

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-27407-4 - Muslim Society  
Ernest Gellner  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

Of all the great world religions, Islam appears to have the most powerful political appeal in the twentieth century. It sustains some severely traditional and conservative regimes, but it is also capable of generating intense revolutionary ardour and of blending with extreme social radicalism. As an agent of political mobilisation, it seems to be overtaking Marxism, and surpassing all other religions.

The present book seeks the roots of this situation in the past. The traditional Muslim society of the arid zone has, in the past, displayed remarkable stability and homogeneity, despite great political fragmentation and the absence of a centralised religious hierarchy. The book explores the mechanisms which have contributed to this result – a civilisation in which (in the main) weak states co-existed with a strong culture, which had a powerful hold over the populations under its sway. A literate Great Tradition, in the keeping of urban scholars, lived side by side with a more emotive, ecstatic folk tradition, in the keeping of holy lineages, religious brotherhoods and freelance saints. One tradition was sustained by the urban trading class and periodically swept the rest of the society in waves of revivalist enthusiasm; the other was based on the multiple functions it performed in rural tribal society and amongst the urban poor. The two traditions were intertwined yet remained in latent tension which from time to time came to the surface.

The book traces the manner in which the impact of the modern world, acting through colonialism and industrialisation, upset the once stable balance, and helped the erstwhile urban Great Tradition to become the pervasive and dominant one, culminating in the zealous and radical Islam which is so prominent now. The argument is both formulated in the abstract and illustrated by a series of case studies and examinations of specific aspects, and critical examinations of rival interpretations.

The cover illustration shows a view of the Iron Mountains from the plains of Akkurmute, from an engraving by J. C. Stadler after a drawing by J. G. Jackson in Jackson's *An Account of the Empire of Morocco*, London 1811.

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-27407-4 - Muslim Society  
Ernest Gellner  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

*Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology*

*General Editor: Jack Goody*

32

MUSLIM SOCIETY

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-27407-4 - Muslim Society  
Ernest Gellner  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

'The boldest and most ingenious... attempt in recent years to present a general account of the fundamental features of social life in the Islamic World.'

Clifford Geertz, *New York Review of Books*

'Building on the Khaldunian core Professor Gellner has provided us with a series of brilliant essays whose sustained originality, compact argumentation and pervasive wit cannot be adequately described in a review of limited length.'

Serif Mardin, *Government and Opposition*

'The vast amount of information it contains, together with the questions which it successfully raises, makes this in any case the kind of exposé that can be read with genuine intellectual pleasure. Whatever the debate it may provoke amongst specialists, it has enriched the way in which we look at the Muslim world.'

Jacques Berque, *The Times Literary Supplement*

'His conclusions are supported by a keen observation and wide knowledge of his subject, but because they are based exclusively on the North African political scene, how applicable they are elsewhere in the Muslim world remains a question. Nevertheless, Gellner has made an important contribution to the study of Islamic culture.'

Abbas Kelidar, *SOAS Bulletin*

'Brilliant work... Professor Gellner has contributed a work to this field that all scholars of Islam, and especially those who uphold the faith, must read with care.'

M. A. Zaki Badawi, *Arabia*

'The revival of Islam... proves to be an apparently insuperable obstacle to modernization, Western-style. From Morocco to Indonesia there are signs of unrest, of the desire for "purification", with Iran merely the most spectacular illustration. Professor Ernest Gellner is almost uniquely qualified to discuss the implications of this development.'

Ralf Dahrendorf, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-27407-4 - Muslim Society  
Ernest Gellner  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

# Muslim society

ERNEST GELLNER



Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-27407-4 - Muslim Society  
Ernest Gellner  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211 USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1981

First published 1981  
First paperback edition 1983  
Reprinted 1984, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1995

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Gellner, Ernest  
Muslim society. – (Cambridge studies in  
social anthropology; vol. 32 ISSN 0068-6794).  
1. Islamic countries – Social conditions  
I. Title II. Series  
301'.09'7'671 HN768.A8 80-41103  
ISBN 0 521 22160 9 hard covers  
ISBN 0 521 27407 9 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2000

## Contents

Preface	<i>page</i>	vii
Acknowledgements		ix
1 Flux and reflux in the faith of men		1
2 Cohesion and identity: the Maghreb from Ibn Khaldun to Emile Durkheim		86
3 Post-traditional forms in Islam: the turf and trade, and votes and peanuts		99
4 Doctor and saint		114
5 Sanctity, puritanism, secularisation and nationalism in North Africa: a case study		131
6 The unknown Apollo of Biskra: the social base of Algerian puritanism		149
7 Trousers in Tunisia		174
8 The sociology of Robert Montagne (1893–1954)		179
9 Patterns of rural rebellion in Morocco during the early years of independence		194
10 Saints and their descendants		207
11 The marabouts in the market-place		214
12 Rulers and tribesmen		221
Notes		231
Bibliography of Ernest Gellner's North African writings		247
Index		252

## Preface

The themes expounded in this book have been gestating for over a quarter of a century, ever since I first visited central Morocco, and my first debt was to those of its inhabitants who tolerated my intrusion. The central ideas are plainly stolen from four great thinkers – Ibn Khaldun, David Hume, Robert Montagne, and Edward Evans-Pritchard. The stream that started in the central High Atlas with fieldwork experience was fed, over the years, by many others – notably by systematic attention to the work of other ethnographers working in the Muslim world. Much of that work was only being produced during that period, and my next debt is to all those anthropologists who shared their ideas and data with me, very often prior to publication. (My attention to historical work was less systematic, as no doubt will be evident to readers.) During much of this period, I took part in running a seminar on the sociology of Islam. Obviously I am indebted to all those who contributed to it with papers or in discussion – often, I imagine, without being fully aware of my debt. They are too numerous for exhaustive listing. Of those who helped in running the seminar, I should single out Michael Gilsenan and Jean-Claude Vatin for special gratitude. North Africans (or persons of North African background) from whose ideas, information or impressions I have benefited are too numerous to list, but they include Germaine Ayache, Alya Baffoun, Genevieve Bedoucha-Albergoni, Lakhdar Brahimi, Fanny Colonna, Jeanne Favret, Ahmed Guessous, Ahmed Guezmir, Abdallah Hammoudi, Youssef Hazmaoui, Marie-Aimée Helie-Lucas, Elbaki Hermassi, Abdelkader Khatibi, Mouhsine Mbarek, Ali Merad, Fatima Mernissi, Taoufik Monastiri, Paul Pascon, Moncer Rouissi, Mohamed Saadani, Paul Sebag, Slimane and Souad Shikh, Nouredine Sraieb, Frej Stambouli, Larbi Talha, Lucette Valensi, and Abdelkader Zghal. Over the years, many secretaries have patiently and generously helped me with the MSS: Mrs E. Llewellyn, Miss K. Phillips, Mrs H. Frankiss, Miss Helen Wheeler, Mrs Thelma O'Brien, Miss Margaret Kosowicz and Mrs Gay Woolven. The final preparation of the main introductory essay of the volume was only possible thanks to the support of the Centre de Recherches et d'Études sur les Sociétés Méditerranéennes in Aix-en-Provence, and my thanks are due to its Director, Maurice Flory, and to all its staff. Mrs Elizabeth Wetton and Ian Jarvie

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-27407-4 - Muslim Society  
Ernest Gellner  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

### *Preface*

guided the MSS to acceptable form with admirable patience, and Ian also supplied the admirable indexes. I am much indebted to Jack Goody for encouragement, as Editor of this series. My wife Susan helped me over the years in more ways than I can say. My son David has read the synoptic first chapter in its penultimate draft and pointed out weaknesses in the argument which I have done my best to camouflage. Katie Platt has been most helpful in checking references. All the people listed or indicated must bear some of the blame for this book appearing at all, but not for any of its specific assertions.

Froxfield,  
December 1979

Ernest Gellner



## Acknowledgements

The author thanks the editors of the following periodicals, in which some of the material collected in this volume has previously appeared: Chapter 1: not previously published; an earlier and very much shorter version appeared in *Annales Marocaines de Sociologie*, 1968, pp. 5–14, and in *Philosophical Forum*, vol. 2, 1970, pp. 234–44. Chapter 2 was originally presented in Tunis in 1974 at a conference marking the fortieth anniversary of the Neo-Destour Party, and was published in the *Cahiers du C.E.R.E.S.*, Tunis, and in *Government and Opposition*, vol. 10, 1975, pp. 203–18. Chapter 3: *Daedalus*, vol. 102, 1973, pp. 191–206. Chapter 4: in Nikki R. Keddie, ed., *Scholars, Saints and Sufis*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1972, pp. 307–26. Chapter 5: *Archives de Sociologie des Religions*, no. 15, 1963, pp. 71–86. Chapter 6: *Government and Opposition*, vol. 9, 1974, pp. 277–310. Chapter 7: *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 14, 1978, pp. 127–30. Chapter 8: *Daedalus*, vol. 105, 1976, pp. 137–50. Chapter 9: *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 3, 1962, pp. 297–311. Chapter 10: *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 3857, 13 February 1976, p. 164. Chapter 11: *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 3936, 19 August 1977, p. 1011. Chapter 12: *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 15, 1979, pp. 106–13.

Unless otherwise stated, all quotations have been translated by Ernest Gellner. References in previously published material to contemporary events have been allowed to stand. The epigraph quotations from Ibn Khaldun are drawn from the F. Rosenthal translation.

**Leadership exists only through superiority, and superiority only through group feeling.**

**Only tribes held together by group feeling can live in the desert.**

. . . inhabitants of cities can have a 'house' [i.e. kin group] only in a metaphorical sense. The assumption that they possess one is a specious claim . . .

. . . while the Bedouin need the cities for the necessities of life, the urban population need the Bedouin [only] for conveniences and luxuries. Thus, as long as they live in the desert and have not acquired royal authority and control of the cities, the Bedouin need the townsmen . . .

Mutual aggression in the cities is averted . . . by government . . . the masses are thus prevented . . . from mutual injustice, save such as comes from the ruler himself.

. . . dynasty and government serve as the world's greatest market-place . . . if the ruler holds on to property and revenue . . . business slumps and commercial profits decline . . . the dynasty . . . suffers . . . because under these circumstances the property of the ruler decreases . . .

*Ibn Khaldun*

. . . the principles of religion have a kind of flux and reflux . . . and . . . men have a natural tendency to rise from idolatry to theism, and to sink again from theism to idolatry.

. . . superstition is favourable to priestly power, and enthusiasm . . . more contrary to it, than sound reason and philosophy . . .

*David Hume*