

Nicole Grandin (1930-2020) : anthropologist and historian of Soudan

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Published in REMM, *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, n. 150, December 2021 [online : <https://journals.openedition.org/remmm/16249>]

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Nicole Grandin left us, at the age of ninety, on December 27, 2020, the day of Saint John of Winter - a feast which, in the Christian calendar, is like Christmas, associated with the winter solstice and symbolizes the passage from this world to an eternity of light. It is not easy to write the biography of a very discreet person, who left us few markers. She was born in Quimper on July 16, 1930. She mentioned an itinerant childhood and adolescence: her father worked in the bank and was frequently transferred from one city to another; she and her brother had to adapt to the new situation each time and to face new friends who were more or less welcoming.

Nicole Grandin began her university studies, specializing in Arabic, Islamic Studies and Anthropology. After a brief career as a journalist, she immersed herself in the study of Sudan (Eastern or Nilotic), where she conducted her field research and explored its archives. She immersed herself in Sudanese society, frequenting in particular the “great families” who recognized her competence. She prepared a PhD thesis in ethnology on the British administration in Sudan (1899-1956) at the EHESS (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales) under the direction of Paul Mercier (1922-1976), which she defended in 1975 and which was published seven years later (Grandin 1975 and 1982a). Most of the articles, books and reviews published throughout her career were on the Sudan.

The beginning of her career was marked by precarious employment, a difficult situation for a researcher and mother of two daughters: she worked as an assistant at the MSH (Maison des Sciences de l'Homme) in Paris, under the supervision of the late Clemens Heller (1917-2002). In 1970, she obtained her first stable job at the Collège de France as an assistant to Jacques Berque (1910-1995), a specialist in the history and anthropology of the Arab world, who let her pursue her personal research in parallel. In 1987, she was appointed as assistant professor of anthropology at the EHESS and attached to the CEA (Centre d'Études Africaines, CNRS/EHESS), which was merged in 2014 into the new IMAF (Institut des Mondes Africains). She kept this position until her retirement in 1998. She remained very active for a

dozen years, working in particular for Amnesty International, before being struck by illness in 2010, the year of her eightieth birthday.

Marc Gaborieau met Nicole Grandin in 1982, during a conference organized by the late Alexandre Popovic (1931-2014) and Gilles Veinstein (1945-2013) on mystical orders (or Sufi brotherhoods) in the Muslim world (Grandin 1986a). She was a faithful and active participant in the research group (CNRS/EHESS) on “The transmission of knowledge in the peripheral Muslim world”, which was set up in 1982 in the wake of this conference. She regularly participated in the weekly seminar of this group (led by Marc Gaborieau from 1982 to 2003, at 54 boulevard Raspail, Paris), as well as in the three other conferences organized by this same group on the Sufi brotherhoods Naqshbandiyya, Melamiyya and Bektachiyya. At the first two conferences, she presented papers on the Sufi brotherhoods in Sudan and Libya (Grandin 1986a) and on the Khatmiyya in Sudan (Grandin 1990). Most importantly, she organized with Marc Gaborieau in 1992 a colloquium on religious education in the Muslim world, the proceedings of which were published in a volume entitled *Madrassa* (Grandin & Gaborieau 1997; for more details on all these activities, see pp. i-iii of this volume). She contributed to the Newsletter of the group *Islam périphérique* (Peripheral Islam) with an article on a proselytizing organization in Sudan (Grandin 1986b). Finally, she did important work for the collective enterprise (too ambitious and unfortunately soon interrupted) that was the *Dictionnaire biographique des savants et grandes figures du monde musulman périphérique* (Biographical Dictionary of Scholars and Major Figures of the Peripheral Muslim World) (Peripheral Islam 1992 and 1998); the biographies contained in these two booklets have been included in an online German database.

Nicole Grandin’s work is characterized by its closeness to the field and to the people of the present and the past who are linked to it. Far from an overhanging attitude, she was interested in the personalities and diversity of the actors involved, both British administrators and major figures in Sudanese Muslim society (Grandin 1982b, 1982d, 1984, 1989b). Breaking with the classical approach of colonial studies which, in the 1970s, still focused on the sources and perspectives of the colonizers, she chose to mobilize heterogeneous documentary corpora, in English as well as in Arabic, to analyze the fundamental ambiguity of the colonial experience and to restore a plurality of historical perspectives. Her ability to combine approaches from history, anthropology, sociology, and Islamology no doubt owes as much to her multidisciplinary training as to a more personal positioning that integrates creativity with rigorous analysis. Her research on the Nilotic Sudan was particularly pioneering in the French academic landscape, between Africanist studies focused on the

territories of the former French colonial empire and Arab studies focused on the Maghreb or the Mashreq. In this respect, one cannot but be struck by the number of book reviews that she has produced, testifying to a strong sense of collective and sharing. She has thus strongly contributed to the circulation of academic knowledge on Sudan between English, Arabic and French speaking academics.

In all her work, Nicole Grandin had the curiosity to explore a region almost unexplored by French research, the courage and the competence to analyze a varied corpus of Arabic sources and British archives; she thus practiced what is now called historical anthropology. She has established herself as a scholar of great stature, capable of making large syntheses on the basis of a great mastery of Arabic, a long familiarity with the field, and a sure knowledge of the vast literature concerning her field. Reading her writings, one cannot but admire her art of giving a clear and perfectly mastered presentation, based on a vast erudition. More rooted in Omdurman than in Khartoum, her discretion was well in tune with the Sudanese society, sensitive and modest in its warm hospitality. She was thus too modest to highlight, as she deserved, the excellence and the scope of her work.

However, her research has paved the way for new generations of Sudanists in France, whether in anthropology (Christian Delmet, Barbara Casciarri, Fabienne Le Houérou, Luisa Arango, Clément Déshayes), sociology (François Ireton), sociolinguistics (Catherine Miller, Stefano Manfredi), history (Elena Vezzadini, Iris Seri-Hersch, Anaël Poussier), geography (Marc Lavergne, Eric Denis, Alice Franck, Agnès de Geoffroy, Khadidja Medani) or in political science (Roland Marchal, David Ambrosetti, Raphaëlle Chevrillon-Guibert, Jean-Nicolas Bach, Anne-Laure Mahé, Lucie Revilla) Her career as an academic and mother has inspired many researchers working on Sudan, Africa and the Middle East. At a time when the Sudanese are questioning the foundations of the state and the relationship between politics and religion, Nicole Grandin's work has lost none of its relevance. Let us wager that it will continue to nourish the reflections of researchers on contemporary Sudan and, more broadly, on Muslim societies from the 19th century to the present day.

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