[Review] *The Deepest Dye: Obeah, Hosay, and Race in the Atlantic World*, by Aisha Khan. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021.

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Book Review: *The Deepest Dye*: *Obeah, Hosay, and Race in the Atlantic World*, by Aisha Khan

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Race and religion are perennial topics in the study of Latin America and the Caribbean. The complex intersections of the two analytic categories in the hemisphere has invited a range of research and reflections, investigating both how the two concepts were shaped and wielded by colonial powers to create and control marginalized communities and how those same communities worked within such categorizations and their resultant consequences to claim some semblance of empowerment and resistance. Currents in contemporary politics and culture in the region suggest these themes are as relevant today—from the race-tinged evangelical campaigns against Afro-Brazilian religions to the religious dimensions of the contemporary "Migrant Trail" experience—as they were over the last five hundred years. Moreover, their convergence in the public imagination and in personal identifications and notions of belonging continues to invite intersectional analyses of them both.

In *The Deepest Dye*, Khan takes what she calls a "parallax view" of the Hosay festival and obeah in order to investigate and interrogate the broader concepts of race and religion in the West Indies (primarily the Guianas, Jamaica, and Trinidad). By "parallax view," she means putting Hosay and obeah into conversation—rather than treating them as wholly distinct phenomena—to show how notions of race and religion related to both were utilized to make people of African and Indian descent into "particular 'types' of persons": savage "rogues" and "simple people" by the colonial regime and its hierarchies in the Caribbean. (Ch. 3) Using Hosay and obeah as "illustrative loci," Khan argues, "that racial and religious identities necessarily and always work in some kind of conjunction, constituting a nexus where the racialization of religion and the 'religionization of race' define, substantiate, and justify identities and the hierarchies that rank them." (2)

Obeah and Hosay are often studied independently as "African" and "Indian," and while put forward as examples of the fluid, hybrid nature of the Caribbean, are rarely given due consideration as examples of mixtures and pluralisms in the region and how racial and religious identities attached to them have been transformed by power and lived experience over time. (4) As she makes her case, Khan points out how the mingling of race and religion in Hosay *and* obeah were viewed as "a sin of the deepest dye" (3) and a threat to the colonial regime and its hierarchies. 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," Khan not only shows how obeah and Hosay are comparable, but also shows race and religion to be "sliding and thus intersectional" things "animated by consciousness of self in relation to other" (14) in the Caribbean and beyond.

Tracing the crisscrossing narratives of obeah and Hosay over time, from the "space of overlap between the end of slavery and the beginning of indenture in the West Indies" (27) to the present day, Khan explores a series of questions about how the religious and racial signifiers mentioned above emerge over time. How did they become "given" in our understanding of these traditions? And quite significantly: how are they divorced from the boundary-overlapping realities to be observed on the ground? Chapters 2 and 3 center on the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, looking at how Hosay and obeah were both caught up in colonial anxieties about race and religion and how this came to shape them as traditions and cultural "things." Chapter 4 concentrates on obeah in the contemporary scene, particularly as it is made manifest in creative arts and legal systems. Chapter 5 shifts focus back to Hosay, looking at its multivalent resonances in the lives of Trinidadians who pack into it a menagerie of meaning based on their personal, social, racial, and religious identifications. Chapter 6 zooms back out to take up the idea of "identity" and how a parallax view of obeah and Hosay help us better examine the category and its uses in the Caribbean.

As can be readily appreciated, this is not a book about "Islam" or "Muslims" in the Caribbean per se. Instead, Khan is much more concerned with the concepts of "race" and "religion" more broadly, arguing that they are not "inevitable conditions of being in the world," (28) but that they are categories that must be continually interrogated as we encounter them being used by ourselves and others. And yet, there are a few elements of Khan's analysis that deserve particular mention here in terms of their relevance for the study of Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America and the Caribbean.

First, Khan brings multiple decades of anthropological experience with Hosay to bear on its diverse meanings and manifestations in Trinidad. Particularly relevant for this Newsletter's readership is how Khan deftly illustrates from such a longitudinal perspective that Islam has always been the "problem" with Hosay—either for the Christian colonizers or contemporary Muslim groups who decry its carnivalesque characteristics. (8) While "street party has replaced plantation protest as Hosay's focal point," (142) Khan shows how it was either Islam's incipient insurgency or about whether the festival is authentically "Islamic" that has framed its multilayered and complicated meaning, performance, and role in Trinidadian society. From the 1884 Muharram Massacre to contemporary conversations among, and between, imams, taxi

drivers, or *tadjah* creators, Hosay has always been a "sliding-signifier," claimed as a symbol for a range of identifications: Hindu, Muslim, Sunni, Shi'i, secular, multicultural, etc. (152-153) The challenge, Khan writes, is to appreciate how "Hosay resides at the multiple perspective crossroads of local common sense: religion, festival, heresy, piety, sacred, sacrilegious" and how "each of these characterizations contains further layers of meaning among participants and observers, who themselves can be subdivided into numerous points of view." (169)

Second, Khan's comments about how Africans and Indians, obeah practitioners and Muslims, were shaped into a mass of "rogue individuals…a testosterone-laden horde brandishing weapons of vast destruction" (61) resonates with contemporary images of "the Muslim Other," especially when seen through the lens of the global War on Terror and its manifestations in politics, the media, and other public spheres.

Third, and related to the points above, Khan argues that Islam often deracinated African Muslims even as it racialized Indian Muslims. While African Muslims were given higher standing within West Indian colonial hierarchies because of their perceived connections to "literate Islam" in West Africa, the perception that Islam and rebellion were intimately linked (due, in part to how colonial authorities interpreted and adjudicated the 1857 Indian Revolt) made Indian "coolies" into specters of terror in the colonial Caribbean imagination.

These three brief points about the relevance of *The Deepest Dye* to the field of Latin America and Caribbean Islamic Studies—of which there are many more—underscore the irreducible complexity of categories like "Islam" or "African/Black Muslims" or "Indian Muslims" in our research and reflections. It also highlights how they are not as distinct as we may first make them out to be. Instead, with her parallax view, Khan shows how none of these categories or identifications are "best interrogated as a single analytical object" but that they should be put into conversation so that we can see how their "genesis and influence happen, to one degree or another, in conjunction with others." (13) As Ali Mian writes, Islam "on its own terms" is never on its own (2020, 239–240). It necessarily involves a range of other ideas, sodalities, discourses, and categories. By presenting race and religion in all their multivariate and intersecting intricacy and entanglement, Khan challenges us to think about how the categories we deal with should be called into more critical question, to see where their substance, meaning, and effects emerge. On the one hand, how did the idea of "global Islam" emerge and what has helped give shape to its categorical contours in our minds? On the other, what do we mean when we speak of the "Americas?" What constitutes this geographic and cultural grouping and how have the emphases we've placed on its use obscured other aspects of its reality (or lack thereof)? Indeed, Khan's work has me wondering about how our very field helps put "global Islam" and the "Americas" into a

sort of "parallax view"—interrogating how such concepts are not stable and predictable givens, but interrelated concepts through which we make sense of certain phenomena and locate particular narratives. By putting them into more critical conversation, we might come to see both in new light and appreciate even more the various ways they co-constitute one another.

In the end Khan's key point is to show how "the intersectionality of race and religion is always a simultaneous process." (172) While one or the other might be foregrounded in a particular historical or social context—say Blackness and Africa with obeah and Indianness and Islam with Hosay—"they are always and necessarily in a state of mutual definition, even as it is variously construed," argues Khan. (173) This goes to show how our identifications and notions of belonging and "being" are not inherent or *sui generis*. Instead, Khan's parallax view of obeah and Hosay illustrate how "race" and "religion" are "complex forms of agency that orient modes of identification (of ourselves and others)." (182) Or, in other words, they are open-ended questions for us to locate ourselves "in relation to the earth and to the cosmos" and our myriad contextual interactions and relations. (176) Therefore, Khan's work is not only relevant for the field with which this Newsletter is primarily concerned, but also for our understanding of "self" and "other" and the generative frictions that occur between them in a cosmopolitanized, late-modern world, evermore marked by diversity and difference.

References

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