



BRILL

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
ISLAM IN ASIA 4 (2023) 1–19

 International
Journal of
Islam in Asia
brill.com/ijia

Introduction: Centering Islamic Studies in Asia

Jaclyn A. Michael | ORCID: 0000-0001-6193-4171

Department of Philosophy and Religion, The University of Tennessee at
Chattanooga, Chattanooga, TN, USA

jaclyn-michael@utc.edu

Received 3 July 2023 | Accepted 28 February 2024 |

Published online 16 April 2024

Abstract

This special issue explores historical and contemporary Asian Islamic traditions to offer an intentional grounding of Islamic studies in and as Asian Studies. Utilizing data from South, Southeast, and East Asian materials, the articles examine Islamic languages and literatures, socio-political institutions, legal practices, miracle workers and pilgrimage networks, and contemporary popular cultures. We build upon scholarship that represents global Islam as a civilizational process, a discursive tradition, a hermeneutic engagement, or as a cosmopolis. In drawing on Asian practices we reassess key categories, conclusions, and questions in the study of Islam such as the nature of Muslim centers and peripheries, the role of ambiguity in religious expression, the importance of the visual arts to identity formation, the gendered dimensions of legal authority and practice, the role of languages other than Arabic in constructing the Muslim community, and how modern Muslim welfare organizations and women's pious fashion serve the aspirational goals of individuals and communities. Rectifying the legacies of colonialism and Orientalism in the marginalization of Asia in the study of Islam, we argue Islamic studies has much to learn from Asian perspectives and that Asia is an exceptional place from which the field can conceptualize Islamic traditions in broader terms.

Keywords

Islamic studies – Asian studies – Asian Islam – colonialism – Orientalism

While Asian Muslims comprise a majority of the global Muslim community both historically and today, Islam is not often thought of as an Asian religion or tradition. Asian Islam tends to be overlooked, excluded, or considered derivative of a supposedly normative and authentic Islam defined as Middle Eastern or Arabian. This special issue explores the broader subject of connections between the study of Islam and the study of Asia. We argue that an intentional grounding of Islamic studies in and as Asian studies presents the opportunity to reassess key categories, conclusions, and questions in the academic study of Islam and beyond.

In this article I provide an overview of the relevant landscapes and modes of inquiry that are essential context to the research presented by this issue's eight scholars. I argue that essentialism in determining what is authentically "Islamic" marginalizes Asian practices and histories, producing unrepresentative ways of knowing Islam and Muslims. Biases in the study of Islam are not simply theoretical but have implications beyond the academy. How Islam is construed and taught in academic settings shapes, and is shaped by, intellectual discourse and popular understandings of Islam and Muslims. This extends to how Muslims understand their traditions and pursue representation in society and culture. Lastly, I discuss how a more diversified approach to the study of Islam that centers Asia is relevant for achieving the broader goals of the study of the humanities and the liberal arts.

Islam has long been a global phenomenon.¹ This contrasts with tendencies in scholarship and culture to define Islam narrowly by its Middle Eastern beginnings and often in terms of Arab history and culture. One must start there, however, because what would become known as Islamic traditions began in the Arabian Peninsula and in the prophetic experience of Muhammad. Some of the first individuals inspired by Muhammad's message traveled outside of the Arabian heartland to areas throughout Asia, thus establishing the earliest foundations of Islam as a global tradition. These Muslims created foundational systems of land- and sea-based economic trade and pilgrimage across Asia. Their movements also forged diverse pathways for sustained emigration. In the medieval period (roughly 1200–1600 CE), scholars point to the roles of these networks in the shaping and growth of Islam as an Asian institution. Muslim maritime merchants traveled throughout the Indian Ocean with the primary goal of conducting exchanges for economic profit. As they did so, they also shared their customs, heritage, and religious texts, eventually creating both

1 See Richard M. Eaton's 1993 essay "Islamic History as World History" for an assessment of the broader field of Islamic historiography and the author's emphasis on how Muslim histories are central, and not marginal, to academic conceptualizations of world-historical systems.

new iterations of Muslim tradition and contributing to trends in conversion to Islam (Alavi 2015; Feener 2023; Ho 2006; Prange 2018).

Sufi Muslims played essential roles in the formative development of Asian Islam at this time, eventually becoming diverse actors across Asian communities. Scholars have shown that Sufis sharing stories about God and the Prophet Muhammad as they created new lives in Asian areas served as a major factor in the medieval development of Asian Islam (Ernst 2004; Lipman 1997; Ricklefs 2006). Sufis and networks of economic trade are just two of many key examples of how Muslim traditions were slowly introduced to Asian areas around the globe far beyond the Arabian contexts of the religion's beginning. These histories also illustrate the ways in which Islam has always been fundamentally an Asian custom and practice, and much more than just a Middle Eastern tradition.

Asian Muslims understand themselves as part of a global *ummah* whose religious thought and practice have been shaped by intellectual, cultural, political, and economic ties to the broader Islamic world. Moreover, no mere passive recipients of a Middle Eastern tradition, Asian Muslims have actively contributed to important intellectual, political, and cultural developments of global Islam. Southeast Asian Muslim scholars were part of formative networks of transmission in seventeenth-century Mecca and Medina, producing new ideas regarding mysticism and more Shari'a minded orientations that Azyumardi Azra (2004) has described as "neo-Sufism." As part of these networks, Malay-Indonesian (Jawi) students participated in debates on modernity, tradition, and progress that influenced the intellectual work of Meccan and Median scholars interested in this discourse. In another example from Southeast Asia, Muslim students participating in Islamic centers of learning at Mecca and Cairo in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century came to shape discussions on reform and nation, thus producing a burgeoning Indonesian nationalism informed by religious commitments (Laffan 2002). The South Asian philosopher and poet Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938 CE), also the subject of one of this issue's contributions, wrote speculative treatises and poetics expressing his conceptions of Islam, the self, and political autonomy that were distributed and read by Muslims on a global scale (Jalal 2000).

Considering these formative contexts of Muslim Asia, the contributors to this special issue come from diverse fields and specializations to argue for a more purposeful and sustained centering of Asia in Islamic studies. Drawing on South, Southeast, and East Asian Muslim materials, we contend that the study of Islam can learn from Asian traditions, histories, and contemporary lives. In this approach, we are influenced by the task presented to scholars to reorient their approach to Asia from simply learning *about* Asia to instead

learning *from* these histories, cultures, and experiences (Davis 2015). The articles build on and develop scholarship that represents Islamic traditions as a civilizational process, a discursive tradition, a hermeneutic engagement, or as a cosmopolis (Ahmed 2016; Asad 1986; Hodgson 1974; Ricci 2011). We are in conversation with recent assessments of the field of Islamic studies, extending their emphasis on the historical and continuing nature of Muslim cosmopolitanism and pluralism (Curtis 2023; Ernst and Martin, 2010) with a singular focus on Asia. Joining others who have emphasized the status of Asia in the study of Islam (Feener 2009; Formichi 2020; Lawrence 2003), we are particularly interested in identifying how centering Asian data influences core ideas and conclusions within the wider field of Islamic studies.

From their interdisciplinary geographical and methodological perspectives, the authors in this issue investigate diverse themes within and dynamic debates regarding Islamic Asia. The topics examined start with late medieval Muslim linguistic networks in East Asia and late nineteenth-century *keramat* (miracle worker) textual and pilgrimage traditions in the Malay archipelago. The issue continues its focus on Southeast Asia by examining contemporary Indonesian women's legal practices and authority. It then moves to late-colonial South Asia to consider the philosophical import of Muslim literary expression and the diverse roles of Muslim welfare organizations in debates on modernity and nation-building. An examination of the question of belonging in a twentieth-century Indian American Muslim woman's visual arts production finishes the issue's focus on South Asia. The issue concludes by returning to East Asia with a case-study of the current interplay of women's pious fashion consumption and notions of cosmopolitanism in Hui Muslim communities.

This special issue's authors argue that a focus on Islamic Asia presents new ways of rethinking key conclusions and questions in the field. They also offer new directions of research for Islamic studies that take into account the diversity of historical and contemporary Muslim experiences. Several articles address a key question in the field regarding the nature of how assumed Muslim centers and peripheries are defined and understood in relation to each other. Our authors do not suggest that Asia replace Middle Eastern or Arabian forms of practice as the authoritative or more authentic version of global Islam. Instead, they suggest thinking of Muslim centers as multinodal, pluralist, and evolving. Other primary claims made by authors in this issue include how ambiguity and marginality are integral to, and not an anomaly within, modern Muslim political and ethical thought, the importance of the visual arts to contesting and constructing visions of religious belonging, the gendered dimensions of legal authority and empowered practice, the role of languages other than Arabic in constructing the Muslim community, and the opportunities

that modern Muslim welfare organizations and pious fashion present for serving the aspirational goals of individuals and communities. This special issue's culminating argument is that Asia is an exceptional place from which the field can conceptualize Islam in broader terms. Together, we endeavor to create a provocation within Islamic studies by showing the discipline what it stands to learn from Asian perspectives on history and experience.

1 Legacies of Colonialism and Orientalism in the Study of Asian Islam

It was in part due to colonial legacies of governance and scholarship that Asia would become marginalized in Islamic studies. Colonial rule and imperialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had crucial impacts on Muslim lives and intellectual traditions around the world, and not just in Asia. These effects, which were complex and not always predictable, became manifest in various realms, including law, politics, science, and education. Critiques of Islam as a religious system and source of normative guidance often defined interactions between Muslims and colonial officials in many Asian contexts. These claims were often founded on assumptions that Muslim customs and practices were culturally backward and uncivilized, and perpetuated the stereotype that Islam was a religious, political, and civilizational other. In regions of Southeast Asia, Islam was often defined as a pretense, as an overlay, and not a legitimate local spiritual tradition when compared to Buddhism and Hinduism.² For example, the authenticity of the Islamic identity of late-colonial Javanese Muslims tended to be dismissed by European administrative attitudes that Islam was the superficial iteration of their otherwise "authentic," inner Hindu-Buddhist selves. This denial served in part to assuage colonial fears of the power of a more politicized Islamic identity that they constructed as foreign and out of place in their conceptions of Javanese culture and identity (Florida 1997).

The premise that legitimate Islam was also an inherently political project was part of an ideological discourse that defined Muslims in other colonized Asian contexts. In South Asia, a diverse group of Hindus, Muslims, and Indians of other affiliations joined forces to stage an uprising against British rule in 1857. While anti-Muslim sentiment preexisted this formative resistance, it prompted British administrators to more specifically claim that the

² Clifford Geertz's *Religion of Java* (1960) was one of the formative studies of Southeast Asian religion to construct Islamic traditions as somewhat alien to so-called indigenous Hindu-Buddhist cultures.

subcontinent's Muslims were in essence violent and singularly obsessed with *jihad* (Morgenstein Fuerst 2017). An important legacy of representing Muslims and Islam as uniquely connected to violence is how this assumption supports Islamophobic rhetoric and movements throughout Asia in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which I discuss later in this article.

The theory and practice of Orientalism in approaches to representing both Islam and Asian religions and cultures is another significant factor in the marginalization of Asia in Islamic studies. As Edward Said and others have shown, Orientalist depictions of Asia and Islam were not uniform and often contradictory. For example, Arabs, Muslims, and Asians were construed both as militant fanatics and effeminate hedonists, resembling a threat to or justification for European imperialist ideologies (Inden 1986; Said 1978). In these contexts of knowledge production, colonial interests and academic pursuits often worked to support the conclusions of the other, thus forming a dialogical relationship that often foreclosed alternative understandings of Muslims. Academic priorities developed in Euro-American contexts in the mid- to late nineteenth century served to shape primary ways of knowing, and some problematic stereotypes of, Islamic traditions and Asian humanities (Masuzawa 2005). The Orientalist Euro-American academy in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries prioritized the philological study of major Islamic texts as essential method in the study of Islam and Muslims.³ This emphasis that many Orientalists placed on Arabic in learning and teaching about Islam and Muslim societies contributed to how Middle Eastern and Arabian forms of Islam were constructed as more legitimate than Asian forms. Richard Bulliet's observation that "the story of Islam has always privileged the view from the center" (1994, 5) has remained accurate from both scholarly and practitioner perspectives. To be sure, Arabic is of critical importance as the language of the Qur'an and is essential to many aspects of Muslim ritual and tradition. However, it is not the primary language of all Muslims. Thus, prioritizing the language in this manner means that the experiences of Muslims, many of them in Central, South, Southeast, and East Asia, whose main language of expression is not Arabic, were overlooked or assessed as not authentically Islamic. An important exception to this trend is Marshall G. S. Hodgson's *The Venture of Islam* (1974), a three-volume study of the wider Islamic world that includes formative Muslim

3 For more on the history of Orientalism in the teaching of Islam in the US academic context, see Carl Ernst and Richard Martin, "Toward a Post-Orientalist Approach to Islamic Religious Studies," in Ernst and Martin, eds. (2010).

histories and practices, as well as their influence on non-Muslim cultures from the Middle East to Central, South, and Southeast Asia.⁴

Just as Islam and Muslims have been and often continue to be represented through Orientalist patterns in scholarship, what comes to be known as Asian religious traditions is similarly subject to problematic academic assumptions. As Islam in its Asian iterations was categorized as not true “Islam,” authentic Asian religion was assumed to be primarily oriented towards Indic or Sinic forms of mysticism and polytheism (King 1999). Serving as Asia’s supposed religious opposite, Islam often remains the foreign, desert religion of Arabian societies. This narrow conceptualization continues to define Asian cultures and religious systems today, especially as they are represented in Euro-American popular culture. For example, aspects of Hindu and Buddhist traditions are often characterized as unique sources of complex Asian spirituality and exotism for the West’s commodification and consumption.⁵

A significant legacy of this Orientalist framing today is the way in which many of these same premises undergird contemporary anti-Muslim exclusionary movements across Asia. In places as far-flung and diverse as Chechnya, India, Myanmar, and China, Muslim minorities are consistently accused of being inherently anti-national, a threat to the existence of nation states, and a problem that must be solved (Bakali 2021; Roberts 2020). The enduring claims that Islam is foreign to Asian culture, and that Muslims are predisposed to violence, are fundamental assumptions that shape these discourses. While these anti-Muslim attitudes are not new and extend historical stereotypes, they have come to take on a new urgency and institutionalization in context of the post-9/11 War on Terror. As they have in the past, Asian Muslims today respond to Islamophobic attitudes in various ways, including renewed articulations of their affirmative places in national society and cultures *as* Muslims, and not despite being Muslim.⁶

4 Moving the field’s focus beyond what he described as “Arabistic” traditions (Vol. 1, 1974, 39–45), Hodgson emphasizes the fact of diversity in global Muslim experiences and serves as an early predecessor for approaches like those taken by the authors in this issue.

5 Sophia Rose Arjana’s comparative study (2020) of American consumerism regarding aspects of Hindu, Buddhist, and Sufi Islamic traditions illustrates the enduring categorical power of “mysticism” in popular culture. Representations of Asian Hindu and Buddhist figures as exotic sources of esoteric knowledge in American popular visual arts, such as film, was a key method that Jane Iwamura (2011) identifies in how “Asia” was introduced to the American public in the early twentieth century.

6 Refer to Michael (forthcoming 2024), who illustrates this trend in context of Indian Muslims using political performance to challenge recent anti-Muslim sentiment and to emphasize their Islamic identities as part of the Indian national imagination.

Institutionally the field of Islamic studies continues to grapple with its Orientalist origins. In its earliest inception towards the end of the nineteenth century, the academic study of Islam in the North American context was often housed in “Oriental Studies” departments. The curated programs of study of these departments frequently replicated Orientalist patterns in their emphasis on Muslim pre-modern history, textual scholarship, and language acquisition in Arabic. The role and legacy of colonial and Orientalist scholarship in categorizing Islamic studies continues to impact how Islam is taught in the university context today. Southeast Asia, home to several nation states with some of the largest global Muslim populations, is underrepresented in research and teaching on Islam (Formichi 2016). Muslim East Asia is perhaps even more overlooked, apart from a recent focus on the marginalization and mistreatment of the Uyghur community by the Chinese state.

That Islam has come to be constructed as primarily Middle Eastern and Arab also impacts how global religions are constituted in the university curriculum. One example is the situation of the study of “World Religions” in many American universities today. The customary approach is to categorize global religions into “Western” and “Eastern,” with separate classes and instructors for each. This method raises many questions, but for the purposes of this article the main concern is where does Islam fit?⁷ Conventionally Islam is taught as a “Western” religion, given its historical ties to the Middle East and theological connections to Judaism and Christianity. This scheme does not just construct “Western” religions in a curious way. According to this logic Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are understood as the authentic religious traditions of Asian or “Eastern” religious traditions – thus perpetuating classifications that emerged in the Euro-American, Orientalist academy. This categorization often forecloses the inclusion of Islam and Muslim traditions in the “Eastern” religions syllabus, and it perpetuates (even if inadvertently) the historical marginalization of non-Arab, non-Middle Eastern Muslim histories and experiences in the classroom setting. There is often little to no mention of Islam or Muslims in most major college-level textbook introductions to Asian religions from academic presses. An exception is the textbook *Religions of Asia Today* by Esposito et al. (2009), which includes a chapter on Asian Islam.

Orientalism and related modes of scholarly perspectives also shape who is visible and deemed an authentic Islamicist, something particularly significant in terms of hiring at the university level. Narrow assumptions about what

7 For more reflection on these issues from a long-time scholar and teacher of Muslim Asia which includes specific suggestions for the classroom, see Schubel (2005; 2023).

defines “Islam” and “Asia” influence job descriptions and hiring priorities of academic teaching positions, at least in the European and North American job markets.⁸ A recent study of instructional positions in Islamic studies conducted by Ilyse R. Morgenstein Fuerst (2020) details how these entrenched approaches continue to determine successful candidates as those who teach Islam in the context of Middle Eastern Studies. Additional qualifications usually include the expectation that candidates possess a strong competency in the Arabic language, and preference is often given to those working in the analysis of Islamic textual traditions. Given the numbers of graduate students trained in Islamic studies in South, Southeast, and East Asian contexts, not to mention the diverse interdisciplinary focus of many of these same scholars, these modes towards the profession and university teaching seem out of step. And as Morgenstein Fuerst notes, job descriptions and associated hiring priorities in Islamic studies tend to propagate stereotypes and narrow assumptions that many specialists in the field spend years of their careers trying to dismantle and rectify (2020, 916).

The act of centering Asia in Islamic studies has the potential to address current urgencies faced by academia in the early twenty-first century. As a field of the liberal arts and the humanities, the place of Islamic studies is part of a debate on the present crisis of relevance in the Euro-American academic context. While clearly anti-Muslim sentiment has not been solved (and in fact is increasing in areas around the world), the academic study of Islam is otherwise often deemed not relevant for a general undergraduate education. This conclusion is informed by many of the same assumptions about how or why it is important (or not) to pursue knowledge in humanistic fields of inquiry. Yet if one were to identify the task of the humanities as the charge to examine human cultures, societies, and values in order to reflect meaningfully on the greater human condition, then the study of Asian Islam has much to offer to the university’s diverse constituencies.

Rather than serving as simply a niche topic in the study of human history and culture, methods and approaches within Asian Islamic studies can orient humanists to critically reflect on standard paradigms in the classroom and beyond.⁹ Scholarship in Asian Islam provides models for engaging the humanities broadly, such as studies of gender and sexuality that illustrate how women

8 See the articles in Bridges, et al. (2022) for key perspectives on positionality, authority, and anti-Black and anti-Muslim racism in Asian studies as an academic field.

9 Ilyse R. Morgenstein Fuerst and Zahra M. S. Ayubi (2016) contend that ongoing debates within the field of Islamic studies highlight how the field serves as a model for the humanities. They argue that these disciplines share a common characteristic in that they are continuously shaped by pivotal questions related to categorization and methodology.

and LGBTQ+ Muslims debate and reinterpret Islamic tradition in ways that affirm their multiple identities (Kasmani 2022; Ismah this volume; Jaschok and Jingjun 2000). Asian Muslims demonstrate how pluralistic societies engage in the construction of meaning, critical interpretation, and the development of new conceptualizations of gender and sexuality expression. Anna M. Gade's research on Muslim approaches to the environment, largely drawn from Southeast Asian materials, details how these communities address concerns about climate change and environmental justice influenced by diverse sources of Islamic guidance, ethics, and practice (2019). The changing climate, and how those developments unequally impact people around the world, is an anxiety shared by many of our students and colleagues. In this sense there is an opportunity in the humanities classroom to learn from Asian Muslim environmentalists. Additionally, to study Asian Islam in a university setting is not only an experience in acquiring key skills in the humanities, such as analyzing primary source material or identifying the strengths and weaknesses of intellectual arguments. It is also an opportunity for students to gain cultural competencies in Asian religions, cultures, and societies. Moreover, Asian Muslims are part of our learning communities; students from Asian and Muslim backgrounds are sitting in our classes. For these reasons, classes on Asian Islam serve the interests of our diverse constituencies to better recognize and acknowledge our shared sense of humanity.

2 Reorienting Islamic Studies in Asia

The articles in this special issue are organized by region apart from our two examinations of East Asian Islam, which begin and conclude the volume. Through starting our issue's research with a historical Chinese linguistic cosmopolis and finishing with a study of cosmopolitanism in Chinese women's pious fashion, we emphasize these peripheral topics and geographic areas as our issue seeks to center Islamic studies in Asia.¹⁰

Asian Islamic traditions have developed in part by projects undertaken to understand, adapt, and integrate non-Islamic religious ideas and traditions. Efforts to translate Qur'anic and legal texts into local Chinese languages and Confucian idioms is but one example of a trend to bring Islamic materials into conversation with local East Asian contexts (Petersen 2017; Tontini 2016). Guangtian Ha's contribution to this issue illustrates multiple linguistic

¹⁰ I am grateful for this suggestion of how to structure the issue's articles from an anonymous peer reviewer.

interconnections through what the author terms the Perso-Arabic cosmopolis of China's Sinophone Muslims. Ha begins with a key question: why would Chinese Muslims continue to acquire linguistic skills in Persian, and to a lesser extent Arabic, given the existence of diverse Islamic materials translated into vernacular languages? The answer lies in the existence of a thriving Arabic and Persian reading public that brought Islamic texts published in Central Asia, South Asia, and Arabia into circulation in China. Ha's discussion reveals the creative ways in which Chinese Muslim intellectuals, since at least the eighteenth century, used Arabic, Persian, and Chinese interrelatedly to clarify, annotate, and interpret matters of doctrine, grammar, and religious law. Ha's article further develops studies of the linguistic cosmopolis in Asian Muslim contexts (Ricci 2011) with new material from an East Asian setting. This research is a pertinent reminder that Islam has always been an incredibly multilingual tradition, despite the common and narrow correlation with Arabic.

The dynamism of Asian Islam as a lived religion is particularly evident through the long history of intra-religious participation at shrines, at public monuments, and in sacred spaces throughout Asia associated with charismatic Muslim figures and communities. These practices continue to illustrate new ways of understanding how Islamic traditions contribute to non-Muslim Asia, and vice versa (Bellamy 2011; Sevea 2020; Taneja 2017). They are also part of debates amongst scholars and practitioners regarding the categories we use to describe religious tradition, such as the nature of normative centers and peripheries. Scholars of Muslim Asia ask key questions about the accuracy of these categories and what consequences arise from their scholarly use (Alatas 2021; Adiong 2020; Meyer 2023; Schubel 2023). Teren Sevea's contribution for this issue takes up the center and periphery question through examining the importance ascribed by Southeast Asian Muslims to *keramat* (miracle worker) personalities, shrines, and literatures. What does a Hadrami's pilgrimage to the grave of Sayyid Nūḥ b. Muḥammad al-Ḥabshī (d. 1866 CE) in Singapore indicate about the importance accorded to sacred sites and acts of pilgrimage that have been dismissed, by scholars and practitioners, as derivative and too "local" to be considered properly "Islamic"? First, Sevea turns to Malay source texts to show a conscious internal categorization of Southeast Asian island Muslim materials and spaces as centers of their Islam. Self-understandings of local *keramat* reveal how Muslims imagined these sites and traditions as participating in plural and coexisting Islamic centers. Thus, this article proposes the idea of a "multi-centered" Islam, or an "Islamic world formed by multi-ethnic and multilingual centers instead of a heartland in the West." Sevea's discussion does not critically reflect on categorization in Islamic studies in order to propose that a different periphery become the center.

By emphasizing the importance given by practitioners to the so-called margins of Islam in Southeast Asian devotional practice, Sevea pushes scholars in Islamic studies to reconsider the usefulness of these categories.

The special issue continues its focus on what the field can learn from Southeast Asian Muslim traditions with analysis of the role of gender in constructions of contemporary legal authority and practice. Drawing on ethnographic work conducted in Indonesia, Nor Ismah reveals how Muslim women in search of empowerment reach outside of customary fatwa-making institutions dominated by men and the male perspective. Ismah explores the everyday legal participation of Indonesian Muslim women in the creation and circulation of fatwa opinions, which has become a key space for contesting gender relations today. The study builds upon research that examines fatwa legal processes using ethnographic methods (Agrama 2010) and extends it by focusing on women's participation, including women as fatwa producers. Ismah's discussion renders fatwas not simply as transactional legal documents but as a node in a connected field, driven by ethical aspirations, between the *mustafti* (fatwa seeker) and *mufti* (legal authority). This, Ismah argues, marks a shift from viewing fatwas as final and fixed, to recognizing them as part of a dynamic interaction in which agents interact dialogically and new dimensions of piety and legal norms are created. Ismah's study is part of a larger picture of growing and important research on women's authority in global Muslim communities (Ali 2022; Bano and Kalmbach 2012). This scholarship illustrates the ways that Muslim women seek empowerment within their traditions, circumventing obstacles and reinterpreting norms and regulations that are often construed in ways that disempower women. Ismah's contribution is an important addition to this literature in its emphasis on materials from Asian Muslim women's experiences.

Moving to case-studies from South Asian Islam, the special issue's next two articles consider how late colonial rule and movements for independence prompted formative Muslim reassessments of what role(s) Islamic tradition would serve for their political and aspirational goals. This occurred across Asian contexts and was highly tied to local circumstances. Using evidence from the Urdu and Persian poetry of the South Asian philosopher and poet Muhammad Iqbal, Francesca Chubb-Confer's contribution to this issue shows how the device of uncertainty came to serve Iqbal's prescriptive visions of a modern Muslim selfhood emerging from years of colonial rule. Iqbal is known not only for his literary work but also for how his poetics conveyed socio-political articulations of Muslim selfhood. Chubb-Confer's discussion centers on Iqbal's preference for the *ghazal*, a poetic form marked by its formal qualities of ambiguity and paradox. A key question for this article is why Iqbal,

the consummate modern reformer whose literature is often thought to reflect absolute certainty, chose to express his ideas so often in a form that introduces and reproduces uncertainty. In a close reading of Iqbal's use of the tropes of the nightingale and the falcon, Chubb-Confer argues that the metaphorical meaning behind these visions is meant to express the uncertainties that many Muslims experienced regarding the legacies of tradition and the new demands presented by late-colonial modernity. In doing so, Chubb-Confer contends that Iqbal's poetry illustrates the important role of uncertainty in modern Muslim thought. Chubb-Confer encourages scholars in Islamic studies to question the narrative of a distinct rupture between tradition and modernity in which ambiguity, contradiction, and paradox were sacrificed in favor of narrower and more literal interpretations of religion, literature, and politics.

Our issue's examination of South Asian Islam moves to consider Sri Lankan Muslim political institutions, a subject often overlooked in conceptualizing what defines Islam in the subcontinent. Farzana Haniffa details how the leadership of the Moors' Islamic Cultural Home (MICH) endeavored to serve diverse civic, religious, and social needs of the Sri Lankan Muslim community at the time of independence in 1948. Still in existence today, the leadership of the MICH participated in formative pre-independence debates on the legal status of the island's Muslim community and the terms of citizenship in an independent nation. The decision of the MICH to adopt the term "Moor," Haniffa argues, reveals the appeal of a formative, non-Asian Muslim history and the leadership's desire to chart a course for Ceylon's Muslims that was distinctive amongst the local elite Sinhala, Tamil, and Eurasian communities. It was also geared, Haniffa notes, towards combating negative assumptions about Muslim "backwardness" and "fanaticism." The vision of Sri Lankan Muslim modernity that the MICH encouraged, conveyed in diverse media such as English language newspapers and pamphlets, was middle-class, pious, aspirant, and dedicated to ensuring a respectable place for the community in burgeoning post-independence national institutions. This case-study presents new material for understanding local Muslim nationalisms at a time when their loyalties toward nation states were questioned, in South Asia and elsewhere. The MICH is also significant for the choice to claim a legacy in Moorish Spain, rather than Mecca or in Muslim revival and reform movements closer to home in British India.

In our current moment global geo-political formations, neoliberal regimes, new forms of imperialism, and the War on Terror continue to profoundly shape many contexts of Asian Muslim lives. Perhaps the most pressing issue for Muslims around the world, and especially in Asia, is growing political and cultural exclusion based on pervasive anti-Muslim sentiment. These

circumstances produce diverse Muslim responses ranging from resistance to separatism to accommodation and adaptation. The historical and continuing question of South Asian Muslim belonging and their self-identification is explored in Ali Altaf Mian's article on the visual materials produced by Zarina (1937–2020), an Indian American Muslim artist whose work explores themes of home, homeland, and the relationship between the individual and the collective. Having lived during many formative events that still shape the modern South Asian Muslim experience, Zarina's art, and her reflective commentary, offer new ways of thinking through relationships between the Muslim self, community, and nation. They also present a Muslim identity impacted by formative moments of inclusion and exclusion within the transnational contexts of India and the United States. Mian reads Zarina's work and words as signifying a "minor globalism" (Gandhi 2017) characterized by interdependence and grounded in expressions of the singularity of her experiences. Her art participates in a discourse regarding Muslim identification in contemporary India by highlighting unbelonging – in contrast to composite nationalism and separatism, the two primary conceptualizations of Muslim affiliation. Mian's analysis contributes to new trends in the field of Islamic studies that illustrate how material sources and visual cultures serve to construct and deconstruct analytic categories and concepts such as identity, religious authority, and the secular. Furthermore, Mian makes an argument for continued exploration of the material arts in Islamic studies because they call our attention to the limits of the written word and language and engage our subjectivities through shaping the viewer's multiple senses.

Ali Altaf Mian's discussion picks up a thread also evident in Nor Ismah's article, which is that Asian Muslims today are remaking their worlds in order to resist their marginalization and recover their agency in social and religious spheres. Examination of Muslim claims to authority and empowerment is of growing importance to the study of Asian Islam today, dominated as it is by Islamophobic attitudes that make claims about a supposed fundamental lack of agency within Islamic traditions. These articles highlight how Asian Muslims reject the limited terms of their belonging and influence to instead construct alternative spaces and networks of expression and existence.

Asian Muslims today participate in the shaping of identity, culture, and aesthetics within the wider Muslim community through diverse mechanisms of global mobility, particularly on social media platforms. Yang Yang's contribution to this issue illustrates this participation through examining the connections between bridalwear, aesthetics, and local Muslim cosmopolitanisms in East Asia today. Drawing on ethnographic work conducted

in urban areas of Xi'an, Yang details how Hui Muslim bridal customers and store owners (serving as stylists) participate in a pious and aspirational consumerism as they evaluate, photograph, and purchase different styles of wedding wear. The stylists Yang interviews cater to customers who desire a look that conforms to perceived norms of piousness and modesty in women's fashion and is also sophisticated. The Hui Muslim bridal fashion industry in Xi'an is the setting for what Yang describes as a vernacular cosmopolitanism (Werbner 2006), in which the adoption of global Muslim aesthetics in bridal wear (here, Malaysian styles) serves important purposes on the local level. One purpose, Yang argues, is to connect the Hui community to the global *ummah*, a matter of increasing importance as a minority in the larger Chinese context. A second significance Yang identifies is that the Hui consumption of Malaysian Muslim fashion represents their desire to make empowered choices related to Muslim self-expression. Those choices of identity presentation are, Yang notes, often determined by the Chinese state. Muslim fashion, particularly for women, is a burgeoning area of research (for example Bucar 2017; Jones 2007). These sartorial preferences illustrate key patterns of influence in the global Muslim world, determined by capital and resources, and suggest how that influence can come to intervene in local political and cultural contexts. Developments in the Hui Muslim women's bridal industry also reveal, as Yang shows, how the Muslim woman's body continues to serve as a canvas for various aspirations and discourses for both consumers and producers.

In conclusion, the authors in this special issue prioritize diverse Asian Muslim materials, engaging and extending key themes and debates in the academic study of Islam. Verena Meyer's afterword offers critical reflections on how Asia is a privileged space for studying global Muslim histories and experiences. As I have argued in this article, the field has much to learn from Asian Islamic practices. Acknowledging the diversity of Muslim traditions holds important and influential consequences for understanding Islam and Muslims beyond the academy, influencing how Muslims represent themselves and pursue recognition in society and culture. Centering Islamic studies in Asia would rectify longstanding patterns in both scholarly and popular work that tend to overlook influential developments and perspectives from Asia as marginal or not authentically Islamic. Focusing on the complexities and productive innovations within Asian Muslim communities would break down persistent binaries and assumptions in the field that hinder rather than advance understandings of global Islam, providing new directions for paradigm building in Islamic studies.

Acknowledgements

I appreciate the perseverance of each of our authors when putting this special issue together. I have been grateful to work with Verena Meyer on this project for the past two years. Special thanks are due to the two anonymous reviewers of this introduction, and the Editor in Chief of the *International Journal of Islam in Asia*, Karen Ruffle, for their feedback that improved this article.

Competing Interests

I declare that there are no competing interests.

References

- Adiong, N. M. "Redefining Center and Periphery in Islam." *International Journal of Islam in Asia* 1 (2020): 1–2.
- Agrama, H. A. "Ethics, Tradition, Authority: Toward an Anthropology of the Fatwa." *American Ethnologist* 37:1 (2010): 2–18.
- Ahmed, S. *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.
- Alatas, I. F. *What is Religious Authority? Cultivating Islamic Communities in Indonesia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021.
- Alavi, S. *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.
- Ali, T. M. *The Women's Mosque of America: Authority and Community in US Islam*. New York: New York University Press, 2022.
- Arjana, S. R. *Buying Buddha, Selling Rumi: Orientalism and the Mystical Marketplace*. London: Oneworld Academic, 2020.
- Asad, T. *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1986.
- Azra, A. *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004.
- Bakali, N. "Islamophobia in Myanmar: The Rohingya Genocide and the 'War on Terror.'" *Race & Class* 62:4 (2021): 53–71.
- Bano, M., and H. Kalmbach, eds. *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2012.
- Bellamy, C. *The Powerful Ephemeral: Everyday Healing in an Ambiguously Islamic Place*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

- Bridges, W. H., N. T. Sharma, and M. D. Sterling. *Who Is the Asianist?: The Politics of Representation in Asian Studies*. Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, 2022.
- Bulliet, R. *Islam: The View from the Edge*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Curtis, E. E., ed. *Across the Worlds of Islam: Muslim Identities, Beliefs, and Practices from Asia to America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023.
- Davis, D. R. "Three Principles for an Asian Humanities: Care First ... Learn From ... Connect Histories." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74:1 (2015): 43–67.
- Eaton, R. "Islamic History as World History." In *Islamic & European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order*, edited by M. Adas and American Historical Association, 1–36. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.
- Ernst, C. W. *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center*. 2nd ed. New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Ernst, C. W. and R. C. Martin. "Introduction: Toward a Post-Orientalist Approach to Islamic Religious Studies." In *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism*, edited by C. W. Ernst and R. C. Martin, 1–19. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010.
- Esposito, J. L., T. Lewis, and D. J. Fasching. *Religions of Asia Today*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Inden, R. "Orientalist Constructions of India." *Modern Asian Studies* 20:3 (1986): 401–46.
- Iwamura, J. *Virtual Orientalism*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Feener, R. M. "Issues and Ideologies in the Study of Regional Muslim Cultures." In *Islamic Connections: Muslim Societies in South and Southeast Asia*, edited by R. M. Feener and T. Sevea, xiii–xxiv. 1st ed. Singapore: ISEAS, 2009.
- Feener, R. M. "Muslim Circulations and Islamic Conversion in Monsoon Asia." In *Monsoon Asia: A Reader on South and Southeast Asia*, edited by D. Henley and N. Wickramasinghe, 197–216. Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2023.
- Formichi, C. *Islam and Asia: A History*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Formichi, C. "Islamic Studies or Asian Studies? Islam in Southeast Asia." In "Special Issue: Shifting Boundaries: The Study of Islam in the Humanities," edited by I. R. Morgenstein Fuerst and Z. M. S. Ayubi. *The Muslim World* 106:4 (2016): 696–718.
- Gade, A. M. *Muslim Environmentalisms: Religious and Social Foundations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.
- Gandhi, L. "Utonal Life: A Genealogy for Global Ethics." In *Cosmopolitanisms*, edited by B. Robbins and P. L. Horta, 64–88. New York: New York University Press, 2017.
- Geertz, C. *The Religion of Java*. Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960.
- Ho, E. *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- Hodgson, M. G. S. *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*. 3 Vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

- Jalal, A. *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam Since 1850*. London; New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Jaschok, M. and Jingjun, S. *The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam: A Mosque of Their Own*. Richmond: Curzon, 2000.
- Jones, C. "Fashion and Faith in Urban Indonesia." *Fashion Theory* 11:2-3 (2007): 211-31.
- Kasmani, O. *Queer Companions: Religion, Public Intimacy, and Sainly Affects in Pakistan*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022.
- King, R. *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East."* 1st ed. United Kingdom: Routledge, 1999.
- Laffan, M. *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma Below the Wind*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Lawrence, B. B. "Islamicate Civilization: The View from Asia." In *Teaching Islam*, edited by B. M. Wheeler, 61-74. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Lipman, J. N. *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997.
- Masuzawa, T. *The Invention of World Religions, Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Meyer, V. "Where is Mecca? Or, Map and Territory: Reflections from Java." In *Storied Island: New Explorations in Javanese Literature*, edited by Ronit Ricci, 176-200. Leiden: Brill, 2023.
- Michael, J. "The Role of Performance in Constructing Muslim Citizenship in the 2019-20 Anti-CAA Protests: New Trends in Indian Muslim Belonging Today." "Special Issue: *Hindutva* and the Muslim Subject." *ReOrient: The Journal of Critical Muslim Studies* (forthcoming 2024).
- Morgenstein Fuerst, I. R. *Indian Muslim Minorities and the 1857 Rebellion: Religion, Rebels, and Jihad*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2017.
- Morgenstein Fuerst, I. R. "Job Ads Don't Add Up: Arabic + Middle East + Texts ≠ Islam." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 88:4 (2020): 915-46.
- Morgenstein Fuerst, I. R. and Z. M. S. Ayubi. "Shifting Boundaries: The Study of Islam in the Humanities." *The Muslim World* 106:4 (2016): 643-54.
- Petersen, K. *Interpreting Islam in China: Pilgrimage, Scripture, and Language in the Han Kitab*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Prange, S. *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Ricci, R. *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Ricklefs, M. C. *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization From the Fourteenth to the Early Nineteenth Centuries*. Norwalk: East Bridge, 2006.
- Roberts, S. R. *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2020.

- Schubel, V. "Let the Margins Be the Center." In *Across the Worlds of Islam: Muslim Identities, Beliefs, and Practices from Asia to America*, edited by E. E. Curtis, 249–83. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023.
- Schubel, V. "Teaching Islam as an Asian Religion." *Education About Asia* 10:1 (2005): 4–10.
- Sevea, T. *Miracles and Material Life: Rice, Ore, Traps and Guns in Islamic Malaya*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Taneja, A. V. *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017.
- Tontini, R. *Muslim Sanzijing: Shifts and Continuities in the Definition of Islam in China*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2016.
- Werbner, P. "Understanding Vernacular Cosmopolitanism." *Anthropology News* 47 (2006): 7–11.