HISTORY AND ANTHROPOLOGY IN AMITAV GHOSH'S IN AN ANTIQUE LAND

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ABSTRACT

There are two main narratives in Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land.* The first consists of the narrative of an Indian slave and his Jewish master in Indian and the Middle East during the 12th century. The second narrative is constructed around the author's experiences as an ethnographer in an Egyptian village in the 1980s. These two narratives embody a triangular relationship between historical reconstruction, ethnography, and literary text. This paper explores aspects of this triangular relationship. It also explores the main opposition to emerge in the text between the "medieval" and the "modern". The medieval world which the author evokes becomes the basis of a critical perspective on modernity and in the polemic of the text the term "medieval" is shorn of its pejorative connotations.

The main historical narrative in the text is the reconstruction of the stories of Abraham Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant who travelled between the Middle East and India during the 12th century, and of his Indian slave, Bomma. The material used by Ghosh for this reconstruction is the so-called Geniza connection. He charts the history of this body of archival material from its inception in the geniza (or storehouse) of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo to its formation as the Taylor-Schechte collection at Cambridge University. It is on the basis of the fragmentary remains of Ben Yiju's letters and their references to Bomma that the author pieces together the personal narratives of two of the main characters of the text.

KEYWORDS: Bomma ("The Slave of MS. H.6"), Ben Yiju, Medieval Egypt, Geniza, Magavira, Mowlid