

**Seeking the Seeker:
Frameworks for Understanding Islamic Commodities**

prepared for the Sophia University Symposium,
Consuming Religion: Globalization and Popular Beliefs,
19-20 November 2005

Gregory Starrett
Department of Anthropology
University of North Carolina at Charlotte
9201 University City Boulevard
Charlotte, NC 28223-0001

(704) 687-4350
(704) 687-3091 (fax)
gsstarre@email.uncc.edu

Like Tokyo, Cairo is a written city. The text that surrounds its residents as a semi-permanent part of the environment is inseparable from the smaller objects that circulate through the economies of gift and commodity exchange. This is, in part, because the two regimes of writing interpenetrate as writing attaches itself to walls, automobiles, bicycles, and signs, and to the people who create and use them. Likewise, older traditions of public writing, particularly the practice of placing Qur'anic inscriptions on the exteriors of buildings, have inspired their miniaturization and proliferation elsewhere (Starrett 1995b). Most, but not all Islamic commodities, contain writing—even if this is simply the names “Allah” or “Muhammad.”

There are many possible ways to classify Islamic religious commodities: by form, by use, by theme or genre, by audience. One could begin with those that are not normally written, such as objects used in conjunction with religious festivals: Ramadan lamps, the `Arusa al-Mawlid, which is a sugar figurine distributed at the time of the Prophet's birthday, or at objects directly associated with identity marking or worship, such as skullcaps, or prayer beads, which are used to track iterations of sacred speech. Then there are apotropaic devices of various sorts: charms, amulets, and talismans used to ward off the evil eye, a supernatural attack occasioned by envy which can cause sickness and spoliation. Closely related to these objects are posters, wall-hangings and bumper stickers which are meant to draw God's blessing and repel harm from those who use them. Most Egyptians express confidence that a written Qur'anic verse or a small copy of selections from the Qur'an, if carried in a pocket or pinned inside the clothing of a

child, will ensure God's protection for them. These types of objects blend into another, as ritual objects become magnified and architectural objects become miniaturized in order to Islamize public and private spaces. Strings of egg-size prayer beads join photographs or dioramas of sacred places as decorative objects that create Islamic physical surroundings. A final category of Islamic objects might be called intellectual or pedagogical commodities: those intended to teach, to inform, or to help mold the personality: books, written copies of prayers, cassette recordings of sermons, videotapes, children's games, and computer software.

The difficulty with such a typology is not only that these categories have no clear borders, but that they actually fold back upon and imply one another. The kaff (representation of the palm of the hand) that working-class Egyptians use as an amulet is reinterpreted, by the educated, as a natural encoding of the Divine Name in the human form. The ultimate tool of self-fashioning and instruction, the mushaf (written copy of the Qur'an) is just as likely to be used as an amulet, perched above the back seat of a car, as it is to be studied. The object becomes a kind of writing, while the text becomes an object. All of them taken together serve to Islamicize the visual environment.

When Egyptians talk about the purpose of such an environment, they stress that the divine speech of the Qur'an and other religious signs and commodities are not merely decoration, but either mark or influence human behavior and character. This is expressed in different ways by those with more or less formal education. The middle classes attribute the good effects of these objects to their psychological and spiritual effects. Seeing them reminds one of the moral duties of Muslims, and results in calm and moderate behavior, because it

reminds people of a transcendent reality of greater importance than their daily frustrations.

At the same time, seeing a Qur'anic verse written above a doorway virtually forces one to read it, and this reading—even if only a mental recitation—is itself a pious act. In either case, these objects are activated through one's different modes of engagement with them (Starrett 1995a).

On the other end of the socioeconomic scale, a different logic is articulated. While most working-class Egyptians explain that God has promised to protect His Word wherever it is found, and that therefore keeping His Word near will also protect its bearer, the maid who worked in my apartment had a different explanation. She often complimented me on the objects I had collected and placed on my walls: a colorful genealogy of the Prophet Muhammad, a chart in the shape of a palm tree illustrating the history of the prophets from Adam, Moses, and Abraham on to Muhammad, Qur'anic verses of various sorts. She always referred to them as “hilw,” “sweet,” and praised me for having them, although she knew I was not a Muslim. When I asked her why people use these things, she replied that they were like having a Qur'an in one's house, and that it would help bring God's blessing. Assuming this indicated the operation of some sort of magical efficacy, I asked her if these objects bearing the Divine Name would protect and bring blessings on anyone, even, perhaps, a criminal like a thief. She looked puzzled at the question and shook her head. “Of course not,” she replied. “A thief is a bad person. And a bad person wouldn't be interested in these things. He wouldn't have any of them in his house!”

Her explanation is unusual insofar as it is similar to explanations offered by the educated middle classes, linking moral psychology and the use of religious commodities. But she reverses

the causal link between objects and morality. For her, these objects were not about forming personality or acting as a reminder of an invisible universe of sacred obligations. Rather, they were about displaying the character and moral standing of their user. A good person can be expected to have Qur'anic verses on his wall, while a bad person will not.

I would like to focus here on the issue of what religious commodities signify, by exploring how their increasing proliferation in public space affects the meanings people attribute to them. In particular, I would like to examine intellectual or pedagogical commodities—those meant to inform, instruct, and teach—and the role of the market in both restricting and expanding the sorts of uses to which these objects can be put.

To illustrate, we can look at two different ways in which new technology can be used as religious teaching tools. Both were prepared and marketed for Muslims in the United States and Europe, but the illustrate types of commodities increasingly available in the Middle East as well. The first relies on the simple recording of a traditional teaching situation: a master teaching the audience to recite the Qur'an. In the tape, a South Asian Qur'an teacher stands in front of a large poster on which a page of the Qur'an is written in large letters. He recites a verse twice, pointing with a wooden pointer at each word as he goes, and then, after a pause, moves on to the next verse. It's a dreadful viewing experience. What makes this unsuccessful *as video* is precisely its attempt to remain authentic to the original interaction. In the actual teaching context, the student's attention is held on task by the immediate presence of the teacher, who might scold his students or even hit them with the stick should their attention wander. When transferred to tape, the social relationship between student and teacher is

removed, and it becomes all too easy to become bored and turn it off. This is not to say that learning in this format is impossible, but that it requires tremendous motivation and self-discipline from the student, or else a third-party supervisor (a parent, a live teacher, etc.) to enforce continued viewing.

We can contrast this with another strategy for imparting information: videotapes created and marketed specifically for children and often using a variety of production techniques to retain attention. In the U.S. one of the most interesting of these products is called "Adam's World," produced by the SoundVision Company of Chicago. Adam is a muppet with shocking orange hair and a white brimless cloth hat marking him as a Muslim. The story frame of the series is that Adam is a journalist who produces and hosts a television show in his family's basement, targeted to Muslim children. Adam and his live friends take viewers on imaginative trips to Muslim majority countries like Pakistan, or to unusual Muslim communities like those in China. He reads viewers stories, teaches them the Arabic alphabet, and is taught about Muslim ideals by his own talk-show guests and friends. The series makes use of songs and other music, including writing new words for popular lullabies and children's tunes. It is important to stress here that not only is the format different, but the information being transmitted is likely to be different as well. The use of music, pictures, and lyrics is both ironic and completely sincere. The producers of the tape have used what video does best—transmit multiple kinds of content simultaneously—to capture and hold an audience's attention. When done well, the medium of the videotape relies on the use of technique and content that attracts the viewer in its own right, independently of any lesson it might teach. It merges

entertainment with instruction in the way educational materials for children have long done. In fact, children's religious literature has often been the first entry-point for new formats, themes, and styles into Islamic pedagogy generally. The use of drawings, interactive assignments, and other new instructional formats, first targeted at children through their schoolbooks, are later extended to goods targeted at adult audiences (Starrett 1996).

The market in these new kinds of commodities relies on appeals both to the conventionally approved desire for learning, and to the psychology of the consumer. Muslim societies have long recognized the need for learning and the great lengths to which people might go to achieve it: pilgrimage to Mecca, travel to a regional madrasa, international migration for attending university. Travel of various sorts is given a privileged place in Islamic thought because the worldwide scope of the ummah is not necessarily matched by an even distribution of intellectual resources. The seeker of knowledge might travel to Fez or Cairo, to Cordoba or Kufa for training unavailable at home (Eickelman and Piscatori 1990). While such travel is more common now than ever before, the market constitutes a network through which knowledge can circulate in new ways. In providing an almost endless variety of new specialized mass produced religious commodities appealing to particular audiences, one who seeks knowledge no longer has to alter his life and leave his home to find a teacher who can transmit the contents of a particular text. Instead, in the words of Kingsley Ubabukoh, "the text is made to seek the seeker." Both in terms of establishing networks of distribution and in terms of creating attractive products, the commodity is designed to play an active role in its own dissemination.

While this development might be assumed to benefit Islamic society by flooding the environment with signifiers of divinity, of cultural heritage, and of standard models for correct knowledge and action, the actual reaction to the market in Islamic commodities is mixed. Some Muslims object to the placement of religious writing on utilitarian items—such as placing the phrase “God is Great” on a coffee mug—where it might be polluted or subjected to physical harm. Others argue that flooding the environment with religious signifiers does not increase their psychological and spiritual power, but dulls our appreciation of them and transforms what should be powerful spiritual technologies into mere decoration, into folklore which fades into the background of consciousness rather than shaping one’s life (Mahmood 2004).

These criticisms are similar in some ways to the sociology of culture formulated by members of the “Frankfurt School” of the mid-twentieth century, particularly Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, as inspired in part by Walter Benjamin. Following Marx, these theorists reflected on the effects the mass production and distribution of commodities might have on the world of culture, particularly the fine arts. They argued that the commoditization of art destroys the “aura” of a work—its uniqueness and authenticity as a singular creation tied to a specific place and time. The mechanically reproduced work of art loses its use value—its ability to draw the viewer out of himself in contemplating it—and becomes mere exchange value, something that can be acquired and displayed, like an item of clothing or other commodity that might mark the buyer’s interest or taste or wealth.

“The old affinity of the beholder and the beheld is turned on its head. . . .The consumer arbitrarily projects his impulse. . .on whatever is presented to him.

[Previously,] the subject who viewed, heard, or read a work was to lose himself, forget himself, extinguish himself in the artwork. The identification carried out by the subject was ideally not that of making the artwork like himself, but rather that of making himself like the artwork. This identification constituted aesthetic sublimation. . . .[T]he subject. . . becomes subject in spiritual experience through self-relinquishment, the opposite of the philistine demand that the artwork give him something. As a tabula rasa of subjective projections, however, the artwork is shorn of its qualitative dimension. The poles of the artwork's deaestheticization are that it is made as much a thing among things as a psychological vehicle of the spectator. What the reified artworks are no longer able to say is replaced by the beholder with the standardized echo of himself, to which he hearkens (Adorno 1997 [1970]: 17).

The viewer who alters himself in response to a confrontation with great art becomes the consumer who attaches the image to himself as an advertisement of his own taste or position. Adorno and others believed that this loss of aura was a necessary result of the technologies of the mass reproduction and distribution of cultural products.

But this does not necessarily fit the situation of Islamic commodities. The reason for this is that religious commodities bearing sacred writing do not necessarily lose their aura in being mass produced and distributed. Their sacred quality is not lessened, but merely increasingly exposed to the danger that they will be profaned, or perhaps, if the environment is too full of

them for attention, ignored. Each bumper sticker, each booklet containing extracts from the Qur'an, retains the aura of its original, which is the uncreated speech of God, the articulated essence of the divine in heaven, of which each individual copy of the Qur'an, and each verse written out in the world around us, is a manifestation. The Qur'an is, in Alfred Gell's terms, a distributed object (Gell 1998:221). Therefore, whether a viewer approaches the verse with an attitude that allows him to become lost in its beauty and lifted out of his everyday concerns, or whether he treats it as an advertising slogan for being a Muslim, is not a matter of the form in which the verse exists: in a book or on a coffee cup or on a bumper sticker or keychain or poster. It is not a feature of the product, but of the attitude brought to the product by its consumer.

What this does is to create a different dilemma for Muslims living in societies like Egypt, where such sacred speech surrounds people constantly. In filling the visual environment with signifiers of the divine, the market which encourages the consumption of religious commodities might help us distinguish between good people who are attracted to them, and bad people, who, as my maid implied, might not be attracted to them. But it does not help us to distinguish between good people who are using these products as markers of attachment to a heritage—turning Islam into folklore, in the views of their critics—and those good people who are using them as technologies of personal spiritual transformation. On this view, the environment that matters is the internal moral environment. The interior becomes the sacralized space of correct intention, while the visible world—swamped with the signifiers of religion—is impossible to evaluate. When the text is made to seek the seeker, in other words, pervading our lives with

objects to fit every activity and use, from children's games to posters to computer software illustrating the correct postures of prayer or helping us to search the text of the Qur'an, the problem is not that the commodity has lost its aura and that we can no longer transform ourselves through our encounter with it. The problem is that the commodity's consumers, when they encounter each other, have lost some of their ability to distinguish the pious from the merely fashionable.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor. 1997 [1970]. *Aesthetic Theory*. XXXXX

Eickelman, Dale F., and James Piscatori, eds. 1990. *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gell, Alfred. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mahmood, Saba. 2004. *Politics of Piety: xxxxxxxx*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Starrett, Gregory. 1995a. "The Political Economy of Religious Commodities in Cairo,"

American Anthropologist 97(1):51-68.

Starrett, Gregory. 1995b. "Signposts Along the Road: Monumental Public Writing in Egypt," *Anthropology Today* 11(4):8-13.

Starrett, Gregory. 1996. The Margins of Print: Children Religious Literature in Egypt, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, N.S., 2(1):117-139.