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Urban Anthropology: The MENA Region (Middle East and North Africa)

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For a long time, urban research was not a part of the “three central zones of theorizing within Middle East anthropology” identified by Lila Abu-Lughod (1989): “segmentation, the harem, and Islam.” Urban issues were more evident in orientalist studies during colonization and its aftermath when dealing with the “Islamic city” (Hourani and Stern 1970) – a perspective that was subsequently challenged (Eickelman 1981). However, research in urban anthropology has intensified as a result of massive urbanization in the MENA region over recent decades (Naciri and Raymond 1997). During the 1970s intense population growth (demographic transition) and rural-to-urban migration attracted the concern of various anthropologists (Sanjek 1990) about the ruralization of the city and its capacity to integrate these newcomers (Miller 2006). Anthropologists (and geographers) addressed this concern by focusing their surveys and research on urban practices, especially those taking place on the margins of the city (Berry-Chikhaoui and Deboulet 2000; Navez-Bouchanine 2005).

Morocco has been a prime focus of urban ethnography in the MENA region. During the 1970s two emblematic studies carried out there questioned the preoccupation with city centers: Pétonnet's (1972) study of the shantytown of Douar Doum on the outskirts of Rabat and Geertz's (1979) study of Sefrou's bazaar. Urban anthropology has now become one of the most important empirical and analytical prisms for analyzing societies in this region. This entry describes these main achievements and paradigms along three axes: urbanity and urban practices, public spaces, and urban culture.

Urbanity and urban practices

From the Persian Gulf to Morocco, via Yemen, Lebanon, or Egypt, the issue of urbanity (the social fact of being a city inhabitant) has been and remains a privileged entry point for urban anthropology. In his book dedicated to Aden and Beirut—two cities torn by political and community violence—Franck Mermier (2015) defines urbanity (*citadinité*) as both an “identity resource” and “a mode of identification and categorization.” It is an instrument for combining “the study of singular experiences of urban life with the study of the production of imaginary and social practices in relation to the processes of territorialization that characterize each city” (Mermier 2015, 169). Notably, in

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the postwar context, the city and the dynamics of urbanity have formed a field of questioning that is particularly prevalent in Lebanon: Brones (2010), for instance, focused on the reconstruction and management of ruins once peace returned.

In these studies on urban practices and belonging, the social organization of the city was often addressed. Michel Seurat's (1985) analysis of the communities in a Tripoli neighborhood during the Lebanese war, for example, drew on the Khaldunian notion of *'asabiyya* (group feeling). Bedouin tribal affiliation has sometimes received attention—as in Saudi Arabia (Akers 2001)—but several recent surveys, including two French doctoral theses, focused on the relationship of young adults to the city. Mariangela Gasparotto (2018, 2019) analyzes the urban practices of young inhabitants of Ramallah who have migrated from outside the town or who live in the surrounding refugee camps. Laure Assaf (2017, 2020) shows how foreign young adults born in Abu Dhabi use the interstices of urban spaces, such as informal spaces, vacant plots, or parking lots, to develop a sense of belonging to the city at a very local scale, thus bypassing the Emirati national community to which they have no access. Urban youth culture has also been interpreted as a public issue through religious activists leading a nationwide moral panic over young Saudis joyriding and skidding cars on Riyadh's avenues night after night (Ménoret 2014).

The organization of urban society has been also addressed through the professional and artistic practices and cultures of popular wedding musicians in Cairo (Puig 2006, 2010). Recently, research has taken up the question of urbanity through the study of sensory perceptions, particularly involving sound. Battesti and Puig (2016, 2020) have proposed a "sonic ecology" of the city: how residents collectively experience the sound dimensions of their urban territory, navigate between very different territories, and recognize and respond to them.

Public spaces

In MENA cities, new configurations of public spaces are emerging and replacing old forms. These spaces welcome "the contacts of different socio-economic categories," and are evolving toward "a certain diversity, a sexual and, to a lesser extent, generational mix" (Navez-Bouchanine 2005). Among these new configurations, for example, are new forms of commercial spaces, such as malls (Abaza 2006), but the appropriation and "reanimation" of downtown public spaces and parks in Cairo by the lower class also marks the invention of a unique urban, recreational ambiance. They did not reproduce the bourgeois ethos that used to prevail there but partially imported, expanded upon, and reinvented the urban models of their quarter of origin: self-control, density, and urban ambiance in a festive crowd, with new public norms of sociability and urbanity (Battesti 2006).

Focusing on the rise of café culture in the Beirut suburb of Dahiya during the 2000s after Israel's evacuation of its "security zone" in southern Lebanon, Lara Deeb and Mona Harb (2014) drew a map of the moral geography of leisure negotiated by middle-class Shiite youth. The regulation of interactions establishes the public quality of the place "in connection with exchange, anonymity and control," and along the Corniche of Beirut

“the performance of the city takes on its full value through the role that the inhabitants play in the situation’s experiment, and thus in the manner they present themselves in public: clothing, visibility, angle of view, proximity, surface of the scene, extent of movement, display or distance” (Delpal 2005, 142, 146).

The significant and permanent presence of foreign migrants in Arab cities contributes to diversity in public spaces through the multiplication of segregation (e.g., with “impossible citizenship” in Dubai for the Indian diaspora: Vora 2013) and the creation of migrant and minority centralities as well as interethnic meeting places. This fieldwork uses audio and visual methodologies to document the interactions between ethnic groups and their imprints on the sonic and visual spaces of the city, as in the Sabra market in Beirut (Kassatly, Puig, and Tabet 2016).

Urban culture

The urban territories, always multiple within the cities of the MENA region, are the scenes of urban microcultures—the fruits of different social, political, geographical, cultural, aesthetic, and sensory experiences of the city (Battesti and Puig 2011). Except for the ethnographic studies of Cairo’s middle class (De Koning 2005, 2009), researchers have focused on the *sha’abiyya*, the large lower class (Wikan 1980), which still manages to generate its own kind of political expression through everyday practices in Iran and in Egypt (Bayat 1996, 1997; Ghannam 2002). The megalopolis of Cairo has been a real laboratory of analysis for urban studies, no doubt triggered by the seminal work of Janet Abu-Lughod (1971). Here, suspicious of popular urban culture and collective life and averse to power sharing (Ghannam 1996), Egyptian governance structures have tried to weaken people’s ability to shape the city (Singerman 2009; Singerman and Amar 2006). However, the political mobilizations that led to the revolution of January 25, 2011, which lasted until Marshal al-Sissi took power in July 2013, were translated into visual occupations of Cairo through graffiti and murals over the walls, especially in the Tahrir Square area and Mohammed Mahmud Street (see Figure 1). Mona Abaza (2013) linked these expressions to the emergence of a “public culture of protest,” while Jessica Winegar (2016) noted the contrast between the widespread use of crude



Figure 1 Tahrir Square and the remains of the 25 January Revolution, Cairo, April 11, 2011. Source: Photo by Vincent Battesti.

language during the revolution and the parallel push for “purity,” which she describes as acts of aesthetic ordering.

Urban anthropology has greatly contributed to renewing our perception and understanding of the MENA region. As the region has become predominantly urban and the countryside itself is becoming urbanized, urban contexts attract most of the fieldwork undertaken by anthropologists. This research no longer has to claim the label of urban anthropology—gender studies currently has a prominent position, initiated by studies of the status of women, as in Cairo (Early 1993)—and this is probably justified when such research fails to analyze the ecological totality of the urban phenomenon. Moreover, the current trend tends to focus on the urban as a subject for a radical anthropological critique of capitalism (Kanna 2017). The urban phenomenon deserves a plural approach as situations are diverse and the region is complex.

SEE ALSO: Bazaar; Class; Class and Identity; Community-Based Ethnography; Demographic Transition; Ethnography; Ethnology; Leisure and Recreation, Anthropological Study of; Social and Cultural Anthropology; Urban Ecology; Urbanism; Urbanization and Urban Environments

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