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Interview

In conversation with Zuflikar Hirji

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In conversation with Professor Zulfikar Hirji

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This piece is a transcription of our conversation with Professor Zulfikar Hirji regarding his edited volume *Approaches to the Qur'an in sub-Saharan Africa*, published by Oxford University Press in 2019. Dr. Hirji is appointed as an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Anthropology at York University in Toronto, Canada. As an anthropologist and social historian, his research focuses on Muslim societies, art, and material culture from historical to contemporary periods. He teaches at both undergraduate and graduate levels, and some examples of his courses are "Anthropology, Islam and Muslim Societies," "Core Concepts in Anthropology," and "Anthropology, Art, Aesthetics and Material Culture."

In *Approaches to the Qur'an in sub-Saharan Africa*, Professor Hirji has compiled and edited a multidisciplinary volume that explores how Muslims engage with the Qur'an in sub-Saharan Africa. The choice to focus on sub-Saharan Africa is two-fold, first to emphasize the rich social context that has not received the scholarly recognition it deserves; and second, to open conversations about how different spaces and localities influence how people engage with Islam and the complex social happenings of being Muslim. Each chapter contributes to these goals by reflecting on ways that Muslims engage with Islam and the Qur'an, using different case studies to examine how the Qur'an is "understood, felt and imagined" (Hirji 2019).

Our goal for publishing this transcript is to introduce both the book and Professor Hirji's research, as well as to explore some of the more unfamiliar ways Muslims practice Islam. Thus, we encourage readers to consider some of the reasons why certain forms of Islamic practice have been considered less often than others and how scholars have contributed to this underdetermination. Throughout the conversation, we explore themes of colonialism and Eurocentrism in academia and Islamic Studies and introduce how Professor Hirji's work is challenging these normalized ways of thinking about Islam, Muslims, and practice in Islam.

Interview Transcript

ELLIE NEILSEN Why it's important to reflect upon the different interpretations and translations of the Qur'an?

DR. ZULFIKAR HIRJI Engaging with the Qur'an is an act of the highest piety for Muslims. From the perspective of Muslims, the Qur'an is the Word of God—it is God's Revelation, the final message to humankind – revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632)¹ over a period of some twenty-three years. Historically, we know that the Prophet conveyed the Revelation to people around him. The Prophet is regarded by Muslims as the first interpreter of the Revelation, someone who could explain God's message and provide guidance to the community of believers. Subsequent to the Prophet's death, the Revelation, which may also have been written down during the Prophet's lifetime, was formally compiled into an official codex under the direction of the third Muslim caliph, Uthman ibn Affan (d. 656).² In some ways, this act of compilation may be regarded as an act of interpretation. For example, it appears to have been a choice to compile the Revelation from its longest to the shortest verses rather than in the order in which it was revealed. And this choice then informs the manner in which one now reads the Qur'an and interpret its meanings. It should also be recalled that the Qur'an is complex. It contains didactic stories of the past, guidance, and instruction on many aspects of human life on topics such laws, ethics, knowledge, and spiritual responsibilities, and its language is both direct and oblique, often containing allusions and metaphors. These aspects of its character seem to call upon readers to consider its many meanings.

As anthropologists, we can observe that since the seventh century, multiple interpretations of the Qur'an have emerged. Today there are many so-called 'communities of interpretation' that surround and engage with the Qur'an, and the interactions between Qur'anic texts and diverse communities are an interesting thing to explore. Moreover, as in the past, a central challenge for many Muslims today is to determine the 'true' or the 'best' understanding of the Qur'an. This question is also important to anthropologists because it involves questions of authority and are related to questions of power. Throughout Islamic history there have been many authorities who are regarded as superior interpreters of the Qur'an and we can ask many questions about their backgrounds, social status, role, networks, etc. By extension, in the context of political formations like empires or nation-states, where the Qur'an serves as a foundational point of reference or informs governance and laws, we can ask who in the state has the authority to interpret the Qur'an and how do these interpreters serve the interests of the state? Of course, Islam is not alone in this regard, this has also been true of Christianity. For example, under the Roman emperor Constantine the Great (d. 337) Christianity became part of the Roman state, which was previously pagan, and this marriage between state and religion had all sorts of repercussions for understanding Christianity. Similarly, when Islam and Muslims made the Qur'an a part of the state's legal apparatus, it has all sorts of interesting repercussions that are worthy of scholarly research. Today, the internet is providing a new platform for many more interpreters of the Qur'an to communicate their understandings to a world-wide audience, beyond the state and its particular communities. The internet has not only transformed the role and place of traditional interpreters, but possibly what authority means. In the digital age, authority seems increasingly to come from the number of online followers, which is again a new configuration that is worthy of anthropological research and exploration.

BRIAN LOFASO What does it mean to study the Qur'an through an anthropological lens?

ZN As anthropologists, we are interested in groups, people, individuals, and what they think about the world, how they express themselves, impact the world, as well as how people's lives are shaped by the various socio-cultural forces around them. The Qur'an is effectively the foundational scripture for at least a quarter to a third of the world's population. This means millions of people have a relationship with the Qur'an and think about what it says about various aspects of human life. Studying Islam and Muslim societies invites us to consider questions such as: how do Muslims think about this scripture and what do they say about it? How do they engage with the Qur'an? How does it become part of their everyday life, vocabulary, culture, and religious expression? But there are also many other questions related to how various socio-cultural forces and issues in the contemporary world are shaping Muslim worldviews and how this impacts understandings and interpretations of the Qur'an, for example, climate change, science, gender, race, diversity, equity, Islamophobia, and political Islam, which are all issues that Muslims are grappling with.

An interesting thing for anthropologists is that for many people around the world, historically the Qur'an has been orally communicated and it continues to be. It has not been something people have always just read; from childhood, many Muslims are taught to memorize the text to engage with it over their lifetime. This sort of sonorous nature of the Qur'an is very exciting to me because, up until very recently, most people who have studied the Qur'an— including most academics and anthropologists— have focused on the Qur'an as text as something that is written down. Although the text is an integral part of the Qur'an, the vast majority of Muslims' first experience with the Qur'an is something that is heard and recited aloud as part of daily prayer and during other ritual and religious activities. For example, amongst some Muslims when a child is born, verses of the Qur'an are often whispered into their ears. Or when a couple is married, they read the opening verse of the Qur'an. Another example is when people start a task, they might recite a verse of the Qur'an. Such oral modalities and sonorous aspects are critical to Muslim expression and are being increasingly studied by anthropologists. This type of research connects up with an increasing interest in anthropology about the multiple ways humans experience and understand the world through the use of their diverse range of senses, material objects, and the physical world around them.

EN Can you elaborate as to why there is a gap in the literature with regards to the forms and expressions of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa and how *Approaches* to the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa is addressing this gap with the twelve case studies?

ZH I think that *Approaches* was attempting to fill a gap in several ways. The first way was to think about the multiple ways in which Muslims engage with the Qur'an. The Qur'an can be engaged with textually, socially, politically, sensorially, and through the lens of gender. For example, in *Approaches* there is a case study that discusses how the Qur'an is printed on a cloak and is used as a talismanic protective device. In addition, there is a case study about a preacher using multiple languages and modes to explain verses of the Qur'an to a live audience. The aim of *Approaches* is not to think of Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa, or their approaches to the Qur'an, as somehow anomalous, but to show that Muslims in

this geographical region share many of the same traditions as Muslims in other parts of the world.

However, the issue we did need to address was that Islam and Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa have received a limited amount of research when compared with other parts of the world. This is very odd, because historically and today, there are a multitude of Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa. Unfortunately, what has happened in the academic study of Islam and Muslim societies, in a range of disciplines including anthropology, is that there has been an inordinate focus on Islam and Muslims in the Middle East. Of course, the Middle East, and the Arabian Peninsula in particular, is where Islam was revealed, but in numerical terms, the vast majority of Muslims do not live in the Middle East. They live in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. However, the focus on the Middle East is partly due to scholarly concerns about origins and authenticity, which are ideas that were underwritten in the advent of European colonialism, a time when many Western academic disciplines were born. European colonialism also categorized people through statements such as, “these people did not have literacy; these people were primitive; these people cannot be true Muslims.” It cannot escape us that these sentiments have racial undertones. The limited focus on Islam and Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa is likely the result of this thinking. Muslims in these regions were seen to be practicing derivative or unauthentic versions of Islam or versions that were imported from elsewhere. While such ideas can be attributed to European colonialism, it is also true that some Muslims have adopted comparable perspectives; for them the most authentic Islam is to be found in Arabia. Such views contribute, in part, to attitudes circulating in contemporary landscapes of Muslim life wherein there are ongoing tensions between valuing the diversity of Muslim expression and understanding, and a desire for a singular, uniform, homogeneous Islam.

Hence, *Approaches* is trying to show that, on the one hand, that Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa are no different than Muslims elsewhere, but on the other, it is also trying to show the ways in which Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa—as elsewhere, including Arabia—developed their understandings of Islam in particular cultural and historical contexts. *Approaches* aims to re-center the sub-Saharan African Muslim experience and speak about sub-Saharan Africa in a way that is respectful of the communities that for centuries have engaged with the Qur’an in diverse ways. As far as I’m aware, *Approaches* is the first edited volume that looks at the Qur’an in sub-Saharan Africa. And when you think about it, this is quite remarkable because we know from Muslim history that the first location that Muslims went to outside the Arabian Peninsula during the time of the Prophet was the Horn of Africa. Hence, I think *Approaches* breaks new scholarly ground and opens conversations about the Qur’an, Islam, and Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa, and the ways that these places and peoples are framed and marginalized in academia, as well as why this has been the case.

EN In the introduction of *Approaches*, you write the aims of the book are: “to open up new discourses about Islam and Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa and their engagement with the Qur’an, as well as to open up new discourses about the Qur’an itself through an examination of how Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa engage with it.” (Hirji 2019, 11). Could you

elaborate on the two aims for *Approaches* and explain how this has to do with the notion that there are ‘authentic’ and ‘unauthentic’ expressions of Islam?

ZH During the colonial encounter, Islam was compartmentalized according to European models of what constituted ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ or perhaps, ‘authentic’ and ‘hybrid’ Islam. In sub-Saharan Africa, Europeans made determinations about communities in the area based on racialized characteristics. For example, according to the colonial Europeans, regardless of if you were of Arab background or of Yoruba background, those who were fairer skinned and more ‘Arab-looking’ were considered to be more ‘authentic’ Muslims, and others were ‘less authentic.’ Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa probably did not see themselves in these ways. That is not to say that there were no Indigenous conceptions of race or ethnicity, but European colonization hardened the contours of ‘Arab-ness’ and ‘African-ness’ in ways that were linked to access to resources and power. In coastal East Africa where I do my research, in the advent of European colonization, people began to name and identify themselves according to colonial categories to, for example, receive food rations or gain privileges. This is evident during the world wars, if you were identified as ‘African,’ you would get maize meal as your staple, whereas if you were identified as ‘Arab’ or ‘Indian,’ you got rice as your provision. But there were people who did not fit neatly into these categories. My introduction in *Approaches* touches upon the legal apparatus of the colonial state and how these governing models shaped discourses around Islam and Muslims and ultimately, the Western academic study of Islam and Muslims.

The study of the Qur’an in Western academia was likewise shaped by its European colonial inheritance. The Qur’an was often seen as a kind of static text and regarded as a law book, that “you do not need to read it because you know what it says,” or that, “well, the Qur’an is the Qur’an and it is never changing, so why bother looking at that?” What has been missed is that Muslim engagements with the Qur’an are part of a living tradition that is constantly responding to real-world situations. Thus, whereas rituals, traditions, and practices have been the focus of anthropological and other academic attention, Muslim engagements with the Qur’an have not. I think a new generation of scholars are discovering that there is much to explore and investigate. In addition, if you study Qur’anic manuscripts—that is handwritten copies of the Qur’an—you can address other issues such as the materiality of the Qur’an and other aspects of manuscript production. In addition, such Qur’an manuscripts often have a para-text, or annotations, that are typically located in the margins or inter-linearly of the text that include different readings of the Qur’an, glossaries on words, and scholarly interpretations. All of this information can be studied to understand how people who produce and use these Qur’an manuscripts understand and interpreted the Revelation.

BL In Chapter 13 about the Siyu Qur’anic manuscripts: “What do the aesthetic aspects, such as calligraphy and designs, add to the interpretation of the textual discourse of the Siyu Qur’anic manuscripts?”

ZH It is important to know that the writing down and codification of the Qur’an in the seventh century also facilitated the development of Arabic calligraphy. While the written

form of Arabic existed in pre-Islamic times, it is only after the Qur'an began to be written down, and when Muslim empires grew and expanded, that Arabic writing and calligraphy really began to develop and flourish. During this time, people began to write the Qur'an in beautiful scripts and different styles as they sought to decorate and adorn God's Word.

For example, I am currently working on Qur'anic manuscripts that were produced between ca. 1750– ca. 1850³ in two towns on Pate Island, Siyu and Faza, located on the northern coast of Kenya. This is a region that was historically part of the historic Swahili coast, a region that at one time stretched from southern Somalia to Mozambique. In studying these Qur'ans, I began to ask questions such as, "who would be producing these manuscripts in these towns?" and "what is their social history?" What I have learned is that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries these were not marginal places but were located at the center of a maritime Indian Ocean trading network. Hence, the style and aesthetic of these Qur'an manuscripts reflect this prosperity and the multiple connections that these communities had to including Arabia, China, Europe, India, and Southeast Asia, but also reflect a local aesthetic that is found in other material culture from the region.

What also became evident to me is that scribes who produced these Qur'ans created a local style of Arabic calligraphy that echoed the idea that writing the Qur'an facilitated the creation of Arabic scripts. Moreover, the people who made these incredibly beautiful, illuminated manuscripts also used various kinds of colors including red, black, green, and yellow, which are probably mineral or vegetable dyes. Such details reveal that the Qur'anic manuscripts were seen as objects of beauty and reverence, but also show what tools the makers had at their disposal, their ingenuity, and aesthetic sensibility. This manuscript tradition, of which the Qur'an is a part, reflects the experience of those living at the center of a rich Muslim culture that was also part of an Indian Ocean trading network. This being said, there are many questions that remain unanswered. We know very little about who was producing the materials, who decorated the Qur'anic manuscripts, their training, communities, and how they were connected to the trade networks. These are all areas of possible research. Thus, we spoke earlier about how the Qur'an has been seen as a "kind of static, non-changing text," and for that reason, and due to the preconceptions that people have about the literacy, scholarly, and artistic capabilities of these coastal East African communities, these manuscripts have not been studied.

Another interesting thing about these Qur'an manuscripts is that their annotations are written in Arabic. But at the time of their making, we have examples of the local language of Swahili written in Arabic script. It was common for local languages as recipients of Islam, to write their local languages in Arabic script. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, you start to see a change in the way the local language is written. When Christian missionary schools started to appear alongside other kinds of Islamic education, everything started to change. It is only in the colonial period that Roman characters systematically replaced Arabic characters. Up until this point, people wrote Swahili in Arabic script. Thus, from the study of the Qur'an manuscripts, all sorts of new conversations about the formation of Islam in this region and the histories of these communities open up, many of which remain integral to the life-worlds of present-day communities in the region.

EN Can you talk about how the themes "interpretation, embodiment, gendered knowledge, and transmission" overlap and what they suggest for the study of Islam in this particular area?

ZH I think these themes and others in the book are reflective of current scholarship. This book came out of a conference held in Toronto in 2009 with a truly amazing group of scholars. At that time, it became apparent to me that there were very few people working on the Qur'an in sub-Saharan Africa. Ten years on, I am seeing that there are more scholars looking at this subject, and due to an interest in decolonizing and deracializing the academy, there is more focus on the histories and cultures of Africa and on peoples of African origin outside of Africa.

In terms of embodiment, writing can be seen as an embodied act. There are some Muslims who suggest that writing the Qur'an is itself an act of piety and worship or that the written Qur'an or parts of it can be used as forms of spiritual protection. In *Approaches* there is an article on a cloak from Burkina Faso which is inscribed with Qur'anic verses. We know from other contexts, such as Turkey and India, such cloaks are thought to be protective. In addition, in article in *Approaches* on Zanzibar, the Qur'an was used in medicinal healing practices. This article is an ethnographic study of a woman who articulates her belief that the Qur'an can serve as a way of healing when ingested or spoken, as the words themselves become purifying. These are just two ways in which the Qur'an may be regarded as embodied.

The themes explored in the book—interpretation, embodiment, gendered knowledge, and transmission—are entry points to connect the different articles. Of course, they are not the only themes that can be investigated, as there is much more that can be said in the study of the Qur'an and sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere. The themes are a useful way to think about the collections within this volume, but I would not want anyone to use these themes to predetermine inquiry in this field.

I should note that the choice of using the geographical boundary of sub-Saharan Africa is purposeful, but it has its problems. Often, there is difficulty with regionalisms and regional studies by putting localities into a fixed container. That was not the intention here and I hope that is conveyed in the introduction of the book where I talk about “lines in the sand.” North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa should not be considered as two solitudes, but for the purposes of the volume we had to make certain choices. Similarly, East Africa was connected to the Horn of Africa, Arabi, and communities around the Indian Ocean littoral. However, I do think it is useful to draw some lines in order to begin to decolonize academic studies by focusing on parts of the world that have regularly been understudied and marginalized. Therefore, the focus of sub-Saharan Africa should be seen as a provisional container with many dotted lines around it; scholars and others should take up the themes and ideas in this volume as an invitation to consider new lines of inquiry and to cross new terrain.

Endnotes

- 1 Muhammad ibn 'Abdullāh b. 570 Mecca, Arabia, d. 632 Medina, Arabia.
- 2 A caliph, in Islamic history, would be the ruler or successor to the Muslim community.
- 3 ca. refers to “Circa,” Latin for “around, about, roughly, approximately.”

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