



Book Review

of

Islam and the Americas

Edited by Aisha Khan

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Editor Aisha Khan writes in her introduction, "This is a book about Muslims as they craft Islam in the new world of the Americas". Khan is not interested in Islamic origins and diasporic dispersions as a claim to authenticity but in the multiple ontological states of being Muslim. She is interested in how people in small undocumented communities who have had relatively long histories of Islamic practices live that experience and in so doing participate in the making of those societies.

Apart from the valuable overview introduction and another essay written by the editor that locates Islam at the congruence of the Old and New Worlds, and central in the making of the new world itself, the book has three sections: Part I – Histories: Presence, Absence, Remaking; Part II – Circulation of Identities, Politics of Belonging; and Part III: Spatial Practices and the Trinidadian Landscape.

Each essay transports us into the practice or peculiarity of Muslim practitioners in different geographical locations and each is a gem of a story that reveals something about the way in which people claim and own up to the faith of their ancestors. In Part I for instance, we are introduced to the Oriental hieroglyphics of the priesthood of freemasonry, a uniquely American order known as the Shriners – a sect located in New York and founded in 1878 and practiced differently by white and black adherents. The author of this piece, Jacob Dorman, demonstrates that Americans in the US have not always imagined Muslims and Arabs as enemies and have long been involved in producing romantic forms of orientalism. The essays take us through the US Asiatic association between Asian identity and Islam, to Javanese introduction of this religion in Surinam in the 1920s by the well-known Dutch historian Rosemarijn Hoefte and into a delightful post 9-11 piece about Puerto Ricans who identify themselves through related Muslim and hip pop identities that are synchronous and complementary to their continued defense of their faith.

Yarimar Bonilla's essay in Part II is another exegesis of elements that helped to shape the iconography of terror of Islam as it reverberated in the island of Guadeloupe. A well-known labour activist Michel Madassamy is arrested and cartooned as Ousamma Dassamy – the transference of the US war on terror being revisited in the local politics of Guadeloupe. Essays in this section also deal with Islam in Mexico, The Bahamas and Brazil, finding pockets of these believers in places one would rarely associate with this religion.

Part III hosts four essays in the island of Trinidad as an ethnographic study of Islam on this location. They include Rhoda Reddock's feminist analysis of Muslim women's struggle to reclaim masjid or mosque space in this society; Gabrielle Hosein's examination of the conflict between democracy, gender and Indian Muslim modernity, between political partnerships and spiritual correctness of followers of the *Anjuman Sunnatul Jamaat* in south Trinidad; Jeanne Roach-Baptiste looks at the issues around decriminalising the Jamaat Al Muslimeen and Madressa (the former a group associated with national unrest and a coup in 1990 and persistent association with crime and criminality); and my own essay traces the emergence of a recognisable religious iconography consistent with global Islamic aesthetics that have persisted in the strands of both African and Asian practices of Islam and currently increasing in visibility in this society.

The project of this book is a prescient one. Collectively the essays persuade us to read beyond the dominant scripts that continue to threaten the lives of innocent people who have engaged in their everyday observance of this religion, creating cultural variances that in general have enriched the communities, or states, or groups, or gendered categories. As always Aisha Khan is sensitive to gender nuances in her publications. For the reader interested in this area, the four essays in Part III that deal with Trinidad, however, all focus on different readings of gender within a range of Islamic communities in this island and collectively perhaps provide the most concentrated overview of Islam as it is received and variously practiced in one geographical space over time.

I take away another valuable and profound message from this collection that should be prominent as we continue to handle the messy politics around this religion in the 21st century.

On page 96, Nathaniel Deutsch quotes a 1914 text by historian Lothrop Stoddard whose insightful analysis of the Haitian and French revolutions leads him to conclude: "The world-wide struggle between the primary races of mankind – the 'conflict of color' as it has been happily termed, bids fair to be the problem of the twentieth century". Aisha Khan's culling together of historical, ethnographic and aesthetic analyses in *Islam in the Americas* positioned under the spreading banyan tree that shelters a disparate set of adherents globally, jolts us into another categorisation that has become ineffably fixed as we have moved into the 21st century. She underscores the racialisation of Muslims as the construction of a category based on religion rather than race or colour – reverberating other echoes of the past: orientalism versus Occidentalism, Christianity versus Islam, the Nazi demonisation of Jews in the Second World War, and before this, the justification of the Atlantic slave trade itself on religious grounds. The book is a serious reminder of the dangers of ignoring the variance between political and economic agendas of few, over the real lives of many. In an age where the word Islam echoes with the thunder of crumbling towers and terrorists' beards, the publication of *Islam and the Americas* is a brave and necessary book.

