

A FEMALE ANTHROPOLOGIST IN THE ARAB WORLD:  
BIBLICAL ORIENT AND PALESTINIAN FOLKLORE IN THE LEGACY  
OF HILMA GRANQVIST (1890-1972)

INAUGURAL DISSERTATION FOR ATTAINING A DOCTORATE FROM THE  
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## Introduction

The present research aims at shedding light on hegemonic traditions of Middle Eastern and Oriental Studies, as they are represented in the life and academic work of Hilma Granqvist (1890-1972). Her anthropological and ethnographical study of the Palestinian village of Artās in the first half of the twentieth century provides a lens through which it is possible to analyse the preconditions and circumstances of European knowledge production on the “Orient” while showing how the knowledge produced in this context was later reconfigured and adapted to a different cultural and historical setting.

Between 1925 and 1931, Hilma Granqvist carried out field research in the West Bank village of Artās. There, she produced five monographs which have a unique place in the social anthropology of Middle Eastern Muslim societies. Because of the complexity of her biography and works, Granqvist represents a fascinating object of analysis. Not only were the research conditions challenging for a woman, but she also had to deal with various Arabic dialects and ritual practices. Her perseverance and stubbornness in the face of difficulties mark her as a painstaking researcher, who was determined to achieve her goals. Thanks to her work, Artās is the best-documented Palestinian village to this day. Nevertheless, she never had a professional academic career and her work remained little known for decades. Granqvist, for example, neither appears in most handbooks of anthropology nor in biographical collections of female anthropologists.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1970s, the independent writer and researcher Shelagh Weir collaborated with the *Palestinian Exploration Fund* (PEF) to catalogue, organize Granqvist’s archive, and wrote a brief report with a biographical introduction on this basis.<sup>2</sup> In the 1990s, some scholars from the Åbo Akademi, the Swedish language university where Hilma Granqvist earned her PhD in 1932, did some research about her intellectual heritage. Solveig Widén, for example, dedicated some articles to Granqvist’s biography in Swedish<sup>3</sup> and one article in English where she compares Granqvist to one of her predecessors, the Finnish historian, Alma Söderhjelm.<sup>4</sup> Some biographical information about Granqvist is found in Riina Isotalo’s analysis of Orientalist discourse in Westermarck’s and Granqvist’s work<sup>5</sup>. In 2008, Isotalo was the first to analyse Granqvist’s position in academia as a case of discrimination due to gender bias and due to the rather original way she dealt with “the Orient.” Jarrko Wilman wrote one long text about Granqvist’s initial dissertation topic, “Women in

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<sup>1</sup> Jansen, *Women* (2000), p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> Weir, ‘Hilma’ (1975), pp. 6-13.

<sup>3</sup> Widén, ‘Hilma’ (1979), pp. 57-73; Widén, ‘Hilma’ (1989), pp. 26-35; Widén, ‘Hilma’ (1991), pp. 83-103.

<sup>4</sup> Widén, ‘Alma’ (1998), pp. 133-142.

<sup>5</sup> Isotalo, ‘Edward’ (1995), conference paper, download: <https://org.uib.no/smi/paj/pajtoc1.html>.

the Old Testament” in 1997.<sup>6</sup> The book contains a biographical introduction. The Finnish anthropologist Ulla Vuorela was working on an intellectual biography of Granqvist but sadly died in December 2011 before finishing her work.<sup>7</sup> The French-Palestinian historian Falastin Naili, who studied the oral history of Arţās in 2003, published several articles on Granqvist and on her key collaborator Louise Baldensperger.<sup>8</sup> Different authors had expressed the need of a complete biography of Granqvist during the past two decades. The publication of Sofia Häggman’s book *Hilma Granqvist—Antropolog med Hjärtat i Palestina* in 2016 was an important turning-point in the small circle of mostly female scholars interested in Granqvist’s legacy.

All the aforementioned authors highlight the pioneering aspects of Granqvist’s work, but nobody has yet ventured into studying how language, ethnography, translations, and political contexts have shaped the production of those texts and the dynamics her work created in contemporary Palestine. The present thesis proposes a critical description and analysis of Granqvist’s work and a discussion about its reception in the academic world and in contemporary Palestine. In particular, it focuses on the multi-layer processes of linguistic and cultural translation that shaped Granqvist’s ethnographic works. Social and political transformations in the context of Granqvist’s work played a significant role in the way she documented her data and interpreted her subjects.

Given the scope of this field of research, I positioned the present study in the field of Islamic Studies, with a particular focus on the History of Middle Eastern Studies and the History of Anthropology. The boundaries of Islamic Studies, situated between a strong tradition of Orientalism, an area study and a specific variant of religious studies, have been often revised and the scope, methods, and theoretical frameworks of the discipline are still highly debated among scholars.<sup>9</sup> Because of the wide thematic diversity and the different methodologies employed, scholars of Islamic Studies find themselves under pressure to overcome the boundaries of traditional academic disciplines and area studies.<sup>10</sup>

This study builds on my previous research on the contribution of Granqvist’s work to the knowledge of Palestinian Arabic. During research for my BA- and MA-thesis, I extracted lexical material from both Granqvist’s published work and unpublished field notes in Arabic, collecting it in a glossary. In 2013, I began a PhD research in Semitic Studies, supervised by Prof. Dr. Werner Arnold, a prominent and internationally recognized scholar of Arabic Dialectology. My research focused on the field notes in Arabic used for Granqvist’s books *Marriage conditions in a*

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<sup>6</sup> Wilman, *Ideal* (1997).

<sup>7</sup> Weir, ‘A pioneering’ (2012), p. 17.

<sup>88</sup> Naili, ‘L’oeuvre’ (2007), pp. 74-84; Naili, ‘Hilma’ (2008), pp. 126-138.

<sup>9</sup> See Nanji (ed.), *Mapping* (1997).

<sup>10</sup> See Ernst- Richard (eds), *Rethinking* (2010), pp. 1- 19.

*Palestinian village* vol. I (1931) and vol. II (1935). Through the linguistic analysis of the texts, I expected to uncover significant linguistic issues, such as words not documented previously or new meanings for words already documented in repertoires of Palestinian Arabic. After two years of training in Arabic Dialectology, I was granted the possibility of travelling to Arṭās. The *Palestine Exploration Fund* (PEF) funded the first part of my stay for a project entitled *Arṭās Wailing Songs in Hilma Granqvist's legacy at the PEF: a diachronic study*. In the second part of my stay, I carried out a field research aiming at describing the Arṭās dialect and producing a correct transcription of the texts to further increase the number of glossary entries. During my short but intensive fieldwork (1<sup>st</sup> September- 31<sup>st</sup> October 2015), I interviewed eleven old women belonging to the families described in Granqvist's work. Thanks to the availability and trust of these women, I collected more than 24 hours of audio recordings, which, according to my plan, I should have transcribed and analysed from a linguistic perspective. But while I was in Palestine, I became increasingly interested in the dynamics Granqvist's work had created in the context of Arṭās. Moreover, a purely linguistic approach seemed increasingly inappropriate: the dialect spoken in Arṭās is far from being homogenous. In addition, the attempt to use the dialect spoken in Arṭās at the beginning of the twentieth first century to reconstruct the local dialect as it had been put down in writing by Hilma Granqvist and her helpers between the 1920s and 1930s, appeared increasingly futile to me. A pure linguistic approach to Granqvist's work would have been reductive, because it would have ignored the historical, anthropological, and pioneering aspects of Granqvist's work. For this reason, I decided to change the direction of my research and to position it in the wider field of Islamic Studies. Methodologically, this meant to cross the traditional boundaries between academic disciplines, and to move from the field of Arabic Dialectology to a combination of perspectives borrowed from different fields of research.

## **I. Methodology and theoretical framework**

In this thesis, I pursue different approaches starting from a presentation of the transcultural approach and the concept of intersectionality which highlight the necessity of approaching topics of research from different perspectives. The different perspectives I will use to analyse the complex dynamics of Granqvist's life, academic work and its reception are: a historical approach that uses contemporary documentation and secondary sources to provide information about past social practices and context; a biographical approach, with particular attention to the relations between

individual lives, social structures and historical processes; a linguistic and sociolinguistic approach that serve to reconstruct the specific vocabulary and texts of a particular time, place and social sector. Finally, I use the history of reception that analyses how the material collected is decontextualized and recontextualized.

Being part of the “Graduate Program in Transcultural Studies” (GPTS) within the *Cluster of Excellence Asia and Europe in Global Context* gave me the opportunity to explore the concept of transculturality and reflect upon its interaction with Islamic Studies. In particular, recent research on the relevance of the transcultural paradigm for Islamic Studies<sup>11</sup> traced the guiding line to build my methodological framework. Fernando Ortiz coined the concept of “transculturality” (in Spanish transculturation) in 1940 in his *Cuban counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, one of the most important anthropological accounts of the last century. Since then the term has spread to various professional fields and has been understood and defined in many different ways.

“Methodologically, this definition encourages the analysis of phenomena that question supposed boundaries. It obliges the researcher to analyse phenomena from various angles and thus to insist on the multipolarity, multiple perspectives, and transformative dynamics inherent to the research subject. It obliges the researcher to analyse phenomena from various angles and thus to insist on the multipolarity, multiple perspectives, and transformative dynamics inherent to the research subject.”<sup>12</sup>

Following this path in order to grasp and shed light on the complexities that formed Granqvist’s vision as an anthropologist producing academic work about the “Orient”, and on the dynamics her work created both in academia and in contemporary Artās, the multidisciplinary and multi-perspective approach evolved that forms the basis of this thesis.

My theoretical and investigative methodology relies heavily on the broad theoretical frame of post-colonial and feminist theories. The concept of “intersectionality”, in particular, plays an important role in analysing Granqvist’s multiple identities and how these interacted in the different contexts of her fieldwork and her academic home-institution.<sup>13</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality”<sup>14</sup> in the context of black feminist theories in the 1990s to challenge the idea that gender was the main factor to determine a woman’s lot and to shed light on the complex dynamics, factors, and identities which determine social inequality and oppression.<sup>15</sup> The term spread to various disciplines where it was used to describe how oppressive categories interact in producing systemic inequality.

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<sup>11</sup> König, ‘Islamic’ (2016), pp. 101-135.

<sup>12</sup> König-Rakov, ‘The Transcultural’ (2016), p. 95.

<sup>13</sup> Davis, ‘Intersectionality’ (2008), pp. 67-85.

<sup>14</sup> Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing’ (1989), pp. 139–167, and Crenshaw, ‘Mapping’ (1991), pp. 1241–1299.

<sup>15</sup> See Cho- Crenshaw- Williams- McCall, ‘Toward’ (2013), pp. 785-810; Lutz, ‘Intersectionality’ (2015), pp. 39-44;



Through an intersectional analysis of Granqvist's biography, that also positions her studies within the framework of Orientalist discourse in Europe, I examine the factors which shaped her vision of Palestine. I show how the intersection of gender, nationality, and class in interrelation with nationalism and Orientalism shaped the conceptualization and evolution of her work and its reception within and outside the academic world. In this case, intersectionality as a method of analysis is helpful to understand the interconnection of factors which obstructed her career in a given context of power relation: the academic institution. Moreover, it challenges the idea that the professional lives of women anthropologists and the work they produced was mainly shaped and in various ways mediated by their being female.<sup>16</sup> Beyond being a female scholar in male-dominated academia, Granqvist belonged to the Swedish-speaking community in Finland and began her academic career when Finnish nationalism was at its peak; she called into question the dominant Orientalist discourse on Palestine, bringing innovation into the methodological approaches hitherto cherished by her academic environment. Many scholars who dealt with Granqvist's case present her as a pioneer, highlighting that being female allowed her to describe "the Orient" in a way, which set her apart from the Orientalist discourse of her time. In particular, they refer to the fact that Granqvist, at least in her first work, criticizes the existent literature on Palestine, and intends to avoid what she called the "biblical danger" of trying to reconstruct living conditions in ancient Israel on the basis of contemporary observations. In fact, Orientalist production on Palestine represents a rather special form of Orientalism hardly touched upon by Edward Said in his classical criticism of Orientalism.<sup>17</sup> In this particular case of what Lorenzo Kamel has called "biblical Orientalism,"<sup>18</sup> Palestine was regarded, first and foremost, as the Holy Land, the Biblical Orient described in the Bible—not only by tourists, travellers and missionaries, but also by scholars, all of whom regarded living conditions in Palestine of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century through a religious lens. A deep analysis of Granqvist's work shows that she did not break completely with this theoretical framework, and, very interestingly, did not discredit it by presenting it as one facet of a colonial approach to Palestine. However, although she did not distance herself completely from contemporary ideologies of research, Granqvist always tried to avoid a Eurocentric attitude and made conscious efforts to avoid imposing herself as scholar and to thus create a power imbalance between her and her research participants. For example, she wrote:

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<sup>16</sup> This idea is spread in many books which aim at rehabilitating female anthropologists in the official cannon. See for example the introduction to Gacs- Khan- McIntyre- Weinberg (eds), *Women* (1989).

<sup>17</sup> Said, *Orientalism* (1978).

<sup>18</sup> Kamel, 'The impact' (2014), pp. 1-15.

“I wished to learn their methods of thinking in order not to give European explanations, or views and motives foreign to the people of the village.”<sup>19</sup>

Granqvist, I argue, avoided the dangers of biblical Orientalism and Eurocentrism by using participant observation in a time before Bronisław Malinowski (1884-1942) had theorized it. Celia Rothenberg considers her a precursor of feminist theorists and researchers,<sup>20</sup> because of the great importance she gave to her research participants’ speeches and points of view. Granqvist avoided interpreting their customs and habits; she let them explain themselves instead of making theoretical assumptions. According to Nefissa Naguib, Granqvist “articulated women’s agency and self-reflection”.<sup>21</sup>

Granqvist was very sensitive to women’s issues and, in her books, certainly challenged the stereotypes of Muslim women as passive and oppressed subjects. She participated in several events organized by feminist organizations in Finland but, I argue, this was not the core of her research. Granqvist chose women as informants, because they were regarded as the guardians of traditions and had knowledge about aspects of society, like marriage and the education of children that men of this period often ignored.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Granqvist’s published texts and field notes archived at the PEF represent not only an invaluable corpus of texts produced by Palestinian peasant women before 1948, but also a corpus of documents on fundamental social practices.

Following a multi-perspective and multi-disciplinary approach, I propose a sociolinguistic as well as a sociocultural reading of Granqvist’s “women’s texts”. “Sociolinguistic” is here a broad and general term to indicate the branch of linguistics which deals with the interaction between language, society and culture.<sup>23</sup> From a careful reading of her published work and from the analysis of the field notes in Arabic archived at the PEF, it is in fact possible to cull some relevant linguistic issues, interesting for the subfields of Linguistic Anthropology, Ethnolinguistics, or Anthropological Linguistics. By means of examples, I show how Granqvist’s work informs the reader on patterns of linguistic behaviour and sheds light on language as a cultural practice. Leaving aside the sociolinguistic perspective, the texts in Arabic, interpreted as a corpus of Palestinian female literature, are highly relevant to the preservation of Palestinian Folklore. This has also been understood by Palestinian scholars, intellectuals and activists who, since the 1970s, have made great efforts to preserve Palestinian cultural heritage. As something possessing the potentiality of being owned and re-owned in different cultural settings, Granqvist’s work is open to different

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<sup>19</sup> Granqvist, *Marriage* (1931), p. 21.

<sup>20</sup> Rothenberg, *On doing* (2016), p. 70.

<sup>21</sup> Neguib, *Women* (2009), p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Granqvist, *Marriage* 1931, p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> Duranti, *Linguistic* (1997); Foley, *Anthropological* (1997); Berruto, *Fondamenti* (1995).

interpretations and appropriations. Using the history of reception as theoretical framework,<sup>24</sup> I present the case of the scholar Sharif Kanaana and the activist Mūsā Sanad who rely on Granqvist's work as a source for Palestinian Folklore, using it as a tool to strengthen Palestinian national identity in the wider context of the so-called Arab-Israeli-Conflict. Considering that, in Palestinian nationalist discourse, the figure of the peasant, anchored to the earth with stubborn determination, has become the epitome of steadfastness (*ṣumūd*),<sup>25</sup> one can understand the symbolic importance of Granqvist's work for some Palestinian actors. Palestinian scholars such as Sharif Kanaana stress the crucial role of Granqvist's work for Palestinian national identity. Inspired by Granqvist's work, Mūsā Sanad even founded the *Artas Folklore Center* in 1993 with the aim of preserving Palestinian heritage, promoting alternative tourism and sustainable development. The centre has a permanent exhibition of photographs Granqvist took during her fieldwork, published in 1981 by Karen Seger. The analysis of the way Granqvist depicted the village and how these pictures acquired significance for Artās villagers represents an additional contribution to the history of the reception of her work.

## II. Dissertation Structure

The intersectional approach helped me to start a reflection on several main questions: can Granqvist be considered a model for feminist theorists? To which extent did she distance herself from the dominant discourse of her time? Was discrimination based on gender the only one factor to determine her exclusion from the academia? The first part of the dissertation (Chapter 1-3) will centre Granqvist's life and work in order to answer to these questions, while the second part (Chapters 4-5) will develop an analysis of the reception of her work, bring Palestinian Arabic into focus. The thesis is divided into five chapters: Chapter 1 aims at giving an overview on the historical and intellectual context in which Granqvist operated as an anthropologist, especially in the most intensive part of her fieldwork from 1925 to 1931. It will outline the major events which occurred in Palestine from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire to the creation of the British Mandate. In particular, it will focus on knowledge produced on Palestine from the late nineteenth century to early twentieth century and it will provide a description of the Orientalist discourse on

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<sup>24</sup> Thompson, 'Reception'(1993), pp. 258-272; Knight, 'Wirkungsgeschichte' (2010), pp. 137-146. Nickisch, *Zur Rezeption* (1991).

<sup>25</sup> Swedenburg, 'The Palestinian' (1990), pp. 18-30.

Palestine, permeated by the idea that Palestine was the living Bible. These premises will allow to position Granqvist in her intellectual environment and to shed light on her imaginaries and theoretical baggage.

Chapter 2 will offer an outline of Granqvist's biography, focusing on her educational background in Finland, the emergence of her interest in Biblical Studies and her fieldwork in Artās. Initially, Granqvist travelled to Palestine to study at the *Deutsches Evangelisches Institut für Altertumswissenschaft des Heiligen Landes* (DEIAHL) in Jerusalem. The exchange of views with other scholars and the observation of local realities, led her to question her doctoral thesis topic on women in the Old Testament. Consequently, Granqvist decided to prolong her stay and to focus on the ethnographical survey of one single village. During her fieldwork, she could count on the support and help of local scholars and research participants. Louise Baldensperger, an Alsatian woman who had been living in the village for 30 years, and two village women, °Alya Ibrāhīm and Ḥamdīye Sanad provided Granqvist with oral accounts, which she and Louise Baldensperger annotated in transcribed Palestinian Arabic. Two local scholars, Elyas Nasrallah Haddad and Judy Farah Docmac later copied the texts in Arabic and helped her to interpret and translate them into English.

The result was a series of monographs about the main events of people's lives in the village, which I will describe in Chapter 3. Here I will give an overview of Granqvist's published works namely *Marriage Conditions in a Palestinian Village* vol. I (1931) and II (1935), *Birth and Childhood Among the Arabs* (1947), *Child Problems among the Arabs* (1950) and *Muslim Death and Burial* (1965). I will discuss to which extent Granqvist distanced herself from the dominant Orientalist discourse on Palestine and how this was the starting point to create conflicts of methodological, power and gender nature within her academic environment. By means of examples, I will show how Granqvist challenged the Eurocentric and Orientalist discourse much before it was defined and discussed, although she did not break completely with the image of Palestine as the Biblical Orient.

Chapter 4 will provide a reading of Granqvist's work focusing on material in Arabic. It will show how her work was reconfigured, thus becoming a corpus of literature that served an essential function in the preservation of Palestinian Folklore. Firstly, I will propose a sociolinguistic analysis of her material in Arabic, highlighting its relevance for the knowledge of Palestinian Arabic. From here, I will present a selection of Arabic material culled from her work and transcribed unpublished field notes in Arabic, as a sample of a corpus of Palestinian female oral literature.

In Chapter 5, I will delve into the discussion on the preservation of Palestinian Folklore. I will focus on the way Granqvist's knowledge production about Palestine was reconfigured and

reinterpreted in the context of West Bank Palestine after the creation of the Palestinian National Authority in the 1990s. I will examine the cases of the abovementioned Mūsā Sanad and Sharif Kanaana. On top of that, as part of the history of the reception of Granqvist's work, I will take into account the photographs she took during her fieldwork. I will discuss the way the American anthropologist Karen Seger and the journalist and photographer Mia Gröndhal "translated" Granqvist's work for a broader public in 1981. Finally, I will highlight the relevance of the photographs for Artās villagers. The Appendices contain some examples of Granqvist's photographs and, courtesy of the PEF, some original field notes in Arabic on which I based the transcription of the texts presented in chapter four, to give the reader the possibility to have access to the raw material on which Granqvist based her work.