Review: The Places Where Men Pray Together: Cities in Islamic Lands, Seventh through the Tenth Centuries

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negating ethos of the plantation South” (p. 83). Doctor Know-It-All suggests at least the possibility of change in the status quo, but “the Coon in the Box instead evokes a milieu absolutely incapacitated by ceaseless and pointless exploitation and victimization” (p. 83). Minton and Evans do not see the tale as just a series of successful black hustles. Instead the tale pictures the slave system itself as self-defeating, because the slave John and the master take turns “in the roles of trickster and dupe, deceiver and deceived, victimizer and victim” (p. 83). Even when John “wins,” he loses. His “victories” often involve negative gains: he does not get beaten. Sometimes he gets an old suit of clothes or some days off work. None of these alter the central fact that he is still a slave. Only one or two subtypes of the tale say that John gains his freedom. In fact, the deceived Master often profits as much or more than the slave; and anything that leaves the Master in control—regardless of John’s short-term success—leaves John defeated.

This monograph should interest students of American Studies and especially African-American Studies, as well as students of folklore. Although this is not its primary intent, the book provides a further indictment of slavery and the peonage that followed the Civil War in the United States. Among other strengths, it is full of fascinating detail, such as the changing meaning of the word “coon,” whose racist connotations developed about the same time the tale reached a relatively definitive form in the late nineteenth century. Folklorists—the text’s primary audience—will appreciate Minton and Evans’s careful following of every analogue and subtext they can find and their exploration of possible explanations of the texts.


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The culmination of a career’s worth of research and published posthumously, The Places Where Men Pray Together is a wide-ranging study of the Middle East’s urban centers from the earliest days of Islam through the tenth century. Paul Wheatley applies history and urban studies methodologies to the data collected and described by the tenth-century Arab geographer al-Maqdisi. Thus the book provides not only a modern analysis of the growth and development of urban centers in Islamic lands, but also a means for English-speaking readers to access economic, political, and cultural information collected ten centuries ago.

Wheatley addresses the admittedly vexed question: What made a Muslim city Muslim in the medieval period? His approach is to discuss changes in structure and function of thirteen urban centers between the pre-Islamic period (the jahiliyah or “Age of Ignorance”) and the tenth century. These thirteen centers extend from al-Mashriq in the East, which includes what is now Iran and Afghanistan, to al-Maghrib in the West, now southern Spain and North Africa. Wheatley readily admits the difficulty inherent in studying history and cultural geography of the earliest centuries of Islam. Like medieval folklorists, he must depend on scattered manuscript sources, archaeological remains, and early geographers such as al-Maqdisi for his data, despite the fact that he studies the most populated and well-known regions of the Islamic world.

Within each of the thirteen urban systems, Wheatley looks at marketing and service centers, transportation, industrial and craft centers, religious centers, and fortified settlements. He identifies three components that determine settlement in a region: first, the spread of settlements around a center that can provide goods and services; second, a linear component along transportation routes; and third, a clustering around specialized industrial or cultural centers. Muslims created very few cities, choosing rather to modify existing urban centers. One change was the introduction of the mosque, a center not only for prayer, but also for other communal gatherings. In cities that Muslims founded, mosques could be found in central districts. In cities that were conquered, mosques were often established in places where churches or synagogues had been built, sometimes in the same structures, and usually in the central district, if the city had one.
Not all cities developed along the same patterns, owing to the fact that geography varies widely in Islamic regions. In cities such as Baghdad or Alexandria, situated on rivers and lakes, growth of the urban center followed geographical imperatives as much as cultural ones, with smaller cities sprouting up along the same bodies of water. In regions such as the Arabian Peninsula (al-Jazirah), entirely Muslim and predominantly Arab, settlement patterns and urban development were influenced more heavily by religious forces, as the numbers of people undertaking the pilgrimage to Makkah and Madinah increased in each of the first four centuries of Islam.

Wheatley includes an enormous amount of cultural data in this book, which includes 159 pages of notes. Those interested in the possible transmission routes of folklore during the seventh through tenth centuries can find information on travel routes, settlement patterns, and population changes through the Islamic region. The volume is especially helpful for those studying the material culture of this period or region. A material folklorist would be well-advised to read the "Industrial and Craft Centers" section of each of the chapters on the thirteen regions. One learns the distribution of a variety of industries, such as mining, which clearly influenced jewelry and art as well as the manufacture of tools; leather-working and textile manufacture, which led to centers of clothing and housewares production; and agricultural products, which influenced foodways.

The difficulty nonexpert readers will encounter with this volume is that Wheatley relies heavily on Arabic terms, usually only translating them when they first appear in the text. The glossary mitigates this difficulty somewhat, but reading is still slow and tedious for those unfamiliar with Arabic or urban studies. For the patient reader, however, the book contains a wealth of information that provides much-needed context for the study of Arab and Muslim folk culture both in the medieval period and today.


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Turner and Fine’s ambitious book (hereafter *Whispers*) seeks to wed folkloristics, social/political commentary, and popular psychology. It is highly unusual in its outright aspiration to assist in dismantling barriers that inhibit racial harmony. Although this underlying impulse has certainly driven many folkloristic studies, it is rarely acknowledged as an overarching focus. In most instances, scholars have worked toward this end through an examination of materials that expose the racism of the dominant, white American culture (e.g., by focusing on the traditional expressions of African Americans). This has been the prevailing paradigm informing works in African-American folklore since the earliest times, including works by such scholars as Martha Warren Beckwith and Zora Neale Hurston and, more recently, Daryl Dance, Gladys Marie Frye, and even Patricia Turner. Such studies as these are, in the general sense of the term, Afrocentric. Implicit in these works is the assumption that the reader will gain a deeper understanding of black Americans, which will lead to improved race relations. In short, such studies may presuppose that white Americans are more responsible for the state of race relations than are black Americans.

One of the most engaging ideological currents moving throughout Turner and Fine’s study challenges this entrenched presumption. The authors advocate the idea that blacks should make an equal effort to understand what it is like to be white in America and that the dismantling of racial discord depends upon an admission on everyone’s part that we all harbor negative (if not racist) attitudes. The specific goals of *Whispers*, then, are to (1) examine how rumors work, (2) present and contextualize beliefs that whites and blacks have about each other, (3) provide information that helps readers to understand racially based rumors, and (4) “provide a basis from which an honest racial