ethnographic criticism and kept closest to the original brief of recognizing the importance of time and place in regional ethnographic writing.

The value of this collection as a resource is complemented by the stimulus it should give to discussion of the political, temporal and spatial context of anthropology and

awareness of the limitation of its conventional boundaries. For example, in the paper on West Africa, Elizabeth Tonkin asks why "the first indigenous researchers were historians and not anthropologists." Canadian readers will be disappointed that the author of the chapter on Inuit foregoes a valuable opportunity, stating in a footnote that he does not "wish to be embroiled in the controversy over whether . . . these people should be referred to as Inuit." Both of these questions have implications worthy of inquiry for the complex and different roles ethnography has in the intellectual life of different nation-states.

Whatever one might favour or criticize, none will leave this book without a respect for the range and depth of, and implications and consequences of, ethnographic scholarship.

### **Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition**

Michael M.J. Fischer and Medhi Abedi

Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990. xxxvi + 564 pp.

\$49.75 (cloth), \$23.50 (paper)

*Reviewer:* Gus Thaiss

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The title of Fischer and Abedi's book, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition*, sets the stage for an interesting and challenging look at an important geopolitical area (Iran) and an intellectual debate in modern anthropology (postmodernism). The two are, of course, not separated but are rather intertwined in the text, or, as the authors note: "... there is an increasing cultural interreference, or cross-cultural reading, or play between hegemonic cultural forces and counter discourses of resistance, subversion, and alternative realities" (p. xxxi).

As one would expect with a "postmodern" theme, the book can be read and interpreted at a number of different levels of understanding. This perspective in itself is both an aspect of postmodern literary criticism and a basic assumption of Shi'ite Muslim thought in Iran, thus combining, at a quite fundamental level, the two approaches. The structure of the book proceeds along the same vein constantly interspersing Bakhtinian and other insights into the communicative importance of dialogue and discursive interaction with the similar Shi'ite Muslim stress on the dialectical disputation method of teaching and learning.

There is no question but that Fischer and Abedi's book is an extremely erudite study covering not only a vast literature in anthropology, philosophy, linguistics, literary criticism, etc., but also an equally in-depth knowledge of excellent Persian and Arabic sources which makes the work quite useful for specialists in the field.

The main problem with the book, however, is that it reads like a collection of working papers that might have ended up as journal articles (in fact, Chapter Seven is a reprinted journal article), were they not brought together in this book. As such, they appear rather loosely strung together with little to join them except a rather vague sense of a dialogic process among Iranians and postmodernists. Despite this weakness, each of the chapters stands on its own with interesting and challenging insights.

Chapter One is a fascinating life-history written by Abedi recounting his life experiences in Iran and the U.S. As such it covers socialization, psychology, class dynamics, politics, folk religion, clerical styles and social changes in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s. In itself it provides, as the authors note, a useful introduction from "the ground