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Introduction | Himalayan *Ummah*: Mapping Muslim Communities and Cultures in the Himalayas

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Introduction | **Himalayan Ummah: Mapping Muslim Communities and Cultures in the Himalayas**

Megan Adamson Sijapati
Jacqueline H. Fewkes

Welcome to this special issue of *HIMALAYA*, which brings together a variety of pieces that explore interactions between specific iterations of Muslim community/practice/experience in the Himalayan region and the concept of the general Islamic community, the *ummah*.

The aim of this special volume is to explore the presence of varying Muslim cultures in the Himalaya, and encourage consideration of “Himalayan *ummah*” to broaden our understanding of both the region and notions of Muslim community. Included in this collection are pieces that highlight the interconnections between multiple cultural spheres of Muslim community at local levels, and bring attention to the cultural, social, artistic, and political diversity of the Himalayas beyond the better understood and frequently documented religio-cultural expressions of the region. The regional focus on the Himalayas provides us with a site of both geographic and cultural crossroads, where Muslim community is simultaneously constituted at multiple social and cultural levels, thus allowing papers to explore a wide range of local, national, and global interests while maintaining a focus on localized experiences.

This focus on local experience is crucial to our approach to the Himalayan *ummah*. Concepts of the global, such as a worldwide Islamic *ummah*, are compelling social forces, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz has reminded us, “no one lives in the world in general,” rather we all live “in some confined and limited stretch of it—the world around here” (Geertz 1996: 262). As the world in general is necessarily experienced in local ways, varying notions of community in global and regional contexts alternatively inform,

constitute, and/or deconstruct each other. Examining segments of this process is valuable to understanding the concept of Muslim community from both global and regional perspectives. Thus, while many of the pieces in this special issue may not mention the *ummah* explicitly, each provides a local perspective on how we might conceptualize it.

To this end, in this issue we bring together diverse types of pieces that foreground the work of scholars from multiple disciplines focusing on Muslim communities and Islamicate traditions—historical and contemporary—in India, Nepal, Pakistan, and China. Much of the focus of the research articles is on the construction of Muslim identity in relation to larger socio-cultural processes; for example, Singh’s analysis of how Shia ritual in Ladakh employs narratives that document the construction of community identity demonstrates how this process occurs in relation to transnational Islamic history. Pieces by Kanjwal and Kanth, while focusing on Kashmir, have broader contexts too, emphasizing how local socio-politics play a crucial role in this process. Kanjwal does this through an exploration of how the “Naya Kashmir” (new Kashmir) program helped to politicize a sense of a Kashmiri Muslim identity, while Kanth addresses the significance of the *moi-e-muqaddas* (the Prophet’s hair) in the religious, social, and the political life of the Kashmiri Muslim community. Bhutia’s discussion of the *Khache* community—constructed historically as Kashmiri Muslims in Tibet, and in the contemporary period as Tibetan Muslims in Kashmir—reminds us that the interplay between the global/local is temporally fluid, as well.

We also present here a few pieces that emphasize Muslim voices in the Himalayas. Sijapati's and Fewkes' pieces foreground first-person perspectives from interviews in the field. Sijapati documents Nepali Hajj narratives and suggests ways they highlight the everyday-ness of religious endeavors and the interior dimensions of piety among a community better known for involvement in national identity politics. Fewkes brings attention to local-global interactions in Ladakhi women scholars' work, emphasizing that her interpretation is not the only way to understand these women's accounts. Hille's piece interrogates the notion of regional identity among the Xidaotang of Lintan in southern Gansu (China). These articles are meant to emphasize emic perspectives on, and diversify—spatially, physically, and temporally—scholarly discussions of a Himalayan *ummah*.

Throughout this special issue we hope to provide a broad perspective on issues associated with Islam in the Himalayas, explore the ways in which Muslims mobilize regional identities and expressions, and examine some of the myriad ways in which regional interactions and institutions can shape the practices of being Muslim in specific areas and contexts.

The Himalayan region provides us with a site of both geographic and cultural crossroads, where Muslim community is simultaneously constituted at multiple social levels, thus allowing the special issue contributors to consider a wide range of local, national, and global interests, while maintaining a focus on the grounded, localized experiences of real people—"the world around here."

Megan Adamson Sijapati and Jacqueline H. Fewkes
Special Issue Co-Editors

References

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