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**REFERRING TO ISLAM AS A PRACTICE**  
**Audiences, relevancies and language games within the Egyptian parliament**

**Enrique Klaus & Baudouin Dupret**

In this chapter, we address the question of the reference to Islam as a social practice, not in abstract terms, from an overhanging viewpoint, but as it is embedded in members' routine activities. Hence, the interest for ethnography in our undertaking, for referring-to-Islam is a situated accomplishment that must be described in context and in action. What it contextually means and "does" to refer to Islam can only be elucidated through a close description of people's orientation to, and reification of, categories as they emerge from their actual encounter with social matters.

The context we are dealing with is the Egyptian Parliament in the course of a session that was part of the broader polemic that ensued the publication of declarations allegedly held by the Minister of Culture Fārūq Husnī, in which he considered the Islamic headscarf as a mark of backwardness. This session constitutes a "perspicuous setting"<sup>i</sup> for the study of referring-to-Islam as a situated practice, since references to Islam proved numerous as it unfolded. Our data consist in the official verbatim transcription produced by the parliament's secretary, and submitted to the approbation of the deputies, for all parliamentary practical and bureaucratic purposes<sup>ii</sup>. The secretariat's concern for accuracy is obvious in these documents, through the following of endogenously developed rules, but also in the respect of a procedure which accounts for a genuine editorial work (the formulation used to refer to the participants, the description of specific actions, or the elision of

injurious words). As such, the official minutes prove sufficiently detailed (registers of language, errors of syntax, repetitions, interruptions, applause, etc.) to attest their satisfying faithfulness to the original interactions during the parliamentary session.

In previous works, we have reconstituted the “dialogical network” around which the polemic articulates, and studied the mechanisms specific to the birth, the swelling and the dying out of this scandal. Focusing on the parliamentary session, we have detailed the procedures which constraint talk at the people’s assembly (*majlis al-sha’b*)—mainly the speech allocation system— in order to document its very institutional character<sup>iii</sup>. Here, we intend to study the discursive resources at the participants’ disposal to play with such institutional constraints. Through the detailed description of a limited number of speech-turns, three different resources of discursive alignment are considered. With reference to Islam in scope, we will observe how members of parliament (henceforth MPs) a) resort to particular sets of relevancies, b) address at physical and virtual audiences alike, and c) explore specific language games, in order to have their fellow MPs siding with them.

A parliamentary session is a peculiar moment in public debates. It is grounded in an institutional context which is oriented towards specific practical ends (e.g.: votes for the law; questions to the government; budget approbation), and which is organized around a set of procedural rules (the by-laws). The debate unfolds in a sequential way, through a succession of contiguous and interactive interventions. At least five different kinds of intervention are distinguishable: a) the assembly speaker’s turns, which are mainly procedural (agenda, speech allocation, repairs to

breaches made to the allocation system); b) legitimate speech turns by MPs (i.e. those regularly allocated by the speaker); c) discursive, sonorous or gesture interruptions to these latter, which are always illegitimate (except for the speaker) and might be ignored by the legitimate orator; d) interruptions taken into account by him; and e) salvos of applause that might punctuate or interrupt some speech turns.

In the course of a parliamentary debate, MPs routinely address various audiences and mobilize different sets of relevancies, i.e. repertoires on which a discursive alignment is operated and whose observance is claimed, including the principles that rely to the order of truth that they establish<sup>iv</sup>. The fact that the session is inaugurated in the name of God immediately accounts for the legitimacy of the resorting to Islamic relevance. In parallel, the fact that it is also opened in the name of the people warrants the validity of the democratic and constitutional relevancies, i.e. the mechanism of parliamentary representation formally warranted by the Constitution and the basic principles of the rule of law. However, relevancies are never given for granted once for all and it always remains emergent. The mere invocation of the legitimacy of a set of relevancies does not suffice to ensure its actualization.

In the debate on the minister's statements, other categorical relevancies also found their way, whether it be the Egyptian identity or Arab nationalism. Thus, sets of relevancies are multiple, intertwined and open for modulation, and only a detailed description of their contextual unfolding allows to measure their importance and to observe their mechanism:

**Excerpt 1: Parliamentary session, 20 November 2006**

*Mr the honourable Deputy 'A. 'Abd al-Ghānī*

138 Mister speaker, this is a subject of the highest importance and we all have to take care of  
139 it. Yes, we are an Islamic State. Yes, our Constitution stipulates that the Sharia is the main  
140 source of our legislation. Yes, we are all Muslims. Yes, we are all fond of the Islamic religion,  
141 the Islamic predication (*da'wā*) and the principles of Islam.

Resorting to a set of relevancies sets forward the terms in which the debate will properly unfold, thus leading to the impossibility to take part to the debate without relying to the resources that such or such register offers. In others words, the terms of the debate are established and, somehow, it becomes impossible to escape them. Excerpt 01 is one of the many occasions in which a close link between Islamic and constitutional relevancies is projected. The statement “Egypt is an Islamic State” (line 139) not only refers to a religious belonging, but also to a constitutional provision (Article 2), which the orator exploits to underscore the inscription of law in the Islamic frame. The projection of both relevancies to the foreground leans on various rhetorical devices, such as scansion (lines 139-40: “Yes, we...”) and listing (lines 140-1: “the Islamic religion, the Islamic predication and the principles of Islam”).

Obviously, both constitutional (that relates to the principle of legality) and democratic (that relates to the principle of majority) relevancies constitute grade-one registers at the people’s assembly:

**Excerpt 2: Parliamentary session, 20 November 2006**

*Mr the honourable Deputy M. Dā'ūd*

599 Mister speaker, the truth is that the human being which is inside of us is really pleased  
600 by what is going on at the Egyptian people’s assembly, today, on behalf of both the majority  
601 and the opposition, regarding a specific minister, with all my respect for the person of the  
602 minister. But, Mister speaker — and this is a very important thing — it is the people’s  
603 assembly that the people has chosen and it is the minister of culture who comes to us from  
604 the days of the ‘Āṭif Sidqī cabinet. Each prime minister who took office found himself with  
605 an imposed minister, Fārūq Husnī, the one who can scorn today the will of the people of  
606 Egypt, which is the land of al-Azhar, the source of Islam, and the beacon of Islam. Today, we

607 stand up to protest against the blow struck on the veil in France and in any other country.  
608 Today, what will we do, Mister speaker, as people of Egypt? And who will answer the  
609 deputies of the Egyptian people's assembly, from both the majority and the opposition?  
610 Because there's a blow struck on the foundations of religion, Mister speaker. This is what the  
611 Almighty God said, not Aḥmad Naẓīf. No, Mister speaker, we cannot leave the subject and  
612 treat it with indifference; otherwise, Islam will be a subject of mockery for the government of  
613 the national party. At the same time, I am grateful to my colleagues, the deputies from the  
614 national party, the deputies from the opposition and the independents, because there is a  
615 common position against a minister who has struck a blow on the true religion. [...]

This excerpt is one of the most explicitly political speech-turns during this session. It is noteworthy that this orator is member of an ultra-minority opposition party in Parliament (the neo-Wafd). His argument grounds in a contrast between the MPs, who stand as representatives of the nation as they are elected by the people (lines 602-3), and Fārūq Husnī, an irremovable member of the cabinet whose presence has been imposed to successive governments for the last twenty years on, without regards for the popular will (lines 603-5). Out of this, the orator builds up a second contrast between the cabinet as a whole, which might come up to mock Islam (lines 612-3), and the deputies—whatever their political pertaining—who hinder attacks on “the true religion” (lines 614-5). In other words, the argumentation is founded on the idea that, as an emanation of the popular will, the people's assembly cannot be but faithful to a “true” conception of religion, and that its very democratic legitimacy constitutes it de facto as the ultimate guardian of its respect. Contrastively, the successive cabinets, to whom the minister has been imposed, are deprived of popular representativeness and, consequently, ministers may well hold religion up to derision. In sum, democratic relevance draws a discriminatory line between representativeness and authoritarian rule, and its association with the register of Islamic relevance allows the orator to put in equation democracy and genuine “Islamic-ness”.

In this excerpt, several audiences are called upon as recipients of the speech-turn: the speaker, different groups of deputies, the majority party, the Egyptian people, a former prime minister and the actual one, the Almighty God, and foreign States. The projection of these recipients authorizes the convocation of what can be called in semiotic terms “actants”, whether virtual or “material”, who embody the relevancies. In a game interweaving audiences and relevance, deputies categorize the publics they represent and address them to mark the camps in presence, to create antagonisms and alliances and to provoke alignments. This rhetoric strategy is founded on the idea that speech indeed possesses performative virtues.

The speaker and the deputies from the opposition and the majority constitute audiences which are physically co-present with the orator. At the opening of this speech turn (line 599), the speech is formally addressed to the speaker in a routine fashion, thus constituting him as a procedural audience (cf. also Excerpt 01, 138). Yet, as he is one of the party’s pundits, his many convocations within this intervention (lines 602; 608; 610; 611) shows that the speaker’s aligning on the orator’s position is not irrelevant to the latter. By addressing MPs directly, as one of them, and by underscoring their convergent viewpoints, the orator projects the existence of a kind of negative solidarity on the primacy of Islam and its intangibility without consensus on the content of this principle<sup>v</sup>. Playing with the multiple audiences he is able to transcend the classical parliamentary oppositions and to produce a “we”, from which no other participant can retract. This “we” is first constituted by the MPs (line 599) and comes up to encompass the whole of the Egyptian people (lines 603; 606-8), before being circumscribed, once again, to the

MPs (line 611). Another illustration of the game of audiences interwoven with registers of relevance is noteworthy, in the reference to “France and any other foreign country” (line 607), which pops up as a kind of contrast. The foreign audience, to whom Egypt has addressed its opposition on different occasions, enables the orator to establish a dichotomy between the Egyptian and Muslim “we” and the foreign and non-Muslim “they”, thus paving the way to the rejection of the minister in the latter category<sup>vi</sup>. The Islamic and national relevancies mobilize — for the practical and immediate purposes of the unfolding parliamentary debate, and through membership categorizations — the use of contrasted audiences previously established in the debate.

**Excerpt 3: Parliamentary session, 20 November 2006**

*Mr speaker*

815 The subject is closed, but the chairman of the commission for religious and social affairs  
816 and *awqāf* asks for the floor. After you.

*Mr the honourable Deputy A. Hāshim*

817 In the name of God, the Clement, the Merciful. Thank you, Mister speaker. While we are  
818 discussing the subject, we have to put in balance that such a phenomenon has previously  
819 been discussed, when the book *Banquet for seaweed*<sup>vii</sup> was released, and we are discussing it  
820 now with the affair of the veil. It is an affair that has already been treated, about which there  
821 is no controversy. And it is not possible to infringe onto it because it is clearly [stipulated] in  
822 the Book of God: “They [fem.] shall not show their attire but what appears of it”<sup>viii</sup>. What is  
823 revealed in the Book of God and what is revealed in a text from the Koran, nobody needs to  
824 talk about it, neither make concessions on it, whatever the circumstances. (applause) [...]

878 (applause) Our religion is eternal... Our religion is eternal... Our religion is the religion  
879 of the [true] values, our Prophet is the Imam of the Sent ones, our religion is an eternal  
880 religion. Our Islamic community has been described in the Book of the Lord as “the best  
881 community conceived of for men”, without complaisance towards it, but from the fact that it  
882 encapsulates the rest of the faith on the surface of Earth. He said: “You form the best  
883 community conceived of for men, you order what is acceptable and you forbid what is  
884 blamable. You believe in God.”<sup>ix</sup> By the One who holds my soul in His hand, and by the One  
885 who is second to none, if we applied the teachings of the Prophet — upon him be the prayer  
886 of God and salvation — we would be, as the Koran establishes it, “the best of the  
887 communities”. So, let us edict a law that criminalizes and forbids all those who try to offense  
888 Islam or any other religion. Because we are the community to whom it was asked to believe  
889 in the whole of the [revealed] Books and in all of the prophets. Have I testified? May God be  
890 witness!<sup>x</sup> Have I testified? May God be witness! May the peace of God and His mercy be  
891 upon you. (applause)



Excerpt 3 contains the opening and the closing of Hāshim's speech turn, in which the main point he is trying to make is calling for a law criminalizing what he depicts as offenses to Islam and other religions (lines 887-8). While law proposals lie at the very heart of parliamentary work, the orator is pursuing this goal in rather unconventional ways, by making use of a specific language game, which departs from more traditional interventions in Parliament (e.g. Excerpt 2). By virtue of this language game, his speech turn is virtually turned into a sermon (*khuṭba*) and, correspondingly, the MP is transfigured into a preacher. As for relevancies, the indexation of a language game is never achieved once for all: language games are always pervasively emergent and need to be actualized through devices irreducible to the language game at work.

Right after the closing of the debate, Hāshim is remarkably given the floor in his quality of chairman of the commission in charge of religious affairs (lines 815-6). His intervening *ex officio* may explain the fact that his speech turn is one of the lengthiest in the whole debate, in an obvious departure from the parliamentary practical grammar. Like other MPs (11 out of 25), he acknowledges his floor-taking by means of a set expression called *al-basmalah* (line 817), thus forecasting the Islamic relevance, before procedurally addressing to the speaker. Then, he contrasts the anteriority of the topic MPs were discussing (lines 817-20) with the fact that such a topic is not opened for discussion (line 820-1). In the words of Heritage and Greatbatch, the comparison with a former affair coupled with the assertion concerning the very possibility to talk about the debated issue creates a puzzle that calls for resolution<sup>xi</sup>. Part of the solution is given under the shape of a verse

excerpted from the Koran (line 821-2), which is meant to apply to the subject under discussion, in a typical move as far as sermons are concerned — i.e. the embedment of a quotation from the Koran in the course of an argumentation. Yet, this is not enough to disambiguate the puzzle previously set. The punch line is delivered in a statement holding God's Word as intangible (lines 822-4), thus producing a first round of applause.

On the whole, seven salvos of applause scatter this speech turn, that is, a bit more than a third of the total number of applauses during the whole debate. Such a reflexive attitude on behalf of Hāshim's fellow MPs reminds of similar expressions of pragmatic alignment in the course of a sermon. It is as if the direct physical audience constituted by the MPs replaced interjections commonly heard at the mosque (e.g. "allāh!" or "āmīn!") with applauses, which are more appropriate in the institutional context of parliament.

Reaching at the sixth salvo of applause (line 878), and comforted by so many pragmatic alignments, the orator is making use of another typical device of the sermon, namely, scansion, employed here for the predication of the Islamic religion and community (lines 878-82). This predicative move is sustained by a second quotation from the Koran, in which the Islamic community is depicted as "the best community [ever] conceived of for men"<sup>xii</sup>. Then, the orator thrusts forward, by swearing twice to God (lines 884-5), that it would be so, only if the Prophet's teachings were applied, thus constituting both God and Prophet Muhammad as transcendental audiences. The logical linkage (so, line 887) of this argument with the main point defended here (i.e. promulgating a law that would criminalize offenses

to Islam) completes the intertwining of the parliamentary task of law proposal with the accomplishment of God's Word, in a kind of formulation<sup>xiii</sup>, which announces the closing of this sermon-like allocution.

The speech turn is closed with a device that elicits a final salvo of applause: a three parted-list. Consistently with the sermon language game, this latter is composed of two set-phrases referring to Islam. One is the traditional greeting in Islamic society, which also punctuates prayers, and which closes here both the list and the speech turn. The other is asserted twice and corresponds to the words used by the Prophet at the very end of his last sermon, precisely. This explicit reference to "the farewell sermon" (*khuṭbat al-waḍā'*) retrospectively gives the speech turn to be heard as having been instructed by the language game specific to the sermon.

Through this chapter, we have considered the social activity consisting in referring to Islam as a practical accomplishment. We have described three different devices through which participants to a debate in Parliament referred to Islam, namely, orienting towards specific relevancies, calling upon peculiar audiences, and exploring particular language games.

Mobilizing relevancies sets to the foreground the roundabouts of an unfolding debate. This is accomplished in a rather coercive fashion, insofar as it becomes difficult for prospective participants to retract from the "imposed" relevancies. Relevancies can overlap, as we have seen in the parliamentary session under study, where the Islamic, institutional and constitutional relevancies were closely intertwined. Parties to a debate can employ relevancies by themselves (cf. Excerpt

1), or they can rely to different kinds of audiences to “embody” them (cf. Excerpt 2). Audiences are multiple, by definition, and they can be either physical or virtual. They play an important role in the many orientations that a debate can take as it unfolds, as they allow to underscore partition lines between the different camps in presence, thus sealing antagonisms and alliances. If relevancies and audiences can interweave, they can also be embedded to sustain a specific language game, which is always contingent upon the specificities of the interactions in which it is used. The use of specific language games almost subliminally marks an orientation towards a specific relevance. As we have seen in Excerpt 3, the orator adopted some conventional forms of talk typical of a sermon preaching, thus marking his orientation towards the religious/Islamic relevance.

The close description that we have made of these devices as they actually appeared in the course of a parliamentary session proves that referring to Islam is not a monolithic and transcendental undertaking, merely amounting to the orientation towards a “set” corpus of authoritative sources (the Koran, the Sunna and fiqh). It is rather a practical achievement that has to be described in the actual context of its instantiation. Hence, only ethnography could provide us with the necessary tools to come up to the conclusion that the social activity of referring to Islam cannot be but the contextual product of situated interactions informed by a cluster of various practices.

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<sup>i</sup> Garfinkel, Harold and Wieder, D. Laurence, 'Two Incommensurable, Asymmetrical Alternate Technologies of Social Analysis', in Graham Watson and Robert Seiler, eds, *Text in Context: Contributions to Ethnomethodology*, London, 1992, pp. 184s

<sup>ii</sup> The session is archived online (<http://www.parliament.gov.eg>).

<sup>iii</sup> Cf. Klaus, Enrique, Dupret, Baudouin, Ferrié, Jean-Noël, 'Derrière le voile : analyse d'un réseau dialogique égyptien', *Droits & Sociétés*, 68, 2008; Dupret, Baudouin, Klaus, Enrique, Ferrié, Jean-Noël, 'Scandal and Dialogical Network : What does Morality Do to Politics ? About the Islamic Headscarf within the Egyptian Parliament', in Richard Fitzgerald and William Housley, eds, *Media, Policy, and Interaction*, Surrey, 2009; and Dupret, Baudouin, Klaus, Enrique, Ferrié, Jean-Noël, 'Parlement et Contraintes Discursives. Analyse d'un Site Dialogique', *Réseaux*, 148-149, 2008

<sup>iv</sup> Ferrié, Jean-Noël, Dupret, Baudouin, Legrand, Vincent, 'Retour sur la politique délibérative en action : une position praxéologique', in *Revue française de science politique*, vol. 58, no. 5, October 2008, p. 798

<sup>v</sup> Ferrié, Jean-Noël, *Le régime de civilité en Égypte. Public et Réislamisation*, Paris, 2004

<sup>vi</sup> Cf. Leudar, Ivan, Marsland, Victoria, Nekvapil, Jiří, 'On Membership Categorization: 'us', 'them' and 'doing violence' in Political Discourse', in *Discourse & Society*, 15 (2-3), 2004

<sup>vii</sup> A novel by Syrian writer Ḥāidar Ḥāidar, which was first published in Beirut in 1983 and was reprinted in Cairo in 2000, stirring up virulent demonstrations by Islamist militants who hold it as injurious for Islam.

<sup>viii</sup> Koran 24, 31

<sup>ix</sup> Koran 3, 110

<sup>x</sup> Literally: "hallā qad ballaghtu — allāhumma fa-ashhad"

<sup>xi</sup> Heritage, John, Greatbatch, David, 'Generating applause: a study of rhetoric and response at political party conferences', in *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 92, no. 1, 1986

<sup>xii</sup> Off the excerpt, the orator also uses a *hadīth*.

<sup>xiii</sup> Heritage, John, Watson, Rod, 'Formulations as Conversational Objects', in George Psathas, ed., *Everyday Language*, New York: Irvington Press, 1979