֎ CHAPTER **10**

Being From There
Dilemmas of a 'Native Anthropologist'

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Introduction

The Revolution of 1978–79 brought a rupture in anthropological studies of Iran. After more than a decade during which, at any one time, probably more than a score of non-Iranian anthropologists were engaged in field studies in the country, suddenly this 'field' was closed to them.[1] At the same time, for native Iranians, the 'Cultural Revolution' of the early 1980s closed the universities for two years and led to a restructuring of the curriculum in social sciences and their 'purification' from 'non-Islamic' elements, mainly done by purging 'corrupt and westernized' teachers and replacing them with 'honest and committed' ones, i.e. those able to teach from an 'Islamic' perspective.[2]

Meanwhile, anthropology as a discipline was grappling with the issue of authorial responsibility in ethnographic writing and such hoary dichotomies as insider/outsider, activist/scholar and observer/participant. The production of anthropological knowledge and texts was coming under increasing scrutiny; the old certainties and the 'scientific objectivity' of the classical anthropological texts had lost their authority. Anthropologists began to situate themselves in their texts, to tell something of their interactions with the 'natives' and the processes through which they came to construct their ethnographic accounts.[3] By the early 1980s a new genre of ethnography was emerging, which Barbara Tedlock (1991) calls 'narrative ethnography', reflecting a move from 'participant observation' to the 'observation of the participation'. This methodological shift not only made the public revelation of fieldwork experiences less of a taboo but also broke down the strict dichotomy between 'Self' and 'Other' (the ethnographer and the subject) – the hallmark of the 'objectivity' of the ethnographer, a token of the 'scientific' nature of the endeavour.[4] All this has been accompanied by the recognition of two important features of dialogue. First, it is in the dialogue between the ethnographer and the subject that the latter's 'culture' is produced. Second,

dialogue, conversation and debate actually change the participants' views and perceptions – their 'culture' (Dennis Tedlock 1987). A new breed of ethnographers emerged who 'cannot be tucked away or pigeonholed within any of the four historical archetypes … the amateur observer, the armchair anthropologist, the professional ethnographer, or the "gone native" field-worker'. They are interested 'in the co-production of ethnographic knowledge, created and represented in the only way it can be, within an interactive Self/Other dialogue'; and many of them 'are themselves subaltern because of their class, gender, or ethnicity' (Barbara Tedlock 1991: 82).

In what follows I explore the ways in which these developments in anthropology and my own involvement in the politics of gender in Islam have come to shape my experience of fieldwork and to shape the ethnographies (two of them documentary films) that I have produced since completing my doctoral thesis in 1980. I narrate the stories behind the production of my ethnographies not because I consider my own trajectory particularly important or representative of Iranian anthropology but because I think it highlights some of the issues central to the theme of anthropological perspectives on Iran. The central question that I want to explore is one that has occupied my mind since the early 1990s. What kind of ethnography can I produce as a 'native feminist' anthropologist? I use the term not only to indicate my Iranian identity, but in the sense of a certain consciousness, and the way in which it interacts with the anthropological and feminist epistemologies that are rooted in Euro-American traditions.

How I Turned to Anthropology

My conversion to anthropology was gradual. My first degree at Tehran University was in sociology; soon after graduation in 1974 I went to England to continue my studies. In 1976 I registered as a doctoral student in the Social and Political Sciences (SPS) at Cambridge University to do a thesis on the changing family structure in Iran under Esther Goody, an anthropologist of Africa with an interest in the family. All I knew then about anthropology came from a two-credit course in the third year of my BA, and from reading Henry Field's *Contributions to the Anthropology of Iran* (1939). Now, since my supervisor was from the Department of Social Anthropology, and since my research entailed fieldwork, I joined the departmental pre-fieldwork seminars and read and attended classes in anthropology. In 1977–78, I did fieldwork in Kalardasht, a picturesque mountainous district in northern Iran experiencing a tourism boom that had transformed previous agricultural land into a market commodity. When I was writing up my research, Esther was abroad and I was supervised by John Barnes, another distinguished an-

thropologist of Africa. Andre Beteille, an anthropologist of India who was visiting the department that year, also read and commented on my work. In my thesis, I explored the impact of the changed economy on marriage rituals and family relations in four Kalardasht villages with different ethnic compositions and varying degrees of exposure to tourism. In short, by June 1980, when I submitted my thesis, I was fully integrated into the anthropology department and had come to see myself as an anthropologist.

In late 1980 I returned to Iran, full of hope. In my late twenties, newly married, my doctorate in hand, I looked forward to teaching anthropology and living happily with my new husband. Neither aim was to be fulfilled. Like many other Iranian women of my background, I found myself rejected by the Islamic Republic soon after it became established and began to restructure Iranian society. Soon after the reopening of the universities in 1983, I taught English for two semesters to social science students in Shahid Beheshti University; meanwhile I applied for a teaching post in anthropology, which had to be done through the Committee of Cultural Revolution. I was called for an interview to the committee's headquarters and appeared in front of a small board, two members of which were sociology professors at Tehran University whose courses I had attended as an undergraduate. The interview went well. I was asked about my research and study in Cambridge and was given the impression that they would welcome me as a colleague. A week later, at seven in the morning, I received a call from the man in the committee who had arranged the first interview, asking me to come for an interview that very morning. 'I had my interview last week', I told him. 'That was the academic interview, this is the ideological one', he said. Later I learned that applicants were called for their 'ideological interview' at the very last minute so that they would not have time to prepare using the booklets and pamphlets, sold in bookstalls in front of Tehran University, containing a range of questions and the 'correct' answers for the ideological tests that had become part of the university entrance exams.

For my 'ideological interview' I went to a different location from the first one, wearing what I thought was proper dress: matching trousers and overcoat (*rū-pūsh*), with a large scarf (*rū-sarī*) tightly tied under my chin and no make-up, of course. After a short wait, I was ushered into a large room. There were two tables in the room; I was directed to sit at the one near the door. At the other table – at the far end of the room – sat my interviewer. A large lamp hung over his table, leaving his face in shadow so that I could not see him but only hear his voice. The interview lasted for over two hours, in the course of which I was asked a gamut of questions. In retrospect it is clear that these were meant to enable him to ascertain two facts: my religious/ideological correctness and ability to teach anthropology from what he called 'the Qur'anic perspective'. 'Why did you go to England

to study? Did you cover your hair when studying in England? How much of the Qur'an do you know by heart? How do you propose to study a social problem, such as divorce, in the perspective of Qur'anic anthropology?' My answer to each question was evidently problematic, leading to new ones, my answers to which became more and more incriminating. For instance, I said I had gone to England to study because my sister was living there, which led to a host of questions about her British husband and the reasons for their marriage, his line of work, his trips to Iran, etc. Similarly, not knowing that he had a file in front of him containing a report based on inquiries made by our neighbours about my conduct and appearance, I claimed that I had observed *hijab* while studying in England. This then led to a chain of questions that lasted for over half an hour wherein he tried to force my hand and I tried to cover my lie.

I did even worse when we moved on to teaching anthropology. What I did not appreciate then was that his questions were based on a theological concept of anthropology, the nature of human nature. My responses came from a different notion of anthropology, the study of human societies and cultures. The interview eventually came to a close when he asked me whether I prayed, and then to recite the *fatiha,* the Qur'anic verse that is recited in daily prayers. By this stage I was in a panic and when I had finished reciting the verse, I knew that I had missed something. I finally turned on him and protested angrily: 'Is this an interview or a trial? What are these questions for? Is it a crime to study abroad and to want to teach in one's own country?' His response, in a nutshell, was: 'Blood has been given for this Revolution, we want an Islamic university, and we cannot allow people like you, trained in the West, to teach in our universities.'

I relate this experience because it tells not only something of the way in which the advocates and operatives of the 'Cultural Revolution' in the early 1980s viewed both the subject of anthropology and women from my social background, but also something of the dissonance, of the gap, between us in our cultural assumptions and language. I came to feel the shock more intensely when my marriage broke down shortly after. The dismantling of the Family Protection Act shortly after the Revolution put me at the mercy of my husband: he refused to grant me a divorce or permission to leave the country. My only option was to negotiate my divorce in the new courts presided over by religious judges. I started to educate myself in Islamic family law, and I learned it well enough to secure my release.

I had come to realize that I did not understand the cultural codes of the new regime that was shaping and changing society. It was as though the cocoon in which I had lived was shattered, the ground taken from under my feet. My response to both these experiences was to try to treat them anthropologically – in the sense that I sought an intellectual understanding

of the revolutionary culture that was so different from the one in which I had grown up.

New Field, New Approach

In 1984, following my divorce, I returned to Cambridge, where my former supervisor, Esther Goody, took me under her wing again. I started a post-doctoral project as a research associate of the Department of Social Anthropology. My experiences in revolutionary Iran had given me a passionate interest in the issue of women's rights and the working of the sharia. I began a project on the theory and practice of Islamic family law, focusing on marital disputes and litigants' strategies. Between 1985 and 1988, I spent three months conducting fieldwork in family courts in Tehran – then called Special Civil Courts. In 1988, I managed to obtain two grants for field research in Morocco, where I spent a year doing research in the family courts of Rabat, Sale and Casablanca.

This was the first time I had done fieldwork outside Iran. Not being emotionally involved in Moroccan society and politics, I was able to keep some distance and to be more an observer than a participant; at the same time, living at close quarters with Muslims from a very different tradition gave me the intense 'culture shock' I had not experienced when working in Iran. In both countries, however, I was collecting the same kind of data and dealing with the same issues. My own divorce experience brought me close to the litigants, most of them women, in both countries. When meeting women outside court and asking them about their cases, I often started by relating how my own marriage had broken down and how I had obtained my divorce, which created an immediate bond between us. After a while, I noticed that each time I told my story, it sounded different – I would emphasize aspects of my experience that related to the situation of the woman I was talking to. I became increasingly sensitive to situation, to how different contexts produce different narratives, how one can control this production, how much was dependent on one's perspective, how one can resolve what might seem palpable contradictions.

I completed my first monograph, *Marriage on Trial,* in 1992, when I was still feeling my way in terms of my own academic and personal engagement with both feminist discourses and Islam. I was concerned and often dismayed by a dominant approach in the academic literature of the 1980s on women in Muslim societies, mostly produced by women from Muslim backgrounds writing in English or French. These writers, it seemed to me, shared – and thus helped to reproduce – the same essentialist and orientalist

assumptions about gender in Islam that were held by many of their Islamist antagonists: that the Islamic position on gender was divinely ordained and immutable. My own experience, as both a litigant and an ethnographer, was quite different: 'Islamic' positions on gender were changing and thus open to negotiation and modification. Like the Islamists, many of these academics were selective in their arguments, had an ahistorical understanding of Islam and gender, resorted to the same kinds of sophistry, and resisted any readings of Islamic law that treated it like any other system of law; and they disguised their polemics by obfuscation and misrepresentation. Both sets of antagonists, in other words, had a strongly ideological approach, and in the final analysis they read what they wanted into Islam, though in pursuit of different agendas, the one Islamist and the other feminist.

In *Marriage on Trial,* I tried to shift the debate on the relation between Islamic law and women to a different level. Instead of condemning the sharia as responsible for all women's problems, I sought to understand how it operates and in what ways it is relevant to today's Muslim societies: how individuals, both men and women, make sense of the religious precepts that underlie every piece of legislation regulating their marriages. I also tried to shift the focus from how women are oppressed by sharia rules to how women can manipulate the contradictions embedded in these rules and use the courts as an arena for negotiation. In the court cases I witnessed and recorded in Iran and Morocco, I noticed that many women were aware of these contradictions and manipulated them in order to renegotiate, and at times to rewrite, the terms of their marriages. In so doing, they could turn the most patriarchal elements of sharia law to their advantage in order to achieve their personal and marital aims. I was sensitive to this, in part because it was exactly what I had managed to do myself some years earlier when my own marriage broke down.

When I started field research in Tehran family courts in 1985, I sought to retain the impartiality of the 'objective' academic observer, firmly instilled in me by my 1970s training in 'participant observation'. But at times I caught myself being more a 'participant' – and certainly not an impartial observer. My own gender identity and my own experience of divorce often mediated many of my 'observations'. My 1989 fieldwork in Morocco helped me to come to terms with my own Muslim identity and to reexamine my relationship with the faith into which I was born, yet I still found it difficult to reconcile my growing personal involvement in feminist discourses and Islam with my academic aim of 'objectivity'. By the time my research in Morocco ended, I had realized that this aim was impossible but still hesitated to acknowledge it, let alone to participate actively in what I was studying: I still carried a heavy baggage of conflicting identities and politics, too painful to

unpack in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution in my own country. So, while writing up my field material from Iran and Morocco, I tried as far as possible to keep my distance and not to insert my own voice into the text.

From Observation to Participant Activism

In 1992, after completing *Marriage on Trial,* and after four years' absence from Iran, I returned for six months to pursue an earlier and rather different research interest: the mystical tradition of a sect, the Ahl-i Haqq.[5] I found Iran less ideological, now boasting a wider range of journals to read, more tolerance of different ideas and a lively debate on women's rights in Islam, aired in women's magazines. Between 1993 and 1995, I returned to Iran several times a year to do both research and consultancies for the Food and Agriculture Organization, which took me to various parts of Iran, rural and urban, where I met and talked with women from different walks of life. These consultancies gave me access to women working in government, as well as the opportunity to contact those who had contributed to gender debates through either their writings or their activities in women's organizations. In time, I made close friendships with some of these women, who came from very different backgrounds and held divergent views. It was during one of these trips that I started collaboration with Hojjat ol-Eslam Sa'idzadeh, a cleric who used to write for women's magazines, under different pseudonyms, on gender equality and women's rights in Islamic law. He introduced me to the clerical debates on gender and facilitated my fieldwork in Qom in 1995.

If *Marriage on Trial* was my initiation into the politics of gender in Islam, in my second published ethnography, *Islam and Gender* (1999), I abandoned the impossible ideal of 'academic' detachment and described my own engagements with a series of clerics and their texts as a personal search for understanding. I wrote not only as an anthropologist but also as an Iranian Muslim woman who needed to make sense of her faith and culture. True, the book owes its format to a traumatic experience in Tehran airport in November 1995, and the loss of my field material, but by then my approach to fieldwork in Iran and my involvement in the politics of Islam had already changed.[6] Not only was I now deeply involved in gender debates in Islam, I was also interested in collaborative work.

During the writing of *Islam and Gender,* I started working with an independent British filmmaker, Kim Longinotto. When I met Kim through a mutual friend in March 1996, we discovered that we shared the same frustrations with media stereotypes of the Muslim world. We decided to make a documentary film in Iran, inspired by the court cases in *Marriage on Trial.* The first step was to apply to British TV commissioning editors for funding,

and to Iranian officials for access and permission to film. Kim focused on the first and I on the second. This, my first experience in filmmaking, involved me in a long series of negotiations, not only with the Iranian authorities for permission and access, but also with myself: I had to deal with personal ethical and professional dilemmas as well as with theoretical and methodological issues of representation.[7] The film's subject matter inevitably entailed both exposing individuals' private lives in the public domain and tackling a major issue dividing Islamists and feminists: women's position in Islamic family law.

In the course of these negotiations I came once again to confront my own multiple identities. I found myself in an uncannily familiar situation of shifting perspectives and self-redefinition. When I started the film project, I was fresh from fieldwork in Qom. In my discussions with the clerics I had had to justify my feminist stance, whereas in making the film I wanted to honour the Muslim and Iranian aspects of my identity. I came to realize that the problem was also inside me. I could not integrate the multiple discourses and representations of women in Iran, nor could I synthesize my own identities and positions. I disagreed equally with Iranian and Western stereotypes of 'women in Islam', images that did not reflect a complex reality. As a feminist, an Iranian and a Muslim, I objected to how women were treated in Iranian law and wanted to change it. But my objections were not the same as those implied in Western media discourses or those aired by feminists after the Revolution: I did not see women in Iran as victims, but as pioneers in a legal system caught between religious tradition and modern reality.

This was not the kind of 'reality' the women's organizations and authorities in prereformist Iran wanted shown to the outside world. The officials in both the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and women's organizations with close ties with the government refused to cooperate with us. Our chosen topic – divorce – was a 'reality' denied by their ideological discourse, a taboo theme that threatened to undermine a central tenet of the early rhetoric of the Islamic Republic. At the very core of their critique of the West was that family values had broken down, as witnessed by rising divorce rates; the Islamic Republic prided itself on the stability of the family. I understood why officials in the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance rejected our proposal and why no Islamic women's organization wanted to be associated with us: it would be like washing dirty linen in public. But at the same time, I felt strongly that it was an issue that should be addressed, as divorce laws had become the most visible yardstick, after the 'Islamic' dress code, for measuring women's emancipation or repression in Islam. Both Western media and Islamist rhetoric treated the whole issue of family law ideologically and ignored the complex reality on the ground. It was used as a means of 'othering' – and there lay the importance of addressing it.

We spent eighteen months negotiating for permission to make our film and had no success until Khatami's election to the presidency brought a shift in government discourse and policies. In autumn 1997, we finally got our permit to make a film about 'reality' as seen through the eyes of women going through divorce. The women who agreed to be in our film shared our vision and seized the opportunity to have their voices heard, to express themselves – to make the film with us. In this way, the film became part of the debate on women's rights in Iran, which I had been passionately involved in since the early 1990s. I wanted to show that there are different voices in Islam and Iran. The voice most often heard is that of the law: highly authoritarian and patriarchal, and increasingly out of touch with people's aspirations and lived realities. But there is also an egalitarian voice in everyday life, seldom heard by outsiders or acknowledged by the authorities. It is this voice that women are expressing – the true voice of 'Islamic feminism'. It is by hearing this voice that we can come to see the anachronistic nature of the law, and how social change is daily chipping away at its monolithic authority. Just as my 1995 debates with the clerics in Qom and my collaboration with Sa'idzadeh made me realize that I wanted to be not just an observer but also a participant in defining the terms of gender discourse in Islam, so my involvement in making the film with Kim, and my subsequent engagement with its various audiences, enabled me to continue my transition from the detached world of academia to that of a scholar activist.

In 2000, I codirected another feature-length documentary with Kim Longinotto for Channel 4. This time we filmed in a shelter for runaway girls, exploring issues like child abuse and the unbearable family situations that force these girls to run away. And recently I completed a book with Richard Tapper about a reformist cleric – Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari – who was imprisoned for over four years (2000–05) because of his liberal views on Islamic law and his advocacy of democracy and women's rights. Our book traces the development of his thought and places in context the writings he produced between 1995 and 2000, when the reformist movement was in formation (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper 2006).

Concluding Remarks

I conclude by reflecting on certain issues implicit in my account, and try to suggest some answers to questions with which I have grappled since the early 1990s. What does it mean to be a 'native' ethnographer? In what ways, if any, do the fieldwork experiences and the ethnographic accounts of 'insider' and 'outsider' anthropologists differ?

I explored these questions in the context of the rupture brought to Iranian anthropology by the Revolution of 1978–79 and its impact on my own anthropological trajectory. As stated above, I did my first fieldwork in Kalardasht in 1977–78, but by the time I had completed my thesis two years later, the ethnography had already become history. When the Iranian universities reopened after the 'Cultural Revolution', they had been 'Islamized' and had no room for teachers trained in the West. I returned to Cambridge in 1984 to resume my academic career, but I was no longer interested in 'traditional' fieldwork in villages or tribes – the 'Other', for an urban middle-class Iranian anthropologist like me. The research I have done since then does not fit the image of anthropology and its subject matter in Iran and other non-Western countries (see Fazeli 2006). I have often been reminded of this. Moroccans told me that I should not call myself an 'anthropologist' because I was one of them: a Muslim, not an 'Other'. In Iran, I have often been told that what I am doing is 'not really anthropology' but sociology. Above all, I am writing about city people. Yet I continue to see myself as an anthropologist, not only because I have remained faithful to its time-honoured methodology but also because of what attracted me to it in the first place: the peculiar way that anthropology makes the familiar strange in one's own society and the strange familiar in another. For me, 'doing anthropology' is more than an academic discipline: it is a way of life, a means of making sense of, belonging to and yet being able to transcend both the society that I was born into and the society that I now inhabit.

It is in this sense that see myself as a 'native' anthropologist. It is not only a matter of my Iranian/Muslim identity; rather, it concerns a certain consciousness of the link between epistemology and politics. It is this consciousness that, in my view, separates the ethnography done by a 'native' anthropologist from that of others – whether 'insiders' or 'outsiders'. In Barbara Tedlock's words:

> Just as being born a female does not automatically result in 'feminist' consciousness, being born [in] an ethnic minority does not automatically result in 'native' consciousness. Native ethnographers … have worked to bridge the gulf between Self and Other by revealing both parties as vulnerable experiencing subjects, working to coproduce knowledge. They have argued that the observer and the observed are not entirely separate categories. To them theory is not a transparent, culture-free zone, not a duty-free intellectual market hovering between cultures, lacking all connection to embodied lived experience. They believe that both knowledge and experience from outside fieldwork should be brought into our narratives and that we should

demonstrate how ideas matter to us, bridging the gap between our narrow academic world and our wider cultural experiences. These strategies should help us simultaneously deepen and invigorate our writing and our selves. (1991: 80–81)

This 'native' anthropology, for me, also comes with a promise and a commitment to engage in productive dialogue between persons inhabiting different societies and differing political realities.

NOTES

1. I am of course aware of the small number of foreign anthropologists who either continued to conduct fieldwork during the Revolution or were able to revisit Iran afterwards.
2. On the development of anthropology in pre- and postrevolutionary Iran, see Fazeli (2006).
3. See for instance, Abu Lughod (1993), Appadurai (1988), Clifford (1988), Clifford and Marcus (1986), Kondo (1986), Barbara Tedlock (1991) and Dennis Tedlock (1987).
4. The previous generation of anthropologists dealt with this problem either by publishing accounts of their field experiences under a pseudonym and in a semi-fictionalized form, or by keeping personal records and comments in the form of a diary; see Barbara Tedlock (1991: 70–76).
5. I published four articles based on this fieldwork (1994, 1995, 1996, 1997), but have not yet completed the monograph I originally planned.
6. See preface to Mir-Hosseini (1999).
7. For a detailed account see Mir-Hosseini (2002).

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