

# **The Secrets of Fariba Adelkhah's Anthropology**

## Intimacy and Mobility

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## The Secrets of Fariba Adelhah's Anthropology. Intimacy and Mobility

### Abstract

Fariba Adelhah's anthropology gives an original twist to Bronislaw Malinowski's classical prescriptions for "participant observation" and "being on the spot" – for him the condition for doing full justice "to the imponderabilia of every life." For Fariba such an approach has been most productive for understanding the kaleidoscopic and often unexpected effects of an authoritarian regime – of which Iran seems to be an extreme example – in everyday life. Her work offers, therefore, seminal views on the possibilities of an anthropological approach to highlight the "underside" of authoritarianism. For her this means also a deep distrust against the binary oppositions – often carried by the present-day turn to identity politics all over the world – which risk to block a deeper understanding of developments not only in Iran; similar simplistic oppositions seem to make a return in present-day anthropology in general. This article is a tribute to her courage now that she is becoming a victim of such binary thinking, but also to her creativity in overcoming these barriers to academic research.



## Les secrets de l'anthropologie de Fariba Adelhah. Intimité et mobilité Résumé

L'anthropologie de Fariba Adelhah donne une tournure originale aux prescriptions classiques de Bronislaw Malinowski en matière d'« observation participante » et de « présence sur le terrain », qui sont pour lui la condition pour rendre pleinement justice « aux impondérables de chaque vie ». Pour Fariba Adelhah, une telle approche s'est avérée très productive pour comprendre les effets kaléidoscopiques et souvent inattendus d'un régime autoritaire – dont l'Iran semble être un exemple extrême – dans la vie quotidienne. Son travail offre par conséquent des vues séminales sur les possibilités d'une approche anthropologique pour mettre en évidence les « dessous » de l'autoritarisme. Pour elle, cela signifie également une profonde méfiance à l'égard des oppositions binaires – souvent véhiculées par la tendance actuelle à la politique identitaire dans le monde entier – qui empêchent une compréhension plus profonde des développements, et pas seulement en Iran. Des oppositions simplistes similaires semblent faire un retour dans l'anthropologie actuelle en général. Cet article est un hommage à son courage maintenant qu'elle est victime d'une telle pensée binaire, mais aussi à sa créativité pour surmonter ces obstacles à la recherche universitaire.



### Keywords

Anthropological approach; authoritarianism; binaries; Fariba Adelhah; fieldwork; mobility; multi-sited mobility.



### Mots-clés

Approche anthropologique ; autoritarisme ; Fariba Adelhah ; mobilité ; oppositions binaires ; terrain multi-situé.

*Pour le sixième temps de notre réflexion collective sur la liberté scientifique, Sociétés Politiques Comparées publie trois contributions qui, de façon différente mais convergente, mettent en évidence des ressorts de la violation de la liberté intellectuelle et scientifique, ressorts internes aux situations autoritaires et qui tous ont trait aux idées et aux visions du monde.*

*Peter Geschiere le fait à travers son hommage à l'anthropologue qu'est notre collègue et amie Fariba Adelkhah, laquelle fêtait, le 5 juin dernier, le triste anniversaire de ses trois années d'emprisonnement à Evin, la célèbre prison de Téhéran. En insérant le travail de Fariba dans les pas des grands noms de la discipline et en montrant ses apports sur les questions cruciales du terrain et de l'observation participante, Peter Geschiere souligne en creux l'un des ressorts les plus efficaces de la violation de la liberté scientifique : la pensée binaire et ses catégories structurantes de la vie politique. Ce sont en revanche l'instrumentalisation de la justice et peut-être plus encore les atteintes aux modes de vie et à la vie quotidienne elle-même (dans ce qu'elle a aussi d'émotive et d'intérieur, dans ses conceptions et rapports aux autres nécessairement pluriels) que met au jour Osman Kavala. Dans un court mais intense texte sous la forme d'une ode aux arbres et à la force qu'ils apportent, ce dernier nous offre sa lecture du « procès » de Gezi qui a eu lieu à Istanbul en avril 2022 et au terme duquel il a été condamné à la perpétuité. Marek Węcowski quant à lui décortique l'idéologie du parti au pouvoir en Pologne et ses conceptions de l'histoire dans les contraintes qui pèsent sur les intellectuels, à commencer par les historiens. Il montre comment la guerre en Ukraine renforce cette lecture mythique de la grandeur du pays et risque d'accentuer encore davantage les attaques contre la science.*

How could Fariba build up such a rich body of work on Iran, a country that for quite some time was considered by many as a no-go area? The first answer is of course through the great personal courage that she continues to show during the deprivations over the last three years. But in her own writings she suggests another answer as well: her anthropological approach. Clearly she is quite proud of being an anthropologist, and she feels that it is through her anthropological approach that she has special insights to contribute to our understanding of the complex developments in her native country. When I first met her at the end of the 1980s, I could not help wondering how she would fare as a young anthropologist in the CERi, then and now mainly populated by political scientists. But of course, the centre has been (and is) an ideal environment for her. As far as I know it is about the only political science centre in the world where people are truly interested in what an anthropologist can contribute and are happy to create space for a colleague from this other discipline.

But what is special about Fariba's anthropology? Going through her work the answer came for me a bit as a surprise. It is a combination of two elements that do not seem to be that easy to reconcile at first sight: intimacy and mobility which, in combination, have enabled her to develop a special take on people's everyday life. Clearly it is a combination that has special advantages in an authoritarian context. "Being there" – or rather "having been there" – has become a hallmark of anthropology ever since Bronislaw Malinowski in the 1920s turned fieldwork into a must for an ethnographer<sup>1</sup>. And despite all subsequent doubts about his guidelines, the idea that participating in people's everyday life is a rich source of information is generally upheld in the discipline. It is quite clear that Fariba brought a special talent for intimacy – becoming a part of... – to such an undertaking. However, combining this with mobility – and much of Fariba's work breathes a true lust for travelling – has become a challenge in anthropology. The very idea of fieldwork suggests a spatial circumscription; so, how then to deal with the simple fact that people travel (and even if they do not do this, still dream of it) has been an issue for consecutive generations of anthropologists. In her work – clearly inspired by one of her teachers, Gérard Althabe, and his style of an

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<sup>1</sup> Malinowski 1922.

anthropology engaging with contemporary issues in a global setting – Fariba developed original ways of combining intimacy and mobility that give her anthropology its evocative and vivid charm.

In this brief text I first want to follow the trajectory of both ideas – intimacy and mobility – in our discipline in general, and their special manifestations in Fariba’s work. Then I want to address another fundamental element in her work that seems for her to follow from combining mobility and intimacy: her constant resistance to binary oppositions. It is this principled stance that gives her work such great relevance in the Iranian setting, determined as it appears to be – also in the view of many academics – by well-known binaries like religious versus secular; state versus society; traditional versus modern. The great merit of Fariba’s work on everyday life is that it shows instead a kaleidoscopic assemblage in which nothing is what it seems to be, exhibiting unexpected linkages, constantly shifting and producing hybrid forms. It is also this stubborn refusal of simplistic oppositions – that may have their use for activists but for Fariba function as an alarm when they turn up in an analysis with academic pretensions – that gives her work much broader relevance. To throw in a polemical note (and I am not sure whether Fariba will go along with me on this): her work implies also a warning, for instance, for the ethical reveille that risks dividing our discipline itself in an easy opposition between “predators” and “survivors.” An anthropology that seeks to erase ambiguity and the poly-interpretability of signs has no future. For me this is the main message of the way Fariba works with ideas from our discipline.

### INTIMACY: THE PROMISES AND CHALLENGES OF FIELDWORK

The classic story of anthropology and fieldwork – at least as I was taught it as an anthropology student in the 1960s in the Netherlands – turns around the audacious decision made by Bronislaw Malinowski. In 1914 this Polish anthropologist who was to become an iconic figure in the crystallization of anthropology as a discipline, set up his tent *inside* the Trobriand village he wanted to study. Malinowski, born in 1884 in a part of Poland that at the time was annexed by the Austria-Hungary empire, happened to be in Australia when the First World War broke out. Threatened to be interned because of his status of citizen of a hostile country, he asked for permission to settle in an area where he could do research. After living for some time at a mission station on the island he decided, however, to go and live among the “natives” themselves. He came to defend such a choice as a condition for proper anthropological research, criticizing his predecessors as “arm-chair anthropologists.” Fieldwork, implying living for longer periods of time among the “natives,” and “participant observation” became for him essential for studying the “imponderabilia of everyday life.”<sup>2</sup> Following the publication of his much acclaimed monograph *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*<sup>3</sup> such a vision became increasingly the hallmark of the discipline, making anthropologists who could not boast of a decent period of fieldwork – preferably far-out and resulting in a monograph – struggle with some sort of a minority complex.

Of course the story is more complex than this. A difficult moment was the posthumous publication of Malinowski’s diaries (originally written in Polish) in 1967.<sup>4</sup> It turned out to be full of egocentric lamentations, racist remarks and scorn for many aspects of “native” life that clearly did not correspond to the happy feelings an anthropologist in the field was supposed to have. A major shift in the debates about fieldwork, was the discovery that it could also be done in “more complex” societies – not only on Pacific islands, among African “tribes” or “native Americans” but also in peasant societies and increasingly also in anthropologists’ own society.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the idea of fieldwork as a necessary initiation of the anthropologist into the discipline

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<sup>2</sup> See also Murdock 1943.

<sup>3</sup> Malinowski 1922.

<sup>4</sup> Malinowski 1967.

<sup>5</sup> A forerunner in this respect was American anthropologist Robert Redfield doing fieldwork in a Mexican village (Redfield 1930). It was notably the turn – several decades later – towards working in the anthropologist’s own society that served to overcome the distinction, common for some time, between sociology as the discipline of academics working on complex societies versus anthropology as supposedly studying “simpler” societies.

remained for quite some time special to Anglo-Saxon contexts; it spread only gradually in other national traditions. When I began my fieldwork in Cameroon, in 1971, I was struck by the fact that many French colleagues still talked about “*une excursion dans le terrain*,” going from one research station to the next one. German colleagues remained focused on material culture for quite some time, in those days mainly linked to museal projects. But the main turn that affected anthropological ways of doing research throughout the world was the “writing culture” debate of the 1980s because it quite clearly related fieldwork to power differences, and in this sense converged with the debate, started somewhat earlier about the colonial roots of anthropology.<sup>6</sup> Fieldwork could no longer be seen as just gathering information. It necessarily took place in a context of the power differences of the (post-)colonial context, but also in the relation between anthropologists and their interlocutors.

Another question was whether Malinowski was really the first one making the step “from the verandah” into “the field.” Clearly the step from the armchair to “participating observation” was in the air in the beginning of the twentieth century. In Cameroon, for instance, Günther Tessmann developed, already in 1905, an original research style that allowed him to live for months on end in a series of Fang villages just over the border with “Spanish Guinea” in an area claimed by the Spanish but not yet occupied by them. Tessmann’s plan was to finance his own research through elephant-hunting and the sale of the tusks. This seemed a risky business to his German fellowmen. But he soon discovered that he could strike a mutually satisfactory arrangement with the villages in the area: he allowed a local hunter to use his gun, then he would have his assistants sell the tusk towards the coast, while the villages would have the meat and he had time for his research activities. This formula worked quite well for some time. It allowed Tessmann to build research stations in three consecutive villages, where he would settle with his assistants and have all the time for research. Tessmann’s approach to research had strong military overtones (each morning a small military parade, assistants were regularly whipped). Yet it allowed him to live among the Fang, share not only the “imponderabilia of everyday life” but also participate in their spectacular rituals (no longer performed today, which makes Tessmann’s monograph and his very detailed descriptions a true treasure box for present-day Fang). Indeed, it was this very proximity that turned Tessmann into an anthropologist; earlier his main interest had been plant and animal specimens.<sup>7</sup>

In his *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, the prominent American anthropologist Clifford Geertz<sup>8</sup> (published in 1988, at the time of the *Writing Culture* debate) offered a biting analysis of the way classical anthropologists (notably Malinowski’s students) opened their monograph with an arrival scene. The styles of these introductions differ – sometimes quite epical, sometimes more mundane – but the message is the same: the introduction has to assure the reader that the anthropologist has been there. The other message is that one way or another, and despite initial misunderstandings, the anthropologist and the locals managed to come to some sort of exchange. Power and power difference are mostly neglected in such introductions. But Geertz’ analysis – despite all the irony at anthropologists’ ways of introducing themselves – shows also that “being there” did matter. Even with Tessmann’s military style of “fieldwork,” proximity<sup>9</sup> – the simple fact that he managed to spend longer periods of time on the spot – did help gaining certain insights. Even if there are many reasons to debunk the classic story of anthropology seeing the light through Malinowski’s courageous decision in 1914, and even if there are many different styles of doing fieldwork, the basic idea that being on the spot – not just for a visit but “doing time” – gives anthropologists certain advantages in understanding the “imponderabilia of everyday life” has become basic to the discipline.

But how about Fariba’s anthropology? How can we relate her particular style of doing fieldwork and “being there” to these long and tortuous discussions within the discipline? Fariba’s ethnography is clearly

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<sup>6</sup> On the “writing culture” debate, see Clifford and Marcus 1986 and Clifford 1988; on anthropology and colonialism see Leclerc 1972 and Asad 1973.

<sup>7</sup> See Tessmann 1913 and Geschiere and Orock 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Geertz 1988.

<sup>9</sup> Tessmann 1913.

circumscribed by power but in a quite different sense as signaled above. With her, the ethnographic approach of being there and joining people's everyday life is a way to find out what is hidden behind a regime that presents itself as highly authoritarian and as being in control of every aspect of people's life. In a certain sense Fariba uses ethnography to show "the underneath" of authoritarianism – to borrow an expression Mariane Ferme<sup>9</sup> used in her visionary ethnography of power struggles in Sierra Leone. Authoritarian leaders may be keen to show, in Iran as elsewhere, a well-polished surface – everything under control – but Fariba's rich descriptions of everyday life show the cracks underneath this shining surface: inconsistencies in the control mechanisms, allowing people to deal with prescriptions in their own ways, internal factionalism and misunderstandings. What from the outside seems to be a closed front turns out to be a precarious assemblage in everyday life, full of unexpected turns. This is the force of an ethnography that gives full rein to "the imponderabilia of the everyday." Of course, to achieve all this, just "being there" is not enough. Fieldwork will only work if the researcher has patience, does not try to deduce too quickly a coherent story from everyday imponderabilia but is prepared to listen and respect what people say. A critical eye may suit a journalist, but an ethnographer might rather take things people say at face value, at least initially; the truth – if there is such a thing – should emerge by itself when observations and other data keep piling up. All these particularities stand out from Fariba's work. In all the different settings where she worked – in the everyday of South Teheran or among rich Iranian migrants in California, among the Hazara minority in Afghanistan or among Iranians in the rough side of Tokyo – she succeeded in creating an intimacy with her interlocutors that made them share experiences, ideas and suppositions. This is why her work is so effective in showing the other side of authoritarianism. This is also – and here we touch already upon the wider relevance of her approach – why she shuns any easy binary opposition: Fariba loves to show that reality is always more complex and outcomes can be ironical or even perverse. This is why her work is so very much alive!

### THE OTHER POLE: MOBILITY

As said, Fariba's fascination with movement, with creating ever wider networks – by *bazari* people (is it this mobile quality that makes Fariba so interested in the bazar?) but also by religious experts – and looking for open spaces, seems to sit somewhat uneasily with the localizing implications of the notion of fieldwork on the spot. Again, we touch here upon an aspect that has a longer history in anthropological debates about ethnography. Right from the emergence of ideas of fieldwork and participant observation as hallmarks of the discipline, the stabilizing implications of the term became a problem for the simple fact that people do move, and that ethnography had to be capable of dealing with this. The idea of the "primitive isolate" as the proper setting for anthropological research – first Pacific islands, later African and Amazonian "tribes" – was in practice impossible to maintain. Some tried to save this idea by defending that anthropologists should abstract as much as possible from colonial influences (focusing on a hypothetical "point zero" in time – that is, the time just before colonial contact). But this raised the problem that, thus, anthropologists had to abstract from their own presence on the spot which mostly was inherently part of the colonial presence. Moreover, the discovery that all societies – the Pacific, Africa and Amazonia included – had followed highly dynamic trajectories, also in precolonial times, made both the idea of an "isolate" and a "point-zero-in-time" completely untenable.

In African anthropology, for instance, Max Gluckman's innovative "Manchester school" – so called because, its guru, South African by birth and undertaking fieldwork in southern Africa, became the first professor of anthropology at the University of Manchester in 1949 – made change and mobility central in a new style of anthropology<sup>10</sup>. Gluckman's students – Clyde Mitchell, Brian Epstein, Victor Turner, Jaap van Velzen – worked also mainly in southern Africa where migrant labor for the mines in South Africa and in the "copperbelt" (in present-day Zambia) had had great impact on local societies. This meant that they had to

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<sup>9</sup> Ferme 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Werbner 2020.

follow their interlocutors to the urban centers. In France, Georges Balandier similarly advocated to study African societies in the wider context of *la situation coloniale*.<sup>12</sup> Typically, this was seen at the time as an approach that put him in sociology, rather than in *ethnology* (anthropology). When I began my study in anthropology in the Netherlands there was still an institutional separation between anthropology and “non-western sociology” – the latter was supposed to deal with change and “more complex societies,” implicitly relegating anthropology to the study of stable, “primitive” societies. Subsequently, essays like the one by Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz on “creolization”<sup>13</sup> (mainly on the basis of his own research in Nigeria), did away with such distinctions between anthropology and sociology. Clearly anthropology had to face that the societies it studied were, even in cultural respect, the product of long-term exchanges and processes of hybridization through external contacts. This raised inevitably the question to what extent fieldwork could remain limited to “being on the spot” – indeed, to what extent could the field be spatially circumscribed? In 1995 American anthropologist George Marcus – also one of the initiators of the “Writing Culture” debate cited before – published a plea for “multi-sited ethnography”<sup>14</sup>: anthropologists should realize that the societies they studied were part and parcel of a “world-system”; so, one way or another fieldwork should deal with people’s open horizons. Around the same time Arjun Appadurai’s visionary plea<sup>15</sup> that anthropologists should study “scapes” – similarly unbounded as the idea of a “landscape” – effectively undermined the notion of fieldwork as self-evidently circumscribed by the spatial limits of “the” community under study. Clearly ever more incisive processes of globalization demanded a style of fieldwork and ethnography centered on people’s mobility and search for openings towards the outside.

Yet, it is important to realize that such opening up required quite a struggle within the discipline. A striking example were the hesitations by Jaap van Velsen, already mentioned as one of the anthropologists of the Manchester school. Van Velsen was the author of a pioneering contribution on “the extended case-method”<sup>16</sup> describing how in his research among the Tonga (present-day Malawi) this method had become the solution for his struggle with understanding “what made this society tick.”<sup>17</sup> The search for structural principles behind everyday realities that had made, for instance, Evans-Pritchard monograph on the Nuer<sup>18</sup> by then already a classical example of how to analyze fieldwork data, did not work for van Velsen among the Tonga. His solution was to examine in detail a serious conflict around a girl’s burial in the village where van Velsen had settled. By following how the conflict developed, involving ever more people bringing in ever new resources (material and ideational) the anthropologist began to discover regularities in the way people sought to solve the conflict. Van Velsen’s solution made quite an impression in the 1960s and 1970s since it suggested also how ethnographers could deal with the challenge – ever more pregnant in situations where local societies’ involvement in wider processes of change became ever more manifest – of including such wider perspectives in a still locally oriented fieldwork practice. By ever extending such case-studies the researcher is automatically taken along by the ways in which local actors mobilize outside contacts, drawing the circles ever wider. Thus, anthropology’s case study method, as propagated by van Velsen and his colleagues of the Manchester school, foreshadowed in many ways the work of Italian “micro-historians” like Carlo Ginzburg<sup>19</sup> or Giovanni Levi<sup>20</sup> but also the *sociologie historique et comparée du politique* as developed by Jean-François Bayart<sup>21</sup> who in many respects was Fariba’s mentor during her introduction into CERI’s political science world.

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<sup>12</sup> Balandier 1951.

<sup>13</sup> Hannerz 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Marcus 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Appadurai 1996.

<sup>16</sup> Van Velsen 1967.

<sup>17</sup> See also Michael Burawoy (1998) invoking van Velsen’s article on the extended case method as a source of inspiration for further developing qualitative methods in sociology.

<sup>18</sup> Evans-Pritchard 1940.

<sup>19</sup> Ginzburg 1983 [1966].

<sup>20</sup> Levi 1989.

<sup>21</sup> See Bayart 2022 for his recent summation of this approach.

For Fariba, anthropology must have been right from the start about mobility and the opening up of new horizons. Indeed, her last book, evocatively titled *The Thousand and One Borders of Iran: Travel and Identity* (in French, *Les Mille et une frontières de l'Iran. Quand les voyages forment la nation*),<sup>22</sup> suggests that it was travelling and border crossing that made her interested in anthropology – in what this discipline could do to capture her fascination with how people create new worlds for themselves. Her title suggests already her focus on mobility as ambiguous and inherently contradictory. It is not the border but rather border-crossing – the porosity of borders – that is crucial in people's national identification, and it remains to be seen whether Iranians are special in this respect.<sup>23</sup> The poetic title of another article,<sup>24</sup> “Partir sans quitter – Quitter sans partir” (Taking off without leaving – leaving without taking-off) similarly points to basic ambiguities: some people live with a travelling project without ever leaving, but those who do take off often are still there in all sorts of respects. It is clear in any case that such insights made Fariba opt for a multi-sited approach to fieldwork. Also, in this respect her work is at the cutting edge of debates on ethnography in the discipline. But again, such an approach requires special talents: not only a love for travelling but also a readiness to adapt oneself to very different life-styles. The ease with which she succeeded in becoming familiar with migrants in Los Angeles and Herat, in Dubai and Khorramchahr (an Arab-Iranian city on the border with Iraq, turned into a war museum) shows that Fariba has what it takes to reconcile intimacy with mobility in the practice of fieldwork.

### A PILGRIMAGE AS FIELDWORK

An ethnographic gem and a superb example of how Fariba succeeds in linking these two poles – intimacy and mobility, quite difficult to reconcile – is her 2009 text “The Moral Economy of Pilgrimage and Civil Society in Iran: Religious, Commercial and Tourist Trips to Damascus”.<sup>25</sup> In just 17 pages Fariba offers a vivid sketch of being on the road with a group of 45 women for 14 days but also a sharp analysis of the implications and the changing dynamics of such an apparently “traditional” undertaking. The project was also a courageous choice, since for Fariba, apparently registered as normal participant, this meant not only being 14 days in the bus but also participating in all meals (communal) and the whole programme, strict and detailed. The group's destination was already some sort of a novelty since for Shia pilgrims the obvious places to visit are (next to Mecca and Mashhad) Karbala and Nadjaf. However, the two latter places are situated in present-day Irak, still difficult to visit for Iranians because of the traumas left by the war. Consequently, Damascus emerged as an alternative since it could boast of the graves of the sister and the daughter of imam Husayn plus his 72 companions also slain in the battle at Karbala. But this was not the only change in the pilgrimage world. New is also that women – mostly travelling in groups – are becoming an ever-larger contingent – which of course relates to a central trend in Fariba's analysis.

Striking is that throughout the text Fariba is very conscious of the conceptual dangers not only raised by current stereotypes, but also by anthropological concepts that at first sight seem to fit with such a pilgrimage project. In the text Fariba starts to signal her surprise that the conglomerate of participants – coming from quite different social backgrounds and moreover recruited through different channels – functioned throughout the heavy programme with neither problems nor open tensions. The smooth collaboration within the group on the basis of an apparent equality may make it tempting to refer to Victor Turner's well-known notion of *communitas* – the religious setting of the whole undertaking creating a space outside “normal” hierarchy. However, Fariba adds immediately that, at least in this case, the *communitas* notion as it came to circulate in a simplistic version among anthropologists, risks to obfuscate important ambiguities – remember

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<sup>22</sup> Adelhah 2016 (first in French, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Interestingly such insights make Fariba's work converge with a recent trend in African studies, envisioning the African as a “frontier-person,” basically “incomplete” and open, eager to cross borders whether it concerns national borders or separations between the visible and the invisible (see Nyamnjoh 2017, Meyer 2018, Mbembe 2016, and Guyer 1993).

<sup>24</sup> Adelhah 2003.

<sup>25</sup> See Adelhah 2009. A longer version of this study is published as a chapter in her 2012 book translated into English in 2016, pp. 38-53.



Malinowski's "imponderabilia of everyday life." Clearly Fariba has a good antenna for discovering inequality behind a show of equality and togetherness. One participant clearly had a special role, enjoining special privileges. She played a key-role in recruiting the participants – either through her personal contacts or through the agency involved. Moreover, since this was already her seventeenth pilgrimage to Damascus, she was in a position to orient the other women – even telling the driver to change his route. Setting up pilgrimage trips had become a true enterprise for her from which she deduced considerable prestige – which was reflected in special privileges she enjoyed throughout the trip (a special seat at the back of the bus where she could enjoy a nap and so on). Informal trade ("from the bag") turned out to be a crucial complement of the trip, creating again all sorts of inequalities and differences. Indeed, the official motive of the trip may have been religious, but in the everyday economic and religious activities intermingled so that it was often impossible to separate the two – which did not exclude that the visits to the graves were moments of deep religiosity.

More current stereotypes bite the dust as the article progresses. Precisely such a religious undertaking with heavy traditional overtones turned out to provide new opportunities for the women: not only their trading activities, enlarging these networks beyond the national borders – the logic of the bazar, which has such a central place in Fariba's work in general returns here through a special setting. More generally, the pilgrimage as it unfolded became an occasion for the women to assert their presence in the public domain, and even the limits the religious framework imposes turned out to be relative. A high point in Fariba's ethnography is the moment when the bus had to stop for a technical problem that could last a while. A gentleman passing by driving a donkey-car invited the women to get in his car to visit a near-by shrine. A few women accepted making the most of this additional excursion. a nearby shrine. Of course, this was a religious outing again, but also an occasion for much merry-making and spontaneity.

Striking is again the ease with which Fariba got involved with the group, most of them complete strangers to her. As in the other and completely different settings (South Teheran, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Afghanistan) where she worked, it is the very naturalness of her ethnography – the intimacy she succeeded in creating – that makes a show of self-reflexivity superfluous. The stories her interlocutors told her suffice to articulate how they saw her and why they liked talking to her.

### OVERCOMING BINARY OPPOSITIONS

As the preceding may have suggested already, for Fariba opting for an anthropological approach and doing fieldwork clearly mean overcoming the binary oppositions that seem to dominate perspectives on Iran – both among outside observers and insiders. Indeed, the great merit of her work – also beyond the field of Iranian studies – is her determined struggle not to be captured by such stereotypes. In this sense there is a straight line from Malinowski's plea for fieldwork on the spot, as a precondition for getting access to the "imponderabilia of the everyday life", to Fariba's approach. In her programmatic 2007 text "Islamophobic et malaise dans l'anthropologie," (Islamophobia and malaise in anthropology) she discusses with some impatience a whole series of conceptual oppositions that in her view can explain the stalemate of both social science *and* activism in Iran: the veil as an icon of terrorism or, in contrast, of respect; Islamists versus secularists; despotism versus freedom. But also state versus society; politics versus religion; the 1979 revolution as radical innovation or bridge to the past. In such a polarized climate it becomes, indeed, well-nigh impossible to stay out of identity narratives, yet these make research impossible in practice.<sup>26</sup> For Fariba an open anthropological approach is necessary to do justice to the kaleidoscopic character of the world the 1979 revolution has created.<sup>27</sup> And, indeed, in most of her work everything is not what it seems to be at first sight: a pilgrimage of traditional appearance is in everyday practice a site of innovation helping women to assert their presence in public space and opening up new horizons for them beyond the national borders. No

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<sup>26</sup> See also Adelhah 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Confer also her praise of travelling and crossing borders as liberation and breaking out of the limits of identity and nation (Adelhah 2016).

wonder Fariba is quite severe with academic texts where the oppositions of activist discourse are adopted – implicitly or explicitly. For her, there is no place for such oppositions in an academic text since they deny the complexity that should rather be the very focus of research. This is why the anthropological approach of “being there” is so important for her.

Fariba’s work can be read as a long and courageous struggle to create such an open space for research – not captured by the worrying polarization of Iranian studies and activism, but free to follow how a kaleidoscopic reality unfolds itself, full of surprising turns and unexpected ramifications. This makes it all the more tragic that she is now for three years already a prisoner – in the literal, gruesome sense of the word. I am dumbfounded by her admirable courage in sacrificing her own freedom in her fight for freedom of research. Yet, I am sure it is a worthy fight. Indeed, the relevance of her determination in defending an approach that leads us beyond binary oppositions, identity thinking, and political polarization reaches out far beyond Iranian studies. The way she succeeds in highlighting the “underneath of authoritarianism” is of much broader value if only because the present-day world is marked by a return of authoritarian relations in all sorts of forms.

Fariba’s fascination for the complexity and surprises of a kaleidoscopic everyday seems to me, for instance, highly relevant to what at first sight might appear to be a quite different dimension: the increasingly polarized conception, I already mentioned, within our own discipline as being divided between (sexual) “predators” and “survivors.” In a longer term historical perspective, anthropology has this strange see-saw dynamic between purity and complexity. The founders of our discipline were obsessed with discovering the pure authentic core of “other cultures” hidden under change induced by external interventions (remember the idea of a “point-zero” in time). One of the benign effects of the crisis in the discipline in the 1970s and 1980s was that the focus switched rather to processes of hybridization as creative moments, producing new forms. But since the turn of the century, we seem to return to purity. The alacrity with which the notion of ontology is borrowed from material studies and transferred into culture and perspectivism, often with great theoretical sophistication, can hardly avoid resurrecting old ideas of cultural stereotypes as givens. Also on a more personal level the quest for complete purity seems to be increasingly at large, unsettling the discipline. Of course, it is vital that anthropology as an academic institution will develop much stronger institutionalized forms for protecting people from any form of discrimination and harassment. But if this leads to procedures in which basic human rights – innocent until found guilty, the right to know of what you are accused, and so on – are ignored, and any idea of the poly-interpretability of signs is denied, such a quest for purity becomes a danger. Closer attention to the imponderabilia of everyday life, the old virtue of ethnography and fieldwork, should caution us from adopting such unequivocal viewpoints. As said, I am not sure that Fariba will be happy to follow me in this, so let me emphasize that this is very much a personal digression. But the splendid way in which her work shows that researchers must be open to the kaleidoscope unfolding before their eyes, makes it for me a shining guide in this and many other directions.

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