

Diasporas and Religious Identities: Insights from Anthropological Perspectives

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1. Stationarity and Mobility

For many years, anthropology contributed significantly to the reinforcement of “dominant notions of culture and identity as being closely tied to specific territories” (Jansen and Löfving 2009, p. 3).¹ However, in recent decades, the discipline has experienced a critical shift away from a ‘sedentarist metaphysics’ (Malkki 1992) toward what has been termed a ‘nomadic metaphysics’ (Cresswell 2006). This intellectual turn has yielded a substantial body of research that offers innovative frameworks for reinterpreting human experience through the lens of mobility (see Clifford 1997; Gupta and Ferguson 1997a, 1997b; Rapport and Dawson 1998; Waterston 2014). By focusing on human mobilities—whether within national borders or across them—anthropologists have challenged long-standing assumptions embedded in the discipline’s primary methodological practice: fieldwork. Historically, fieldwork, rooted in geographically fixed locales, framed people as stationary and contained within well-defined spatial boundaries (see Coleman and Collins 2006; Gupta and Ferguson 1997c).

A straightforward methodological response to the assumption of human spatial fixity has been to concentrate on populations in migration. In this volume, Yona Abeddour (2024) relies on this methodological approach by examining a group of people who migrated from the same place but dispersed to different destinations. By focusing on Jews of Moroccan origin who immigrated to Israel and France, Abeddour demonstrates how the original place of departure is not monolithic but rather composed of individuals with varied traditions, customs, and religious practices.

Over the past few decades, the theoretical and epistemological shift towards mobility has been so comprehensive that mobility is now often considered the norm, while attachment to place is framed as a deviation or a form of resistance to globalizing forces (Salazar 2010, p. 54). This conceptual turn toward ‘nomadic metaphysics’ is closely linked to the socio-political and demographic realities of globalization. Indeed, contemporary globalization has accelerated the movement of people, ideas, goods, and even languages at a previously unimaginable pace. Although the theoretical framing of mobility is recent, human movement is not a new or modern phenomenon (Anthony 1990). What is unprecedented is the rapidity and scale of movement today, and scholarly interest extends beyond the phenomenon itself to its broader implications for global political and social orders (Clapham 2002). See also in this Special Issue: (Liebelt 2024). However, as the COVID-19 pandemic and other structural conditions have shown, movement is not always unfettered. Nation-states, in particular, exert control over migration flows, further complicating the idealized notion of free movement (Bashford 2002).

This shift in focus has fundamentally altered the epistemological foundations of the social sciences. Intriguingly, the intellectual turn toward mobility draws on modernist thinkers such as Alfred Schütz and his notion of “the stranger” (1944) and Walter Benjamin’s (1999) concept of the *flâneur*. It has also been influenced by more contemporary works, including Michel de Certeau’s (1984) writings on the pedestrian, Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) reflections on the nomad, and James Clifford’s (1997) examination of the shift from



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roots to routes. For instance, Benjamin's concept of *flânerie*—idle, aimless wandering—offers an alternative way of conceptualizing urban experiences. In contrast to earlier views that saw the movement as destabilizing, Benjamin presents it as a means of generating intimacy with urban life, where the flâneur accumulates experiences as if they were commodities. In this line of thought, mobility is no longer associated with moral or theological notions of exile or punishment but rather as a source of renewal and vitality. Indeed, scholars have drawn on both explicit and implicit connections between mobility and human freedom, a linkage that has rendered the focus on movement morally compelling. Sociologist Ulrich Beck, for example, argued that globalization—and the mobility it engenders—offered the possibility of liberating humanity from the colonial order imposed by powerful nation-states (Beck 1996). Nation-states, in their efforts to demarcate borders and protect territories, define and distinguish those who belong from those who do not. In contrast, the desire for mobility represents an aspiration for freedom, a deep-seated human fantasy. Individuals confined to a specific geographic location often yearn for movement or travel, while those who are constantly in transit often imagine themselves attached to a single place, much like diasporic communities envisioning a territorial homeland (Weingrod and Levy 2005). As the biblical myth of Cain and Abel suggests, a stationary lifestyle—in the form of agriculture in this case—ensures cultural continuity. Imaginaries of rootedness, as the myth insinuates, deeply influence the experience of mobility (Easthope 2009), and vice versa.

Although the turn toward mobility has yielded significant insights, the time may be ripe for a theoretical recalibration that revisits sedentarism. A renewed focus on sedentarism should not involve abandoning the valuable perspectives gained from studying mobility. Rather, it calls for a more nuanced analysis that, for example, considers how fixed, stationary populations confront and respond to the dynamics of movement. A particularly fruitful area of investigation is diasporic communities, which are constituted through migration yet remain ostensibly provisional sojourners—people who reside in a place but, metaphorically or concretely, declare having a dream of being elsewhere. These communities embody (as Georg Simmel argued in his analysis of the stranger) the paradox of being simultaneously rooted and mobile, living within and beyond the boundaries of a particular place (Simmel 2008, p. 323).

2. Migration and Diasporas

Largely, migration studies have historically concentrated on the experiences and outcomes of migrants in their destination countries (Guarnizo et al. 2003). They examine how migrant cultures evolve in response to interactions with local populations or investigate the impact of migration on both newcomers and host communities. Often, their narratives portray a linear process wherein immigrants, initially perceived as outsiders, gradually integrate into the host culture—a process framed in Schützian terms (Schütz 1944). In these accounts, immigration is portrayed as a unidirectional trajectory: from strangeness to integration.

However, critical scholarship challenges this view, acknowledging that, for example, integration is not always seamless. Diaspora communities, in particular, may resist assimilation due to structural barriers or following a desire to maintain distinct cultural identities (Cohen 2022). Traditional diaspora studies frequently depict these communities as culturally marked from their host societies, maintaining symbolic and emotional ties to a homeland from which they are exiled (voluntarily or not). In this analytical framework, the homeland is viewed as the source of historical and cultural identity, while the diaspora is positioned peripherally—a structure termed the “solar system model” (SSM) by André Levy (2001, 2005). In this ideologically laden model, claims Levy, the homeland presumably functions as the symbolic core, with diaspora communities orbiting around it. Moreover, the relationships between diasporas are primarily defined by their shared identification with the symbolic center.

In contrast to this rigid model, recent scholarship has infused dynamism into diaspora studies by questioning the hierarchical relationships that position the homeland as the

symbolic center (Gilman and Shain 1999; Levy 2005). Ben-Lulu's contribution to this Special Issue offers a compelling case study that illustrates how, despite his originating from Israel (the presumed symbolic center), he encounters religious practices in the U.S. that challenge orthodox definitions of Judaism. Ben-Lulu's narrative, as an LGBTQ individual, highlights how the intersection of religion and sexuality within diaspora communities can create spaces for identities and practices marginalized in the homeland. Similarly, Abeddour (2024) demonstrates that for some Israelis of Moroccan descent, Morocco functions as a symbolic center, providing an authentic foundation for their identity as Moroccan Israelis.

This post-colonial perspective challenges the assumption that a utopian desire for a return to the homeland inherently defines diasporas. The opposition to the dominance of the symbolic center—the goal of the return—gives rise to creative possibilities for defining religious identities. Thus, in the collection of articles here, Rachel Werczberger and Daniel Monterescu (2024) demonstrate that removing the burden of Jewish identity as defined by Jewish Orthodoxy in Israel (and not only in it) gives birth to many inspiring syncretic possibilities, even if they are certainly not (and perhaps precisely because they are not) central to the currents of Israeli Judaism. Their article is particularly fascinating because comparing two ethnographic sites outside Jewish Orthodox hegemony offers insights concerning the multitude of creative solutions to contemporary Jewish identity. The article by Cohen and Moreno (2024) of that same collection takes a step further, showing how what is defined as a “diaspora”—the Jews who lived in Morocco—is not a homogeneous group. They are diverse and different within themselves, including in matters related to their religious identity. For example, Jews in northern Morocco developed dietary practices that deviate from traditional Jewish kosher laws. Levy's article (2024), also included in this collection, closely analyzes the dynamics of cultural diversity within the Jewish diaspora in Morocco. However, unlike Cohen and Morano's article, Levy examines a diaspora whose population has almost completely disappeared, making the distinctions between varied diasporas in the same country no longer relevant.

Not all diasporas aspire to return; some may ultimately relinquish it in favor of full integration into the host society (Brah 2005). This option rejects the notion that diasporas are perpetually estranged from their host cultures. Rather, as Boyarin and Tölölyan (2015) argue, diasporas can foster productive dialogs with host societies, offering new forms of belonging. In this volume, Liebelt (2024) expands on this by demonstrating how late anthropologist Pnina Werbner, a former Israeli who lived in the UK, frames diasporas not simply as dispersed ethnic or religious communities but as dynamic arenas of public debate, engaging with both host societies and global issues. Likewise, Levy (2024) shows in this Special Issue how even the space of a synagogue may serve as a ground to unite into one action Jews and Muslims in Morocco. The Lazama synagogue he analyzes serves as a ground for a multitude of activities that are not limited to the Jewish community of Marrakech.

Crucially, the static and hierarchical SSM model reinforces nation-state ideologies, particularly the notion that belonging is exclusive to a single territory. One should aim to challenge this epistemological boundary, which imposes a partition between homeland and diaspora and restricts the potential for alternative forms of belonging. Levy (2024) illustrates in this volume how diaspora communities that resist the dream of return provide valuable insights into alternative forms of belonging, despite ideological and demographic pressures to immigrate to the homeland. His ethnographic study of Moroccan Jews who remain in Morocco emphasizes how gender and cultural intimacy, both within the Jewish community and between Jews and Muslims, challenge the SSM's assumptions about strangeness and diaspora.

What, then, remains of the construct of “diaspora”? A solid working definition may be found in Vertovec's (2009, p. 5) adaptation of Anderson's concept of imagined communities: diasporas are “imagined communities dispersed from a professed homeland”. The relationships between homeland and diaspora, as well as between different diaspora communities, offer crucial opportunities to question the symbolic authority of the homeland.

Ben-Lulu (2024) and Abeddour (2024) illustrate that diasporas develop distinct identities not only in relation to the homeland but also in response to their local contexts, creating space for comparison and reflection.

Ultimately, the study of diasporas provides a critical lens through which to explore broader questions of religious identity, belonging, and cultural continuity. Moving beyond traditional models that privilege the homeland allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the complex and fluid relationships that shape diaspora communities with their varied religious identities. This shift invites us to reconsider the nature of diasporic existence—not as one of perpetual exile but as an ongoing negotiation between movement and rootedness, between strangeness and familiarity.

In sum, the collection of articles assembled here demonstrates not only how the examination of religious and cultural life within a specific social context reveals diverse, fluid, and multifaceted dimensions, but also that what is commonly perceived in the literature as a rigid force—religious identity—is, upon closer scrutiny, capable of manifesting in a range of varied public expressions. Thus, the assumption that religion necessarily functions as a conservative force is once again revealed as unfounded, at least within this selection of articles.

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Note

- ¹ Thus, for example, one can read the groundbreaking work of Clifford Geertz (1971) who pitted Moroccan Islam against the Indonesian one, thereby creating two monolithic religious units based on spatial-territorial differences.

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