



Khan, Aliyah: *Far From Mecca: Globalizing the Muslim Caribbean*

New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 2020.
ISBN 978-19788006641, 271p.

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Published online: 15 September 2020
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Introduction

Brenda Flanagan’s 2009 novel *Allah in the Islands* tells the story of the lives, dreams, and social tensions of the residents of Rosehill, a community on the fictional “Santabella Island.” The novel centers around the protagonist Beatrice Salandy and her decision whether or not to leave Santabella, a lush and tropical Caribbean island only thinly veiled as real-life Trinidad. Weaving its way through the novel is Beatrice’s relationship with an “Afro-Santabellan” Muslim community that is critical of island politics and outspoken on behalf of the poor. Through first-hand narratives from Abdul—one of the members of the community and right-hand man to its leader, Haji—readers learn that the “Afro-Santabellan” Muslim community is planning a coup against the Santabellan government. This, in turn, is a thinly veiled reference to the real-life 1990 Jamaat al-Muslimeen coup. A key theme that runs throughout the book, and in contemporary Trinidad, is how the non-Muslim residents of Santabella view “Afro-Santabellan” Muslims. Situated between the island’s Black and Indian communities, Flanagan writes how island residents react with a mixture of awe and opprobrium to their Muslim neighbors.

While it may seem strange to start a review of one book with a discussion of another, I would not have been aware of Flanagan’s work if it were not for Aliyah Khan. Khan’s adept analysis of Flanagan’s *Allah in the Islands* serves as one of the primary means by which she argues that the 1990 coup is the seminal event for the Caribbean’s perception of Islam and Muslims. Combining this analysis with an interview with “Haji”—the real-life “celebrity terrorist” (201) Imam Yasin Abu Bakr—and an exploration of popular calypso music about the coup, Khan shows how events in Trinidad in the 1990s “changed national perceptions of Muslims” (192) throughout the Anglophone

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Caribbean, long before 9/11. This is just one small example of Khan’s masterful interdisciplinary treatment of the subject of Islam and Muslims in the Anglophone Caribbean.

In this regard and many others, *Far From Mecca* is a commendable monograph that will spark additional research in the burgeoning field of Latin American and Caribbean Islamic studies, building on previous literature on Islam and Muslims in the Anglophone Caribbean in particular (Afroz 2012; Bauer 2005; Chickrie 1999, 2002, 2007, 2011; Cottee 2019; Khan 2004; Korom 2003; Searle 1991, among others). It is also a worthwhile text by which scholars in different fields—religion in the Americas, Caribbean studies, global Islamic studies, postcolonial studies, etc.—might branch beyond their main disciplines and come to learn something fresh, from a slightly different perspective. Such was the case for me as I came across *Allah in the Islands* in Khan’s work. It is rare for works to be able to speak to so many different fields and to do so cogently and convincingly, but Khan’s book is an exception that is enlightening for readers in multiple disciplines, critical of an array of entrenched scholarly discourses, and useful for various classroom discussions.

Overall, Khan argues that appreciating the continuous Afro- and Indo-Muslim presence and cultural influence in the Caribbean tells a different story about *both* global Islam *and* the Caribbean. Following Aisha Khan’s emphasis on Islam *of* the Americas, rather than Islam *in* the Americas (Khan 2015), Aliyah Khan claims that Muslims are “*not* different from other Caribbean people in their negotiation of culture and place” (46) and situates Islam and Muslims firmly within the history and society of the Anglophone Caribbean as a whole. At the same time, Khan also seeks to de-center the study of Islam in the Americas outside the USA, looking at the hemisphere’s “formerly colonial whole” and pinpointing events and figures beyond 9/11 and the USA’s respectively well-studied Muslim communities. Khan brings an interdisciplinary approach to the subject, weaving together literary analysis of fiction, autobiography, poetry, non-fiction, and music in Guyana, Trinidad, and Jamaica with interviews, media analysis, and personal connections to key events in the Anglophone Caribbean. Khan’s work is a timely, incisive, and critical addition to the growing corpus of literature that seeks to bring the lens of Caribbean studies to bear on the study of global Islam and expanding the perspectives and paradigms scholars use to frame Islamic studies and its “literatures.”

“Globalizing the Muslim Caribbean”

Previous literature on Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America and the Caribbean, while significant in its own right, has been scant and scattershot when compared with the reams of monographs, articles, and essays about Muslim minorities in other parts of the world (see Chitwood 2017). Only in recent years has attention to the region began to percolate and produce book-length scholarship. While the study of Muslims in the USA has blossomed, especially since 9/11, the concomitant study of communities and regions farther south has not yet matured or multiplied in the same way. Khan’s book aims to address that gap and provoke additional research in the field. This is a welcome provocation. Furthermore, Khan’s efforts fit within a broader appreciation for how transregional foci help scholars better elucidate local stories and

trace the threads of entanglement that exist across, at, and between national borders in the American hemisphere and beyond. To that end, Khan writes about the Anglophone Caribbean with a focus on Jamaica, Trinidad, and Guyana with an eye toward the networks that exist between Muslim communities in these areas and others in places afar as North Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, and North America.

A prime example of how Khan analyzes such plural, traveling, and entangled traditions in the context of multiple political and social orders is Chapter One: “Black Literary Islam: Enslaved Learned Men in Jamaica and the Hidden Sufi Aesthetic.” Previous scholarship on West African literacy (Diouf 1998, GhaneaBassiri 2014, Gomez 2005, Lovejoy 2004, 2016, Turner 1997) illuminated the dual role it played in Caribbean plantation cultures—both contributing to the seminal success of Black Muslims in the Anglophone Caribbean and revealing the racist notions of slave societies that believed enslaved persons literate in Arabic were somehow superior to others enslaved. Khan shows how Sufism is an essential aspect of the enslaved West African Muslim’s experience and legacy in the Anglophone Caribbean by examining the “autobiographical and religious writings of Muhammad Kabā Saghanughu and Abū Bakr al-Siddīq—both Islamically educated West African Muslims enslaved in early nineteenth-century Jamaica.” (53). In particular, she wrote that Saghanughu and al-Siddīq, “called into being an ancestral African Sufi literary tradition for the descendants of Africans in the Caribbean” (74) as they processed, resisted and conformed to the new socio-cultural and religious environs they were forced into. Beyond analyzing these nineteenth-century texts, Khan also notes how the “Islamic mystical tradition of classical Sufi poets” found its way into the twentieth-century Caribbean literary scene in Afro-Guyanese Muslim Muhammad Abdur-Rahman Slade Hopkinson’s work. By tracing the connections across space between nineteenth-century West African Sufi traditions and the experience of enslaved Muslims in the Americas and across time between enslaved Black Muslims in the Anglophone Caribbean to contemporary Afro-Caribbean literature, Khan illustrates how African Sufi literary traditions have infused Islam into Caribbean literary discourse, “teaching” Islam to Caribbean audiences by locating it in their milieu (81).

Regarding how this was missed in previous analyses of Anglophone Caribbean poetry and literature, Khan surmised that most Caribbean scholars did not know what to do with such “Islamic stuff” (74). Although I would agree with this estimation, I would say that Islamic studies scholars are even more woefully prepared to recognize, appreciate, and sufficiently appraise the impact and influence of Islam and Muslims in the Caribbean. Either way, Khan’s interdisciplinary approach to the autobiographical and poetic works of Black Muslims in the Caribbean shows what can be gained from combining the insights of both fields. In this instance, her analysis not only sheds new light on the ways in which the Anglophone Caribbean came to shape Muslim experience but also how Muslims likewise shaped the history, culture, and literary legacy of the new lands they were forced to come to. No less important, Khan also makes plain that Anglophone Caribbean Muslims are not only of Indian descent, but that Afro-Caribbean Muslims play an integral role in the region over time.

An additional example of how Khan outlines the overlapping networks that define both historical and contemporary Muslim communities in the Anglophone Caribbean is Chapter Five: “Mimic Man and Ethnorealist: Global Caribbean Islam and the Specter of Terror.” While Chapter One predominately focused on nineteenth-century

experiences, this chapter turns to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, with a particular emphasis on the global “War on Terror” and its echoes and reverberations in, around, and from the Anglophone Caribbean. In this chapter, Khan argues that Islam has truly gone “global” and is no longer “just a regional, religious legacy of Indian indentureship” (237) in the Anglophone Caribbean. In the media, popular imagination, and various public spheres, Khan argues that Islam is now seen as a multi-ethnic, transnational, and generally conservative community that spans cultural communities and national boundaries, prompting scholars to reconsider how they analyze both the “local” and the “global” in their understanding of Islam and Muslims in the late-modern world.

This, in my estimation, is one of the book’s greatest strengths, which earns Khan the right to claim in the subtitle that she is “globalizing the Muslim Caribbean.” By scrutinizing the interrelations that exist between disparate locales in the Caribbean and around the globe, and which impact areas of life in both, Khan challenges scholars to pay attention to the interactions, networks, and entanglements that make global Islam *and* the Caribbean what they are. She also inspires scholars to consider what might be gleaned from a comparative conversation between global Islamic studies and Caribbean studies. Such a perspective might better apperceive processes of influence and change, divergence, and diversity in light of seemingly faraway and culturally unfamiliar experiences. In part because the Caribbean is not at the center of Islamic studies and Islam is not at the center of Caribbean studies, such comparative discourses, which Khan’s work exemplifies, might offer novel understandings and prompt new lines of inquiry in both fields.

Creolizing Global Islam

At the same time, Khan does not simply tell a story of global connectivity, but one that focuses on the expressions of Islam *of* the Caribbean. While I side with other anthropologists of Islam and avoid talk of “national Islams” (American Islam, Caribbean Islam, etc.), I appreciate Khan’s emphasis on the ways in which the Caribbean context—made up as it is of a *creolized* conjunction of cultures, religions, and lifeways forced together by the pressures and abuses of colonialism—has both shaped and been shaped by the presence of Muslims and their discursive wrangling over the texts, traditions, and lived applications of Islam in places such as Jamaica, Trinidad, or Guyana. For instance, in Chapter Three, “The Marvelous Muslim: Limbo, Logophagy, and Islamic Indigeneity in Guyana’s El Dorado,” Khan wrestles with what it means to be Indo-Guyanese. Straddling between India/Pakistan and Guyana, Hindu and Muslim communities, Afro-Guyanese and indigenous Guyanese communities, and the colonized and the post-colonial, Khan describes the Indo-Guyanese experience between elsewhere and here, now and then, as a process of “becoming” an as yet unidentified ideal, characterized by fragmentation.

Khan wrote that Indo-Caribbean Muslims used “absent-present Amerindians” in their literature as foils to establish their own identity in a new place. In doing so, Khan argues that these authors overlook the real, lived, politically underrepresented, and generally impoverished reality of the indigenous peoples of Guyana (182). I appreciate

how Khan explores the theme of Islam *of* the Caribbean in reference to the indigenous peoples of the Americas (Amerindians), too often left to the wayside in treatments of Islam and Muslims in the region. On the one hand, dealing with “marvelous real” literature in Guyana, Khan is able to treat the “Caribbean Muslim subject,” which she calls the “fullaman”—a performative identity that relies on a gendered and racialized view of Islam—as fully *Caribbean*. In doing so, she interrogates discourses around creolization and ethnic identity, which are central to Caribbean countries’ postcolonial nationalisms. On the other hand, Khan is not only able to speak about Caribbean realities but also relevant themes for Muslims around the globe, such as identity politics, race and racialization, or postcolonialism and decolonialism. In one instance, she wrote of the possibility of “a decolonial refusal of imposed borders” in the Middle East, which is afforded by perspectives from the “marvelous real” (169). In another, even more pointed comment, she wrote, “the Muslim in the Caribbean, the fullaman, resists the framework of the essentialized pious, purist Muslim by entering the postcolonial Caribbean processes of creolization and postcolonial mimicry...” existing in between the global and the local, the Caribbean and the Islamic (277). Thus, Khan illustrates that even a literary analysis entrenched in a postcolonial Caribbean perspective *can* and *does* speak to themes relevant to the study of global Islam as a whole.

On balance, Khan’s work advocates—both explicitly and implicitly—that the study of Islam and Muslims in Latin America and the Caribbean should no longer be viewed as peripheral to a perceived Middle Eastern and North African core. While on the rise, studies of Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America and the Caribbean remain secondary (or tertiary) to scholarship on Muslim communities elsewhere. Furthermore, the anthropological, cultural, and sociological study of Latin America and the Caribbean continues to regard Islam and Muslims as “outside of” or “foreign to” the Americas rather than appreciating, and integrating, the study of Islam and Muslims as intrinsic to the region’s heritage and experience. At best, scholars and various publics may make Islam and Muslims the subject of one-off articles, journalistic pieces, or blogs. However, this trivial and limited treatment assumes, and undergirds the pervasive idea, that Muslims are foreign to the region and not thoroughly American. As Khan shows, this could not be further from the truth—their history and presence here is long, robust, and significant. Yet, because of this continued marginalization of both subject and people, there are relatively few studies that have fully investigated the linkages between Latin America, the Caribbean, and the broader world of global Islam. Khan’s book is a welcome departure from this pattern; in that, it makes evident how global Islam’s story—past and present—is woven into the very fabric of the Anglophone Caribbean. And vice versa.

Conclusion and Areas for Further Consideration

With that said, as an ethnographer of religion, I often found myself wanting to hear more from the situation of Muslims in the Anglophone Caribbean and their day-to-day experience. To my pleasure, and to the general reader’s benefit, Khan intersperses her specialist’s analysis of literature with reflections from fieldwork and personal experience among Indo-Caribbean Muslims and interviews with the likes of Imam Yasin Abu

Bakr of the Jamaat al-Muslimeen. These interludes of direct experience help ground the sometimes lofty, theoretical analysis that is this book's hallmark. This is especially helpful in Chapter Three when Khan is discussing a "Stick" (as in, from a tree) with Muslim heritage that speaks to the postcolonial experience. Khan's stories of real-life Muslims in the Anglophone Caribbean and the forefronting of their own narratives through interviews bring such abstract discourses back down-to-earth. These real-life stories are their most powerful when they come from Khan's own biography, such as when she discusses taking on a Sufi master in order to better understand West African enslaved Muslims' texts or describes her family's direct experiences of the 1983 Ahmadiyya gathering bombing in Trinidad and 1985 assassination of an Ahmadiyya Muslim missionary in Freeport, Trinidad. Khan's reflexivity in this regard, although measured, puts flesh-and-blood on the themes she otherwise addresses through poetry, fiction, and music.

In her conclusion, Khan suggests that the New World context of Caribbean Islam, with its geographic and historical distance from Mecca, Islamabad, Istanbul, Tehran, Jakarta, Jerusalem, and other representative sites and cities of Islam, offers a unique window into Muslim migration to majority non-Muslim countries in colonial and postcolonial modernity, refuting the ahistorical supposition that Muslim migration and displacement are new to the world in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (276).

Although I agree, I would go even further, and avoid terminology such as "Caribbean Islam," to say that Khan's work demonstrates how this "New World context" is not as geographically or historically distant from "other representative sites and cities" within the network of global Islam as we often make it out to be. With both robust migrant and convert communities and the histories of Muslims dating back just as long as those of Europeans in the Americas, I suggest that works like Khan's elucidate how the Americas is a representative site of global Islam as well. I would also say that Muslim communities' engagement with non-Muslim sodalities has been, and will continue to be, constitutive of Islamic civilizations across time and space. Thus, to truly appreciate what we are studying when it comes to global Islam, the Caribbean, or the Americas, we should be doing more to study Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America and the Caribbean, past and present.

Khan's book demonstrates how scholars can both appreciate the particularities of the global Muslim experience and the nuanced history of religion in the Caribbean and the Americas. To that end, Khan suggests further regional inquiry, goading other scholars to look deeper into the story of Islam and Muslim communities in places such as Suriname or to do comparative studies between the Anglophone, Hispanophone, and Francophone Caribbeans. As someone who focuses on one locale within the Hispanophone Caribbean (Puerto Rico and its diaspora), I fully appreciate her suggestion and look forward to such comparisons. Until such opportunity arises, Khan's *Far From Mecca* is a gladly received correction to tired narratives about *both* global Islam *and* the Caribbean. My only hope is that it will provoke more conversations and research in this regard. Given Khan's erudite treatment of the subject, I have no reason to doubt that it will.

Acknowledgements Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

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