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# MUSLIM COMMUNITIES AND CULTURES OF THE HIMALAYAS

CONCEPTUALIZING THE GLOBAL UMMAH

Edited by  
Jacqueline H. Fewkes and  
Megan Adamson Sijapati

ROUTLEDGE



# Muslim Communities and Cultures of the Himalayas

This book chronicles individual perspectives and specific iterations of Muslim community, practice, and experience in the Himalayan region to bring into scholarly conversation the presence of varying Muslim cultures in the Himalaya.

The Himalaya provide a site of both geographic and cultural crossroads, where Muslim community is simultaneously constituted at multiple social levels, and to that end the essays in this book document a wide range of local, national, and global interests while maintaining a focus on individual perspectives, moments in time, and localized experiences. It presents research that contributes to a broadly conceived notion of the Himalaya that enriches readers' understandings of both the region and concepts of Muslim community and highlights the interconnections between multiple experiences of Muslim community at local levels.

Drawing attention to the cultural, social, artistic, and political diversity of the Himalaya beyond the better understood and frequently documented religio-cultural expressions of the region, this book will be of interest to academics in the fields of Anthropology, Geography, History, Religious Studies, Asian Studies, and Islamic Studies.

**Jacqueline H. Fewkes** is Professor of Anthropology at the Harriet L. Wilkes Honors College of Florida Atlantic University, USA. She is also the author of *Trade and Contemporary Society Along the Silk Road* (Routledge, 2008) and *Locating Maldivian Women's Mosques in Global Discourses* (2019).

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# Foreword

Islam's geography typically brings to mind vast spans of desert, the alluvial plains of Egypt, Iraq, and northern India, the holy cities Mecca and Medina, and imperial capitals such as Cordoba, Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, Istanbul, Isfahan, and Delhi. At various turns in its history it has also encompassed the large bodies of water of the Mediterranean, the Black and Caspian Seas, and stretches of the Indian Ocean. *Muslim Communities and Cultures of the Himalaya* shifts this geography to a frontier region that is largely neglected in scholarship on Islam and Muslims. The Himalaya were conventionally viewed as a barrier to Islam's routes and realms (*al-masalik wa'l-mamalik*), the contributions to this volume focus on the ways the Himalaya are a region of both refuge and interaction in Islam and for Muslims. Extending 1,500 miles from east to west, they form a seam that has marked both the conjunction and separation of the peoples of East, West, South, and Central Asia through history. Its complex religious, ethnic, linguistic, and ecological landscape is reminiscent of other mountain frontiers where Muslims encountered others: the Balkans, the Sarawat Mountains of Yemen, the Caucasus, and the Taurus to Zagros mountain arc.

The Himalayan region's heterogeneities point to another question explored by the authors of this volume: to what extent do Himalayan Muslim communities participate in an overarching global *umma*? How are they linked by their histories, institutions, and practices to other Muslims? This volume invites us to join in tracing the interplay of the local and the translocal, a dynamic characteristic of Islam's other mountain frontiers. It provides a major contribution to scholarship on the region in this regard.

Juan E. Campo

# Preface<sup>1</sup>

We began discussing the concept of this volume at the 2014 Annual Conference of the Association of Nepal and Himalayan Studies (ANHS) at Yale University. Jacqueline H. Fewkes had organized a panel on the “Himalayan Ummah” for the conference, and brought together five scholars working on Islam and Muslim cultures in the region. The regional coverage was broad, the topics wide-ranging as well: Rohit Singh presented research on contemporary Shia lamentation rituals, Jonah Steinberg on historical British Afghan frontier narratives, Megan Adamson Sijapati on approaches to the study of Islam in Nepal, and Fewkes on female scholars of Islam in Ladakh. The eminent University of Pennsylvania anthropologist Brian Spooner served as discussant for the papers. Although the conference was bustling with excitement about the ANHS finally having its own conference, and many panels drew full audiences, our panel was (to our surprise) not well attended. Those of us on the panel were energized to hear one another’s work and to bring our studies into conversation with each other, as it is rare to find another scholar researching Islam and Muslims in this part of the world (or at least it felt so at the time). Yet despite the panel being generative and compelling for us, our session seemed almost a satellite conversation to the conference, where the overwhelming subjects were related to Himalayan Buddhism, Hindu and/or Bon cultures. This reflected the terrain of the field – as we will discuss in further detail in the introduction of this book – and revealed an imbalance, sounding for us a call for a more inclusive framing of what is conceived of as Himalayan.

During this conference – and other academic events – there have been moments when we have been prompted to consider that the absence of Muslim perspectives in academic discussions of the region is sometimes not a value-neutral omission or form of benign neglect. Outside the quiet room of our small panel on the Himalayan Ummah, in the social area of the conference, we overheard negative comments about Muslims in the region and assertions that the Himalaya is a region not only “of” but “for” Buddhists and Buddhism, not Muslims and Islam. While these troubling and disputable claims may have been partially grounded in a lack of familiarity with the diverse and long-standing Muslim communities that live the region of the Himalaya, no claims about people being “good” or “not belonging” are ever as simple as that. In this case, we recognize that such claims emerge from longer and complex discourses rooted in colonial narratives and

played out in geocultural politics that have long promoted a view of Muslims as outsiders to these regions, despite long and rich histories of Muslims throughout the area.

As much as we intend this book to be a contribution to expand Himalayan studies, this book is meant also to be a much-needed contribution to Islamic Studies. Studies of the so-called Muslim world that are Arab-centric can promote a stereotype of Muslim beliefs and practice that occludes the diversity of the *ummah*, the global Muslim community. This can create misunderstandings about what it means to be Muslim, frequently conflating Middle Eastern cultural norms with Islamic beliefs and practices, and is used as a sociopolitical tool to “other” Muslims in communities around the world.

The problematic nature of these narratives in academic discourses – that Muslims are outsiders to the Himalaya, and that the Himalaya are a peripheral site of Muslim cultures and traditions – is worth expanding upon. Fostering an inclusive approach to regional studies and the study of religions we are prompted to ask a series of critical theoretical questions, all of which are addressed in the essays of this book, either implicitly or explicitly. Who *does* belong where? What does it mean when a space or community is conceived as ‘essentially’ or authentically of one culture, religion, or ethnicity (and these are more often than not intertwined in complex ways), and not of another? What can we learn about a religion or region by reframing it through a lens not typically used? And in the world of academic research, how can we document the lived cultures of a place in a manner that rejects the assertion that some people are more representative of a concept (community or place), and hence more deserving of study, while others are not? No book can cover all lived experiences of a people – even when focusing on one segment of that community, i.e. “Himalayan Muslims,” the range and diversity is dizzying – but it can attempt to provide a view into a diverse, multivocal community to provide a fuller picture of both the Himalayan region and Muslim experience.

As we finish this manuscript in May 2020 the world sits in the grip of a global pandemic; so many people are intensely focused on how what happens globally affects our local towns, immediate neighborhoods, and homes. The chapters in this book speak directly to this concern: they suggest that an understanding of the interconnectedness of the world – that the global is intensely personal and vice versa – is integral to breaking through stereotypes that divide and weaken us. In providing a challenge to canonical, and bounded, imaginings of both the Himalayan region and global Muslim *ummah*, we hope to suggest a far more varied, richly nuanced, inclusive, and expansive understanding of the socioreligious landscapes in which we all reside.

## Note

- 1 This book is the product of several of years of collaboration between the editors, Jacqueline H. Fewkes and Megan Adamson Sijapati, who contributed equally to the development and production of this volume. We have therefore presented our names throughout the volume in alphabetical order to reflect our shared editorial labor.

# Acknowledgments

Every book comes to fruition through the hard work of many people associated with the project, and we would like to jointly thank all of the people who have helped to make this one a reality. We appreciate the support of the organization and members of the Association of Nepal and Himalayan Studies (ANHS), whose annual conference at Yale University in 2014 provided the setting for a panel on Muslims in the Himalaya, the starting point of this volume, and later the first forum for publication of early versions of some of this work in the ANHS publication, the *Himalaya* journal. The contributors to that early panel – both those who have contributed to this book and those that were unable to do so – deserve a special mention for starting this important conversation. We would also like to extend a special thanks to the people at Routledge for contributing to the successful production of this book, particularly for the enthusiastic support and skilled assistance of our editor Dorothea Schaefer and editorial assistant Alexandra de Brauw. Thanks are also due to the chapter contributors for trusting us with shepherding their essays into the final form of this book.

We would both like thank our colleagues and friends around the world for the joy of continued conversations and collaborations. Thanks to those at home is always due, but uniquely significant in this work; the last versions of this manuscript were finalized during the global pandemic of 2020, and working at home while schools were closed and/or online was a difficult challenge. Jacqueline appreciated the patience and loving support of her family, particularly in the form of homeschooling assistance from her parents (Robert and Mary Anne Fewkes) and Miranda Farrow. Megan would like to express gratitude to her family, particularly her parents, who have always believed in her and celebrated her accomplishments with love.



# Language Abbreviations

<b>A.</b>	Arabic
<b>D.</b>	Dhivehi
<b>K.</b>	Kashmiri
<b>L.</b>	Ladakhi
<b>M.</b>	Malay
<b>MN.</b>	Mandarin
<b>N.</b>	Nepali
<b>P.</b>	Persian
<b>PH.</b>	Pahari
<b>PO.</b>	Pashto
<b>TG.</b>	Tagalog
<b>T.</b>	Tibetan
<b>U.</b>	Urdu
<b>UZ.</b>	Uzbek

# 1 Diversity, Continuity, and Disjuncture

## Approaching Multivocal Perspectives on Being Muslim in the Himalaya

*Jacqueline H. Fewkes and Megan Adamson Sijapati*

This book chronicles individual perspectives and specific iterations of Muslim community/practice/experience in the Himalayan region to bring into scholarly conversation the presence of varying Muslim cultures in the Himalaya, and encourage consideration of the voices that can contribute to a broadly conceived notion of the “Himalayas” that enriches our understanding of both the region and concepts of Muslim community. We present here a variety of types of chapters – including shorter, nontraditional perspective pieces – that highlight the interconnections between multiple experiences of Muslim community at local levels, and bring attention to the cultural, social, artistic, and political diversity of the Himalaya beyond the better understood and frequently documented religio-cultural expressions of the region. The regional focus on the Himalaya provides us with a site of both geographic and cultural crossroads where Muslim community is simultaneously constituted at multiple social levels, and to that end the essays in this book document a wide range of local, national, and global interests while maintaining a focus on individual perspectives, moments in time, and localized experiences.

A focus on local experiences is critical for an understanding of Muslim cultures of the Himalaya, and – we believe – to understanding what it means to discuss Muslim experiences and/or perspectives in general. While concepts of the global, such as a worldwide Islamic ummah, are compelling social forces to consider, the global is necessarily personally experienced in local ways,<sup>1</sup> as varying notions of community in global and regional contexts alternatively inform, constitute, and/or deconstruct each other in relation to individuals’ experiences and conceptualizations. Examining segments of this discursive process – a dialogical development between multiple perspectives and varied contexts of community – is valuable to understanding more abstract concepts of Muslim community. It is also crucial for challenging limited conceptualizations of the Himalayan region that, as we will discuss in more detail later, leave out the experiences of many who live in the area. Thus, the pieces in this book are oriented towards individuals’ voices and local narratives about Muslim experiences, identities, and histories, to highlight how those perspectives alternatively overlap, contrast, or intersect with – and/or challenge – each other. Our interest is not in crafting a narrative of a monolithic version of the “Muslim Himalaya,” or in using the experiences

of select communities to define the region as a whole, but rather in exploring the multiple perspectives that comprise Muslim experience and community in the Himalayan region, while expanding notions of what it means to speak about the Himalaya more broadly.

## Points of Origin

Following our discussions at the 2014 Annual Conference of the Association of Nepal and Himalayan Studies (ANHS), as mentioned in the preface, we initially set out to put together a book that would address a lacuna in the fields of Islamic and Muslim studies: that is, Islam and Muslim cultures in the region of the Himalaya. While coming from different disciplinary backgrounds, as scholars of Anthropology and Religious Studies, we both recognized, and lamented, that studies of Islam and Muslims at the sites in which we both conducted our first full-length research projects – that is, Ladakh and Nepal, respectively – were few and fairly segmented in their approaches. In neither place does one find a substantial amount of academic literature to draw a comprehensive picture of the histories and cultures of Muslims of these regions, or of the broader region of the Himalaya. While few, studies that come to mind that approach Muslim cultures and traditions in the region include monographs such as Atwill's *Islamic Shangri-la: Inter-Asian Relations and Lhasa's Muslim Communities, 1600–1960* (2018), Akasoy, Burnett, and Yoeli-Tlalim's edited volume *Islam and Tibet: Interactions Along the Musk Routes* (2010), Marsden's *Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier* (2005), Fewkes's *Trade and Contemporary Society along the Silk Road: An Ethno-History of Ladakh*, Sijapati's *Islamic Revival in Nepal: Religion and a New Nation* (2011), and Foltz's *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* (1999).

Thinking critically about the ways in which Himalayan humanities and social science studies are frequently focused on Buddhism and Buddhist cultures, and recognizing that this stems only partially from the demographics of the region, we hoped to address some of the holes in this literature in way that could help readers to think critically about the traditional academic framing of the regional study of the Himalaya that has foregrounded Tibetan Buddhist peoples and cultures. Amidst the academic literature documenting Buddhist cultures of the Himalaya, the experiences of large and diverse communities of Muslims in the region remain remarkably under researched and under-documented. Yet Muslims have a long history in the region, dating back as early as the tenth century CE (fourth century AH).

Misperceptions about the presence of Muslims in the Himalaya in academic conversations are therefore not simply regrettable, they mirror the dangerous underlying discourses of one side of battles and pogroms across the region and reveal their pervasiveness. For example, such exclusive concepts of belonging fuel heated and protracted identity politics surrounding place and belonging in Ladakh, and lend support to the militarized politics of place and citizenship in