

Book Review

***Knowledge and Power in Muslim Societies: Approaches in Intellectual History.* Edited by Kazuo Morimoto and Sajjad Rizvi. Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2023. ISBN 9783959941648. viii + 422 pp. €125 cloth.**

NEBIL HUSAYN

University of Miami

This volume is a collection of case studies on the intellectual activities of agents in the production of knowledge, art, or rituals in the world of Islam. The case studies feature individuals and texts representing a vast array of social, political, and historical contexts. The book is divided into three broad sections: philosophy, knowledge production, and modernity.

The book begins with a brief foreword on the importance of knowledge and its relationship to power by Ian Richard Netton. The volume's editors, Kazuo Morimoto and Sajjad Rizvi, then offer an introduction to the book's contents and key themes. The chapters are the products of two workshops, one held in Japan in April 2019, the other online (due to the Covid-19 pandemic) in March 2021. Both were organized and attended by scholars from the University of Exeter, the University of Tokyo, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Kyoto University, and Aichi Prefectural University. The organizers hoped that the workshops would offer participants the opportunity to not only explore Islamic intellectual history together, but also better understand the methods and assumptions that underpin the study of Islam in Japan (and a European university like Exeter). This collaborative volume also includes contributions from two Islamic studies doctoral students who participated in these workshops. What follows is a synopsis of the book's fourteen chapters.

Chapter 1, "Three Portraits of a Philosopher in Islamic Cultures" by Sajjad Rizvi, begins with a methodological explanation of what constitutes philosophy, its scope, and the reasons for which one must study the history of Islamic philosophy. Rizvi then provides the reader with three case studies: Aḥmad Bābā (d. 1627), a Mālikī jurist from Timbuktu; Umm Salama Bēgum Nayrīzī (b. 1731), a Shī'ī Sufi based in Iran and Iraq; and 'Abd al-'Alī Muḥammad b.

© 2025 Nebil Husayn. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, which allows users to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form only, for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the original authors and source.

Nizām al-Dīn (d. 1810), a prominent Sunnī metaphysician and court philosopher in India. Rizvi deliberately selects three figures who are probably unknown to most specialists of Islamic intellectual history and includes figures who would not normally be considered philosophers to challenge academic assumptions about the subject of philosophy and its study. Rizvi explains that this chapter falls within a series of studies that he is writing to imagine how decoloniality may be applied to Islamic thought. Rizvi questions what one means by philosophy and the borders of the discipline by offering portraits that contribute to a “global conversation on philosophy” (p. 17) in a decolonized academic context. He desires readers to understand philosophy beyond “a particular Greek heritage of rationality that has structured the history of European philosophy” and that frames non-Western traditions “as wisdom traditions” (p. 17). If philosophy is understood as a potent force with thinkers that seek to decolonize hegemonies and speak truth to power, then one can understand philosophy as “rather consistent with a vision of Islam that is spiritually, intellectually, and ethically oppositional” (p. 28).

Chapter 2, “Philosophy for Politics: Ancient Greek Philosophy Echoed in Ibn al-Muqaffa’s Writings” by István T. Kristó-Nagy, examines the origins of Arabic philosophical literature. While previous studies have already considered the translation movement from Greek and Syriac into Arabic, here, the author explores the extent to which early Arabic texts on political philosophy drew on middle Persian (or Pahlavi) works on the same subject. The author explains that political advice literature was one of the first genres to bring ancient Greek philosophical ideas and structures into Islamic civilization. The author examines the writings of Ibn al-Muqaffa (d. 757–58) and determines that his use of allegory, late antique political theories, and logical and rhetorical structures represent prominent features of Greek (and Indian) philosophy that were organically integrated into Middle Persian advice literature and replicated in Muslim literature centuries after him. Consequently, the author cautions readers against understanding “Islamic advice literature with an exclusivist eye” (p. 69), i.e. one that assumes such texts to have little precedent and fails to consider how the methodology of harmonizing ancient philosophical traditions was a trend in the genre before its appearance in the Muslim or ‘Abbāsīd context. Advice literature that preceded Islam already represented an advanced level of coalescence between Greek, Iranian, and Indian thought, but then allowed for “further fusion and elaboration within its new civilization” (p. 69).

Chapter 3, “The Sorcerer Scholar: Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī between Grammar and Grimoire” by Emily Selove and Mohammed Sanad, challenges academic assumptions about the subject of philosophy by examining the legacy of Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī (d. 1229), one of the most respected linguists and rhetoricians of the Islamic tradition who was also an occultist and court magician. Occultists regarded the occult sciences as having multiple branches including geomancy and lettrism (*‘ilm al-ḥurūf*). Although al-Sakkākī’s *Kitāb al-Shāmil*, a grimoire or textbook on sorcery, remains unedited and untranslated, the authors argue that al-Sakkākī’s famous book of language, the *Miftāḥ al-‘ulūm*, showcases his belief in the magical potency and efficaciousness of words in the worldview of occultists. For example, al-Sakkākī writes that letters and the forms of words possess special hidden properties (*khawāṣṣ*) in the way that gemstones, plants, and other magical tools are described as

having such properties in occult texts (p. 99). The authors argue that this belief was a feature of a broader worldview among philosophers regarding the relationship between language and philosophy.

Chapter 4, “Knowledge for All: Zayn al-Dīn al-Kashshī (d. before 1228) on Philosophical Writing” by Hisashi Obuchi, explores the various facets of the question “what is philosophy?” by examining the work of Zayn al-Dīn al-Kashshī, an influential student of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210) who was revered for his expertise in logic. Rather than view philosophy as a discipline led by and for a learned elite, al-Kashshī argued that the pursuit of knowledge was the duty of every human being and the composition of books was the duty of philosophers. Philosophy was the path to human perfection and eternal bliss. According to Obuchi, al-Kashshī held that philosophers were obliged to write such works for the edification of the general public rather than simply writing texts beneficial only to other scholars.

Chapter 5, “Cancelling the Apocalypse: Refracted Anticipation for the Awaited Mahdī in Sayyid Muḥammad al-Musha‘sha’s Discourse” by Tetsuro Sumida, the last chapter of the section on philosophy, considers a key theme of Islamic intellectual writing: eschatology and the apocalypse. Sayyid Muḥammad al-Musha‘sha (d. 1466) was a charismatic and self-proclaimed Mahdī who was active in the post-‘Abbāsīd Islamic world in which Sufism, pro-‘Alīd sentiment, and militant, messianic movements all appeared as intertwined popular currents across various regions of Iraq and Iran. As a Twelver Shī‘ī, Sayyid Muḥammad positioned himself as a deputy of the twelfth imam believed to be in occultation. In a treatise entitled *Kalām al-mahdī*, Sayyid Muḥammad further articulates his belief in the manifestation or incarnation of God in the person of ‘Alī and the immortality of the Twelver imams (p. 148). While Sayyid Muḥammad acknowledges that the Twelver imams were murdered and experienced death, he also explains his belief that, similar to the twelfth imam, all of them are alive, concealed in the invisible world (*al-ghayb*), and in occultation (p. 151–52). Sumida argues that it is Sayyid Muḥammad’s belief in such doctrines that allows him to deny the common belief in any return of a twelfth imam and put forth his own messianic claim that he was the imam’s deputy and “veil” (*ḥijāb*). In this case, Sayyid Muḥammad offered paradoxical theories without fully accounting for some of their apparent contradictions (for example, belief in the murders of the previous imams as well as their occultation). Perhaps further discussion of how Sayyid Muḥammad’s understanding of the occultation differed from key exponents of the theory such as al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 1044) and al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī (d. 1067) would have been helpful for readers. Both al-Murtaḍā and al-Ṭūsī carefully considered reasons for the twelfth imam’s occultation and why his death or nonexistence would violate a doctrine regarding the necessity of divine assistance (*luṭf*).

The second section of the book, on knowledge production, consists of five chapters and begins with chapter 6, “Didactic Discourse and Sarcastic Expressions in the Context of Abū Hilāl al-‘Askarī’s Literary Criticism” by Mohammed Sanad. Sanad examines the writings of Abū Hilāl al-‘Askarī (d. 1009), a prominent literary critic and litterateur, and argues that al-‘Askarī aimed to write with clarity so that his works could be read widely. According to Sanad, al-‘Askarī’s use of sarcasm in his critique of poetry that he considered subpar was an effective tool that he employed to enrich his didactic style of writing.

Chapter 7, “Writing the Imams’ Virtues under the Interconfessional Policy of al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh: Ibn al-Biṭrīq al-Ḥillī and His Faḍā’il Works” by Ryo Mizukami, discusses the ways in which the ‘Abbāsīd Caliph al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh (r. 1180–1225) pursued an interconfessional policy that attempted to garner support from various religious groups, including Twelver Shī‘īs, to reinforce his authority. It also discusses the reasons for which the Iraqī Twelver Shī‘ī scholar Ibn al-Biṭrīq al-Ḥillī (d. 1204–5) may have written his *al-Umda fī ‘uyūn ṣiḥāḥ al-akhbār*, a compilation of hadiths on the virtues of ‘Alī and the Twelver imams, which relies exclusively on famous Sunnī hadith collections. Mizukami explains that Ibn al-Biṭrīq wrote this work during the caliphate of al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh, when the latter encouraged a culture of reverence for the Prophet’s family and the Twelver imams among Sunnīs. Ibn al-Biṭrīq encouraged this rapprochement between Sunnīs and Shī‘īs as well as ‘Alīds and ‘Abbāsīds by writing such works and by emphasizing the noble status the ‘Abbāsīds possessed as the Prophet’s kinsfolk (p. 197).

Chapter 8, “A Ja‘farīd-Zaynabīd Genealogy from Thirteenth-Century Egypt: ‘Urbān Uprising, Najafī Connection, and the Representation of the Twelver Imams” by Kazuo Morimoto, examines a manuscript on the genealogy of a Hāshimid family in thirteenth-century Egypt authored by Ibrāhīm b. Yaḥyā al-Mashhadī al-Najafī (active 1229), otherwise known as Ibn Ballūh, an Egyptian ‘Alīd who promoted the practice of tomb visitations in Cairo. Morimoto considers ambiguities regarding Ibn Ballūh’s relationship to Najaf and the confessional identities of this author and other prominent ‘Alīds in Egypt at a time when reverence for the Twelver Shī‘ī imams within Sunnism was on the rise. One can agree with this book’s editors that Chapters 7 and 8 highlight the important role that scholarly production played in supporting interconfessionality among rulers, noble families, scholars, and the laity.

Chapter 9, “*Ilm al-siyāq* and Bureaucrats in Safavid Iran” by Nobuaki Kondo, examines the history of *siyāq* or bookkeeping for financial affairs, an important Safavid *siyāq* manual, and the social contexts and political power that experts of this discipline wielded. One accountant (*mustawfī*) who mastered this discipline was the sixteenth-century Ghiyāth al-Dīn Abū Ishāq Kirmānī, author of *Jāmi‘ al-ḥisāb*, the most comprehensive extant Safavid *siyāq* manual available to date. Kondo studies the contents of this manual to better understand the ways in which fiscal transactions were recorded in ledgers under the Safavids. According to Kondo, bookkeeping was a respected discipline and field of knowledge during the Safavid period that sometimes granted its experts especially close access to political power.

Chapter 10, “Ma Dexin’s Criticism of Saint Veneration: ‘Chinese’-Flavored Islam Formed by a Denominational Conflict” by Tatsuya Nakanishi, examines the anti-Sufī views of a famous Hui Muslim scholar, Ma Dexin (d. 1874), who lived in Southwest China and wrote treatises critical of Sufism after performing the pilgrimage to Mecca, studying at al-Azhar University, and residing in various regions of the Ottoman Empire between 1844 and 1848. He is remembered for his condemnation of saint veneration and rejection of a culture of adherence to Sufī masters.

The third and final section of the volume, entitled “The Making of the Modern,” consists of four chapters and begins with chapter 11, “The Politics of the Bay‘a Ceremony in Modern Morocco” by Nozomi Shiratani. The author explains the roles of the ceremonial pledge of allegiance (*bay‘a*) and the king’s speeches on the occasion of the Feast of the Throne (*Īd al-‘arsh*) in Morocco as annual political ceremonies that aim to link the king to his subjects. It is in the invention of such traditions and by emphasizing the king’s descent from the Prophet that this post-colonial monarchy seeks to bolster its legitimacy.

Chapter 12, “The Tawhīd of the Painting of God the Mother” by William Gallois, examines iconography of a pre-Islamic divine mother found in Tunisia to demonstrate how debates on what constitutes Islamic art and what is “Islamic” about such art can be problematized as exceedingly reductive and limited by modern, post-colonial conceptions of orthodoxy and normativity. According to Gallois, Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s famous legal opinion regarding the permissibility of painting and the creation of sculptures, while liberal for its time, fails to fully recognize the significance of such art (p. 339). The perennial concern of Muslim jurists who traditionally condemned art was that it encouraged idolatry and polytheism, but Gallois explains that their assumptions regarding the divine (and the permissible) cannot be considered representative of those Muslims who painted God in the form of the Phoenician goddess Tanit.

Chapter 13, “Teaching Iranian History: Narrative Style and Messages” by Keiko Sakurai, assesses how history has been taught in Iran since 1963, when the Pahlavi government initiated a policy “requiring the exclusive use of state-designated textbooks at all school levels in both the public and private sectors” (p. 367). These textbooks are regularly revised and, thus, even after the 1979 revolution, continue to serve as extensions of state media disseminating its official ideologies regarding culture, politics, history, and morality. Sakurai notes that the textbooks published by the Islamic Republic of Iran discuss history using a narrative style that strongly moralizes an epic struggle against foreign domination, tyrannical rulers, and anti-religious forces.

Chapter 14 is the final chapter of the volume and is entitled “Inscribing ‘God’s Words’ in Japan: Connecting the Past to the Present through the Translations of the Qur’an.” The author, Emi Goto, briefly discusses the history of conversion to Islam in Japan, which began in the late nineteenth century, before examining famous Japanese translations of the Qur’an published over the last century, their reception, and the stylistic choices of a few of their translators. Goto selects two influential translations of the Qur’an for further analysis: first, *The Koran* by Toshihiko Izutsu (d. 1993), one of Japan’s most influential scholars on Islam, and, second, a bilingual Japanese-Arabic edition of the Qur’an with annotations by a leading Japanese Muslim named Ryoichi Mita (d. 1983). Izutsu favored a philological approach to the Qur’an and relied on European scholarship and Bayḍāwī’s (d. 1286) commentary on the Qur’an for his translation. By contrast, Mita sought to translate and annotate the Qur’an so that readers understood normative views regarding the causes and context in which verses were revealed as well as their theological and ethical implications for both medieval and contemporary Muslims. According to Goto, Mita published a work that explained the Qur’an’s relevance and could be used as a guide for his fellow Muslims (p. 407). Whereas Izutsu’s work became popular among academics, Mita’s work became a standard reference for Japanese Muslims.

The book closes with a “Postscript” by Shigeru Kamada in which the author reflects on the challenges scholars have faced in studying Islam in Japan and perennial tensions that exist in the academic study of religion.

This volume is a testament to the power of rigorous academic inquiry and the importance of international conferences, which serve as key sites for knowledge sharing and provide scholars with invaluable opportunities to learn from one another and broaden their understanding of their fields of expertise.