
Why do traditional Muslim societies throughout North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia exhibit so many continuities? Why did the traditional society "work" and why are contemporary societies not "working?" Jamel Akbar's thesis is that when we look at the societal process that produced the traditional environment, we see that "patterns of responsibility in the traditional environment were different from those today and affected all aspects of the built environment." (p. 13). Concomitantly, "a society can improve the quality of its built environment by changing the patterns of responsibility that operate within it" (p. 14).

Jamel Akbar's theory is developed by abstracting the concept of responsibility, which is made up of the two concepts of claim and party. A party is a decision-making figure (from an individual to a family to a corporation) which has a claim of use, control, or ownership on something in the built environment. A street is owned by the government, controlled by a municipal board, and used by the community. A house is owned by a family but leased to another family which uses it. By determining very narrowly and strictly who owns, controls, and uses something in the built environment, we understand the patterns of responsibility which operate.

Using Venn diagrams of the interrelation of these three concepts of use, control, and ownership, Jamel Akbar comes up with five basic forms of responsibility. A family owning, controlling, and using a house is an example of the unified form of responsibility. The traditional street owned, controlled, and used by the Muslims is in a unified form of responsibility. The waqf (religious endowment) is an example of the dispersed form of responsibility, whereas a Qur'ān for instance is owned by God, controlled by a council, and used by a worshipper.

By focussing on patterns of responsibility, Jamel Akbar has been able to identify two kinds of change from traditional to contemporary environments. First, he notices that the identity of the party has changed. Whereas in traditional society the controlling party of the street was the community, in the form of the muhtasib, who was able to bring the disputing parties together, today the municipality controls the street. The remoteness and large size of the new controller hinders the functioning of the community. The second change is in the form of submission. In traditional society, we see most often the unified form of submission where one party owns, controls, and uses. In contemporary society, we see most often the permissive form of submission, where the state owns and controls, and allows the community to use.

Jamel Akbar's examination of legal issues concerning the environment in Islam reveals a common thread of non-intervention as the preferred mode of legislation. His study of Baghdad leads him to conclude that "intervention..."
by the authorities was minimal, and the town's growth was managed by expanding parties, who, in the case of disputes, were forced to communicate." (p. 92).

One of the continuities which deserves further exploration is this tendency in traditional legal practice to let communities solve problems within the community by bringing disputants together and allowing them to communicate. One theme of law brought out by Jamel Akbar is that contemporary regulations are prescriptive, while traditional ones are proscriptive. "Proscriptive principles imply that what is not forbidden is allowed, increase the parties' control and establish relationships between neighbours through agreements." (p. 145). Prescriptive principles, on the other hand, are removed from the community. Decision-makers believe that their regulations are principles which should not be changed regardless of their validity. (p. 143). Of course from the traditional Islamic viewpoint, such regulation-making is akin to creating a new law, implying that God's law is lacking.

We need to emphasize two points about Islamic law. The law's basis is a common ground. Muslims know that it is God's law that is being interpreted. But next to this solidity is a fluidity of actual practice. The way relationships are conducted according to Islamic law is part of the Muslim's worship of God. There is one reason, therefore, for communal activity; there are a myriad of actual expressions of this single minded worship.

Any model of the built environment must be complex and holistic. Jamel Akbar writes that "built environments are complex, interdependent urban systems. They depend on a succession of events which may not be linear." (p. 146). Jamel Akbar is calling for a historical methodology sensitive to religion and culture. His anecdotes of intervention gone wrong emphasize the hazards of isolating problems, narrowly defining objectives, and choosing the simplest and most direct intervention. (Holling and Goldberg). He might have added that the proclivity to intervene with technically advanced tools also contributes to disasters.

Although Jamel Akbar does see the built environment as complex and holistic, a major criticism of his book is that his abstract model, well suited to a description of patterns of responsibility, does not provide the means for assessing the actual processes changing the traditional built environment. His model allows us to see the result of centralized, remote, big authority; but we do not understand it. His book is not about modernization itself, but it could be. In fact, researchers developing theories about the disruptive process of modernization should consider much of their work done by Jamel Akbar's study. But even so, we must know how the process, which creates a traditional society, works. If there can be no traditional society surrounded by American cultural imperialism or the secular world system, his book is a historical investigation. But because he claims to be describing how societies can improve their built environment by changing patterns of responsibility, (p. 14), he must be faulted for leaving untouched the issue of the penetration of an anti-traditional world system.

The photographs in the book include a fascinating look at ingenious and creative solutions in the built environment, drawn largely from Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia. The photographs are well integrated into the book.
Jamel Akbar's book is a powerful description of how the traditional Muslim society worked and a powerful explanation of why contemporary societies do not work. One conclusion is that "the major difference between the traditional and contemporary environment is in the percentage of owning parties who control. This percentage is much higher in the traditional built environment than in today's centralized cities, with the inevitable consequence of a large number of people who neither own nor control. People who neither own nor control are irresponsible and dissipate the resources of the society." (p. 200). He has aptly shown how Islamic law can be both eternal, fixed, and sacred besides being fluid and practical. This book offers insights and useful perspectives to everyone interested in the traditional society and in Islam, in subjects ranging from architecture, city planning, to Islamic Revival.

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