

**The Making of Islamic Heritage:
Muslim Pasts and Heritage Presents**

Trinidad Rico, ed.

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The Making of Islamic Heritage is the outcome of a research workshop and a conference at UCL Qatar and Texas A&M University at Qatar respectively—the former focusing on the “past” and the latter on the “present” of Islamic heritage. Professor Trinidad Rico, the editor of the collection, organized these academic events in 2014 and 2016. Her introductory chapter is

an overall methodological assessment of the essays in the book, which examine various conceptual, disciplinary, and regional points of interaction between Islam and Heritage Studies. Rico elaborates on how the essays call for a suspension of the orthodoxies of both Islam and Heritage Studies in order to dwell on a history of the contemporary, displacing linear progressivist constructions of past and present. The text is a refusal of definitional works, namely a text against “addressing heritage from a teleological position” (2). Rico explains: “[The essays] neither prescribe how to maintain or define a relationship between religious, sacred, and secular values in the work of tangible and intangible heritage in Muslims contexts, nor do they aim to promote or endorse any specific iteration of Islamic heritage” (2). This refusal is necessary for a critical reading of not just what is understood as constitutive for the Islamic, but also the coordinates that determine the scope of legacies, archives, and genealogies, that is, heritage. Rico’s framing, however, runs the risk of obfuscating both the historical contingency of the secular, and the ontological grounding of Islam. First, when she guards against prescriptive perspectives on the relationality between “religious, sacred, and secular values” she treats the religious (in this case: Islam) and the secular as if they exist in an equalizing, horizontal entanglement and does not mention the force of the secular. This is most evident when she describes the secular as a “value.” Second, to not endorse “any specific iteration of Islamic heritage” appears to have an archaeological and genealogical attitude—in the Nietzschean and/or Foucauldian sense—in which the historian separates the mobilization of truths from the authenticity of truth-claims themselves. One wonders if such a relativist perspective gives up on the very possibility of theory itself. If in fact there is no way to demonstrate the plausibility, verifiability, and reliability of some histories over others, then are we not closing the very parameters and materiality of history itself? The conditions of possibility that open up a world we name Islam—regardless of internal contestations, disputations, regulations, tensions, difference, and sectarianisms—are nullified by an essentialism of the present. In other words, all presencing of Islam—regardless of their distance from the originary naming of the category by the Prophet himself—become equally present.

Shahzad Bashir’s “The Intertwining of History and Heritage in Islamic Contexts” (Chapter 2) argues against transhistorical continuity, and instead promotes an attentive gesture towards “historical contingencies of events occurring in many regions between the sixth-century CE and the present” (15) to properly understand how authors in different eras are engaged in

“creating” Islam (16). Bashir emphasizes the “distinctive instantiations” of various articulations of Islamic heritage, calling into question chronological accounts of Islamic legacy. While Bashir is suspicious and even dismissive of “Islam’s transhistorical presence,” he reminds us to be careful and not reify contingencies and particularities. The warning against reification is of utmost significance, but because it is not elaborated systematically, it is unclear if it is used as a disclaimer to fend off criticisms of a relativist approach. Bashir’s example of heritage—the Friday mosque of Isfahan—indicates an interest in differentiating appearances of history from history itself. Importantly, Bashir separates a history of hermeneutic depth from surface readings when he states, “The meaning we can make of the mosque changes if the observer is able to ‘read’ its various features more deeply than what meets the eye upon a tourist excursion” (19). For him deeper observations of heritage are the ones that pay attention to “a vast diversity of contents” and a history of “sedimentation of ideas over the course of time” (19). Bashir employs a dynamic historiographical approach for both synchronic and diachronic axes promoting a “variety of ways of being and acting as Muslim” and “diversity of meanings,” though it is unclear how diverse instantiations of Islam—whether over a long stretch of time or in a small moment in time—cohere as concepts or categories worthwhile to be given the name of Islam. Bashir agrees that “heritage is an evaluative concept and is based on assessment of worth,” but he does not inform us of the apparatuses of assessment, or how institutions of jurisdiction are materially organized and produced within a tradition.

In Chapter 3, R. Michael Freener calls into question the idea of a normative singularity when it comes to analyzing pre-Islamic cultural and civilizational legacies within the Islamic tradition(s). Freener describes a wide variety of artifacts—from wooden mosques in Kerala, to swords and weapons found in Tamil Nadu, “porcelain plates decorated with Arabic script” (27), stone *lingas*, *yoni*, and wooden sculptures in East Java—to emphasize Shahab Ahmed’s “explorative” perspective on meaning-making and to demonstrate complex genealogies of pre-Islamic influences. While describing the legacy of Hindu and Buddhist heritage upon Islam in Java, Freener critiques the notion that the “perseverance of such traditions” (e.g., music, dance, literature, etc.) compromised Islamic “orthodoxy.” He is also quick to target “Salafi scripturalism,” “Sayyid Qutb’s clarion call for the rejection of jahiliyya,” and “Saudi sponsorship of scripturalist reform projects around the world” as mechanisms that regulate, tame, discipline the hermeneutic and positivist vision in Shahab Ahmed. This is an important intervention

by Freener, but while attempting to play-up Shahab Ahmed—much like Ahmed’s own approach—it reduces, simplifies, and negates the complex traditions of Salafism, the ideas of Sayyid Qutb and Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, and other intellectual trajectories. Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab is not even acknowledged as a theologian (he simply becomes the retroactive product of “Saudi sponsorship”). Theoretically speaking, Freener fails to address the scope of orthodoxy itself and presents it as self-evidently reductive. He assumes it to be the opposite of Ahmed’s “explorative” approach. Why, however, is the “explorative” represented as obviously more complex than the restrictive measures of orthodoxy? How might encounters between orthodox and heterodox traditions actually be generative? How are performative acts like music, dance, and literature evaluated through specific consensus mechanisms in the discursive traditions of the orthodoxy itself? Most importantly: what are the anticipatory powers within orthodox traditions that allow for the historical and philosophical assimilation of pre-Islamic heritage? Freener’s account is a good starting point to begin to think about these questions, but only if the reader is careful to not succumb to its anti-orthodox polemics and assumptions.

Chapter 4, by Ali Mozaffari and Nigel Westbrook, displaces essentialist accounts of “a unitary and immutable cultural identity” by examining “concepts of remembering, tradition, heritage, and their instabilities” (50). The authors critically examine what is often represented as “Islamic heritage in architecture” by illuminating the relation between “habitat discourse” and “cultural memory” (51). They argue, however, that the necessity of creating an Islamic habitat is directly linked to the condition of Muslim identity in modernity, in the aftermath of colonialism within a “globalized economy” (51). Mozaffari and Westbrook, however, suggest that this identity crisis has “an ethnoreligious, nationalist tendency” (51). It is curious that the authors read concerns of disfigurement of Muslim subjectivity as it relates to the antagonism of Islam and Western secularism—which continue after the formal end of colonialism—through the notion of an erosion of “ethnoreligious” identity under contingent colonial and economic pressures. Perhaps reading de-subjection of Muslim via ethno-religious identity crisis is itself the outcome of embeddedness within the modernist paradigm of the state. Beyond such specific theoretical concerns related to the de-grounding of Islam in modernity—concerns that remain unexplored by the authors—Mozaffari and Westbrook demonstrate the inadequacy of binaries (e.g., tradition vs. modern) and continuities (of tradition). Through the spatial analysis of a model community—New Shushtar—the authors

demonstrate effectively how “modern techniques” are employed for the production of ideal habitats of tradition. In this sense, the secular modern and traditions of religion are mutually imbricated.

Chapter 5, by Ömer Can Aksoy, is in many ways also a calling into question of traditional continuity, except here the author examines the notion of *fiṭra* in Salafi scholarship as a way to suggest that “it is atypical to frame any period of the past as Islamic within the context of the Muslim world, since Islam regards itself as the primordial faith” (68). Aksoy exposes the secular basis of disciplines such as Islamic archaeology and Islamic architecture, and states: “Questions about the origin and scope of Islam have largely been avoided in these disciplinary frameworks” (68). The author then goes on to explain the discursive complexity within Islamic traditions on the concept of *fiṭra* and suggests that this concept played a crucial role in Saudi Arabian historiography. In describing *fiṭra*, the author draws from key figures like Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, and Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr to show not only the diversity of intellectual attitudes, but the epistemic grounds in Islam for a primordial timeline. The author uses two case studies—three museums (Tayma, al-Ula, and the National Museum) and the Hejaz Railway—to demonstrate the continuously shifting nature of Islamic heritage, and the limits of categories that are named “Islamic.” The author warns against “vulgarization and fetishization of the ‘Islamic’ adjective” (83), as he emphasizes Islam as primordial faith, but philosophically it remains unclear how he keeps the name of Islam—outside of its particularity—to denote the originary. There is of course, the problem of language in which the utterance of Islam (or, categories within it like *fiṭra*) signifies the concrete, or worse, the empirical, and “primordial faith” points us towards the beginning of all beginnings, the abstract, the ground. But perhaps, behind the pleasures of secular language, there is an entrapment in unexplored desires of the modern, an interest in immersing oneself in an universal human experience in which Islam is represented as an obstacle.

In Chapter 6, Gaetano Palumbo analyzes conservation practices at a bathhouse in Jordan, and examines the notion of authenticity as it relates to heritage. Much like earlier chapters, this is an exercise in the displacement of conventions of continuity, authenticity, representation, and heritage. There is analytical rigor in this chapter: art historical observations on mural paintings, architectural examination of sites and locations, sociological narratives on populations and their perspectives on claims to heritage, and structural conversations on the four Arabic inscriptions in Qusayr ‘Amra. However, the author fails to show us how simply citing

multiple representations and perspectives on specific artifacts that claim to be “Islamic” reveal the incoherence of Islamic heritage. Identifying contradictions, contestations, ruptures, and discontinuities with regards to claims to Islamic heritage do not necessarily negate the coherence in the name Islam. Palumbo also makes an elitist claim when he suggests that “[a] disjuncture between the public and the intellectual elite is also at play here, as the latter has not been able to inform and interest the public in the depth and complexity of Islamic heritage beyond simplistic and reductive understandings” (103).

The final chapter, “The Buddha Remains: Heritage Transactions in Taxila, Pakistan,” by Hassan Asif and Rico, is an ethnographic study of tolerance and the preservation of Buddhist artifacts in Muslim-majority Taxila, Pakistan. Pakistan as a site is politically significant in this piece. The authors do not fail to mention the Taliban’s history of bombing Buddhist sites in Pakistan. They state: “A relevant reflection in this discussion is the fate of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001, destroyed by the Afghan Taliban in accordance with ultraconservative Salafist precepts” (112). In this chapter, 2001 is presented as if just another year, when it was in fact one of the most devastating years for the Islamic movement in Afghanistan. One is left with little understanding of the social, political, economic, and cultural factors shaping the Taliban’s response to Buddhist artifacts. Despite this, the chapter skillfully articulates the significance of “ambiguity” and how it can help to “evade socioreligious censure in a context where other representational art... is rarely tolerated” (119).

In conclusion, it is important to note that all seven chapters in this text appear to be inspired by a critique of grand narratives in Islamic heritage. The chapters use multiple case studies and a variety of historical and material artifacts to critique representation, claims of authenticity, continuity within tradition, and the reductive structures of orthodoxy in Islam. What would bolster this analysis, however, is a critique of the metanarrative of secularity and its onto-epistemic, libidinal, psychic, and material foundations. Because the calling into question of the basis of secularity requires the identification of Islam as the fundamental *problematic* for the modern, such a critique would reveal the specific concrete antagonism of history that materially grounds the grand narratives the authors already displace. In this sense, *The Making of Islamic Heritage* is ontologically suspect and ethically indecisive. It fails to adequately explain the necessity of heritage in the Islamic world in the first place—in the paradigmatic sense—before displacing them in their various contingent appearances. Without such an

explanatory rubric, the collection runs the risk of being convivial with secular power.

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