Syrian Studies in Sweden

Annika Rabo

Sweden cannot boast of a long a glorious tradition of studies in or on Syria. In fact, we have very little research on contemporary Syria. As in many other European countries there has been a long university tradition of linking theology (in our case the Lutheran variety) to studies in Semitic languages. Arabic thus typically came to be developed in faculties of theology at the old universities in Uppsala and Lund. Historically, studies in Arabic have focused on classical texts, but a number of scholars in Sweden have developed a strong interest in Arabic dialects. The current professor in Semitic languages at Uppsala University, Bo Isaksson, for example, has worked on contact linguistics and Arabic dialects in northern Syria and in southeast Turkey. With Ablahad Lahdo, one of his doctoral students, he has also worked on Arabic and Aramaic dialects along the Turkish-Syrian border areas.

Today Arabic is taught not only in the very old universities in Uppsala and Lund – where they are part of the Semitic languages – but also in the more modern universities in Stockholm and Göteborg which have no traditional theological faculties. In Göteborg Tetz Rooke has worked on modern Arabic literature and he is also a translator of the Syrian born author Salim Barakat. Rooke has also worked on a project called Borders, Boundaries and Transgressions (see more below) where he did research on Muhammad Kurd Ali and on Syrian map-making in the early nationalist period as well as in the early Ba’th period.

There is a fairly strong tradition of studies and research in Arabic in Sweden from one point of view. There is historical continuity and a ‘genealogy’ of well-known scholars working on Arabic in, and on, the Middle East. But today Arabic is not only a language in the Arab world but very much a language in contemporary Sweden. Arabic is our third largest language after Swedish and Finnish. Most of those with Arabic as a native tongue come from Iraq (there are more than 100,000 Iraqis in Sweden) but Syrians, Palestinians and Lebanese also form a large part of this linguistic community. In Stockholm, there is an interest among linguists in research on the way Arabic dialects develop in Sweden, but in general there is very little language research on Arabic speakers in Sweden. Lately, however, the military has employed a few persons with doctorate degrees in Arabic to set up intensive language training for their personnel. The shift from the importance of Russian to Arabic as a ‘military’ language signals new Swedish interests.

Traditionally, as noted above, there has been a close link between theology and Semitic languages. Today much of classical Lutheran theology has developed (sometimes after extreme inter-faculty conflicts) into (at least in theory) non-confessional religious studies. An impressive chunk of contemporary Swedish religious studies (often under the disciplinarian label ‘history of religion’) is devoted to Islam in the modern world and much of the research
done is inspired by anthropological methods. There is thus an emphasis on ‘lived’ everyday religion rather than on texts and expert knowledge. Many Swedish scholars study Islam in Sweden or Europe from many different perspectives and many of these scholars are not trained in classical Arabic, or in fiqh. A number of scholars working on Islam and Muslims in Sweden are engaged in public debates about migrants and questions of integration. A few scholars in religious studies have done fieldwork in the Middle East or in Muslim-majority settings, but until today Leif Stenberg is the only researcher in religious studies with a long fieldwork experience from Syria. In the late 1990s and early 2000s he lived in Damascus and studied the Naqshbandiyya.

Moving from languages and religious studies to the social sciences there is even less to report from the Swedish universities. In the late 1990s Inga Brandell, a political scientist from Uppsala University, led the multidisciplinary four-year project Borders, Boundaries and Transgressions mentioned above. This project had its empirical focus on the Syrian-Turkish border at the time of the establishment of the modern national states and in the more recent period. In this project Emma Jörum, a political scientist from Uppsala, has worked on how the Syrian state values its territory in contested areas such as Golan and Hatay/Antakia. Brandell, Jörum and Åsa Lundgren- who was also part of the border group- now work together on a political science project called Unbound State? The Nation State and the Departed Populations in the Middle East, focusing on state policies in Turkey, Syria and Algeria towards their many migrants.

So far I am the only Swedish anthropologist who has done long-term field research in Syria. Not very much has been done by colleagues in other countries in the region either. Between 1978 and 1980 I did my first fieldwork - for my doctoral thesis - in the Euphrates region, focusing on the huge irrigation project in the region and on state-citizen relations. Since then, I have been in Syria working on various topics but always with an interest in state and citizens. In the late 1980s, I did research in Jordan and Syria on perceptions of development, focusing on mass media and education. In 1997, I obtained a research position with the Swedish Research Council devoted to research on ‘Culture and Society in the Middle East’. This enabled me to do fieldwork in Aleppo focusing on traders in the souq. I have constantly returned to the Euphrates region and now also Aleppo is an important place on my private Syrian map. In 2006, I obtained funding for two projects related to family law. One deals with family law debates in Syria and the other focuses transnational Syrian families and family law. In these projects I have collaborated with Syrian lawyers and collected data in different parts of the country. In the latter project I did a small study in the city of Södertälje in Sweden. This city is called little Assyria/little Babylonia because it is the most important diasporic center for Syrian Orthodox Christians in Europe. The city has now two important and competing soccer teams, one called assyriska and the other syrianska. Although most Syrian orthodox have migrated from Turkey, a sizable number have come from Syria. It was this category and their way of handling family law issues which interested me when working in Södertälje. Since these projects are coming to an end I have worked on a way to allow me continue doing fieldwork in Syria. Together with two colleagues I have applied for funding for a project focusing on future citizens in pedagogic texts and in education policies, with examples from Sweden, Norway, Turkey and Syria. This is a way for me to return to my earlier interest in education and linking this to my newer interest in transnational connections.
The city of Södertälje, 40 km south of Stockholm with about 85,000 inhabitants, is the home of two soccer teams founded by Syrian Orthodox immigrants. Syrianska FC and Assyriska FF started as two local teams competing in soccer but also with different political agendas. Now they recruit players not only among Syrian Orthodox but nationally as well and the match between the two teams Sunday June 13 is an important event in one of the elite leagues in Sweden.

But the event – like other matches played by the teams – will also be broadcast on Suryoyo Sat, the Syrian orthodox television channel housed in Södertälje.

I have worked in, and on, Syria for almost three decades but I am not surrounded by young researchers devoted to working in Syria or even the Middle East. Partly this is linked to the way anthropology is taught in Sweden. Professors seldom form ‘schools’ and students are encouraged to find their own research interests. Partly this is also linked to the fieldwork practices today. More and more graduate students do fieldwork in Sweden and fewer have the time to invest in learning new foreign languages. We still have few anthropology students with Arabic as a mother tongue, and furthermore see no reason to ‘force’ those who have into the slot of ‘native anthropologists’. Finally, we have no strong tradition of area studies and we have no research institute in the region. In Uppsala there is a program combining language studies in Arabic, Farsi or Turkish with social science studies focusing on the Middle East. But this program has not been very successful in preparing the students for graduate work in the social sciences. At Lund University there is a newly founded Center for Middle Eastern Studies. Its task is to support and coordinate research on the region and soon a Master program will be launched. There are, of course, both strengths and weaknesses with area studies. A basic weakness is that ‘areas’ cannot be bounded in any simple geographical way. My hope, however, is that researchers working on Middle Eastern migrants in Sweden also try to learn something about the Middle East ‘out there’ by following the transnational links which are hard to ignore today.

Annika Rabo is Professor in the Department of Social Anthropology at Stockholm University and author of many studies on Syria and Syrians including the ethnography A Shop of One’s Own: Independence and Reputation among Traders in Aleppo (2005) (reviewed in the Spring 2007 issue of this newsletter) and she co-edited The Role of the State in West Asia (2006).