



[Interview] “Spotlight on: Dr. Karoline Cook - Forbidden Passages: Muslims and Moriscos in Colonial Spanish America.”

Source: *Latin America and Caribbean Islamic Studies Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 2. (January 2021), pp. 9-14.

Spotlight Dr. Karoline Cook - *Forbidden Passages: Muslims and Moriscos in Colonial Spanish America*

Interview and Introduction by Ken Chitwood

Emigrants from the Atlantic world came to the Americas for various reasons, with many motives, and precipitated by myriad circumstances. Some were forced, some came to escape an old society or to build a new one, others came to acquire riches or set-up shop. Yet, as J.H. Elliott wrote in his tome *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America 1492-1830*, “they all faced the same challenge of moving from the known to the unknown, and of coming to terms with an alien environment that would demand of them numerous adjustments and a range of new responses.”

Furthermore, as Elliott continues, “to a greater or lesser degree, those responses would be shaped by a home culture whose formative influence could never be entirely escaped, even by those who were most consciously rejecting it for a new life beyond the seas.” While the local context with its diverse ecological, material, political, socio-cultural, and religious environments shaped the contours of American colonization and conquest, the colonial world was simultaneously defined and influenced by its transatlantic nature. Significantly, the historical and legal dimensions of imperial statecraft conditioned the experience of various constituencies in even the most far-flung reaches of the American empires.

It is within this transatlantic imperial nexus that Dr. Karoline P. Cook situates the narrative of *Forbidden Passages: Muslims and Moriscos in Colonial Spanish America*. The following is an interview with Dr. Cook, lecturer in the history of the Atlantic world at Royal Holloway University of London about her previous and current work that provides multiple insights into the state of study on Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America and the Caribbean over the *longue durée*.

Why did you set out to write *Forbidden Passages*? Where did the process begin?

I became interested in Moriscos in the Americas when I was still an undergraduate student at Bryn Mawr College, researching my senior thesis on enslaved Moriscos who were tried by the Spanish Inquisition for practicing Islam. The summer before my senior year, I received a grant from Bryn Mawr to conduct research for my thesis at the Archivo

Histórico Nacional (AHN) in Madrid, but first spent a couple of weeks in Seville with my family. In Seville I stopped by the Archivo General de Indias (AGI) to apply for an ID card that was required at the time for all researchers who wanted to consult Spain's national archives. The archivists told me that I wouldn't find information about Moriscos at the AGI because during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they had been prohibited from emigrating to the Americas. Because I was already familiar with the rich historiography on conversos who faced the same travel restrictions as the Moriscos, and who nonetheless settled in the viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru, I began to wonder whether the same might have been true of the Moriscos. This knowledge and the questions it raised prompted my interest in whether Moriscos emigrated to Spanish America and if so, what implications their presence could have for our understanding of colonial society. Upon graduating from Bryn Mawr, I was granted a Fulbright Fellowship to spend the following year in the Spanish archives to determine whether I could answer these questions. I found more sources than I had anticipated amongst the Inquisition records at the AHN and the Royal Audiencia records at the AGI, and I began applying to PhD programs to continue researching the topic.

In your opinion, how much tactical thought was behind the accusation of being a Morisco?

Accusations that someone was a Morisco or had Muslim ancestry were very tactical, often aimed at discrediting an opponent. They drew upon understandings of *limpieza de sangre* (blood purity) that could be invoked to prevent a rival from holding prestigious offices, practicing certain professions, or emigrating to the lands claimed by Spain in the Western Hemisphere. The reality was much more complex, and the accused could go to court to assert their status and negotiate their position in colonial society. This allowed for degrees of fluidity in the ways that individuals presented themselves. But it was also about access and the persistent vulnerability to accusation that would result in lengthy and expensive litigation.

Are there any implications for today's political landscape that we can draw from the colonialist's fear of Moriscos undermining their agenda and the subsequent failure to exclude the latter from the 'New World'?

The discourses invoked by colonial officials against Muslims and anyone they perceived to be a Muslim finds a great deal of resonance with Islamophobia and anxieties about emigration today. Trump's 'Muslim ban' is one of the most recent examples, but this goes back much farther. My Fulbright year in Madrid coincided with September 11 and the US invasion of Afghanistan – when I returned home each evening after reading denunciations of Moriscos in the archives, I continued to read the newspapers full of reports of hate crimes against people perceived to be Muslims and generally heightened anxiety about Muslims who were viewed with suspicion and associated with terrorism in the media. These images have a much longer history, and it was one of the points I wanted to write about in my book.

If there are any implications that can be drawn it is the insidious persistence of hate speech – the ways that negative images of Muslims and emigrants have been invoked for a variety of political agendas. It is important to recognize the types and patterns of anti-Islamic discourse and be attentive to such images in order to challenge them both verbally and legally before they can gain traction. The ways that the label 'Morisco' functioned in the context of local disputes can also tell us something about early constructions of race and racism, and the different forms that racism can assume in contexts that both pre-dated and extend beyond the 19th and 20th century examples.

If the numbers in the sources are reliable, what is your estimate of how many Moriscos came to the Americas?

This is a very difficult question and something I am still working on in the background, even if it wasn't the focus or main interest of my first book. To date I have found approximately 200 references to Moriscos in the context of denunciations before the ecclesiastical and secular courts for practicing Islam in secret or having Muslim ancestry. I am continuing to gather references for a future book that will attempt to grapple with the question of the ways that individuals who did self-identify as Muslims in Spanish America during the early colonial period might have formed communities or ties with each other. This would include not only Iberian converts from Islam but also Muslims from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa.

That said, a focus on numbers alone can be problematic since it is often very difficult to determine who was or was not a Morisco, and such an approach risks replicating the concerns of inquisitors and colonial officials.

In the second half of the book you describe the Moriscos as providers of magical health services across all classes and castes. What implications do you see in this for understanding the colonial society as a whole?

There was a great deal of exchange at the local everyday level, where Moriscos were sought for remedies – their expertise was valued within their communities. We see this in a variety of contexts where multiple ritual specialists might be consulted if someone was ill or needed the intervention of a healer or a practitioner of love magic and divination. Morisco healers operated in the same local communities as indigenous and African healers, and alongside other broader Mediterranean traditions of healing. Inquisition denunciations could also operate as malpractice suits, but there were important differences between how someone denouncing a failed cure framed the event and the inquisitors' propagandistic use of it in the context of pamphlets and autos de fe. Heightened political tensions or interpersonal rivalries created an environment where denunciations could occur.

You use the term 'Morisco' for both, new Christian converts, and old Christians accused of descending from Moors. What was your reasoning behind this double connotation?

'Morisco' was a label that operated as a legal category with implications for someone's rights and status. There is also little evidence that Moriscos in Spain referred to themselves by this label. I wanted to convey the tactical use of the term in disputes and lawsuits as well as highlight the multiple people who fell under this designation depending on the context.

What has been the ‘afterlife’ of the book? In other words, what conversations has it inspired and what has it contributed to the study of Islam and Muslim communities in the Americas?

Since *Forbidden Passages* was published there has been more interest in the topic. It has inspired conversations about the presence of Muslim communities across the Americas. There are a number of young scholars now working on this topic from different perspectives, and it is gratifying to hear from them about their interests and their work.

If you would have the chance to rewrite the book today, what area would you include that is not covered in the first version?

I would write a lot more about Moriscos and gender generally. When I was researching *Forbidden Passages* I didn't feel that I had adequate source material to do this well, but as time passes and I collect more sources I am increasingly incorporating gender analysis into my work.

What research project(s) are you currently working on?

I am working on two book-length projects, beyond the long-term project that I mentioned above that really won't be ready to write for at least another ten years! My next book project examines constructions of nobility in the early modern Spanish Empire. I will focus on how a range of families who claimed descent from the Nasrid emirs of Granada, the Inca rulers of Peru, and the Mexica rulers of Tenochtitlan claimed noble status at a time when creole families in the viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru were also engaged in litigation regarding the perpetuity of their *encomiendas*, and they invoked and at times invented accounts of Christian-Muslim relations on the Peninsula in order to stake their claims. Broadly speaking I am interested in how such claims to noble status and representations of Muslims in the petitions and court cases can shed light on how ideas about race were taking shape in this period.

My other project is a microhistory that focuses on Cristóbal de la Cruz, a man who was born in Algiers and enslaved as a young boy after being captured on a fishing boat, taken to Seville and baptized. De la Cruz denounced himself before inquisitors in Barcelona, Seville, and Mexico City multiple times over a thirty-year period. I am

comparing his testimonies between the 1650s and 1680s to analyse how he narrated his life story to inquisitors at the beginning of each trial, engaged them in theological debates, and recounted events and exchanges he had with Muslims and Christians in Spain, the Caribbean and in Mexico, all while expressing doubts about whether belief in Christianity or Islam would lead to his salvation. I have already written about De la Cruz in an article that appeared in *The Americas* in 2008.