Introduction

Ecology and Migration in the Middle East

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Abstract: In this special issue, not only is the human-environment relationship addressed with a few types of environmental adaptations in rural and urban contexts, including governmental measures and disaster situations, but also the process of culture making is explored through the use of vocabularies in forming mind sets. In this way, a wide spectrum of ideas and situations is portrayed, and the role of culture in making these processes meaningful is shown. The articles in this issue concern Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and they also consider migration. While environmental problems are partial causes for migration, yet symbolic reference to parts of that same environment can symbolise the lost land. The role of poetic language is seen here, while poetry itself becomes a means of better adaptation for a migrant.

Keywords: disaster, displacement, ecological unit, emancipatory catastrophism, environment, governments, globicide, human-environment relation, migration

If there is an earthquake or a volcanic eruption, but there is no human being to observe or be affected by it, then this is neither reported nor mentioned. If science looks for it in remnants, it will come up with precisions. Disasters are perceived and called so by human beings. Environmental disasters, which are often results of human intervention, may cause various animal, plant and human changes, as well as diseases, to occur. Human reactions to such phenomena might range from exodus, migration, short-term displacement to coping in adapting to new or changed environment. When humans leave their abodes, their integration in a new environment will entail a time for struggle, a challenge.

In this issue of *Anthropology of the Middle East*, we are fortunate to have several articles that show a vast array of topics related to human-environment

relations. The articles cover diverse topics such as delirious projects for the formation of nuclear plants to ecological roofs tops in Cairo, and people's reactions to the drying up of the Zâyandeh Rud, the soul of the city of Esfahan in Iran, to migration of male and female Afghans, to a very important attempt of getting to the heart of nostalgia of a migrant population in Australia through poetry and the deep meaning of the concept of the sea both through experience and its symbolical representation.

Sezin Topçu courageously analyses a difficult phase in the political development of modern Turkey from 2013 onwards, recapitulating what has gone on since the 1955 Geneva Summit. Reading strong national symbols, the author shows a government that is trying to seek legitimacy through splendid megaprojects. From 2013 to 2025, four nuclear projects will provide 10 per cent of electricity of the country, reducing the use of fossil energy while using cutting-edge technology and creating a great market. Whenever political issues arise, one response is to ignore it by giving it minimal importance and instead creating a new event receiving comprehensive attention such as an underwater tunnel or a power plant.

Politics of invisibility seem to have a completely new structure at its disposition, which is at work to minimise the importance of threats from nuclear contamination. Foetal anomalies, cancer and other problems are systematically ignored, or specific terms are created to diminish the significance of nuclear contaminations, for example by using terms that ridicule them, such as peaceful isotopes, serene nuclearism, normalisation of risks or naturalisation of disaster. The author's use of Günther Anders's term *globicide* awakes the reader to prevalent nuclear ignorance or lack of concern, and shows how state reasoning is taking recourse on traditional thought, making nuclear suffering a 'normal price to pay' or a 'destiny'. Topçu finally urges readers to become more vigilant in their comparative studies and she regrets the fact that while our modern societies used to strive to become knowledge societies, they have become ignorant societies with the beginning of the twenty-first century, living in serene unconcern, oblivious of all that surrounds them.

It is a truism that human beings see, feel or analyse natural phenomena or disaster. So, there is quite a vast cultural domain to be explored, which is the perception of nature by humans, their reactions to it and their tending to it – whether taking care of it or extracting from it what is needed to make human life last, and which could sustainably be done so. In a fascinating article on the city of Esfahan, which is nicknamed 'paradise', a disaster has happened: the diversion of its soul, that is the river Zâyandeh ('life-giving') Rud. Sophie Roche and Sahar Faeghi refer to the period of sustained drought that has caused this, but its diversion to take the water to other cities is less explored. What is mostly attended to is the social and emotional place the river has had for local people, the identity it gave them and even its importance for relating to the international world through tourism, and then how such a drying up of a river has created social and psychological problems for its inhabitants.

However, the authors do not stop short to just lament the situation, and they do not visit the rural areas to investigate the effect of this drying up of the river on the agriculture and the weather in the region; instead, they speak of 'emancipatory catastrophism'. So, there is a positive sense of raising people's consciousness towards other catastrophes through having deeply experienced a discontinuity within their own usual life. The authors note how people have used this experience, despite all the pain and disruptions it has created for them, to explore 'the positive side effects of bads'. Maintaining agency has been the means to adapt and to change, and to continue to find other ways of relating to environment and people.

Ingenuity of the people of Cairo is seen through the fascinating and comprehensive article by Noha Fikry, which explores what the author calls 'rooftop architecture'. Here we see home as a socioecological unit in which this space becomes a farm to keep poultry, sheep, goats, pigeons and rabbits. *Khyr*, *satr* and *rizq* are the ideological benevolent qualities of this undertaking, which bring food and goodness but also keep away the evil eye from the household. However, this is not all: going up to the rooftop, one regularly observes the sun and its movements and thus the relationship to nature is heralded daily. Finally, in order to feed the animals, leftovers from stores, instead of becoming garbage, are collected by these households to raise the animals. In this way, the home becomes an ecological unit in itself, and social relations are woven around this production. Instead of being appreciated by the government, measures have been taken to legally stop this system due to hygienic pretexts.

Consequences of war, drought and overpopulation on limited environment have been major causes of migration since the recording of history or archaeological and paleontological remains. Besides displacements of sizeable populations, there have been traders throughout Euro-Asia for thousands of years, as vouched for in summary by the term Silk Road. Magnus Marsden studies this phenomenon among Afghan men within the new theoretical perspective of forming masculinity, showing how young Afghans through such a 'rite de passage', going through the hardships of life away from home, gain the status of marriageable men upon return. Small and large traders today have a share in globalisation, taking goods, ideas and lifestyles across thousands of kilometres.

In her article on Afghan women in Germany, Saideh Saidi shows this difficult period of being in between two cultures, in a grey zone, feeling 'the whole society is a hotel', where they do not feel at home. Identity has been a problem to them, a 'fluid matter, a hybrid phenomenon'. The children, for whose safety they had left their war-stricken zone, are becoming strangers to them, as they celebrate their adaptation to another culture and voice their autonomy. The mothers and grandmothers seek home at the local mosque, where they find solace in what is familiar and there through feasts and celebrations, knit a society for themselves.

Finally, Nasim Yazdani chooses the sea as an important and symbolic notion to express the deep feelings of Iranian migrants in Australia. She first gives a

brief synopsis of the meaning of the term in Iranian poetry, and then encapsulates the experience of those who are separated from Iran by thousands of kilometres of sea, including those refugees who crossed the ocean by boats and the poetry of an Iranian Kurd who was in exile and had not yet reached mainland Australia to receive his Australian prize for literature. Having written and sent his poems as messages via WhatsApp in fear of writing on paper and being confiscated, here we see how social media enters the world of migrants, refugees and those in exile to send their messages across turbulent seas. Nostalgia for the country and entanglement with the sea and its multitude of meanings gives a deeply shared image to poetry reading sessions which united many affected migrant community members. Ecocentrism thus becomes a term used along anthropocentrism to reveal the author's intended meaning.

In 'Notes from the Field' Danila Mayer and Terry Lamb offer insights into ground-breaking research in process, as its conclusion and a scientific article which will issue from it, is in the process of being written. It is an article that allows the reader to see how the four researchers of this article are totally engaged in their research. They aim at transparency and putting into question their own perspectives, paradigms and terminologies of research in order to write on the views of those who have volunteered to take part in this innovative research project in different geographies within Europe. So, this is an article of prime importance for all who are engaged in migration studies and postmodern research methodology.

Rassa Ghaffari is critical of shortcomings both in the literature on research methodologies and what is taught in university courses. She shows agility and intelligence to adapt to each individual she interviews, through her sensitivity to her position, as a woman with dual nationality (Italian and Iranian), and that of the interviewee, in a complex context which is definitely not neutral. She explains her own position, then that of male or female interviewees, in two age groups, not forgetting class differences or the political atmosphere in the Islamic Republic of Iran of the country. She explains the challenges of the complex setting she worked in, and had to face, and how she had to be flexible and responsive in order to reach the aims of her research. Methodology and ethics made her realize the unique quality of anthropology as a reflexive field.

After I, as editor in chief of this journal, read Nahal Naficy's (2018) article 'From Rice University to the University of Tehran: Reflection on Working as an American-Trained Anthropologist in Iran' in *American Anthropologist*, and the articles that commented on it, I decided there is quite a world to be discovered if we open up a section entitled 'Notes from Academia', where we invite various anthropologists, particularly those who have had difficulty in getting themselves integrated within academia, to write. The aim would be to expose problems and never to think one is alone in this struggle by sharing experiences, which would overcome these difficulties. So, in this issue, we are including the first contribution to this new section, and it is an invitation to all our readers within academia to share their experiences. The academic domain, in

terms of reflections of the human mind, recognises no geographical boundaries, and this has been said, experienced and demonstrated innumerable times. Claiming it as such is another matter, and only through showing examples can the younger generation be empowered not to waste time but to work and get their work recognised. So, this is a new section of our journal, like 'Notes from the Field', which we started some time ago, and will be open to reflections on establishing oneself as an anthropologist in the region.

Reference

- Naficy, N. (2018), 'From Rice University to the University of Tehran: Reflection on Working as an American-Trained Anthropologist in Iran', *American Anthropologist* 120, no. 1: 137–142.