



Muslim Networks #3!

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This post represents the third and final installment of our special review section on [Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop, Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks Series](#). First installments available [here](#) and [here](#).

Miriam Cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence, eds: [Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop, Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks Series](#) (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Pp. 338. \$59.95 cloth, \$21.50 paper

I wanted to review this book for one purpose: I know very little about Islam and from its title this book seemed like a good place to begin. This review should therefore be seen from that perspective. Overall, I admit, I was not disappointed.



The main argument of this edited volume is that networks are crucial to understanding Islam. As it appears, Muslim networks enforce a sense of community and help to create common identity both on a group level, and on a larger perspective, by expanding over continents and supporting the movement of ideas or people. This collection of articles focuses on the networks that are related mainly to various facets of identity, centred around the common perception of being Muslim. These identities are related to common origin, religious group affiliation, gender or political views and stretch across time and space. Economic aspects or larger social issues were left out, but the selection of topics is diverse. Geographically the book goes beyond the Orient, discussing Muslim groups and activities in Europe, North America and the World Wide Web.

From the fourteenth-century scholarly travels via politically motivated Mosque networks and various women's groups, to aspects of modern culture like the Internet and hip hop, the reader discovers more about the importance of spiritual interconnection within the global Muslim community. These networks are flexible, in a state of constant recreation and surprisingly vital. In short, as Taieb Belghazi writes, "we encounter the idea of Islam on the move" (p.275).

The book contains thirteen chapters, a masterly analytical introduction and an afterword. A review simply cannot grasp the book in its entirety, therefore only a selected few chapters will be discussed below. As a social anthropologist, I found fascinating the view on Muslim networks presented in the Introduction by miriam cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence. Instead of looking at networks as concrete social relationships, the editor describes Muslim networks as a medium, method and metaphor defining the 'umma', the Muslim community. This approach justifies the claim that such networks are fluid, in process. In the Introduction, general network theories are avoided and the Muslim world is presented as a continuum of heterogeneous forms of identities throughout world history in a situation where



Muslims were both the dominant group and/or minority. Simultaneously, the Introduction also shows how following the chapters interact with each other in order to form a coherent narrative.

The book is compiled in chronological order, starting in the Middle Ages and progressing to the twenty-first century. The first chapter by Vincent J. Cornell describes the travels of the fourteenth-century Moroccan scholar Ibn-Battuta. This chapter exposes how medieval Muslim identity differs from the modern nation state, where loyalties are defined territorially rather than philosophically. The chapter includes a brief but interesting analysis showing how medieval Muslim notables resembled mafia dons” (p.33) and how hierarchies of loyalties were structured in such states. The travels of Ibn-Battuta are also described as a process revealing the nature of Muslim networks as networks of identity and loyalty. Ibn-Battuta, as a typical medieval scholar, lived in different courts, served local sultans as an expert of Islamic law and by necessity changed his patrons. During his lifetime he travelled from Maghreb to India, and in his own way can therefore be considered the forefather of modern mobile scholars. This chapter points out how the Muslim world was held together by common knowledge and jurisprudence as a global spiritual community and how this spirituality was carried by men of knowledge or ‘*ulama*’.

As the author writes: “The solidarity of ‘ulama’ was based in part on a common education and a common epistemology” (p.43). As an expert on Quaranic law, this made possible Ibn-Battuta’s travels and activities in different regions.

The next chapter is directly linked to the first. David Gilmartin gives a detailed overview of how ‘*ulama*’ were involved in the creation of the state of Pakistan.



Here the '*ulama*' is shown in a different role using modern means of communication such as print media and publications in order to foster the creation of a modern nation state. The author goes back to the nineteenth century and shows how structures of the British colonial empire, separation of state from society, and the introduction of print media, created a different environment to that of the medieval state, discussed in a previous chapter. In this chapter, '*ulama*' is shown as the network that instrumentalised colonial structures and modern means of technology in order to mobilise Muslims around the idea of a common Muslim state. Valuable are also remarks that show how, for example, the Taliban and organisers of September 11 are directly linked to the networks of political mobilisation established in the nineteenth century.

Gender in the Muslim world is tackled in several chapters focused on women in different regions and socio-political contexts. Tayba Hassan Al Khalifa Sharif contributed a chapter about the Iraqi Shiite women in the Netherlands and the meaning of the mourning ritual '*majlis al-qiraya*'; a ritual conducted by women only and dedicated to the remembrance and mourning of members of the Prophet's family. A reader unfamiliar with Muslim culture and specific characteristics of different religious schools finds in this chapter an excellent explanation of the main conceptual differences between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. The chapter focuses on a diasporic women's network "that projects female actors as the custodians of hope" (p. 133). Through the detailed ethnographic descriptions, the author paints an interesting picture of the ritual and atmosphere in the room. It is argued that the ritual has a therapeutic meaning to participants linking their new home in Holland not only to the pre Iran-Iraqi war Iraq, but also to Iraqi history. As a whole, the chapter sheds light on how Muslim refugee communities are able to establish their group solidarity around intimate rituals, using poetry and historic narratives.



The concluding research paper on Muslim hip hop networks in the USA is rather disappointing. The author H. Samy Alim shows how different American hip hop artists use 'Islamic knowledge' and particularly the Quran to link hip hop with Islam. For someone who has conducted research on hip hop, the chapter contributes too little to what we know about the different forms and ideologies of hip hop culture. Apart from discovering that some of the most notable hip hop artists like Mos Def, Chuck D or RZA are Muslims, the reader will not find any particular new insight into the world of American Muslims and their take on hip hop. It is shown that Afro-American Muslim artists feel part of the global Muslim community 'ummah' but the chapter does not answer the question of how.

At the end of the chapter the author poses questions for 'further research', which are related to the process of Muslim nation building with the help of contemporary urban music culture. I hope H. Samy Alim will have a chance to explore these issues in the concluding pages and present us with some new and fascinating research in the future.

In general, this book is a well-written and refreshing collection of individual research articles. These articles present an alternative reading of networks, discussing issues of a philosophical, religious and ideological nature rather than strategies or structures. All contributions are theoretically well funded, and in some chapters unexpected links are made between different philosophers and the subsequent analysis of the networks. However, the most glaring attribute of the book is how readable it is for people without a deep knowledge of Islam or the Orient. Regional histories, rituals, and the essence of different spiritual schools are all elegantly explained to create a whole text that is perfectly understandable and interesting for the non-expert. This book is therefore not only recommended to scholars of the Middle East, Islam or the Orient but also to anybody who wishes to gain an insight into Muslim culture. Moreover, anybody interested in diasporas,



nation building, networks or identity construction can find in this book some solid case studies of comparative material.