

Exploring Islamic Public Administration: Ethnographic and Socio-Legal Approaches

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Abstract

This article aims to present and develop methodological tools and analytical insights for the empirical study of Islamic Public Administration (PA). To achieve this, it reviews some of the most common theoretical and analytical approaches in ethnography and socio-legal studies and highlights their relevance and contributions to research on Islamic PA. Specifically, it demonstrates how to (a) conduct ethnographic fieldwork on Islamic PA institutions and (b) analyze, conceptualize, and write about this type of ethnographic fieldwork within PA research. Theoretically, the article draws on socio-legal theories to construct a conceptual framework for analyzing living Islamic administrative traditions within local communities. The central argument is that employing ethnographic and socio-legal methods enables us to view Islamic PA as a living tradition, expressed through the mundane, everyday administrative practices and traditions found in various Muslim contexts. To substantiate this argument, the article presents empirical material from the author's ethnographic study of *Mahalla* institutions in Uzbekistan, illustrating how to conduct and write about Islamic PA research in practice. By doing so, this chapter aims to illuminate theoretical and methodological aspects of ethnographic fieldwork, with the hope of inspiring new empirically oriented studies on Islamic PA.

Keywords: Islamic PA, *Mahalla*, Non-Western Public Administration, Research Methods in Islamic PA, Central Asia, Muslim Societies.

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to a proliferation of Western-backed public administration (PA) reform initiatives in developing countries, especially in post-communist societies in Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia (Raadschelders 2003, Pollitt 2015). In the 1990s, it was commonly believed that implementing a Western-style public administration system (i.e., Anglo-American PA) would be crucial for advancing the rule of law, market economies, and democratisation in non-Western societies (Alkon 2002, Carothers 2002, Lindsey 2007, Krygier 2019). These processes were particularly evident in how the new public management (NPM) discourse dominated the public administration reform agenda globally, being viewed as a panacea for market openness and governance improvement in developing

countries¹. This rested on the assumption that public administration reform was primarily a technical and administrative task, and that transplanting Western-style models and institutions into the 'fertile grounds' of non-Western societies would lead to good governance, the rule of law, and economic development (Carothers 1998, 2002, Otto 2008). As a result, countries that did not adhere to or diverge from global Western standards were often seen as laggards in a transition process, with the expectation that they would eventually adopt Western-style public administration (Drechsler 2014). Over the past thirty years, Western governments, development agencies, and international organisations have devised and financed countless strategies and approaches to reform and modernise (i.e., Westernize) the governance and legal institutions of non-Western societies (Lindsey 2007, Beal and Graham 2014, Krygier 2019).

Despite the sustained efforts by international development agencies and the substantial financial investments directed towards the rule of law and good governance reforms, the task of establishing Western-style administrative frameworks in non-Western societies has consistently proven to be extraordinarily challenging. The initial optimism that fueled the spread of Western public administration models in the 1990s has been tempered by the rise of authoritarian regimes globally (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). An analysis of global political developments over the last three decades reveals an ever-growing number of non-democratic regimes worldwide, a trend commonly described as a "crisis of democracy" (Freedom House 2022) or "authoritarianism goes global" (Diamond et al. 2016). Post-communist states in Central and Eastern Europe, such as Hungary and Poland—once hailed as "arguably the two most likely success stories, vanguard states, of 'transition' and liberal constitutional democratic reform of the '90s"—have experienced significant democratic backsliding and reversals in the rule of law (Krygier 2019). In many post-Soviet countries, Western-backed public administration reform initiatives have, paradoxically, strengthened and reinforced authoritarian governance (Alkon 2002, Sannerholm and Bergquist 2015). As a result, the current era is characterised by a rise in authoritarian leaders within democracies who use legal channels and economic regulations to coerce the population into adopting specific lifestyles and values. These leaders employ sophisticated tools, such as disinformation campaigns and continuous attacks on democratic institutions, to achieve their goals. At the same time, authoritarian regimes have embedded themselves in the global economy and become highly adept at managing their image and branding. They increasingly dismiss the significance of democratic norms, institutions, and multicultural values, which has facilitated their consolidation of power and bolstered their legitimacy.

Notwithstanding these outcomes, the mainstream PA reform agenda—dominated by Western-centric and neoliberal perspectives—continues to endorse a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, while disregarding the role of alternative (non-Western) public administration institutions and norms (Drechsler et al. 2023). Instead of exploring the strengths and functionality of existing non-Western traditional legal and governance mechanisms, Western-backed rule of law and good governance initiatives often proceed from the assumption that these institutions and norms must be disregarded due to their perceived failure to adhere to principles of human rights, democracy, and market economy. Some scholars view this approach as a new form of imperialism that imposes legal and institutional uniformity, thus structuring and regulating political, social, and economic relations (Newton 2006, Ikejiaku 2014).

1 McCourt 2002, McCourt and Minogue 2001, den Heyer 2011, Dan 2014, Dan and Pollitt 2015

In light of these tendencies, there has been a growing call to reassess current approaches, especially within a growing body of literature on Islamic public administration, which argues that public administration reform in non-Western contexts should reckon with the underlying cultural norms, religious values, and traditional or Indigenous legal and governance structures². This rests on the understanding that Western-backed PA reform initiatives often fail to recognise that legal and governance institutions do not operate in isolation; their effectiveness is shaped by historical legacies and surrounding social forces that endorse alternative forms of social behaviour distinct from state law (Tamanaha 2011, Tutumlu 2016, Urinboyev 2023). Consequently, externally imposed legal and institutional frameworks often lack local legitimacy and authority in non-Western societies and are frequently manipulated, adapted, or rejected by local actors (Ahmed 2007, Otto 2008, Yilmaz 2016).

Accordingly, there is no single global (i.e., Western/Anglo-American) best practice in public administration; rather, there are various governance and public administration paradigms that can be effective and ethical according to their own normative standards. This alternative approach highlights the importance of recognising indigenous institutions, everyday religious practices, micro-level orders, and informal community-based welfare and service provision, which can compensate for the state's shortcomings. Studies have demonstrated that local conditions and norms are critical factors in determining the most suitable path for legal and institutional reform. They argue that laws and institutions developed indigenously are less susceptible to corruption compared to transplanted foreign legal models (Grajzl and Dimitrova-Grajzl 2009, Urinboyev and Eraliev 2022). Ethnographically exploring key indigenous service-providing institutions in Morocco known as *zawāyā*, Drechsler and Chafik (2022) demonstrated the existence of an alternative public administration institution that is functional in its operation, delivers on its goals, and is markedly different from the global-Western mainstream on both counts. Hence, a lack of Western-style institutions does not necessarily imply an absence of alternative indigenous and traditional institutions and norms that can more effectively and creatively regulate everyday life.

Despite the growing calls for recognizing non-Western governance and legal institutions, there has been relatively little empirical investigation of alternative, non-Western public administration institutions. This is especially true for the empirical study of the legacy, context, and contemporary practice of Islamic public administration institutions. As Drechsler (2014) notes, if Islamic PA is mentioned in mainstream PA research, scholars usually refer to medieval Islamic times and institutions or discuss it as an obstacle to modern PA and to Europeanization, seeing it as a stumbling block on the way to good PA. With the exception of a few empirically oriented papers focusing on Islamic public administration institutions and practices in Uzbekistan, Morocco, Turkey, and Malaysia (Deligöz 2014, Noh et al. 2014, Urinboyev 2014, 2023, Müller 2018, Chafik 2022a, Chafik and Drechsler 2022), most research on Islamic public administration discusses historical trajectories (Kalantari 1998, 2005, Samier 2017, Hummel 2019) or critically reviews the state of the art while highlighting the need for a new research agenda³ (Drechsler 2013, 2014, 2015, Drechsler et al. 2023). The paucity of empirical research on Islamic public administration can partly be explained by the limited presence of ethnographic and socio-legal perspectives in administrative sciences. The ethnographic

2 Drechsler 2014, 2015, Urinboyev 2014, Hummel 2019, Chafik and Drechsler 2022, Drechsler et al. 2023

3 The Islamic Public Value project, based at University College London, is a promising endeavor focused on developing empirically grounded case studies of Islamic public administration institutions and practices across diverse regions, including the Balkans, Central Asia, South Asia, the Gulf States, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa.

approach is rarely used within mainstream public administration research, which tends to focus on macro-level topics and state-centered approaches. While the ethnographic method is not new to public administration scholars (Rhodes 2005, Huby et al. 2011, Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2019), it has not been widely applied to the study of Islamic public administration, a relatively new research field which continues to remain empirically and methodologically underdeveloped.

The above considerations have informed my position in this chapter, which aims to provide methodological tools and analytical insights for the empirical study of Islamic PA. To this end, I present some of the most common theoretical and analytical approaches in ethnography and describe their innovative contributions to Islamic public administration research. Specifically, I will demonstrate how to (a) conduct ethnographic fieldwork on Islamic public administration institutions and (b) analyze, conceptualize, and write about this type of ethnographic fieldwork in PA research. With that said, my aim is not to provide an exhaustive review of ethnographic approaches in relation to PA literature but rather offer the essential aspects of socio-legal ethnographic approaches that can serve as a methodological tool for scholars seeking to conduct ethnographic fieldwork on Islamic PA institutions. Thus, this chapter sheds light on some of the theoretical and methodological aspects of ethnographic fieldwork, which will hopefully inspire new empirically oriented studies on Islamic PA.

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows. The next section will provide a brief discussion on Islamic PA, depicting it as a living tradition. After that, I will develop a conceptual framework by engaging with relevant socio-legal theories, which will serve as a theoretical lens for analyzing living Islamic administrative traditions within local communities. Following the theoretical foundations, I will discuss the role of ethnographic and socio-legal methods in studying Islamic PA, emphasizing the importance of on-the-ground research for uncovering covert mundane administrative traditions in Muslim contexts. I will then present the results of my ethnographic study of *Mahalla* institutions in Uzbekistan, exemplifying how to do and write about Islamic PA research in practice. Finally, the concluding section will outline the implications of this chapter for broader methodological and empirical debates within Islamic PA research, highlighting key contributions and suggesting avenues for future exploration in this field.

Understanding Islamic PA as a Living Tradition

Before discussing how to conduct ethnographic fieldwork on Islamic PA institutions, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of family and community life, state-society relations and administration in Islam. In this regard, the statement below by Al-Farabi (870–950 CE), the preeminent political philosopher of the Islamic Golden Age, captures the basic features of administrative and communal values in Islam:

By nature, every person's life is organized in such a way that for his own existence and achievement of the highest perfection, he needs many things that he cannot provide for himself alone. He needs a certain community that can provide each individual with things from the common good. That is why it is only through associations of many people helping each other, where each provides another with some share of what is

necessary for existence, that a person achieves that level of perfection to which he is destined by nature. The activities of all members of such a community collectively provide each of them with everything that they need to exist and achieve perfection.⁴

Al-Farabi's assertion reflects the Islamic administrative ethos prioritizing collectivism, mutual support and communal/social responsibility, which are observable across various Muslim societies. His statement also aligns with the concept of *Tawhid* (Oneness), a fundamental Islamic paradigm positing a holistic view of existence (Shariati 1980). Within this paradigm, society is perceived as an intricate network of interconnected social structures, institutions, family, politics, culture, economy, and individual and communal ethics (ibid.). Although Islam has been highly adaptive and flexible to local cultures and social circumstances across various Muslim societies (Hummel 2019), its holistic nature has cultivated similar political and administrative practices rooted in collectivist and religious orientations (Samier 2017). This interconnectedness suggests that material and spiritual pursuits are intrinsically linked, with all actions carrying religious significance (Mahmood 2006). Active engagement, ethical conduct, and social responsibility in all life spheres, including public administration, are thus seen as religious acts and enactments of faith (Ali 1998). Consequently, Islam emphasizes ethical conduct and social responsibility within public administration and business (Halstead 2007). Research has shown that Islamic values serve as a "unifying force" (Weir 2003), an integrating framework", (Weir 2003) or a "moral filter" (Rice 1999), thereby shaping organizational and management practices.

Accordingly, the values, attitudes, standards, and behaviors of people within Muslim societies, across both formal and informal domains, are predominantly rooted in collectivist and religious tenets. While Western societies often prioritize individual autonomy and nuclear family structures (Hofstede 2011), Muslim cultures exhibit collectivist tendencies, characterized by communal values of neighborliness, in-group loyalty, interdependence, mutual support and reciprocal obligations. Individuals within these collectivist contexts can expect support from extended family or the wider community in exchange for adherence to religious and social norms. Resting on this understanding, as Kalantari (2005) observes, many societal problems in Muslim societies are attributed to the prioritization of individual desires over collective well-being, resulting in a disregard for the rights of others. Islam cautions against such self-centeredness, as it distorts judgment and fosters corruption within governance. Thus, Islam provides a holistic framework and general way of life, encompassing spiritual beliefs, cultural values, and ethical guidelines applicable to governance and administration (Kalantari 2005, Egel and Fry 2017).

The preceding analysis suggests that Islamic public administration (PA) can be viewed as a living tradition and a general way of life in Muslim societies, observable through people's reasoning, moral judgment, choices, decisions, and behavior within the flow of everyday life and social relations. However, these processes are not easily discernible when analyzing the operation of formal PA institutions at the macro level. Given the dominance of Western PA paradigms, traditional Islamic PA institutions and practices often operate at the grassroots level, coexisting with the larger state apparatus in meso- and micro-level arenas. These institutions frequently deliver co-produced services (Chafik 2022a, Chafik and Drechsler

4 Abu Nasr Al-Farabi. 1972. "Filosofskie traktaty (Philosophical treatise)." Almaty: Nauka, , 303. (author's own translation and interpretation from Russian into English)

2022) or serve as an alternative welfare structure when the state fails to meet the basic needs of its citizens (Urinboyev 2014, Mumtaz and Whiteford 2021). Building on Peters' (2019) notion of "governing in the shadows," which suggests that governance and public administration extend beyond the state to include alternatives such as markets, experts, social actors, and institutions, Chafik and Drechsler (2022) advocate for recognizing the presence of alternative and context-specific public administration paradigms operating alongside or beneath the dominant global-Western PA models.

Based on the above considerations, this chapter argues for the necessity to move beyond the conventional state-centric understanding of PA, which largely confines it to formal governmental institutions. Instead, I propose an ethnographic and socio-legal lens that encompasses traditional and non-state entities, norms, and practices operating at the meso- and micro-levels of society. These structures, often characterized by hierarchical order, routinized procedures, and decision-making processes, may function informally yet significantly influence daily life and contribute to social order. To effectively conceptualize and analyze Islamic PA, we must adopt socio-legal and ethnographic approaches that delve into everyday life and social relations beyond formal state structures. This requires a meticulous examination of power dynamics, the formation of normative patterns and social meanings, the specific local discourses shaping these elements, and their interaction with broader societal changes.

Conceptualizing Islamic PA through the Socio-Legal Theories

As mentioned in the previous section, Islamic PA should be viewed as a living tradition deeply embedded in social and cultural practices, observable through everyday life and social relations in Muslim societies. This perspective suggests that PA should not only be seen as "an aspect of the modern state that makes state functioning possible" but also as a key arena for "social life and political action" (Bernstein and Mertz 2011, 7). This approach challenges classical assumptions about PA developed by Weber, who viewed bureaucracy as "the very embodiment of impersonal rationality" (Graeber 2012, 110) and "rule by disinterested bureaucrats" (Heyman 1995, 262). Instead, aligning with Müller's (2018) anthropological work on the bureaucratization of Islam in contemporary Southeast Asia, I emphasize the importance of daily interpersonal relations and the collective efforts of Muslim groups and how these interactions produce informal administrative practices and bottom-up law-and-order-making. A relevant example of this could be a case study on how people in Muslim societies, particularly those with weak state capacity, establish and maintain social order, cope with risks, economic uncertainties, challenges, and conflicts in everyday situations, and the role of Islamic knowledge, meaning-production, and values in regulating these processes. Another pertinent example could be a case study on how Islamic values and norms trigger and facilitate alternative service delivery and welfare provision initiatives in meso- and micro-level social arenas, especially when the state fails to secure the basic needs of its citizens.

Accordingly, the scholarly treatment of Islamic PA as a living tradition necessitates a shift from a narrow focus on formal institutions, policies, and laws. Instead, we should also place emphasis on informal and multiple forms of normative ordering that produce routinized

practices, determine the main parameters of social behavior, and ensure order and stability in everyday life vis-à-vis or alongside the formal state institutions. This means that a social practice or normative pattern should be defined as an institution not by its official recognition or legal codification, but by its significance, legitimacy, and functional role within society. In this sense, PA is a "social phenomenon" (Herzfeld 1992) that may take on different social and symbolic meanings and forms depending on the context.

Eugen Ehrlich was one of the first scholars to fully recognize the plurality of normative orders, and his living law theory remains a useful tool for studying traditional and unofficial governance institutions inherent in different social settings. In *Fundamental Principles of the Sociology of Law*, Ehrlich (1912) distinguishes between law created by the state (juristic law and statutes) and informal norms produced by non-state social associations (living law). Ehrlich claims that a 'living law' is not directly linked to the state or its legal system, but to the inner order of various social associations. By 'the inner order of social associations', Ehrlich means society's reflexive web of expectations that grant power and meaning to norms. Thus, for Ehrlich, it is not state law, but the 'living law' of various social associations that dominates everyday life itself even if it is not codified or formally recognized/endorsed by the state (Banakar 2008, Urinboyev 2013). In this way, Ehrlich designates the entirety of law dominating everyday life and social relations as the living law, whereas he refers to a law created/codified by a state as state law or juristic law. He advises us that if we seek to better understand the coexistence of and clashes between different normative orders, we should attentively observe everyday life, the relations of domination, and actual habits of people, and enquire into people's thoughts regarding the opinions of those relevant to them in their surrounding environment and related to proper social behaviors. Thus, Ehrlich's emphasis on the law as it is lived and practiced in various non-state social associations, rather than merely codified by the formal legal system, provides a valuable framework for the plural forms of governance beyond formal state structures.

Ehrlich's idea that state law is not the only regulator of social, economic, and political life is also reflected in the scholarly literature on legal pluralism⁵. Legal pluralism emphasizes the coexistence of and clash between multiple sets of rules or 'legal orders' molding people's social behaviors: the law of the nation-state, indigenous customary rules, religious decrees, moral codes, and the practical norms of social life. From this perspective, law may consist of any rules (written or unwritten) that influence social behaviors and are acted upon by certain groups as binding obligations. In other words, law should be defined by its function and social recognition, not by its form. Thus, state law is merely one amongst many other legal orders within a society. As such, a society is a place of legal and institutional pluralism where a wide range of normative orders, including both official laws and informal norms, coexist and/or clash. Classic legal anthropology studies and the more recent legal pluralism scholarship have described the emergence of 'semi-autonomous social fields' or 'non-state forms of normative ordering' with their own forms of regulation and informal norms, many of which contradict state law (Moore 1973, Tamanaha 2001, Roberts 2005, Pirie 2006). Seen through the legally pluralistic lens, Islamic PA institutions can be said to exist and operate alongside formal PA institutions, offering context-specific solutions to daily challenges and uncertainties in Muslim societies.

5 Moore 1973, Griffiths 1986, 2003, Merry 1988, Tamanaha 2001, von Benda-Beckmann 2002

There is strong support for the legal pluralism framework in the field of law and economics, where Robert C. Ellickson (1991) argued that large segments of social life are located and shaped beyond the reach of the state and its legal system and that his concept of "order without law" provides useful insights for understanding how and why people cooperate, establish order, and regulate daily social and economic relations in the absence of/without resorting to the state law. Ellickson contends the commonly held view that the state and its legal system are the only source of law and order. Rather, order arises spontaneously, and one may observe in everyday life situations many patterns of non-hierarchical and informal processes of law-and-order-making. Based on his empirical observations of how Shasta County, California, neighbors apply informal norms, rather than formal legal rules, to resolve most of the issues that arise among them, Ellickson argues that there is a multitude of informal norms and informal social-control mechanisms in society that enable people to achieve order and stability without law. Ellickson, in this sense, emphasizes the importance of considering informal forms of normative ordering, a postulate that is highly relevant to examining Islamic public administration (PA) as a living tradition.

Researching Islamic PA through Ethnographic Techniques

In this section, I will explore ethnography's essential features and how they align with the conceptual framework presented earlier. More specifically, I will demonstrate how ethnography can uncover the everyday practices and institutionalized routines (i.e., everyday law and order-making) that are regulated and sustained by Islamic principles, concepts, values, and references.

Ethnography explores how daily activities in a society are conditioned by various rules, habits and norms (Sjöberg 2011). It is a naturalistic method that relies on material gathered from a fieldworker's firsthand experience within a particular setting. It must be carried out using the expressions and categorizations of the people and groups studied. Those who are being studied are considered actors rather than passive objects. Ethnographer views activities she/he observed as social actions embedded within a socially organized context and carried out through the daily practices of participants (Atkinson et al. 2001). This requires the ethnographer to depict life as perceived and understood by those who inhabit the environment being studied. The most central aspect of ethnography is 'thick description' – a term popularized by Geertz (1973). "Culture", Geertz describes, "is not a power, sometimes to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something with which they can be intelligibly – that is, *thickly* – described" (1973, 14). As Merriam (2009, 28) writes, "Immersion in the site as a participant observer is the primary method of data collection. Interviews, formal and informal, and the analysis of documents, records, and artefacts also constitute the data set along with a fieldworker's diary of each day's happenings, personal feelings, ideas, impressions, or insights with regard to those events." In this connection, participant observation involves going out and living in the field with an open mindset and participating in mundane activities in the field site (Bernard 2002). Informal interviews (talks) are a natural extension of participant observations since they frequently occur as part of ongoing participant observation fieldwork and rely on spontaneous social interactions between the researcher and informants (Patton 2002). By being in the field

site and directly observing everyday activities, the participant observer can come closer to understanding what activities mean to the people who carry them out (Geertz 1973).

When doing ethnographic studies – the researcher should be 'open-minded' and flexible to various 'discoveries' she/he might encounter during the fieldwork; as in David Silverman's words, the researcher sees "the remarkable in the mundane" (2007, 13). Therefore, in many situations, the primary challenge lies in grasping unfamiliar complexities and mundane activities, where individuals collaborate in informal and unexpected ways and where social and interpersonal dynamics play a crucial role. Good ethnographers are known for detecting such subtle social and interactive cues, often leading to valuable findings and discoveries (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). Sjöberg (2011, 164) maintains that the field is not an absolute concept but rather is constructed by the ethnographer as the study process proceeds. As research progresses, the specific focus and questions are likely to evolve. While initial inquiries provide a starting point, researchers should anticipate refining their research direction as they delve deeper into the subject matter. Thus, ethnography is both a process and a product (Merriam 2009).

During fieldwork, researchers may employ various data collection techniques, including (1) developing an understanding of how information flows within the setting. This involves uncovering the types of information exchanged, the channels through which it is communicated, and the coordination techniques actually in use; (2) exploring what the individuals and groups being studied believe the researcher needs to know about their daily lives in order to fully comprehend them; and (3) comparing what the individuals and community members think they do or aspire to do with what is actually observed in practice. By juxtaposing the researcher's observations with the participants' own perceptions of their daily lives and social interactions, a more comprehensive understanding is formed.

Additionally, researchers may utilize different field strategies, such as (a) following/going along with informants during their mundane activities or when completing tasks of specific interest (Kusenbach 2003), (b) 'hanging around' at different places in the field at different points of time; (c) identify and follow the rumors, gossips and conflicts centered around the "people of influence/power" in the fieldwork setting. Ethnography is well-placed to capture the 'slices, glimpses and specimens' of such daily micro-political operations that other methodologies cannot, and (d) identify the 'war' stories that people are eager to share. These narratives shed light on the issues that are deemed important and problematic by the individuals being studied. These stories offer insights into the prevailing politics and culture within the field site.

Building on Peters' (2019) notion of "governing in the shadows," I argue for a shift away from the conventional state-centric view of PA. By employing ethnographic methods, we can empirically examine the informal, grassroots, and non-state dimensions of Islamic PA institutions that often operate outside of official structures (Chafik 2022b). In so doing, I propose an analytical heuristic – "living law-informed ethnography" – to attend to the subtle and intricate ways people and communities in Muslim contexts establish and maintain social order, cope with risks, economic uncertainties, challenges, and conflicts in everyday situations and how they use Islamic frames and values to regulate these processes. Deploying "living law-informed ethnography" allows us to see these micro-level processes not just as haphazard efforts of

people in informal ad hoc groupings but as highly coordinated, routinized and institutionalized practices, with established power geometries and enforcement infrastructure predicated on Islamic values and codes of conduct.

Thus, when conducting "living law-informed ethnography" in Muslim contexts, it is essential to focus on local meso- and micro-level institutions, norms, actors, practices, and dynamics. Emphasis should be placed on exploring how ordinary people navigate between ethics, legality, religion, and other evaluative frameworks when making judgments about their own and others' actions. By examining these interactions, we gain a deeper understanding of how social norms, religious values, gender identities, and ethical reasoning shape the logic and meaning of everyday life and social relations. This approach requires close attention to the local socio-legal context and cultural repertoires – daily interactions, meanings, cultural values, social norms, religious discourses, and networks of reciprocity and exchange – that contribute to constructing a locally legitimate governance order. These meso- and micro-level orders, distinct from the formal laws, regulations, and policies of state institutions, provide stability and order in everyday life. This form of "living law" often governs daily interactions in the absence of or as a substitute for state law.

***Mahallas* in Uzbekistan – An Embodiment of Living Islamic PA Tradition**

In this section, I will illustrate how I utilized the "living law-informed ethnography" to study and visualize Islamic PA as a living tradition that unfolds within the flow of everyday life and social relations. In undertaking this task, I will present the results of my ethnographic study of *Mahalla* institutions – an indigenous governance structure originating from Central Asia's Islamic past and administrative traditions. Before presenting the ethnographic material on *Mahallas*, I will give brief reflections on the fieldwork process.

I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork in rural Fergana, Uzbekistan, between April 2009 and July 2022 (for a total of 22 months). During the fieldwork, I relied on my unique 'ethnographic toolkit' (Reyes 2020), which included extensive fieldwork experience in a Central Asian context, my background as a native of Uzbekistan, local language skills, and lived experience within Central Asian culture and society. The main methods of data collection were observations and informal interviews. I conducted observations and interviews in the *Mahalla's* social spaces and at events where most residents regularly gather to exchange information. Specifically, I frequently visited I regularly visited key gathering places such as the *guzar* (community meeting space), *masjid* (mosque), and *choykhona* (teahouse), as well as life-cycle events and rituals, including weddings, births, circumcision ceremonies, funerals, and the *Mahalla* residents' monthly get-togethers (*gap*). These gathering places are public and accessible to all *Mahalla* residents and guests. Being a native with cultural competence and extensive social networks at the field site, I had direct access to these hotspots, allowing me to gather a wide range of narratives and stories about everyday *Mahalla* life and social relations. My informants represented a diverse group of people holding various social positions, including 'people of influence' – *Mahalla* leaders, religious leaders, wealthy families, and local state officials – as well as ordinary residents. Meeting more than ten *Mahalla* members daily made it possible to collect different perspectives and experiences on the role of *Mahalla* in people's

daily lives. These strategies allowed me to collect rich ethnographic material on *Mahalla*, the role of Islamic values and practices in daily life, and state-society relations in Uzbekistan. Therefore, the ethnographic material I collected can be viewed as a compilation of the voices of the hundreds of *Mahalla* residents I encountered during my daily visits to these social hotspots.

In contemporary Uzbekistan, the term '*Mahalla*', derived from the Arabic word '*mahali*' (local), is widely used to refer to a local residential neighborhood community that unites residents through shared traditions, language, customs, Islamic values, and the reciprocal exchange of money, material goods, and services (Urinboyev 2013). Most Uzbeks identify themselves through their *Mahalla*. For instance, when asked where they live, a native might respond, "I live in *Mahalla* X" (Noori 2006). This indicates that everyone in Uzbekistan is technically a member of a *Mahalla* (Sievers 2002). Currently, there are 9,361 *Mahallas* in Uzbekistan (Urinboyev and Eraliev 2022), with each *Mahalla* typically housing between 500 and 10,000 residents (Noori 2006).

When doing fieldwork, I reckoned with the post-Soviet governance trajectories in Uzbekistan that resulted in the integration of *Mahallas* into the formal public administration system through legislative codification and institutional reconfiguration. Following the adoption of the "*Mahalla* Law – The Law on Institutions of Self-Government of Citizens" in September 1993, *Mahallas* were assigned to implement a broad range of state administrative tasks, including monitoring residents' religious practices, preventing divorce, allocating state subsidies and bank loans to low-income residents, assisting law enforcement with drug and alcohol abuse issues, job creation, fostering *Mahalla*-based small businesses, and rehabilitating former prisoners. However, by using ethnographic techniques, I found that, despite the Uzbek authorities' attempts to incorporate *Mahalla* into the public administration system, *Mahallas* continue to preserve their traditional nature in which people are tied to each other and maintain everyday relations through common Islamic values and administrative traditions.

Accordingly, *Mahallas* have evolved into hybrid institutions with both formal and informal features, which I have categorized as (1) administrative/formal *Mahalla* and (2) social/informal *Mahalla*. The formal *Mahalla* operates according to the *Mahalla* Law, functioning as an extension of the state within local communities. It serves as a sub-unit of local government and increasingly acts as a state mechanism for social control. In contrast, the informal *Mahalla* operates based on Islamic values and principles. It represents the collective interests of *Mahalla* residents, who mobilize around informal welfare and service provision activities to address gaps left by the state's retreat from service delivery. It becomes evident when observing how informal *Mahalla* practices and interactions gain moral significance within an Islamic framework. These dynamics are particularly apparent when ethnographically exploring everyday life, examining residents' reasoning and perceptions, their strategies to establish order and resolve conflicts, and the moral frameworks they apply to their actions and events.

Karvon, where I conducted my fieldwork, is a *Mahalla* located in the Fergana Valley of Uzbekistan. It comprises 120 households (*oilalar*) with a population of over 1,500 people. During my fieldwork, Karvon was administered by both a formal leader (*rais*), elected according to the *Mahalla* Law, and an informal leader (*oqsoqol*), chosen informally by the residents.

Before the Uzbek authorities' legal intervention, Karvon was led solely by the *oqsoqol*, who was elected informally during a gathering at the *Mahalla's* mosque. Alongside the *oqsoqol*, the *imam* (a religious leader) played a crucial role in the *Mahalla's* everyday governance, providing religious guidance and leading rituals during life-cycle events. The adoption of the *Mahalla* Law in 1993 introduced two parallel power structures within the *Mahalla*: (1) the formal *Mahalla* committee, administered by a *rais* and his assistants, who were state-salaried employees, and (2) the informal *Mahalla*, managed by the *oqsoqol*, who was elected by residents without local government interference. The *rais* operated from a small state-owned office within the *Mahalla*, while the *oqsoqol* used *Mahalla*-owned social infrastructure, such as the mosque, *guzar* (community meeting space), or *choykhona* (teahouse where residents gather daily), as his office. Residents viewed the *rais* and his assistants as the "eyes and ears" of the government, working on behalf of the local state administration (*hokimiyat*). In contrast, the *oqsoqol* and the *imam*, who worked pro bono, earned the trust and respect of the residents. They represented the interests of the community in dealings with the state, even when residents' actions sometimes contravened state laws. The informal leaders coordinated life-cycle events (such as weddings, circumcisions, and funerals), collected and distributed donations, mediated disputes, managed contributions for communal projects like irrigation and road asphaltting, and organized *hashar* (community-based mutual assistance work) for maintaining *Mahalla*-owned infrastructure.

In Karvon *Mahalla*, social infrastructure and community events (e.g., *guzar*, *masjid*, *choykhona*, *gap*, weddings, circumcisions, and funerals) played a crucial role in fostering and promoting Muslim communal values. Since residents gathered daily in these spaces, they became vital social arenas where local politics, norms, and values were shaped, negotiated, and reshaped through conversations, rumors, alliances, and reciprocal relationships. At any given time, whether morning, afternoon, or evening, it was common to find 10 to 15 men sitting and talking in the *guzar*. Meanwhile, women's socializing and information-sharing usually occurred in the streets or within households. These regular, often daily, meetings created a strong sense of mutual dependence among the residents. The shared residence and constant interaction fostered an expectation that community members would support one another whenever needed. Residents who ignored these communal norms often faced social sanctions, such as gossip, ridicule, loss of respect and reputation, humiliation, or even exclusion from community events. Therefore, in Karvon *Mahalla*, money was not everything—upholding one's honor, respect, prestige, and reputation was equally important. As a result, give-and-take rituals were an integral part of everyday interactions in the *Mahalla*.

While conducting fieldwork in Karvon *Mahalla*, I was struck by the significant role Islamic values and sensibilities played in shaping everyday social life. These values provided a moral and regulatory framework for organizing welfare and service provision activities within the *Mahalla*. One notable example of these practices is the *hashar* tradition, where residents cooperate and pool their efforts and resources, often through the reciprocal exchange of free or non-compensated labor, money, material goods, and services.

An *oqsoqol* I interviewed noted that the post-Soviet economic decline had greatly increased the importance of *hashar* as a way for the community to collectively manage and mitigate livelihood risks. Residents organized *hashar* for various purposes, such as weddings, funerals, circumcision ceremonies, constructing irrigation systems, cleaning streets, asphaltting roads,

building homes or mosques, and other services not provided by the state. Many *Mahalla* residents viewed their participation in *hashar* as part of their effort to be good Muslims and live according to Islamic principles.

Accordingly, examining everyday coping strategies within the *Mahalla* provides insight into how deeply Islamic values and sensibilities are woven into the fabric of daily life. The use of *hashar* to build Karvon *Mahalla*'s water and irrigation infrastructure is a relevant example. In rural Ferghana, agricultural production is a significant source of income, making water and irrigation a primary concern for residents. However, the local government did not allocate any funds for building irrigation systems, such as installing a pump to access groundwater during the agricultural season. Instead of addressing the water needs of the people, the government prioritized using a large share of the water supply for cotton and wheat production, leaving ordinary residents with limited access to water.

In response, one of the largest *hashar* projects in Karvon *Mahalla* focused on constructing a pump system to use groundwater for agricultural purposes. Due to the project's high cost, Nosir Rahmon, the *Mahalla*'s *oqsoqol*, collected monetary contributions from each household. The amount each household contributed was based on their financial situation: wealthier families provided larger sums, while low-income households contributed their labor instead. Despite these collective efforts, the funds raised were still insufficient to complete the project. Although there were several wealthy families in the *Mahalla*, only one, Aziz Hoji, chose to cover the remaining costs. During an interview, Aziz Hoji explained that his decision to finance the pump project was motivated by Islamic principles. He believed that providing water to people would earn him a place in *jannat* (paradise) after death. This example highlights the underlying role of Islam as a normative force in Uzbekistan, where Islamic values permeate not only religious rituals but also the everyday life of the *Mahalla*. It aligns with social scientists' interpretations of Muslim societies, which suggest that everyday interactions gain moral significance when framed within Islamic values (Bowen 1993, Lambek 1993, Rasanayagam 2011).

Another example of Islamic values shaping everyday life in the *Mahalla* is a road-asphalting project where residents successfully paved the roads without any financial support or oversight from the local government. Once again, a significant portion of the expenses was covered by wealthy *Mahalla* residents who believed that their contributions would earn them *savob* (spiritual merit) and help them become better Muslims. In this way, Islamic values and principles create a strong moral foundation in the social life of rural Ferghana, where an individual's social status and standing as a "good Muslim" are often linked to their contributions to *Mahalla* projects.

During mosque gatherings and visits to the *Mahalla*'s *choykhona* (teahouse), I observed that residents viewed the donations made by wealthier members of the community as acts of piety and charity. According to the residents, sharing one's wealth with the broader community, giving *zakat* (Islamic income tax), and practicing *ihsan* (doing good deeds, such as helping the poor) were essential to being considered a good Muslim. These observations align with the findings of Johan Rasanayagam, who, in his book *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan* (2011), also illustrated that being a good Muslim is not just an internal, personal matter but is also expressed through actions and relationships with others.

Islamic values significantly shaped local business practices in rural Ferghana, particularly among *Mahalla*-based groups of traders and entrepreneurs known as *rassiychilar*, who exported Uzbek agricultural products to Russia. In Karvon *Mahalla*, almost every household had a small plot of land used for growing fruits and vegetables like cucumbers, grapes, peaches, apples, cherries, and apricots. The *rassiychilar* purchased these products from the residents to export them to Russian markets. What stood out about these business practices was the absence of immediate payments. Instead, the *rassiychilar* collected the produce from the residents based on a debt-and-trust system, exporting the goods to bazaars and supermarket chains in Russia. The payment was deferred until after the products were sold in Russia, which could take two weeks to a month. Despite the sizable economic scale of these *Mahalla*-based businesses, there were no formal, written contracts to regulate transactions between the residents and the *rassiychilar*. Instead, both parties relied on mutual trust and Islamic business ethics, rooted in values such as *insof* (justice) and *halol* (permissible/lawful in Islamic law).

Because these business relations were based on Islamic principles, there was a strong incentive for all parties to comply with the terms of the agreement, reinforced by the dense social interactions and social control within the *Mahalla*. Deviating from the agreed-upon terms was not just seen as a breach of contract but as an immoral act, labelling the transgressor as a bad Muslim. Such behavior would be condemned by the community, especially during prayers at the *Mahalla*'s mosque, illustrating how Islamic values intertwined with both economic transactions and social accountability in Karvon *Mahalla*.

The example of *rassiychilar* and their debt-and-trust-based business practices in Karvon *Mahalla* illustrates how Islamic values functioned as a regulatory framework for economic transactions, even in the absence of formal state law. Many of those I encountered during fieldwork stated that the cooperation between *Mahalla* residents and the *rassiychilar* led to significant improvements in the standard of living in rural Ferghana. With their financial situations improved, *rassiychilar* actively participated in acts of piety and charity, adhering to Islamic principles such as *ihsan* (doing good for others) and *zakat* (the Islamic obligation to give a portion of one's wealth to those in need). For instance, Aziz Hoji, a *rassiychi* whom I previously discussed, regularly gave *zakat* and contributed to *Mahalla* projects as part of his commitment to Islamic values.

These empirical examples demonstrate that the foundational social policy principles of Islam – *zakat*, *ihsan*, and interest-free business ethics – remained deeply embedded in everyday *Mahalla* life in rural Ferghana, despite decades of Soviet atheism policies. The survival and vitality of these Islamic values highlight the continued influence of Islam as a moral and normative force within the community, motivating individuals to engage in charitable acts and maintain a sense of social responsibility. This aligns with Shahrani's (1991) argument that rural Muslims in Central Asia cannot be simplistically depicted as being ignorant of Islamic teachings. Instead, local knowledge of Islam should be understood by examining how various social groups and actors incorporate it into their daily lives and discourses. These values provide an administrative framework for regulating behavior, fostering cooperation, and ensuring social welfare, functioning as an alternative to state law in the governance of everyday life.

Conclusions

This chapter has sought to address a significant gap in the field of public administration by focusing on the empirical study of Islamic PA institutions through the lens of ethnographic and socio-legal perspectives. Despite the increasing recognition of non-Western public administration paradigms, empirical research into Islamic PA remains sparse and underdeveloped, largely confined to historical and theoretical discussions rather than contemporary, empirically oriented studies.

The limited empirical investigations, primarily concentrated in a few countries, underscore the need for a broader and more nuanced understanding of Islamic PA institutions today. The ethnographic approach, while established in some areas of public administration research, has been underutilized in the study of Islamic PA. By conceptualizing Islamic PA as a living tradition, this chapter has illustrated how ethnographic approaches (e.g., living-law-informed-ethnography) are well-positioned to produce valuable insights into the lived experiences of Islamic PA in Muslim contexts. Hence, I aimed to illustrate how researchers, by integrating socio-legal and ethnographic approaches, can uncover covert and mundane administrative practices that traditional macro-level PA studies may overlook.

In conclusion, addressing the empirical and methodological shortcomings in Islamic public administration (PA) research is essential for advancing a more nuanced and pluralistic understanding of governance and public administration across diverse cultural and religious contexts. It is my hope that this chapter's exploration of ethnographic and socio-legal approaches will inspire future research, opening new avenues for inquiry that deepen our understanding of Islamic PA institutions and their roles within the broader global landscape of public administration

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