[Interview] "Aisha Khan: The Deepest Dye"

Author: Aisha Khan, interviewed by Ken Chitwood

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Where did the idea for this book come from?

I have long been curious about how the concept of identity can work simultaneously as a foundation for social equality and as an instrument through which social hierarchies are reinforced. I wanted to approach this apparent contradiction by deconstructing the concept of identity into its working, component parts—focusing on two key aspects, race and religion—and by thinking comparatively: what kinds of shared, underlying conditions generate ideas about the incompatibility or, conversely, commensurability of group identities; when are they interpreted as fixed and inherent; and when are they interpreted as malleable products of social relationships? I focused these theoretical questions on two concrete examples salient in the Atlantic world that had rich possibilities: obeah and Hosay. Both are long-standing traditions that gained their particular constitution and significance within the context of plantation political economy, both are commonly understood to have culturally and racially diverse heritages and constituencies, yet both are also commonly identified and studied as, respectively, "African" and "Indian." My interest was in probing how and why these seemingly contradictory characterizations have been so tenacious, and what larger ways of knowing this tenacity might reveal.

Your book is densely packed with ethnographic narratives, historical commentary, and even courtroom proceedings, but I was particularly struck by your multiple decades' worth of encounters in, around, and with Hosay. What does that long term view bring to your study that perhaps shorter-term fieldwork might miss out on?

Ethnographic research in anthropology is typically conducted for some extended period of time. For example, my first stint of fieldwork in Trinidad, which was for my doctoral dissertation, was almost two consecutive years. Happily, the length of this stay generated as many new questions for me as it presented answers to the initial questions I posed. This kept my fascination with power and identity alive while at the same time allowing me to focus on different, yet related aspects of their relationship. While social and cultural issues or problems often remain, we know that historical contexts change, as do our interpretations, so that longer-term perspective has helped me enormously. It can also help us to see how perceptions, practices, and worldviews are not necessarily consistent within a community, or even on the part of a single individual, no more so

than they are for ourselves, at any given moment. These inconsistencies are interesting and important intimations about the diverse ways that people interpret social norms, values, and popular discourse as they contend with the expectations and demands of the unequal relations of power that structure their lives.

You write about taking a "parallax view" of race and religion in obeah and Hosay — shifting "attention from the objects themselves toward relations among them that entwine them in ways that define, redefine, or reinforce them, in order to attempt different ways of seeing things." Tell us a bit more about what a "parallax" view is and what that means for your research.

I have long been struck by the blind spots that arise when we look at something as if it exists on its own—as discrete, separate from other phenomena. The hold that these occlusions have on so many of us is trenchant, and the effects are so misleading. The value of a parallax view, I think, is to advance comparative analysis by rethinking these notions of boundedness and stability. We should be looking instead for connections among phenomena that reveal unexpectedly formative features and relationships. In the case of obeah and Hosay, it was therefore natural to start with their representation as "types" of person and the sweeping efforts to criminalize and repress them on the part of colonial and contemporary authorities, as well as the consistent resistance to those efforts on the part of practitioners. The premise is that these connections and networks will keep the objects of study in focus while also understanding them in more abidingly empirical ways than we have often done in the past; in so doing, we can not only understand them anew, but perhaps even understand them better.

What other "things" might benefit from a parallax view in this field?

Everything in lived experience benefits from a parallax view. This is because attention redirected to the juxtaposition of things—especially those that are apparently unlike—away from the thing itself, reveals the imperceptible or unanticipated forces and processes, along with the expected ones, that underlie and animate our experience and interpretation of those things. As I explain early in the book, I needed to find

specific “things” to consider through a parallax view, in order to challenge reductionist and inherent, essence-based ideas about race and religion and the ideological work they perform. I chose obeah and Hosay. But that was a means to an end: my aim was not to examine obeah and Hosay as discrete phenomena—although they function that way, as well—but rather to treat them as moving vehicles of racial and religious identities, their intersections exemplifying racialized religion and religionized race. It’s not always easy, at least in Western thought, to understand something as ostensibly stable but also never stable. This applies, for example, to our notions of personhood, our customary traditions, the way we understand our bodies, etc. A parallax view underscores that a “thing,” as Heidegger posited, is the “existing bearer of many existing yet changeable properties.” As “things,” these properties may seem to be contained and fixed, but they are interconnected and variable. These are what a parallax view throws into relief, directing our attention to the ideological work of interpretive categories as both ostensibly discrete and stable and as mutually defining and fluid—and, as in this book, the ways these qualities are put to use in service of exploitation, resistance, and their justifications.

What might the conclusions of your book have to say to the study of “Islam and Muslim communities” in the Americas more broadly? Might they open up conversations around the very terms of our discourse, the very “things” we study?

The Americas present a special landscape in relation to Islam: Muslims’ journeys to this hemisphere, where no country has a Muslim majority, span millennia—as explorers, enslaved, indentured, educated, unlettered, activist, entrepreneurial, and refugees hailing from across the globe, yet their histories remain little known. My conclusions in this book, although trained on two empirical cases (one of which, Hosay, has origins in Islam), derive from principles that I think are applicable to any subject matter. I argue that the figure of the individual, at the heart of the Western concept of identity, is key to the construction and reification of the human “types” which are European colonialism’s legacy, created from the beliefs, practices, and worldviews of the peoples it feared, restricted, and stigmatized; I argue that certain conditions and practices create the things which then get identified with a name (for example, racism created “race,” rather than the other way around); and I argue that components of

identity, including race and religion, are necessarily and always intersected, working together in on-going creation of personhood and group. As people constitute themselves as Muslims over time and place, they draw from canonical common denominators and practice familiar traditions. But they also live in different historical moments and particular relations of power, and with diverse cultural and religious neighbors, co-workers, friends, and even family. In a nutshell, my argument emphasizes agency rather than essence, and contingency rather than fixity. Applied to the centuries of Muslim presence in the Americas and the great array of their experiences, this approach foregrounds the fluidity and heterogeneity of religious (and all) identity and thus the manifold ways, and reasons, that Muslims know themselves and are known by others.

What might your work have to say to the study of "global Islam" or "the Americas" as a whole?

The deconstruction of any interpretive category in the search to understand how it becomes defined and recognized in a particular way will always productively trouble our premises and presumptions about it. The more capacious the category, the more component parts it is likely to have. "Global Islam" and "the Americas" are encapsulations of an enormous range of variables. Each conveys generalizations (and aspirations) about populations being bound together because they ostensibly hold characteristics, histories, or points of view in common. As variables are selectively highlighted, though, what we understand to be "global Islam" and "the Americas" will shift, as different aspects are emphasized. Racial formations and religious traditions vary across time and space, but their intersections are inevitable; it is the configuration, meaning, and significance of these intersections that are contingent. So, what we choose to highlight about them will convey a particular message. At the same time, the principle remains: the racialization of religion and the religionization of race will be a factor everywhere that race and religion are employed in some fashion to define people. As a historically-minded anthropologist with an empiricist bent, I am not sure how I would study "global Islam" and "the Americas" as such. I would begin by distinguishing the generalization (and the aspirations it symbolizes) from the on-the-ground, lived experience of those who are represented by it.