The Ethnographic Studies in the Arab Communities in the Wake of the Arab Spring

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ABSTRACT

For many reasons the Arab spring was sparked. It has a numerous implications in the life fields specially the social one. As a result of this, the ethnographic studies will be formed according to new type of anthropology. In light of the social networking role in the Arab spring, this article proposes a suitable type of Virtual Ethnography which depends on blending the cyberspace and cosmic spaces, and presents a model of procedures of this. [Ethnographic studies – The Arab spring - Virtual ethnography – Social networking]

1. Introduction

As a result of the oppressive economic, political and social conditions in many Arab countries, particularly in North Africa, the first spark for many Arab movements and revolutions started, in what was termed as "the Arab spring". The first spark was ignited when the young Tunisian "Mohammed Bouazizi" burned himself as an objection to the repressive practices of the Tunisian police unleashing the Tunisian revolution, dubbed "Jasmine Revolution", and ushering in a new era in Tunisia after the escape of the Tunisian President "Ben Ali ". In the wake of the Tunisian Revolution, the Egyptians followed fashion protesting against the economic, social and political circumstances which culminated in the eruption the "25January Revolution". On February 11, 2011, the Egyptian president "Hosni Mubarak" stepped down, writing a new chapter in Egypt's modern history. As a matter of fact, following the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, many Arab movements and uprisings in Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, and Syria followed suit, but some of them have not realized their goals yet.

More relevantly, the Arab spring has numerous political, economic and social implications, which formed a new decade for the Arab societies on all its cultural, social levels. These implications have resulted from political changes, which made many concepts come into being such as freedom of expression and respecting others' opinions. These concepts had been, for many decades, nothing more than ideas racing within the minds of many Arab writers, intellectuals and politicians.

Quite honestly, these changes still do not have significant effects in the Arab communities because many Arab revolutions, needless to say all of them, are still in the process of democratization and transitional periods lacking clear characteristics. Undoubtedly, these changes will have a bigger impact on the formation of a new type of cultural, social and political thinking to quench peoples' thirst in these freedom-seeking communities.

As regards the importance of the ethnographic studies, it lies in the fact that they are directly affected by reformation in the social and cultural structure of communities. It will be clarified by knowing the true meaning of the link between the ethnographic studies and the cultural and social climate in the communities. In other words, as Angrosino (2007: 26) put it "the true ethnography relies on the ability of a researcher to interact with and observe people as they essentially go about their everyday lives". Certainly, the everyday lives for many Arab people have changed after the new social conditions in the wake of Arab spring.

The present article tackles the following key questions: how far will the Arab spring have an impact on the formation of a new form of the anthropology, especially in light of the political changes? What are the factors which negatively affected the ethnographic studies in the Arab counties during the last decades? And how can a new form of virtual ethnography through social networking are created, especially in the light of the important role of these networks in the Arab spring?

2. The Arab Spring and the New Political Anthropology

Surprisingly enough, some political analysts were taken aback by the protests which swept the Arab countries. On the other hand, there are many opinions that differ with that view. The second team looked at the Arab protests that sparked and are still to come, as a result of integration of many variables which were absent for many reasons in the past :

Variable of education: As far as this variable is concerned, the educational process in many Arab communities suffers from several weaknesses; however, the education variable resulted in two conclusions: the awareness and the ability to invest this awareness to recognize the value of freedom as a facility for making the change see the light of the day.

Socio-economic variable: Concerning this variable, it has produced two results: the ever-widening gap between the social classes that grew through the lack of equitable distribution of income, and the growth of unemployment as a result of the failure of economic structures.

Variable communicative: With respect to this variable, it is concerned with informing people of what is happening in their countries or in the world, in addition to the ability to communicate together without limitations and restrictions. (Belcazer : 2012)

In the light of these variables, the Arab countries, according to the political anthropology, being a branch of anthropology, must change their methodologies in accordance with the new variables which left its impact on the social, cultural, and political levels despite the fact that, as I have already pointed out earlier in this paper, the political changes have been so far in the process of burgeoning. In other words , the kind of the transformations within the Arab communities made it necessary for the ethnographic researchers to find a new kind of political and social anthropology complying fully with the changes which took place or expected to take place in the near future throughout these communities.

Specifically speaking, this conclusion depends on the major contribution of anthropology to the larger social and political sciences. As Thomassen (2008:269) explains "Anthropologists can say something else, simply because they do fieldwork, because they see things from a different perspective….We are anthropologists because we talk to normal people, not because we come from a discipline with a different history of theoretical development. It is again true that a "thick description" or a "deep immersion" approach has positively identified the discipline within the larger social sciences".

Most importantly, this contribution has helped the anthropologists show how their discipline could be used to draw a more complex, nuanced and profound picture of the Arab Spring. The difficulties experienced by scholars during the annual meeting of (AAA) [1] greatly enriched the understanding of the discipline of anthropology. Anthropologists have tried to make sense of events which were still in process of formation. The "anthropology of events" is challenging as it aims at understanding not only the present but also the future. Moreover, anthropologists often felt overwhelmed by the scale of the inquiry, as well as by the emotions resulting from studying violent and traumatic events. Thus, the "anthropology of the contemporary" cannot be applied without modifying, questioning or challenging the traditional tools, concepts and prerequisites of the wider discipline of anthropology. It is, in itself, an interesting revolutionary movement.

In this way, Eickelman assured [2] that it is likely that the shape of the anthropological field research will take a new form over the coming decade. This new form explores the changing craft of social anthropology in the Middle East over the past half century and lays stress on how the likely shape of field research and the writing of anthropology will develop over at least the forthcoming decade. Therefore, fieldwork, according to Eickelman's opinion, remains at the core of social anthropology, but the meaning of "field" has shifted significantly over the past half century. So has the practice and context of field work especially after the events that began in Egypt and Tunisia in early 2011, followed soon by many other countries in the region. These events have triggered basic arguments about the individual's role in society and the meaning of the common good. These issues once approached only obliquely or in private, are now argued in public throughout the region and with/ before wide audiences.

Consequently, the new format in the field of anthropology within Arab societies must rely on the ethnographic studies as a basic methodology for studying the changes which occurred or expected to occur in all dimensions of political, social and cultural spheres. In other words, it is therefore necessary to create a higher and more effective profile for the ethnographic studies within Arab societies which have been, for decades, unaware of the important role of this type of studies to approach these communities with the aim of solving many of their deep and complex problems on all social, educational and political levels.

As far as the factors and the reasons lying behind this negligence/deterioration in the role of the ethnographic studies are concerned, they can be summarized as the following:

The violation of academic freedom, in effect, the Arab scientific research was subjected to the process of "persecution" by many of the Arab political systems. This persecution always happens when these systems feel that their interest is to maintain the status quo, and they believe that the scientific research, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, brings about changes in values and concepts which are not in their favour. As a result, " The crisis of

social sciences in the Arab world expresses in its own way the crisis of dominant socio-political categories which, ideologically marked as they are by populism or infatuation with technology, have proven incapable of stimulating knowledge in society. The institutions of research, that they permeate, are linked to strategic interests that are not always furthered by knowledge requirements" (Remaoun, 2005:16).

To put it another way, the violation of researcher's academic freedom causes a clash between scientific research and the political systems.. the first side has the scientific credibility, and the second one has the material force which can violate any scientific effort revealing the picture of the regime. In this context, the significant issue, for the social researcher in general and the ethnographic researcher in particular, is that he can't be honest with his research conclusions in light of the violation of his academic freedom. This issue may be unimportant for the researchers who depend on the quantitative research, but on the other hand it is indispensable/absolutely essential in the qualitative research.

Bureaucracy, the administrative restrictions and legal practices, imposed by the laws in many Arab States, have had negatively impacted many researchers by placing obstacles in the way of developing their ideas. More importantly, it can be said that these bureaucratic measures had nipped many ideas of the Arab researchers in the bud. These constraints were naturally due to the structure of political and social system in the Arab countries where autocratic governments and the complex social and administration systems are in power.

In a more direct way, in most Arab countries, scientists, like other civil servants, have shown strong resistance against any attempt of de-bureaucratizing them. A large body of evidence shows how opposition platforms have been created against many proposals for changing the status quo of scientists, university professors, or other civil servants. The profile of protests was low and some scientists welcomed the opportunity to compete for better salaries.

At the end of the day, the bottom line is that there are differences in the scientific productivity between dictatorships and democracies. There are also differences within political regimes. These differences are due to the effect of an intermediate variable; namely, the bureaucratization of scientific contracts. Through bureaucratization, dictatorships reduce the high uncertainties and time inconsistencies inherent to the relationship between powerful principals (governments) and agents that need to make costly asset-specific investments (scientists). Bureaucratization is a second-best solution to prevent the "minimum research effort" expected in non credible dictatorship-like environments. It also precludes the "maximum research effort" expected in more credible environments like democracies. In other words, bureaucracy makes science more productive when governments are not reliable, but it makes science less productive when governments are trustworthy. (Lapuente, V. & Carro R., 2008: 1030)

The Domination of Quantitative Studies, during the recent decades, the quantitative studies have significantly dominated many research methodologies in the Arab countries, especially in the social sciences. Observers for the scientific research in the Arab world find the domination of the empiricist methodology on the ideas of Arab researchers. Having been trained in quantitative research, those researchers acquired a kind of legitimacy which was called "the scientific legitimacy". The majority of researchers focused on studying the variables through the statistical correlations and the relations between inputs and outputs and

left the community's social and cultural interactions as a black fund that we know nothing about.

In this manner, Badran (2005) explained this domination permeating both the Arab studies and social research, not as an academic or scientific goal seeking impartiality and objectivity. Rather, the aims are political and social, which are to achieve the many interests of the social and political classes (Badran, 2005: 4). This analysis has been associated with the control of Arab governments on the sources of statistics and the available information for the researchers in many fields especially in social sciences. More significantly, the ruling regimes in the Arab countries dominate/control what should be declared in research.

Judging from the aforementioned factors, although the quantitative studies dominate the overall activities of the Arab social researchers, the uses of the ethnographic methodology are very limited. More importantly, its applications suffer from fragmentation and eligibility of the application as a reliable research methodology in the humanities and social sciences. Highly noteworthy is the fact that teaching the ethnographic methodology procedures and techniques within university courses is limited, if not non-existent.

After the Arab spring, and through the changes which took place or expected, we find that many of those factors and conditions have been changed, or are about to change, paving the way for many researchers in the field of social sciences to make the ethnographic studies their main methodology which was, until recently, difficult to use.

As far as this article is concerned, it presents, through a few lines, a model or a form of the ethnographic studies. This model depends on the virtual ethnography through social networking, which has spread through many studies in light of the spread of social networking and its applications, and the possibility to use these applications in academic research as a scientific methodology. This methodology has been absent in many Arab Studies in light of the previous factors as I am going to point out in the lines to follow.

3. The Virtual Ethnography through Social Networking in the Arab Countries

Despite the multiplicity of forms, roles and techniques of social networks, all of them have the main property of making a virtual community to be a group of individuals united by attention to an issue or a country or a specific category, within one electronic system of transfer of information, opinions and discussions among them.

Additionally, it became easy for any group of individuals to extend their online social networks as well as sharing and disclosing online social networks. In less than five years, these Networks have shifted from being a niche for online activity to a phenomenon in which tens of millions of internet users are engaged. Consequently, discussing the emergence of a new social phenomenon has permeated both industry and academia. (Cachia, 2008: 35).

On the Arab level, the social networking has continued to grow in popularity throughout the first quarter of 2011. Facebook and Twitter, for example, have expanded their user base and platforms significantly. By way of illustration, on April 2011, more than 677 million users joined Facebook making the Middle East one of the regions that contributed the largest amount of new users. More relevantly, we saw what could only be termed as a substantial shift in the Arab world's usage of social media towards online social and civil mobilization online, whether by citizens — to organize demonstrations (both pro- and anti-government),

disseminate information within their networks, and raise awareness of ongoing events locally and globally – or by governments in some cases to engage with citizens and encourage their participation in government processes.[3]

Highly noteworthy is the fact that the enormous development in the use of social networks may be seen greatly when we say that most protests during the Arab spring were, in their beginnings, no more than calls across the political activists, or perhaps ordinary citizens, through blogs and social networking like Facebook, Tweeter [4]. As Filiu explains (2011:56) "Social networks contributed to subvert the ubiquitous security control in Tunisia, and they constituted the spark of the 25 Jan in Egypt.

In both instances, they were crucial in nurturing a community overflowing with shared grief and mutual aspirations, mainly among the educated and urban youth…. there was no "Revolution 2" but another welcome instrument was added to the protest toolbox; however, the key is how well-organized they were. Interestingly enough, the real novelty of the Arab revolution could be attributed to the fact that the leaderless dynamic of the democratic uprising was, at times, overshadowed by the focus on the "facebook" kids."

This may be the reason that explains the huge increase in numbers of the users of these networks during and after the Arab spring. For example: Facebook users at the end of spring 2011 reached 27.7 million users; an increase of nearly 30% compared to the beginning of the same year. The growing numbers of the users of social networking within Arab societies ran parallel with /coincided with great variety of the users' ages, along with the social and cultural classes, to the degree which qualifies these virtual communities in the space technology to stand on equal footing with/ simulates the actual communities in the cosmic space.

In this regard, the social space from which we can learn about the expression of emotions through the Internet is formed by virtual communities. Studies that have investigated interpersonal communications in these communities have found that online communication enables users to freely express emotions and reach a high level of self-disclosure. This exposure is accomplished through expressive codes developed among users as a sign language and vocabulary of abbreviations, and through written descriptive emotions (in short or expanded form) in "real time" in a genuine, spontaneous manner. (Sade-Beck, 2004: 4)

Thus, this field has become suitable for many Arab researchers to use the ethnographic studies through the social networking "Virtual Ethnography" which was difficult before the Arab Spring. The virtual ethnography has been formed as a result of the appearance of the "Cyberspace sociology" which studies groups of networks' users, the patterns of their personalities, the sites they visit, and topics of interest…...In this way, the virtual ethnography is regarded as a method in which one actively engages with people in online spaces in order to write the story of their situated context informed by social interaction. Furthermore, the type of interaction we suggest involves a researcher and a participant engaging in conversation and making meaning through repeated, revisited and jointly interpreted conversations that support reflection and revision (Crichton & Kinash, 2003).

However, that kind of study is a new methodology for Arab researchers especially in light of the factors that I have already pointed out earlier in this paper which are associated with the ethnographic studies in general. Additionally, many factors associated with the use of social networks are summarized as follows:

Security concerns: Security concerns pose a major component when using the social networking due to the reluctance of participation and the expression of opinions through it for fear of surveillance of the security apparatuses. These concerns have significantly increased before and during the Arab spring in the wake of calls for protests across these networks. In this context, the annual security report 2011 for CISCO explained that the government entities suggested blocking access to social media by cutting off Internet access or seizing personal account records (CISCO, 2011: 26).

But soon, after the success of Arab revolts, these concerns turned, on the contrary, to the desire of the participation and interaction across these networks by many social classes and age groups giving voice to their political views and social situations in a credible and free way. In other words, the way Arab governments dealt with the social networking has become an indicator of political and democratic transition within them.

The Lack of awareness of the role of social networking: Many categories of Arab societies are unbelievably ignorant of the role played by social media in expressing their opinions and making a real difference in their lives. In addition, the users of these networks, according to many community classes, are considered unrepresentative of the various segments of society. But quickly after the success of the Arab Revolutions, this negative trend towards the social networks applications turned to a positive direction after finding how useful the social media can be in solving many social problems.

Technological illiteracy: The twentieth century illiteracy is defined as the ignorance of individuals to keep pace with the developments of modern technology and the lack of knowledge to handle and use it. Many developing countries, the Arab countries included, have suffered from this problem. It must be recognized that many developing countries have been suffering so far from this problem. Or, this was probably the general attitude of the Arab governments to make their people have the technological illiteracy for many reasons and the political reasons come at the top of the agenda. In the same vein, we found that many Arab countries do not have the infrastructure of technology. And up until today, there are many regions in the Arab countries, especially in the villages or the outskirts, which have no access to the internet.

In the light of these factors and other obstacles in using the ethnographic studies through Social networks, the virtual ethnography constitutes the suitable methodology for the Arab ethnographic researcher who can match between it and the real world ethnographic. In other words, the matching between the cosmic space and the electronic space, which was called by Sade-Beck (2004) internet ethnography online and offline "this methodological issues resulting from Internet-based qualitative research….. and suggested a new path that can assist anthropologists to cope with the problematic aspects of such research. This path was based on integration of three complementary qualitative research methodologies of data-gathering: online observations, interviews, and content analysis of supplementary materials" (Sade-Beck, 2004: 2).

This paper describes a model of the ethnographic studies through social networks in Arab countries by using the ethnographic methodology through the cyberspace and cosmic spaces. This model depends on using one of the Arab ethnographic researchers; the social networks tools "Facebook". Facebook is chosen for reasons which will be mentioned in the following

lines to study the job satisfaction for employees within one of the Arab universities through the virtual world and the real world:

▪ Within the real world … internet ethnographic offline:

These kinds of studies should take priority in the culture of Arab societies through the interaction of the ethnographic researcher and the community of his study within the 'real world'. This interaction will break the so-called "the fear of the unknown or the default"; these fears still have a great impact on large swathes of Arab societies. Besides, the researcher must provide in this step the objectives, methodology and the stages of the study. Moreover, he must focus on raising people's awareness of importance of the study through social networking , measure the participation rate of community members in the social networking, and choose one of these networks which is the most frequently used.

At the end of this stage, it is very necessary for the researcher to start the communication with community members of his study. Moe significantly, to achieve a degree of objectivity across the study, it is very useful for the researcher to use groups through social networking which had been already used by the community members of study.

Concerning the example of the job satisfaction for employees: The first step for the researcher will be to communicate with employees while conducting their work within university to determine the study objectives and procedures. It is very necessary to communicate via social networks using the already existing group of workers at the university, or create it.

▪ Within virtual world … Internet Ethnographic Online

At this stage, the ethnographic researcher will use one of the social networks to communicate with members of his community. This communication depends on the techniques of ethnographic studies; but this time, through one of the social networking applications. The style of these techniques must be changed according to the properties and the applications of network which will be studied through it.

In this context, we should take into account that Facebook is considered one of the most suitable networks for this kind of studies, especially in Arab societies after the Arab spring, as a result of the major role it played in making the Arab Revolutions successful. Additionally, it has a lot of applications that give the opportunity to the ethnographic researcher to use the techniques of the ethnographic studies. These applications distinguish Facebook from the other social networking such as the possibility of sharing pictures and videos, making votes and questionnaire, supporting the individual and group Chatting, and the most important properties of Facebook is the huge interaction among friends and the members of groups. This interaction will benefit the techniques of ethnographic studies as the following:

Participant Observation, this element is concerned with living with the people for an extended period of time, participating in and observing people's everyday life. In this technique, the ethnographic researcher can use many applications of the social networking by communicating with employees in a specific time, selected in the first stage (ethnographic offline), and using the application of chatting on the group of employees. By this technique, the researcher can take his field notes which will be useful in data analysis. The greatest benefit by using the social networking applications emerges clearly at this stage showing the interaction between the research community members through the replies and the comments

of employees' reactions to each others on the issues raised by the researcher or by themselves.

Recording Culture, one of the important questions through ethnographic studies is the following: How does an anthropologist keep track of all the information collected in the field and records it for future analysis? As with everything else about fieldwork, things have changed since the early times when a notebook and a pencil were the major recording tools. (Miller, 2010: 40). These tools will change dramatically when we use the internet ethnography online and offline. The ethnographic researcher can use videos or pictures which were recorded by the researcher through the real world stage or by the employees. These videos or pictures must be related directly or indirectly to the elements of his research (the example "job satisfaction"). Through the comments of employees, the researcher will have a huge amount of data to be analyzed.

Votes and questionnaires, it is necessary for the researcher, as it is always the case in many ethnographic studies, to prepare votes or questionnaires to record the opinions of the community members. This technique to the ethnographic researcher using the social networking is very simple because a lot of social networking has the options to do this. Moreover, the process of data analysis will be simple, especially if the researcher uses the social networking applications efficiently.

Specialized methods, the ethnographic researcher also uses several kinds of specific research methods such as Life History, Time Allocation Study, Texts, Team Projects ,…. and the choice of them depends on the research goals. The ethnographic researcher can use many of these methods through social networking applications. In this example, the ethnographic researcher who studies the job satisfaction for employees can present the life history of one of the former employees and his role in developing the administrative performance. In addition, the researcher can use the applications of Facebook, if it is possible, to add employees' pictures and videos. In this way, the researcher can have a large amount of data through the employees' comments about this life history and link these comment to his research elements and goals.

With reference to the online ethnographical procedure, it consists of a number of different steps as it follows: providing cultural entrance, collecting and analysing data, making trustworthy interpretations, and conducting ethically sound research. Furthermore, it also lays stress on the fact that the members of the studied milieu can provide feedback to the research (ers) (Skageby, 2011: 411). Moreover, during online techniques, the Arab ethnographic researcher may be required to go back to the real world to clarify some of the results and data. As a consequence, the ethnographic researcher must find ways to communicate quickly and effectively through the real or virtual world. According to the requirements of his research, he can strike a balance and an integration/correlation among the ethnographic study techniques through cosmic space and cyberspace.

Notes

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In this context Can refer to: The Arab Social Media Report Vol.1, No.2 (May 2011)by Dubai School of Government available at:www.ArabSocialMediaReport.com.

To the extent that the Egyptian revolution was called "the revolution of Facebook" as a confirmation that the large role played by social networking especially Facebook to make the first spark of the revolution.

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