



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Epilogue: Asia as a privileged space of inquiry in the field of Islamic studies

Meyer, V.H.

Citation

Meyer, V. H. (2024). Epilogue: Asia as a privileged space of inquiry in the field of Islamic studies. *International Journal Of Islam In Asia*, 4(1-2), 206-213. doi:10.1163/25899996-20241066

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3766077>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



BRILL

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
ISLAM IN ASIA 4 (2023) 206–213

 International
Journal of
Islam in Asia
brill.com/ijia

Epilogue: Asia as a Privileged Space of Inquiry in the Field of Islamic Studies

Verena Meyer | ORCID: 0000-0001-5465-4833

Assistant Professor, Leiden Institute of Area Studies (LIAS), Leiden

University, Leiden, The Netherlands

v.h.meyer@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Received 4 July 2023 | Accepted 28 February 2024 |

Published online 16 April 2024

Abstract

Looking back at the articles collected in this issue, I want to propose that Asia is a privileged space for Islamic studies for addressing three questions in particular that are relevant for the wider discipline and demand a radical rethinking of familiar understandings of Islam as it has come to be represented in contemporary scholarship. First, the highly heterogeneous landscapes of Islamic Asia invite us to consider the significance of cultural, linguistic, and religious complexity in Islam more broadly. Second, while exhibiting the fundamental changes that Asian Muslims have navigated against the background of the increasing reach of colonialism and globalization, the preceding articles simultaneously resist easy dichotomizations between tradition and modernity. And third, a focus on Islam in Asia allows us to reassess established paradigms of transmission with its various infrastructures, as well as understandings of centers and peripheries undergirding such processes of transmission.

Keywords

Asian Islam – center/periphery – heterogeneity – (post-)coloniality – tradition/modernity – transmission

Given the sheer size of the landmass and the number of Muslims living in the regions that are conventionally called East-, South-, and Southeast Asia, one

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill BV | DOI:10.1163/25899996-20241066

© VERENA MEYER, 2024 | ISSN: 2589-9988 (print) 2589-9996 (online) from Brill.com 08/20/2024 07:52:23AM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

might reasonably wonder about the benefits of grouping them together as “Islam in Asia,” especially when this category is invoked to talk back against established paradigms in Islamic studies. What kind of category, one may ask, is this Islam in Asia? One fundamental problem with invoking such an Asian Islam is that one runs the danger of reifying the field of study as bounded and inherently distinct from Islam in other parts of the world. By highlighting the connected histories both between Asia and the rest of the Islamic world and among Asia’s diverse regions, the authors of the articles in this volume have resisted any such oversimplification, pointing instead to the ways in which the broader field of Islamic studies stands to profit by taking into account perspectives from Asia in their broad variety and multiplicity. In so doing, the articles decenter the field with its traditional geographic focus on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as the favored site of scholarly investigation and propose new paradigms and avenues of inquiry for studying Islam in its global diversity. Likewise, they show that Islam is an intrinsic part of Asia’s religious landscape, thus undercutting conventional understandings of “Asian Religions” as including only Indic or Sinic religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Looking back at the different contributions, I want to propose that Asia is a privileged space for Islamic studies, precisely because it forces us to look beyond the conventions and the discipline’s foundational parameters that have been articulated based on the MENA region as the normative center of Islam, but which are just as culturally and historically contingent as Islamic expressions in the rest of the world. In particular, there are three points that I want to raise that show how a focus on Asian Islam demands a radical rethinking of familiar categories and conceptual frameworks as they have come to be represented in the field of Islamic studies.

First, as a range of articles has shown, the highly heterogeneous landscapes of Islamic Asia invite us to consider the significance of cultural, linguistic, and religious complexity in Islam more broadly. While scholars have long recognized that the trajectory of Islam in the region is not adequately reflected by unifying categories that implicitly take the Middle East as the standard from which all other Muslim communities can only deviate, attempts to conceptualize this complexity through classifications like “national religions” and “world religions” (Kuenen 1882) or “great and little traditions” (Redfield 1956) have done little but re-affirm the old paradigm that Islam in Asia is the “syncretic,” “synthetic,” “hybrid,” or “heterodox” Other of a Middle Eastern Islam that is pure, orthodox, and Arab. This is all the more misguided given that scholars of the Islamic Middle East have long moved away from the idea that Arab Islam is pure and free of any borrowings of pre-Islamic religious aspects and thought, or later interactions with other religious traditions of the Middle East,

as Teren Sevea also notes in his article. But while this obvious fact has come to be increasingly accepted for the so-called Islamic heartland, scholarship on Asian Islam continues to have to bear the burden of proof that the thought and practices of Muslims in our respective studies are more than just “superficially Islamic” or too parochial to be of any significance beyond their point of origin. The very idea that Arab Islam was somehow purer was an Orientalist preoccupation, Sevea reminds us.¹ Although this fact is well known today, such prejudices are perpetuated in academia especially at an implicit level, where textbook compilers, editors of special issues or edited volumes, and especially hiring committees are unwilling or unable to give Asian Islam the same space and significance as other regions of the Islamic world, particularly the MENA region – and where conversely work on “Asian Religions” routinely excludes Islam.

This inability to conceptualize the complexity of Asian Islam in terms other than as an aberration is especially vexing considering that this complexity has provided Asian Muslims with a rich conceptual framework to situate themselves in their theological understandings as well as everyday thought and practice. Guangtian Ha makes a similar point in his article on the multi- and translingual worlds of Sino-Muslim scholars. Certain texts that circulated in communities of learning were not merely bilingual in Chinese and Persian or Arabic, but also transcended the boundaries of any of these languages by inflecting Chinese with Persian or Arabic and vice versa. Rather than being considered a mark of contamination or aberration from a language in its “pure” form, these translingual markers prompted Sino-Muslim clerics “to intuitively dwell in two or three languages at once.”² Only with the advent of modern sensibilities and reformist movements beginning in the late nineteenth century was this linguistic complexity domesticated and sacrificed for the sake of homogeneity with an Arab ideal. More than just the byproduct of historical contingencies, the complexity of Asian Islam can thus itself be productive, both as a means of theological understanding and articulation and as a way of situating oneself in a world marked by post-colonial, nationalist, and rationalist forms of discipline.

We see this also in Francesca Chubb-Confer’s article on the linguistic and metaphorical instability of Muhammad Iqbal’s *ghazal* poetry, which was written in both Persian and Urdu. Choosing both poetic and linguistic registers that some reformers considered incompatible with the modern nation state

1 This point has also been made by Florida (1997); Formichi (2020); Lawrence (2003).

2 For other discussions of this productive translingualism in Asian Islam, see Meyer (2019); Ricci (2011).

and religious sensibilities, Iqbal articulated a vision of modern Muslim identities that defied conventional categories while pointing to a more fundamental truth that transcends any of them. Ali Mian likewise indicates such possibilities in his article on the work of the Indian-American artist Zarina as an expression of a “minor globalism” in Leela Gandhi’s (2017) sense of the word. Defying familiar boundaries between ethno-nationalist groups and religious communities but without fully resisting them either, Zarina inhabits a condition of “singularity and unbelonging” through a personal and artistic trajectory that transcends the geographic boundedness of Asia itself. Perhaps such dynamics are particularly visible in Asia or among Asian Muslims in diaspora, whose lives are criss-crossed by competing ideological agendas as well as religious, moral, and aesthetic norms and values, where conflicts among them often become the subject of explicit debate and engagement. Yet these debates also make visible the broader predicament of Muslim subjects in the postcolonial, modern world and should therefore be taken to be more than just local idiosyncrasies. By working through them, they can help us build paradigms for the study of Islam more broadly.

Second, while exhibiting the fundamental changes that Asian Muslims have navigated against the background of the increasing reach of colonialism and globalization, the articles in this collection simultaneously resist easy dichotomizations between tradition and modernity. Instead, they have opened up a space of debate to study the broad range of “multiple modernities” (Eisenstadt 2000) by inquiring further into the condition of Muslims in the modern, colonial and postcolonial world. Indeed, many phenomena in contemporary Asian Islam challenge categorizations in a binary of “tradition” and “modernity,” as we see, for example, in Nor Ismah’s article, where female fatwa-givers locate themselves within the scholarly tradition and make productive use of the conventional sources used by the legal experts of Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia’s largest Islamic mass organization self-identifying as traditionalist. At the same time, they break with this scholarly tradition by assuming an authority as fatwa-givers that was previously reserved for men. Zarina’s art in Mian’s article is another such example, where contemporary life experiences are expressed through media that display a “vestigial presence of the pre-modern” (Kaviraj 2014), thus pushing against entrenched categorizations and the identity politics of the modern world.

Chubb-Confer’s contribution situates these studies undercutting binaries between tradition and modernity squarely within contemporary within contemporary debates in Islamic studies, where scholars have often assumed that the quintessential Muslim modes of thought and articulation of the pre-modern era – especially the productive use of ambiguity, paradox, metaphor, and

contradiction – have given way to a modern flattening and disenchantment characterized by the disciplinary enforcement of rational coherence.³ In part, this understanding of modernity's flattening effect may be based on a universalization of the trajectory and thought of specific Muslim thinkers from the Middle East, because Muslims across Asia – including those who self-identify as modern or modernist – show that this tolerance of ambiguity, the capacity to draw on contrary or competing meanings associated with the same term, act, or object (Bauer 2021, 10), did not disappear with modernity but came to be reconfigured to make sense of modern life as a Muslim. Chubb-Confer's article is a case in point: Muhammad Iqbal, a quintessential poet of modernity and aesthetic cornerstone of the Pakistani state (with the nation state itself being a modern construct) made use in his poetry of "ambiguous metaphors and metaphors of ambiguity" in order to articulate an understanding of the modern condition itself. This and other Asian examples thus decenter a narrative based on materials from the Middle East. Perhaps they can also raise the question among scholars of Islam in the Middle East whether the situation in the so-called heartland of Islam truly is as clear-cut as it seems.

In fact, other articles suggest that questions of ambiguity and projects of commensuration are not embedded in the modern condition *per se*, but rather in local exigencies and political projects. Farzana Haniffa's article picks up a related point when she argues that Muslims in late colonial Ceylon, who had previously been marginalized and legislated against by both colonial powers and the Sinhala majority, embarked on a project of reconciling what it meant to be a modern Ceylonese citizen on the one hand and Muslim on the other. She locates these efforts in Muslims' middle-class aspirations and negotiations of their minoritization within the Sri Lankan post-independence nation state, thus showing that such projects of commensuration are embedded not in any intrinsic characteristics of modern Islam, but rather in histories of a colonial past and the postcolonial global order (see also Kamali 2012).

The third and final point which makes Asia a privileged site for studying Islam is related to the first: A focus on Islam in Asia allows us to reconsider established paradigms of transmission with its various infrastructures, as well as understandings of centers and peripheries undergirding these processes of transmission. According to familiar understandings, such processes are largely unidirectional, reaching from the Middle East and especially Mecca and Medina – the historical, educational, and ritual heart of Islam – to the various

3 The view that paradox and metaphor are intrinsic characteristics of Islam was made famous by Shahab Ahmed (2016), who does, however, implicitly locate these features in the pre-modern era. Thomas Bauer (2021) more explicitly argued that the loss of the "tolerance of ambiguity" is a modern development in Islam.

peripheries, of which Asia is especially peripheral. More-recent scholarship has moved away from this paradigm, emphasizing the multi-directionality of transmission in the Arabic cosmopolis (Kooria 2022; Ricci 2011) and the Indian Ocean world (Ho 2006; Green 2015), as well as shifting understandings of what counts as center and periphery (Curtis 2023; Meyer 2023). Guangtian Ha's article shows how China, often considered separate from Islamicate southern Asia Henley and Wickramasinghe (2003), has also participated in this cosmopolitan culture, receiving texts and ideas from South and Southeast Asia, even if the symbolic center of authority continued to rest with Arabic and Persian. But the Middle East was not always the unchallengeable center of authority, as Muslims around the world – even the Middle East – have sometimes oriented themselves toward other centers, including centers in Asia – like the Malay Island of Pulau Besar outside of Melaka in Teren Sevea's article, which at one point hosted students and scholars from places as far as Syria. Sevea has therefore called on scholars to pay attention to such processes of “multi-centering Islam” instead of taking for granted unilateral directions of transmission.

In Yang Yang's article, movements of authoritative directionality go not from the Middle East to Asia, but rather from Malaysia to China. In the imaginary of her Hui Muslim interlocutors, vendors and clients in Xi'an's bridal economy, Malaysia – an Asian Muslim country that has been especially marginalized in academic studies of Islam⁴ – actually becomes the center of a normative Islam that also includes the pious consumption of fashion and style. Through this orientation towards Malaysia's Muslim bridal economy as standard and benchmark, the bodies of Hui Muslim brides become a medium for situating themselves and their community in a global Muslim culture that is not centered in the Middle East but a country in Southeast Asia. Her article thus also points to broader social processes in the production and understanding of religious centers, as in this case, economic processes and aesthetic values, reminding us that the very concepts of center and periphery are attached to forces that are not inherently religious.

Nor Ismah's article goes even further, urging us to look not only at traditional institutions as centers of authority but also to take seriously processes at the grassroots level to understand transmission of knowledge and normative opinions as a multi-sited and multi-centered process where individual fatwa-seekers and fatwa-givers work together to come to solutions that are

4 Relative to its neighbors, Malaysia tends to be ignored even more, perhaps in part because most scholarship on Southeast Asian Islam often focuses on Malaysia's neighbor. To be clear, this is not meant to downplay the contributions of the scholars who have written significant studies on Islam in Malaysia, including Teren Sevea in this volume, but simply to point to the lack of attention and support in the wider field.

contextually specific. Her work shows that even anthropological studies run the risk of reinscribing traditional centers of authority as primary loci of knowledge production and dissemination, in this case, the male mufti at an official institution. Because of its rich tradition of female muftis, Indonesia is an especially good starting point for reconsidering the role of gender in the generation of such alternative centers. By focusing on grassroots processes, she urges us to take seriously the diverse array of small local centers of authoritative knowledge that not only exist among the Indonesian Muslim women who participate in the production of fatwas but also in many other forms around the Muslim world.

Of course, the significance and, indeed, centrality of Asia for the study of Islam is not a new insight. Nonetheless, it continues to be downplayed through the structural academic processes that all contributors to this volume have experienced at one level or another. Platforms like the *International Journal of Islam in Asia* are welcome initiatives, and it is to be hoped that they engage a broad readership of Islamicists, not merely Asianists; and that they contribute to a paradigm shift in the field and a removal of structural barriers that foreclose the consideration of perspectives from Asia.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere thanks to all the contributors of this issue for their excellent contributions, and special gratitude to Jaclyn Michael for our productive and enjoyable cooperation. Regarding this afterword, I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback. Finally, many thanks to Karen Ruffle at the *International Journal of Islam in Asia* for her support and help throughout the publication process.

Competing Interests

I declare that there are no competing interests.

References

- Ahmed, Shahab. *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.
- Ali, Muhamad. *Islam and Colonialism: Becoming Modern in Indonesia and Malaya*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

- Bauer, Thomas. *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021.
- Curtis IV, Edward E., ed. *Across the Worlds of Islam: Muslim Identities, Beliefs, and Practices from Asia to America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023.
- Eisenstadt, S. N. "Multiple Modernities." *Daedalus* 129:1 (2000): 1–29.
- Florida, Nancy. "Writing Traditions in Colonial Java: The Question of Islam." In *Cultures of Scholarship*, edited by S. C. Humphreys, 187–217. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- Formichi, Chiara. *Islam and Asia: A History*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Gandhi, Leela. "Utonal Life: A Genealogy for Global Ethics." In *Cosmopolitanisms*, edited by Bruce Robbins, and Paulo Lemos Horta, 64–88. New York: New York University Press, 2017.
- Green, Nile. *Terrains of Exchange: Religious Economies of Global Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Henley, David, and Nira Wickramasinghe, eds. *Monsoon Asia: A Reader on South and Southeast Asia*. Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2023.
- Ho, Engseng. *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- Kamali, Masoud. "Multiple Modernities and Mass Communications in Muslim Countries." *Global Media and Communication* 8:3 (2012): 243–68.
- Kaviraj, Sudipta. "A Strange Love of the Land: Identity, Poetry and Politics in the (Un)making of South Asia." *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 10 (2014): 1–15.
- Kooria, Mahmood. *Islamic Law in Circulation: Shāfiʿī Texts Across the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.
- Kuenen, Abraham. *National Religions and Universal Religions*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1882.
- Lawrence, Bruce B. "Islamicate Civilization: The View From Asia." In *Teaching Islam*, edited by Brannon M. Wheeler, 61–74. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Meyer, Verena. "Translating Divinity: Punning and Paradox in Hamzah Fansuri's Poetic Sufism." *Indonesia and the Malay World* 47:139 (2019): 353–72.
- Meyer, Verena. "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.
- Redfield, Robert. *The Little Community and Peasant Society and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956.
- Ricci, Ronit. *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.