

Islam and Asia: A History
Chiara Formichi
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In recent months, scholars of Islamic Studies in North America have engaged in an occasionally heated debate—in journals and on social media—about the parameters and methodologies of the field. In a recent article in the *Journal of the Academy of Religion* (88:4), Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst points to deep-seated tensions over how “normative Islam” is conceptualized in the modern academy. Fuerst examines recent job advertisements in Islamic studies to show that hiring committees, relying on what she views as outdated Orientalist stereotypes, predominantly seek scholars whose work focuses on Arabic texts produced in the “Middle East” and, sometimes, North Africa.

Chiara Formichi’s stimulating book *Islam and Asia: A History* thus serves as a timely intervention in this wider debate. Formichi, a scholar of Islam in modern Indonesia, shows that to study Islam “from the center” (to borrow Richard Bulliet’s apt phrase) has often led scholars to see the diverse manifestations of Islam in Asia as divergences (or perhaps deviations) from a supposedly orthodox Arab- and Arabic-inflected original. By contrast, by avoiding the pitfall of arguing for multiple “Islams”, Formichi argues that we might productively consider the manifold and geographically specific forms of lived Islam in Asia to be examples of “contextualized orthodoxy” (3). At the same time, Formichi draws out broad trends that can be seen to unite otherwise geographically, culturally, and linguistically distinct Asian Muslims over a millennium and a half. The book also seeks to show how Islam, though now all-too-often viewed as “foreign” to Asia, fundamentally constituted the region (the fact that the idea of “Asia” did not have much valence in Islamic societies prior to the onset of colonialism is, unfortunately, left largely unaddressed).

The task Formichi sets herself is, thus, an ambitious one. The result is a rich and wide-ranging if somewhat uneven piece of work: some genuinely outstanding thematic chapters, especially those on post-colonial developments, are offset by chapters on the pre-colonial and colonial periods that feel, at times, fragmentary. Asia is presented throughout as if it were a self-evidently existing “entity” rather than an imaginative or ideological construct, an endonym that only came to be (patchily) adopted by inhabitants of this region in the late-nineteenth century. The book provides us with little sense of the way that Muslims of the pre-colonial period conceived of the often-multiple geographies that they inhabited (alongside discussions of the *umma*, the book might have considered the well-established albeit protean distinctions between ‘Arab, ‘Ajam, and Hind, for example). Indeed, charting the conditions under which Muslims living in “Asia” began to conceive of themselves as “Asians” at all might have been an extremely fruitful avenue of inquiry.

Chapter 1 covers the first thousand years of Islamic expansion, tracing the trajectory of Islam as it spread across Asia through conquest, conversion and trade. Formichi sees the decentralization of the Abbasids (750-1258) as an inflection point that led to the emergence of local forms of Asian Islam “separate from developments at the Arab ‘center’ of the Empire” (15). While this formulation understates the role of non-Arabs in the Abbasid administration, it allows for a shift in focus to the book’s proper concerns further east and (mostly) later in time. The chapter describes how Turkic military slaves operating at the eastern fringes of the Empire came to establish the Delhi Sultanate by the twelfth century CE. Elements of Formichi’s narrative, in particular the various references to the infamous destruction of Somnath Temple, somewhat

uncritically echo nineteenth-century historiography that, as Romila Thapar, Richard Eaton, and others have demonstrated, was imbued with the political objectives of colonial administrators. The final part of the chapter draws on more recent scholarship to show how Islam spread to Southeast Asia, not by means of conquest but along maritime trade routes.

The following two chapters take a more thematic approach. Chapter 2 considers the way that a range of Islamic practices (pilgrimage, architecture, art) were shaped by the process of encounter with the ideas and material cultures of Asia. As Formichi shows, colonial-era scholars and their heirs have tended to characterize the adoption of local forms as a “thin veneer” of Islamization over deep-seated, indigenous substrata, whether Buddhist or Hindu (67-68). The chapter argues, by contrast, that both Islam and the practices of pre-existent Asian cultures were transformed in the process of encounter. Chapter 3 seeks to trace modes of transmission of scholastic and spiritual knowledge over six centuries (thirteenth to nineteenth centuries CE). It examines, in particular, scholastic and Sufi networks across Asia, demonstrating that these networks were inextricably intertwined during the pre-colonial period and that modern attempts to dismiss Sufism as an unorthodox accretion represent a sharp break with centuries of devotional practice rooted in local contexts. The chapter’s second half includes a series of case studies of prominent Islamic reformers from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, drawing out stimulating parallels between Arab, Central and South Asian, and Chinese reformist programs.

The response to European political domination in the nineteenth century sharpened these earlier calls for reform. Chapter 4 considers the ways in which pan-Islamist and, later, Muslim nationalist reformers sought to channel Islamic symbols for newly urgent ends. The first section shows how the Ottoman Empire sought to reverse its relative political weakness in relation to Europe through the dissemination of pan-Islamic messages in which it positioned itself as the orthodox Caliphate for the *umma*. Formichi demonstrates how new technologies of travel and communication allowed for these messages to spread with ever-greater ease. The second part of the chapter shows how the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 led Muslim reformers across Asia to channel their energies into nationalist and anti-colonial movements.

The process of decolonization and the emergence of nation states led to new configurations of Islamic political thought. Chapter 5, covering the 1940s-’60s, considers how Muslims, including women, engaged and clashed with both late-colonial governments and newly emergent nationalist elites who generally promoted secular, developmental politics and were largely dismissive of religious symbolism. The section on Soviet Central Asia represents an interesting counternarrative, where the colonial power used Islamic symbols and organizations (specifically SADUM) to promote forms of religion that furthered the aims of the state.

The failures of developmentalist policies and the governments that supported them led to the re-emergence of Islam as a viable political mode in the 1960s-’90s. Chapter 6 demonstrates how “bottom-up Islamization” (173) began to transform modes of Islamic piety at the very moment that elite secular politics were stuttering and political leaders (from Bhutto and Zia in Pakistan to Mahathir Mohamad in Malaysia and Suharto in Indonesia) were embracing various Islamization policies. It shows how diverse ideas promoted by transnational Islamic revivalist and reformist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and the Tablighi Jamaat spread throughout Asia and were adopted by regional activists who adapted them to suit local contexts.

The shadow of 9/11 still shapes much popular discourse about violence in Islam. Chapter 7 examines the question of *jihad* to show how the concept has been mobilized in recent decades to vindicate the use of violence to pursue various (often mutually exclusive) goals including

resistance to colonial domination and/or domestic tyranny. The chapter focuses in particular on the way that the framing of Afghan resistance to Soviet invasion in 1979 as *jihad* led to massive inflows of fighters and money. The chapter also shows how Asian states have framed domestic political resistance as *jihad*, allowing them to justify suppression of these movements within the framework of the global “War on Terror”.

Chapter 8 is, in many ways, the stand-out chapter of the book. It begins with an examination of the way that new technologies (beginning with print in the nineteenth century) have served to fragment Islamic scholarly authority allowing for new forms of lay engagement with Islamic texts. This leads to a rich discussion of the ways in which an emergent middle class, “pious modern consumers” (240), have driven a particularly Islamic form of globalized capitalism in Southeast Asia. For example, Malaysia has become a global center for halal foods while Indonesia emerged as a hub of Islamic fashion. The chapter also develops the book’s welcome focus on female Muslim voices by considering the hugely important rise of “feminist Islam” in these countries.

The final chapter is an insightful conclusion that provides a lucid historiographical discussion of the variety of approaches to the study of Islam and the significance of studying Islam as an Asian religion. One almost wonders why this chapter did not appear at the beginning of the book as it lays bare the stakes of Formichi’s project.

This book would serve as a useful textbook for introductory level college classes on Islam or Asian religion, and is written in a generally clear and accessible style. However, the pedagogical utility of the text is diminished somewhat by a number of editorial errors. We find, for example, Ghandi for Gandhi (123 *et passim*), Alighar for Aligarh (126 *et passim*), and Nadqat al-Ulema for Nadwat-ul-Ulama (166). In the first discussion of the Qur’an, we are incorrectly told that the *shahada* appears in Surat al-Fatiha (4). In a discussion of *fiqh*, Formichi transposes the meanings of *ibadat* and *mu’amala* (72). Satuq Bughra Khan, the Qarakhanid ruler (d. 955 AD) is described as a follower of the “Naqshbandi” *tariqa* (p. 81) even though, as noted just five pages later, the Naqshbandi appellation was derived from Baha’ al-Din Naqshband (d. 1389), born centuries after Bughra Khan’s death. Shah Isma’il Shahid’s *Taqwiyyat al-Iman*, first lithographed in 1826, is described as “[l]ikely the first text in the Urdu vernacular to be printed in South Asia” (82). As Ulrike Stark and others have shown, books in Hindustani (i.e. Urdu) were being printed in South Asia decades before the 1820s. Aligarh Muslim University is located in Lucknow, a city two hundred and fifty miles to the east (125). We also read that “The British took political control of the Subcontinent in the second half of the 1800s, after the (Muslim) Mughal dynasty had ruled a Hindu-majority population for several centuries” (165). This phrasing suggests that Crown’s decision to take direct control of India (in the wake of the 1857 Rebellion) marked the beginning of British political domination, ignoring the preceding century of East India Company rule. The book’s “simplified” transliteration system is also inconsistent. These are minor quibbles, however, and the later thematic chapters in particular will be viewed as a valuable resource for college-level courses.

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