

Journal of Muslim Philanthropy & Civil Society

Special Issue

Exploring Muslim Philanthropy in the
Latinx Americas

Guest Editor

Ken Chitwood, Ph .D.

Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy

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Ken Chitwood, Ph.D.
Issue Guest Editor

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From the Editor's Desk

Exploring Muslim Philanthropy in the Latinx Americas

Ken Chitwood, Ph.D.

Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy

As I was working on this editorial introduction, and perusing social media while I procrastinated writing it, Muslims across the Americas were organizing. They were marching. They were making donations. They were engaging in a wide range of philanthropic activities and making concrete contributions to civil society across the hemisphere. At the time of writing, that included Latinx Muslims in Harlem leading “get out the vote” efforts to get Yusef Salaam elected to New York City’s 9th City Council district. It also included Colombians and Puerto Ricans organizing solidarity events on behalf of Palestinians; Latinx Muslim authors donating the proceeds of their book sales to relief efforts in Morocco, Sudan, and Yemen; as well as an imam distributing humanitarian aid and medical supplies to impoverished families in São Paulo’s *favelas*.

While the literatures on Muslim philanthropy and Latinx philanthropy are continuously expanding, they often lack perspectives on how Latinx Muslims and Muslims in the Latinx Americas are part of a wider matrix of generosity, volunteering, and mutual aid within, and beyond, both constituencies. On the one hand, Muslims give to organizations and participate in philanthropic activism at local, national, and global levels, hoping to make the world a better place in accordance with their interpretation(s) of Islam. On the other hand, people who identify as Latinx or who live in Latin America have historically engaged in acts of solidarity and mutual assistance among vulnerable populations, addressing issues related to poverty, education, health, and culture. This special issue of the *Journal of Muslim Philanthropy and Civil Society* takes up these intersecting concerns, putting them into conversation in particular contexts, including Brazil, Colombia, the Latinx US, and Puerto Rico. The aim is to contribute in multiple directions, not only addressing lacunae in the study of Muslim philanthropy and contributions to civil society, but also to further nuance and texture our understanding of Latinx giving and philanthropic work across the Americas. Far from the final word on these topics, this special issue also paves the way for future research and provokes further conversation around the multivalent manifestations and tensions of, as well as intersections and connections between, Muslim and Latinx philanthropy.

The issue grew out of a colloquium, hosted by the Latin America and Caribbean Islamic Studies Association (LACISA) and sponsored by the Muslim Philanthropy Initiative (MPI), in 2022. The colloquium featured a range of presentations based on original research that spoke to how Muslims in Latin America and Latinx Muslims in the US are engaging in a wide range of philanthropic activities and activism to address what they see as critical issues facing the world and that they view as

aligned with their faith. The presentations addressed a variety of questions related to the topic, including what philanthropic activities are undertaken by Muslims in Latin America? By Latinx Muslims in the US? What themes, issues, or people groups are Muslims focusing on and what kinds of institutions and organizations are they creating (e.g., hospitals, nonprofit newspapers and publications, disaster relief programs, refugee and migrant aid, etc.)? At what levels is this philanthropic activity carried out on: the local, national, regional, or trans-national/regional? What partnerships—intrafaith, interfaith, or between Muslims and other actors in civil society—are being created through shared philanthropic action? At what levels are these partnerships engaged: the local, national, regional, or trans-national/regional? Does *dawah* count as philanthropy? Does philanthropy count as *dawah*? How are these terms used and applied among Muslims in Latin America or Latinx Muslims in the US? How do Muslims in the Latinx US and in Latin America mix, combine, or remix classic notions of giving, charity, and aid from both Latinx and Islamic cultures and histories? How are concepts like *zakat/fitrana*, *sadaqa*, and *waqf* interpreted and applied in Latin America or by Latinx Muslims in the US? Are there any accents or emphases that are unique to, or particularly pronounced among, Latinx Muslims or Muslims in the region?

The genesis of this colloquium was an invitation to take part in a previous MPI symposium in 2021, writing what would eventually become my contribution to this issue: “Together in the Struggle: Puerto Rican Muslims and their Philanthropic Activism from El Barrio to La Perla.” As part of this research, I began to see how, from early on, philanthropic activism played a critical role in the formation of Puerto Rican Muslim sociality. From the grassroots struggle for empowerment by Alianza Islámica—founded by four Puerto Ricans in Harlem, New York, in 1987—to the multistakeholder work of the Three Puerto Rican Imams in the wake of Hurricane María, Puerto Rican Muslims have paired the Islamic emphasis on promoting the welfare of others with advocacy around issues of minoritization, in American society and the *ummah*. In this article, I discuss how Puerto Rican Muslims transform the vulnerabilities of marginalization into resilience and resistance through intersectional, philanthropic activism.

My work on this paper led me to explore some deeper questions with the MPI team around the intersections, connections, multifaceted nature, and inherent tensions of Latinx and Muslim philanthropy. Before I wrote my piece on Puerto Rican Muslim activism, I’d also noticed the proliferation of philanthropic activity among Muslims in Latin America and the Latinx US during another project back in 2019, called “The Americas Muslims Map.” My aim with the map was to use the tools of digital data visualization to invite scholars and interested publics to become acquainted with the diversity and distribution of Islam and Muslim communities in the Americas. I designed the map to offer a view beyond the so-called core of the “Muslim world” that further complicates and interrogates our conceptualization of global Islam’s landscapes—both literal and imagined. As I mapped the numerous (and most likely innumerable) organizations, Islamic centers, and other locations, I noticed many of them were focused on social service, contributions to civil society, and philanthropic work.

The initial list included Hospital Nasir, founded by the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in the nation's capital, and other Humanity First (the Ahmadiyya Muslim community's nonprofit organization registered across six continents in 50 countries) initiatives in Belize, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Guyana, Barbados, and Trinidad & Tobago; Rida Hamida's Taco Trucks at Every Mosque, a community building partnership in California between "the taco truck at every corner," a *halal* meat market, a local Mosque and local Latinx and Muslim communities to celebrate one another's identity and tradition in the holy month of Ramadan; Wilfredo Amr Ruiz at the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), a Puerto Rican Muslim lawyer who serves not only as the Communications Director for CAIR-Florida but also as a board member of the Interfaith Workers Justice in Florida and founder of CAIR *en español*; Gujarati Muslims' contributions to civil society in Barbados through organizations like the Barbados Association of Muslim Ladies—with their project called Breaking Barriers, which aims to overcome cultural and social barriers some girls face in accessing education and gaining employment—or local mosque communities who have partnered with the Salvation Army to "alleviate hunger" in Bridgetown, the island nation's capital.¹ This is just a brief snapshot. To say the least, the examples from the map are numerous, and also include Islamic schools and cemeteries in Suriname; the Guyana Islamic Trust and National Islamic Sisters Association; relief work by larger, worldwide umbrella organizations in places like Haiti, Ecuador, and Puerto Rico; Radio Islam in Chile; the ecological restoration work of Mesquita Sumayyah Bint Khayyat in Brazil; or, the Latina Muslim Foundation shelter (Albergue Assabil) at the U.S./Mexico border.

In this edition, we focus on a few additional organizations and initiatives, with the insights of both scholars and activists, insiders and outsiders, in contexts as diverse as Puerto Rico and Brazil, Medellín, Colombia, and Detroit, Michigan. In "Social Welfare Services and *Dawah* in 'Autochthonous' Islamic Centers in Colombia," Baptiste Brodard explores the limits and possibilities of "Islamic social work" in Colombia, looking at a range of groups and contexts where philanthropic efforts are pursued by various means and to multiple ends. His paper specifically examines the motivations, ideologies, and practical outworking of each, with a focus on what he calls "autochthonous" (rather than "indigenous") socialities (i.e., "those not descended from migrants or colonists"). This focus on motivations and ideological underpinnings for philanthropic work among Latinx Muslims and Muslims in the Latinx Americas is a theme picked up on by each of the papers in this special issue.

In "Muslim Arab Beneficence at a Hemispheric Crossroads of Exceptional Rule," John Tofik Karam examines how, between the 1950s and 80s, Muslim Arab retailers and wholesale traders-initiated charity and community work amid the liberal exceptions made by illiberal regimes at the tri-border during authoritarian military rule in Brazil (1964–1985), Paraguay (1955–1989), and Argentina (1976–1980). As Karam writes, "With profits from import-export businesses on the Brazilian and

¹ See Bulbulia (2020, pp. 129-131).

Paraguayan sides of the border, Muslim Arabs [mostly Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian] founded and ran charity and community institutions.” In the latter part of his article, he interrogates how, from the 1990s to the 2010s, “counterterrorist liaisons of democratically elected governments that targeted Muslim Arab beneficence.” As he so eruditely illustrates, the examination of “Muslim beneficence” in the borderlands between Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina “reveal the transformation of Muslim Arabs from local benefactors into foreign suspects, neither fully absolved nor formally incriminated” and as part of “a still unfinished hemispheric history of exceptional rule.” This kind of analysis, which builds on his wider research in the book *Manifold Destiny* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2021), shows how Muslims in, across, and at the borders between various orders in the American hemisphere deploy philanthropic initiatives as means of accommodating various political, social, and cultural orders they are subject to.

Then, in an interview with Hazel Gómez, we discuss how her faith plays a central role in the philanthropic and civic work she does, especially as it pertains to integrating Islamic principles and teachings into her community organizing. Gómez, a board member for Rabata—a network of female Muslim scholars dedicated to educating Muslim women around the world—specifically cites a saying of the Prophet Muhammad that highlights the importance of ensuring people have basic rights such as a home, clothing, food, and water as well as a Quranic injunction that different people, from different places should “get to know one another.” These principles propel her philanthropic work and illustrate the ways in which Islamic tradition informs, and is informed by, philanthropic work in various contexts where Latinx Muslims live, work, pray, and engage their neighborhoods through activism and acts of social concern.

Malika Kettani, in her conversations with two individuals who are part of prominent philanthropic organizations in Brazil (Centro de Divulgação do Islam para América Latina, or CDIAL, the Center for the Promotion of Islam in Latin America and Al-Madina School in São Bernardo, São Paulo) explores the development of Muslim philanthropy in Brazil. The interviews as well as her historical situating of, and personal reflections on, them further engage questions around the relationship of *dawah* to philanthropy and vice versa. The interviews also deal with specific terms such as *zakat*, *fitra*, *sadaqah*, and *waqf* to explore how they are interpreted and applied in Latin American contexts. This paper also provides some perspective on how the Brazilian government provides facilities for Islamic institutions, the way Muslim nonprofits organization spend their *zakat*, and how they manage to help others in Brazilian civil society. Both through interviews and the author’s personal involvement, this paper offers multiple first-person accounts of Muslim philanthropy in Brazil.

Together, I believe these papers and practitioners’ perspectives speak to four “frames” that are important to keep in mind as you read this special issue. First, the importance of *intersections*, or the ways in which principles, perspectives, emphases, issues, and practices from *both* Islamic and Latin American/Latinx traditions and cultures come together in the philanthropic work of Muslim individuals and communities in Latin America and the Latinx US. Second, *connections*, or the ways in which these intersections—and the work itself—create opportunities for new

relationships, collaborations, and solidarities that would perhaps not, or could not, exist otherwise. Third, *tensions*, which at the same time emerge between various Muslim and non-Muslim actors based on various gendered, political, class-based, cultural, social, and religious orders and create room for “generative frictions”: those encounters at, between, and across difference that produce new combinations/conflict, adaptations/closures, and conversations (or, perhaps, arguments). Fourth, *multivalent manifestations*, or the numerous ways Muslim philanthropy is expressed in Latin America and the Latinx US—the various people, institutions, and organizations involved and the multitudinous issues and needs they seek to meet or advocate around. And, as is highlighted in each of the papers, the multivalent motivations and ideological interpretations that spur these actors to be involved in philanthropy and engage in acts of social and civic conscience.

Although valuable for their individual contributions, especially around these four themes, these articles and perspectives also prompt a shared question for readers to consider: How might we come to philanthropy by Muslim, Latin American, and Latinx actors—or the combinations and intersections thereof—in new light and develop our apperception and appreciation of each by putting them into dynamic conversation with one another? This special issue is a crucial step in the direction of such new understandings.

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Special Issue Articles

Together in the Struggle: Puerto Rican Muslims and their Philanthropic Activism from El Barrio to La Perla

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Abstract

From early on, philanthropic activism has played a critical role in the formation of Puerto Rican Muslim sociality. From the grassroots struggle for empowerment by Alianza Islámica—the first Latinx Muslim community, founded by four Puerto Ricans in El Barrio in 1987—to the multistakeholder work of the Three Puerto Rican Imams in the wake of Hurricane María, they have paired the Islamic emphasis on promoting the welfare of others with advocacy around issues of minoritization, in American society and the ummah. I discuss how Puerto Rican Muslims transform the vulnerabilities of marginalization into resilience and resistance through intersectional, philanthropic activism.

Keywords: *philanthropic activism, Puerto Rican Muslims, bregando, American Muslims, philanthropy*

In 2020, WNYC Studios and Futuro Studios produced a seven-part podcast series called “La Brega.” Through a combination of narrative storytelling and investigative journalism, it reported on how *la brega*—the struggle—has defined so many aspects of Puerto Rican life over the centuries. In the opening episode, host Alana Casanova-Burgess (2021) broke down exactly what “la brega” means to Boricuas and how they use the phrase in their everyday lives. She said, “There’s no perfect English translation for this word that Puerto Ricans use all the time, in a way no other Spanish speakers do...” Speaking to Boricuas “from San Juan to Queens,” she unpacked the multivalent meaning of “la brega” in the context of *lo cotidiano*, or everyday life. Casanova-Burgess said:

If you’re boricua and someone asks you how it’s going, how you’re doing, you might say, “ah, ya tu sabes—aquí en la brega.” Here, making it work, you know, dealing with it, in the struggle.... There’s an imbalance of power when you’re bregando, whether it’s against your boss or some larger injustice. It’s an underdog’s word. A brega implies a challenge we can’t really solve, so you have to hustle to get around it.

Referring specifically to the challenging realities confronting Puerto Ricans on the island and in the diaspora, she said:

...in Puerto Rico, there are a lot of challenges that seem unsolvable. Puerto Ricans are constantly bregando with the jobs that don't pay enough, the electricity that comes and goes, their kid's schools that are closed, the broken traffic lights that never get fixed. The hospital that doesn't get built. The government's debts that aren't paid. The frustration over status. Austerity. Colonialism.

"And," Casanova-Burgess continued, "la brega is a word that came to the states with the diaspora, who have had to find a way to deal with a new language ... to navigate somehow being immigrants and citizens at the same time ... to struggle with displacement and discrimination."

At the same time, as Casanova-Burgess (2021) clarified when discussing *la brega* with scholar Arcadio Diaz Quiñonez, "it's not just about dealing with a problem... it can also be finding a way to fight the system, to get around it, or somehow keep moving. There's an edge of creativity, too, it's like an art." In his essay "De Como y Cuándo Bregar," Diaz Quiñonez used *la brega* as a lens to understand Puerto Rican history and politics and identification, arguing that there's something about *bregando* that speaks to *puertorriquenidad* in general. As Casanova-Burgess put it: "Amidst potholes, protests and metaphors ... [la brega] sometimes asks too much of Boricuas" but at the same time carries with it "an innate sense of hope" (Gelpí 2005).

In this article, I discuss how Puerto Rican Muslims transform the vulnerabilities of their multiple marginalizations—what you might call their own *bregando*—into resilience and resistance through intersectional, philanthropic activism. Since the 1970s and 80s, philanthropic activism has played a critical role in the formation of Puerto Rican Muslim sociality. From the grassroots struggle for empowerment by Alianza Islámica—the first Latinx Muslim community, founded by four Puerto Ricans in El Barrio in 1987—to the multistakeholder work of the Three Puerto Rican Imams in the wake of Hurricane María, they have paired the Islamic emphasis on promoting the welfare of others with advocacy around issues of minoritization.

In the main, I explore how philanthropic activism serves as a means by which Puerto Rican Muslims assert their identifications and by which they resist marginalization in the multiple socialities they claim membership in. Utilizing the social capital and intersectional resources available to them as individuals and institutions straddling multiple constituencies (Puerto Rican, Muslim, Latinx, etc.), philanthropic activism becomes a way for Puerto Rican Muslims to (re)establish their own visibility and belonging in multiple publics. I share vignettes that showcase how Puerto Rican Muslims address multiple problems in the diaspora and on the island through philanthropic activism. These stories illustrate how Puerto Rican Muslims hustle around the marginalizations they are confronted with, how they deal with discrimination and difference in the very socialities they identify with, and how they not only try to remedy the problems they face but seek to transform the systems they see as oppressing them through philanthropy.

Doing so, Puerto Rican Muslims join a long line of philanthropic activists in the US (e.g., African American, Chicano, Indigenous, women, and other minority organizers) who not only seek to address a problem but organize for change and

actively pursue strategies to ameliorate the issues at hand through philanthropic infrastructure and efforts (Baldwin, 2007). By setting the agenda, and then defining the terms for success, philanthropic activists make philanthropy *proactive* rather than *reactive*. They not only identify deficiencies in systems and try to remedy them through financial support, but through disruptive, transformational activism (Avedon, 2019). For Puerto Rican Muslims, this work takes on particularly intersectional dimensions. Because they simultaneously identify with, and yet are marginalized from, multiple socialities, Puerto Rican Muslims create multiple, sometimes contradicting, solidarities, and collaborations to address the issues they see as deficient in society at large or within the socialities they identify with. This also means that their efforts at community building and advancement are not necessarily grand in their assemblage, but relatively small-scale and specific to their affective and material contexts. Nonetheless, like other minorities within minorities, they leverage what access and equity they have to spark what change they can within their contexts and beyond (Akango, 2021).

Therefore, I suggest their perspective adds more nuance and texture to our understanding of Muslim philanthropy in the US and its environs as well as its multivalent motivations, means, and methods. By looking at a sub-section of Muslims who engage in philanthropy as a means of activism based on their marginalizations, this view from below might help us continue to consider—and perhaps question—the ways we frame Muslim philanthropy in the US. Puerto Rican Muslims’ contextually specific but complex and intersecting philanthropic work reveals the localized, contextual, motivations for philanthropic activism. The motivations for their activism are not necessarily divorced from globally accessible Islamic sources of inspiration, but Puerto Rican Muslims modify them to meet the pressing needs of their sociality and those with whom they share solidarity. What is glimpsed in their narratives, I suggest, is a more pluralized, entangled, and convergent vision of global Islam in general and “Muslim philanthropy” in particular.

A Note on Method

The narratives that follow were gleaned from my ethnographic research in New York, New Jersey, Florida, Puerto Rico, and online between 2014 and 2020. Through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and engagement with online discussions and debates, I came to appreciate the multiple ways that Puerto Rican Muslims were active in multiple philanthropic initiatives. My ethnographic encounters with interlocutors not only involved in-depth, one-on-one interviews, but also conversations during events, participation in marches and philanthropic activities, as well as engagement in the hypertext of the Puerto Rican Muslim sociality where activists would often share their work and agitate for future change (Chitwood, 2019b). This multilocal and multiperspectival perspective helped me get a fuller, more complex picture of the Puerto Rican Muslim philanthropic landscape. With that said, my view is far from *emic* and my representations of the narratives below cannot be considered comprehensive or purely objective representations of Puerto Rican Muslim philanthropy. Nevertheless, as I wrote elsewhere, “although my positionality prevented full ‘participation,’ and full apperception, my consistent

presence offered an opportunity to intimately consider Puerto Rican Muslims' everyday" (Chitwood, 2022) activism, philanthropic and otherwise, and offer here a critically compassionate view of their work at, across, and between multiple constituencies and contexts.

Situating Puerto Rican Muslims

The first Muslims to arrive in Puerto Rico came as part of the initial encounters between European colonizers and the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean (in the case of Puerto Rico, the Taíno). As early as 1493, Muslims were among the soldiers, slaves, and others who came on ships from Spain. They were *ladinos*, Iberian Muslims forced to take on the Christian faith after the *Reconquista* and *bozales*, African Muslims forced to not only abandon their Islamic faith but also to take part in the colonization of the Americas as enslaved persons (Gomez, 2005; Ramadan-Santiago, 2015, 2016; Rout, 2003). Later, numerous African Muslims were also forcibly taken from their homelands as part of the broader transatlantic trade in enslaved persons. Forcibly brought to multiple ports of call in the colonial Americas—including Puerto Rico—these enslaved persons were utilized as a “solution” to the labor shortage that followed the decimation of local indigenous populations through disease, malnutrition, and forced labor. While estimates are unclear, somewhere between 10 and 20% of Africans enslaved in the Americas were Muslim. Unfortunately, many of their stories are lost to us and they remain largely anonymous in the historical record (Austin, 1997, p. 3).

Without the ability to openly practice, promulgate, or pass on their faith, there is no evidence to suggest that Islam survived in any overt form past the 19th century. Although there are vestiges and “footprints” (or *huellas*) left behind in Puerto Rican culture (Saez, 2017), it wasn't until the later 19th and 20th century that Muslims would begin to populate the island. Due to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and other disruptive and disastrous events in the Middle East and North Africa throughout the 20th century, a steady number of Muslim migrants and asylum seekers arrived in the Caribbean and the wider Americas. Like other locales in the region, these Muslims were able to establish themselves socially and economically, leading to the establishment of Islamic institutions on the island in the latter part of the 20th century. The first to open was Centro Islámico de Puerto Rico in Río Piedras (established in 1981) and the first purpose-built mosque was Masjid Alfaruq in Vega Alta (construction completed in 1997 after operating for several years out of a garage owned and operated by a Muslim migrant). There were also mosques purpose-built in Hatillo (Mezquita Al Madinah), Fajardo (Islamic Centre of Fajardo), Montehiedra (Centro Islámico del Caribe), and Ponce (Centro Islámico), the island's second largest city. In addition to these, there are publicly available prayer rooms in Aguadilla, Jayuya, Bayamón, Guaynabo, and elsewhere on the island.

Along with institutionalization—and the global circulation of media discourses and images about Islam and Muslims—came an increased visible presence for Muslims in Puerto Rican society. Over the last three decades the island has witnessed an increased number of conversions by those who identify as ethnic

Puerto Ricans (Caraballo-Resto 2019; Sánchez 2016). In the diaspora, Puerto Ricans started to convert as part of and alongside Black Muslim movements (e.g., the Nation of Islam, the Five Percent Nation) and through broader, more diverse Sunni Muslim communities in the US (Bowen 2013; Chitwood, 2019a; Martínez-Vásquez 2009; Morales 2018). Recently, there have been increased missionary efforts (e.g., by the Ahmadiyya, based in Guaynabo, or by Puerto Ricans in the diaspora returning to the island for the purpose of *dawah*). Although there are no official or verifiable numbers, there were an estimated 3,500–5,000 Muslims in Puerto Rico (most of them immigrants, predominately from Palestine) before Hurricane María (Caraballo-Resto, 2019) and an additional 11,000–15,400 Puerto Rican Muslim converts living in the US (Espinosa et al., 2017). Making up almost a quarter of the Latinx Muslim population in the US (22%), Puerto Rican Muslims play a significant role in developing and sustaining the broader Latinx Muslim sociality and sentiment. Nevertheless, Puerto Rican specific aspects of this “Latino Islamidad” can potentially get lost in broader treatments of the Latinx Muslim community, including its philanthropic efforts (Espinosa et al., 2017).

Two additional aspects of the Puerto Rican Muslim sociality are salient to mention before highlighting some of their philanthropic activist efforts. First, Puerto Rican Muslims are marginalized from each constituency they claim membership in. They are, as I have written elsewhere, “quadruple minorities”—Puerto Rican among Muslims, Muslim among Puerto Ricans, and *both* Puerto Rican *and* Muslim in the context of American empire (Chitwood, 2019a). As quadruple minorities Puerto Rican Muslims are displaced to the margins, with limited or no access to the terms of the hegemonic discourse of each community they claim membership in: Puerto Rican, Muslim, or “American”. In this essay, I focus on their marginalization—and the ways they attempt to speak back against this marginalization—through the lens of philanthropic activism.

Second, the Puerto Rican Muslim “community” is spread out across vast geographic distances. Puerto Rican Muslims can be found in New York and New Jersey, Connecticut and California, Florida, and Fajardo. There are Puerto Rican Muslims living in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. Not coincidentally, there are concentrations of Puerto Rican Muslims where there are also higher Puerto Rican *and* Muslim populations (e.g., the New York City metro area, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, Orlando and Miami, Florida, etc.). Despite their far-flung geographic distribution, there are multiple nodes that connect Puerto Rican Muslims. Particularly critical are digital spaces such as the “Boricuas Embraced by Islam” Facebook page or other social media groups and platforms that act as virtually connective tissue and an open space for dialogue, connection, and debate on issues of particular importance to Puerto Rican converts to Islam (Chitwood, 2019b). There are also physical nodes that help connect the broader network of Latinx Muslims in the US, such as Centro Islámico in Houston, Texas, or the North Hudson Islamic Education Center in Union City, New Jersey, which hosts the annual National Latino Muslim (Unity) Day. Many of these nodes are in and around New York City where, arguably, the contemporary Puerto Rican Muslim story—and their philanthropic activism—begins.

Alianza Islámica

On May 16, 2020, Rahim Ocasio—a founding member of Alianza Islámica, the first Latinx-specific Muslim organization in the US—posted a video titled, “Alianza Islamica in NY, celebrating Eid in 1998” to the “Boricuas Embraced by Islam” Facebook page. As the video begins, a group of children is playing with balloons at the front of what looks like a basement community center event space. There’s a flag with two green bands separated by a single white band with the first line of the *shahadah* in the middle hanging behind them, a nod to the flag of *al-Andalus*. All the while, Cuban trombonist and bandleader Generoso Jiménez’s “Llegaron del Otro Mundo” blares in the background as the camcorder zooms in on the DJs, who smirk and wave from their set-up in the corner of the room. As the camera pans out, Khalil—wearing a blue *thawb*, dark-rimmed wire glasses, and a black kufi—stands in front of a column bedecked with green and yellow balloons. He smiles a generous grin and greets the anonymous videographer with “Feliz Ramadan.”

It’s just after 2 pm on January 29, 1998 and Alianza Islámica is hosting a celebration for Eid al-Fitr. Founded in 1987 by Yahya Figueroa, Rahim Ocasio, and Ibrahim González, Alianza materialized out of “a revolutionary center of political activism and the struggle for civil rights” (Morales, 2018, p. 36) in the New York City area. Puerto Ricans—and other Latinx converts in general—largely found their way to Islam via Black Muslim groups (Bowen, 2010), who also shared a certain civil rights consciousness, to one degree or another. Via Black Ahmadiyya, Sunni, Shi’i groups, Sufi *туруq*, the Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam, or the Five Percenters, Puerto Rican and other Latinx Muslims converted to Islam, often as a means of augmenting and undergirding their shared civil rights struggle (Morales, 2018, pp. 28–36).

When they founded Alianza Islámica, Ocasio said they “began the difficult journey of being a Puerto Rican Muslim in a world that had trouble accepting that; both inside the mosques...and outside” (Jameel, 2016). He felt that Puerto Rican Muslims should be as proud of their cultural background as they were of their religion. Ocasio elaborated:

So, we started efforts to add a Puerto Rican accent to dawah efforts in the ISNA and ICNA, but to little effect. They were predominately South Asian organizations and they didn’t want anything to do with Spanish. We started independently to put our own identities and idioms first.

They not only wanted to meet pressing human needs, but foster Puerto Rican identity and pride. To that end, they offered various social programs as part of their efforts: GED prep, drug rehabilitation, gang negotiations, and job programs. They held cultural events and marched in the city’s famous Puerto Rican Day Parade proudly modeling a mix of Muslim and Puerto Rican symbols and dress.

Along the way, they leveraged a certain Nuyorican and postcolonial Puerto Rican consciousness that was emerging in New York City and its metro area in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Addressing issues including, but not limited to, “urban deindustrialization, housing divestment, and gentrification” a range of Puerto Rican activists worked in *El Bronx*, *El Barrio*, and *La Loisaida* to ameliorate the ill effects

of these developments and to invest in positive change (Schrader, 2020). Alianza Islámica and its members were an active part of this wider nexus of politically and socially engaged organizations that represented the more radical politics of the Puerto Rican diaspora in US cities in the 1970s and 80s. Collectively, albeit in different ways, they sought to overcome the challenges of migration in a colonial context while also creating new alternatives for social connection and collaboration.

Tired of “second-class citizenship, racism, and poverty, as well as with the United States’ continuing colonial domination of Puerto Rico” (Whalen & Vázquez-Hernández, 2005, p. 237), Puerto Rican activists—including Alianza—resisted various forms of marginalization through their work. They “sought to adjust to and mold their new surroundings to meet their needs, as well as to improve conditions for themselves and others” that “relied on social networks, the celebration of cultural traditions, involvement in existing community institutions, the building of their own community organizations, and political activism” to get their work done (Whalen & Vázquez-Hernández, 2005, pp. 41–42). As part of these “other groups” that sought to “take the mantle of the community struggle for empowerment” to the grassroots of New York community politics (Whalen & Vázquez-Hernández, 2005, p. 102). Alianza’s struggle also transcended their own particular concerns. They saw their marginalization as an “under class” in American cities as part of a broader struggle against neocolonialism and racism (Whalen & Vázquez-Hernández, 2005, pp. 69ff). They shared their struggle with other civil rights groups in the US and with other groups in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East. They saw the connections between “Occupied Palestine” and “Occupied Vieques” (a Puerto Rican island used for US military testing and bombing practice) and their joint struggle against the military might and racist superstructures of the “Western powers” (Morales, 2018, p. 16). Situated as part of this broader network of movements and organizations, Alianza Islámica provides an intersectional perspective on the experimental activism undertaken by Puerto Ricans in New York in the mid-to-late 20th century that is both distinctly Nuyorican and Islamic at the same time.

The confluence of that Nuyorican consciousness and the blossoming of a distinctly Latinx—and particularly Puerto Rican—Muslim political and cultural revival were reflected in the program for that Eid celebration back in 1998. Around two minutes into the video, the program officially begins with a choral recitation of “Puerto Rican Obituary” by Pedro Petri, a member of the Young Lords, a Chicago-based street gang cum political and social action movement fighting for neighborhood empowerment and self-determination for Puerto Ricans, Latinx, and other colonized people. Apologizing in advance for any “offensive language” in the poem, attendees are invited to listen for how the poem resonates with their experience as Puerto Ricans and as Muslims: “we’re hoping *inshaAllah* you might take the general notion of the poem, which we feel identifies with our Puerto Rican roots and culture and struggles here in America...” Then, an ensemble of Alianza Islámica members recite stanzas from the poem, which viscerally gives voice to the economic and political Puerto Rican experience in the US—citizens whose culture and hearts belong to *Borikén*, but who struggle living as minorities in the urban-centers of the nation that inherited the colonial mantle from Spain. As the poem,

and its lines about pledging “allegiance to the flag that wants them destroyed” and being “proud to belong to a community of gringos who want them lynched” ends, the Alianza Islámica crowd responds: *takbir! Allahu akbar!*

At “The Call” event in Queens in October 2017, I had the opportunity to speak with some of the people in the video detailed above—Jorge Pabón, Rahim Ocasio, and Yahya Figueroa. Reflecting on the old days, Figueroa told me how he grew up in New York’s *barrios* and encountered various gangs, social activist groups, and religious communities all “vying for your attention and allegiance.” He became a Muslim in 1973 after being a part of the Young Lords Party, a political organization that represented “the concerns of Puerto Rican urban youth and their commitment to make a difference in dealing with the everyday problems of the inner city barrios” (Acosta-Belén & Santiago, 2018, p. 151). Originally founded in Chicago, the New York chapter would prove “the most visible and active.” Leading up to his conversion, he was attracted to the Ahmadis and said that they were “influential” in the early formation of the Black and Puerto Rican Muslim socialities.² “We wouldn’t be what we are without them,” he said. He also used to “go around with the Tablighi Jamaat to lapsed Pakistanis and started thinking, ‘why am I not doing this with my own people?’” He said he was a “Five Percenter because I was at 112 and Lennox, you had to be. There was no choice.” He saw Malcolm X speak in Harlem, he listened to Clarence 13X—the founder of the Five Percenters—“teach mathematics lessons to the gods.” He even heard of Armando X (aka P.R.) a Puerto Rican in the Five Percenters who came to some prominence. For his part, Ocasio had connected with the Islamic Party of North America (IPNA) where they felt that being Muslim meant abandoning their Puerto Rican and Latinx identity.

These, “young Muslim Nuyoricans now faced a new form of possible assimilation and loss of Latino language and culture. This time, they worried their Spanish would be displaced by Arabic and their culture by one from a Muslim majority society” (Morales, 2018, p. 38). Figueroa said:

They try to tell us that we shouldn’t be tribal or have our own culture. All of them do! They are proud of being Saudi, Turkish, Pakistanis, whatever. And we’ve been behind them. We were out there marching for Palestine before anyone else. We fought to march and protest. We know how to be global, we choose to remain proudly Puerto Rican.

Ocasio and Figueroa said that—along with González—they founded Alianza Islámica with the expressed aim of propagating Islam and offering social service programs to and for “their people.” This Nuyoricans core sought to draw other Latinx members of their community into the fold and to struggle for peace and justice in a shared and “similar cosmopolitan space in the United States” (Morales, 2018, p. 39). Influenced by the “revolutionary center of political activism and the struggle

² “So important was Malcolm X to the New York Young Lords—a group of, primarily, Nuyoricans, radical youth fighting for freedom and justice in their community—that in the first issue of *Palante* published in New York City (in late 1969), their initial biographical feature was not on a great Puerto Rican leader. It was on Malcolm X and the relevance of his legacy.” See http://darrel.wanzerserrano.com/2015/05/19/the-young-lords-and-malcolm-x/?fbclid=IwAR3xPm32wzNtgaL-GL9N3iX7yKCaNshtbHFtVgIvBH3eN9GEu0HsYYL_FJE

for civil rights” they grew up with (Morales, 2018, p. 36), Figueroa, Ocasio, and González drew inspiration from various movements that came before them, from the Ahmadiyya to Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation, the Young Lords to a relatively forgotten group known as Bani Sakr—a community in Newark created in the 1970s with “Hajj Hisham Jaber, who led Malcolm X’s funeral prayer, as their spiritual guide.”

Their pioneering example would come to influence what religious studies scholar Harold Morales called the “second” and “third waves” of Latinx Muslim *dawah* and activism in the US (Morales, 2018). While drawing on Alianza’s legacy, “second wave” organizations like PIEDAD, the Latino American Dawah Organization (LADO), and the Los Angeles Latino Muslim Association (LALMA) differed from Alianza Islámica in significant ways. As Morales (2018) notes, they not only focused more on informational *dawah* without attendant social services, but also sought to work “within, rather than autonomously from, broader American Muslim groups.” (p. 46). Against a backdrop of “colorblind” political aspirations and diversification of minority agendas, this meant a shift away from the politics of philanthropic activism among urban Latinx populations and toward globally influenced Islamic discourses on outreach and giving. Rather than focusing on “civil rights and the creation of a more just civil society” these new organizations focused on distributing information about Islam, both on the streets and online (Morales, 2018, p. 46).

Emerging in the beginning of the 21st century, this “third wave” was “characterized by a distinct historical context” that includes debates around immigration, the public role of Islam and Muslims in the US after 9/11, and the relation of Latinx Muslims to the country as a whole (Morales, 2018, p. 169). This led to a series of attempts at consolidation and narrative building across a diverse Latinx Muslim landscape. Much of this work occurs online since the community is spread out over vast geographic distances and individuals and institutions are often isolated from one another (Chitwood, 2019b). Amid this, Alianza Islámica’s founders have attempted to reassert their voice and call Latinx Muslims—and Puerto Rican Muslims in particular—back to a form of resistance politics founded in mutual solidarity and philanthropic activism. To do this, they have created their own website and share stories from their early days—including videos on YouTube that recall their radical politics and revolutionary call to equality.

The Three Puerto Rican Imams

Some seem to have taken up their call, including the Three Puerto Rican Imams Project. Founded in 2017, the Three Puerto Rican Imams Project can be described as part of both the “second wave” of Latinx Muslim efforts in the US and of “third wave” activism. In September 2017, I had just left fieldwork Puerto Rico and was settling into my new digs in Harlem, in New York City. With a certain dread, I followed along from afar as Hurricane María formed in the Atlantic and aim its deadly wind and rains at the island of Borikén. After making landfall near Yabucoa on September 18, the hurricane ravaged the island. Mobile phone reception and internet was down, and no one knew what was happening to their families and friends “back home.” Although communication was down on the island, correspondence

concerning the island and its people was on overdrive in the US. Puerto Rican Muslims were hyper-active on Facebook trying to find information, rally support, and quickly collect donations to come to the aid of their brothers and sisters, family, and friends in Puerto Rico. As Díaz (2017) reported, “the Puerto Rican diaspora in the United States an all over the world watched in horror as their homeland was devastated beyond recognition...perhaps the most frustrating ordeal was not being able to communicate with family members to find out if they were safe.”

Initially, there was a rush of international assistance that came flooding into Puerto Rico to help with recovery. The storm devastated the island nation’s already beleaguered infrastructure and killed at least 2,975 people.³ Homes were destroyed, forests felled, and roads were impassable. As part of that response, Danny Abdullah Hernandez of Houston, Texas, Yusuf Rios of Cleveland, Ohio, and Wesley Abu Sumayyah Lebron of Passaic, New Jersey, formed the “Three Puerto Rican Imams” project to collect funds and distribute aid to the areas worst affected by the hurricane. They wanted to provide “emergency relief efforts and sustainable projects that addressed and still address the needs of the People of Puerto Rico.” Partnering with organizations such as United Muslim Relief, Islam in Spanish, the Islamic Circle of North America’s (ICNA), the community kitchen El Comedor Pedro Albizu Campos, and El Centro Islamico del Caribe in Montehiedra they sought to fill containers of donations in the US and then ship and deliver the aid on-site in Puerto Rico. Delivering basic goods, the three imams traveled across the island meeting with the people worst affected by the storm—Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Throughout the US, benefit dinners and donation rallies were held, and GoFundMe campaigns started online.

Imam Wesley AbdurRazzaq Abu Sumayyah Lebron, one of three Puerto Rican Muslims who founded the “Three Puerto Rican Imams” project, posted on the “Boricuas Embraced by Islam” Facebook page soon after the full extent of the storm’s devastation became clear in September 2017. He wrote of the project:

These powerful storms literally hit home for the directors, three Puerto Rican Muslim leaders, and their supporters, who share both their pain and vision, making this a mission of love and solidarity. This project is unique in that it unites various organizations and works collaboratively with others both inside and outside of Puerto Rico, while still working independently in its response. It has successfully brought people together of all faiths and nationalities with the common goal of providing relief to those most affected by the hurricanes and easing some of their hardships (refer to our Facebook page for pictures of all the work).

³ This number was acknowledged by the Puerto Rican government in August 2018 nearly a year after their initial report of just 64 deaths and then raising it to 1,427 in the beginning of August. Debates over the number continue to rise. Other reports and estimates put the number even higher. A highly publicized and viral Harvard report said the number could be anywhere between 80 and 8,500. (See BBC News, [2018, August 29], “Puerto Rico increases Hurricane Maria death toll to 2,975,” <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-45338080>; F. Robles, [2019, August 29], “Puerto Rican Government Acknowledges Hurricane Death Toll of 1,427,” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/09/us/puerto-rico-death-toll-maria.html>)

In the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, all three traveled to Puerto Rico. Wearing hats and vests emblazoned with their red and blue logo, including a stylized rendition of the Taíno petroglyph of the coquí frog (one of the most common species of frog in Puerto Rico and a de facto symbol for the island and its people), they delivered food, water, household items, generators, and worked with various organizations to build homes and establish community kitchens.

Beyond their work in Puerto Rico, the organization also pursued and completed projects in Hawaii, Guatemala, Haiti, and in their own communities in Texas, Ohio, and New Jersey. In late summer 2021, they shared that they had successfully commence the construction of a well in Gaza. When tensions flared over the eviction of Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem and Israeli authorities fired rockets on Gaza, killing 256 Palestinians (including 66 children) In May this year (2021) thousands of pro-Palestinian demonstrators marched on the streets of urban centers such as Berlin, Paris, London, and Chicago. As Balta (2021) wrote:

Among the hundreds of “Free Palestine” signs and waving Palestinian flags are Puerto Rican flags peppered throughout the crowd shouting, “Hey hey, ho ho, the occupation has got to go.” Many Puerto Ricans stand in solidarity with Palestinians against what they see as a common enemy: settler colonialism. “During the recent uprisings we continue the long tradition of protesting and demanding an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestine,” declared the Puerto Rican Cultural Center of Chicago in a statement on social media. “We will continue to fight until Palestine, Puerto Rico, and everyone is free.”

Far from the first time such solidarities emerged, scholars such as Sara Awartani have documented how Puerto Ricans and Palestinians have long found common cause in their resistance to imperial domination and in turning to one another to help share the struggle and build resilience (Awartani, 2017).

These dynamics of resistance and resilience are also present and illuminated in Puerto Rican Muslims’ lived realities. The plotline of both Muslims and Puerto Ricans today unfolds in the shadow, and under the influence, of American empire. The story that emerges is one of perseverance, resistance, and resilience, each with their own sociopolitical contours, seminal events, and emphases. In the lives of Puerto Rican Muslims, the narratives of colonialism and cultural assimilation become intertwined to reveal a complex, cosmopolitan, nexus of solidarity around issues of independence, being a people without a nation, and facing an intersection of phobias in the late modern age. When the Gaza attacks occurred in 2021, Puerto Ricans in general, and Puerto Rican Muslims in particular, felt personally imbricated in the conflict and were roused to respond.

Initially infuriated, and then inspired, by the tensions in Gaza, the Three Puerto Rican imams sprang into action and rallied support from among the Puerto Rican Muslim community. Sharing their photos online after months of fundraising, they were proud to report that trucks were dropping off pipes and they were already scouting out the location for a second well in the West Bank. Referencing the shared struggle between “Occupied Palestine” and “Occupied Vieques” like their forebears in Alianza Islámica, they spoke of the need for concrete solidarity (this time, in the

form of a well) between Muslims across the globe. To further connect the two, and as a means of thanking their supporters, the Three Puerto Rican Imams reported that they would be inscribing the name of “the Ríos Family” on the Gaza well, who, they said, “have worked diligently to make this project come to life.”

In this way, the Three Puerto Ricans stand apart, and between, organizations that came before them. The Three Puerto Rican Imams share similarities with groups like IslamInSpanish and LALMA, with their emphasis on *dawah*. Furthermore, they can be situated as part of the reconfigurations of the Latinx Muslim landscape that occurred during the 2010s that represent a distinct and notable divergence from more general “consolidations” that marked this “third wave” of Latinx Muslim organization and activism. However, although the organization features connections and collaborations with non-Muslim Latinx, Latinx Muslim, and other organizations and groups, they are particularly focused on the needs, identifications, and specific historical and contemporary context of Puerto Ricans. They may serve broader needs (e.g., by building wells in Haiti or Gaza), but their impetus of existence is in addressing the peculiar situation and struggle of Puerto Ricans on the island and in the diaspora.

Thus, at least in some ways, they are similar to Alianza Islámica, whose mission emerged out of the particular needs of Puerto Ricans in urban New Jersey and New York in the 1980s and 90s. Likewise, the Three Puerto Rican imams, although creating partnerships with other groups and addressing needs beyond that of Puerto Rican Muslims, are distinctly shaped by the unique historical junctures and narrative outlined above. Moreover, they are seeking to address the specific contemporary notion of what it means to be AmeRícan Muslims. Although their work is more global and diffuse, it is in many ways parallel to that of Alianza Islámica and its Puerto Rican founders’ motivation to “publicly showcase an expression of Muslim culture that was distinctly Puerto Rican and accurately reflected our contemporary cultural reality” with a result that is “novel yet familiar to both Muslims and non-Muslim alike.”

Other Projects, Causes, and Local Initiatives: Sociedad Islámica de Puerto Rico

There are numerous other philanthropic projects among Puerto Rican Muslims that I could focus on. From the work of the Ahmadiyya Community based in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico to Muslim women banding together to campaign against domestic violence and the savagery of “these mean streets” in Newark, New Jersey, and its environs. Due to limitations in space, however, I will highlight just one more organization in this essay: la Sociedad Islámica de Puerto Rico (SIPR), founded in 2002 by Sumayah. I first met Sumayah at the beach at Punta Escambrón in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Dressed in a black *abaya*, she was talking to me between fending off questions about her dress from more-than-curious interlopers, watching her two children splashing in the salty waves, and making henna tattoos for beachgoers to help raise funds for SIPR.

Dedicated to “educating about Islam and Muslims and supporting new Muslims in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean,” SIPR became a conduit for a wide range of activist work by Sumayah and her “society sisters.” In addition to street

dawah and multicultural cooking classes, Sumayah and others take an active role in interreligious initiatives on the island, while imams at local *mezquitas* and leaders of other Muslim organizations have opted to stay away. As part of this work, Sumayah is unequivocal in her support for LGBTQI rights. Having taken part in, and led, mass same-sex wedding ceremonies in San Juan in 2015, Sumayah has received significant amounts of criticism and outright opprobrium from Muslims at *mezquitas* across the island. Her actions in 2015 even led the mosque in Río Piedras to cut ties with SIPR and stop funding Sumayah's efforts.

Even so, she is adamant in her positions. Sumayah told me, "The Prophet (PBUH) teaches that we must pursue justice over the rules of religion." In her advocacy, Sumayah sees herself in the vein of another Sumayah, a slave brought to Mecca from Yemen during the time of the Prophet. Having become a Muslim before her husband and son, she boldly began to advocate for Muhammad's movement in public. "She fought against infanticide. She urged the enslaved to think for themselves," Sumayah said, "she challenged the status quo and roused a sense of resistance among those oppressed by the system." As a Puerto Rican *muslimah*, who she feels are minoritized five times over, Sumayah believes she has more in common with members of the LGBTQI community than with other Muslims in Puerto Rico:

We know what it is to fight for justice, for inclusion, for the right to exist, to be who we are—Muslim and Puerto Rican, gay and Puerto Rican—no matter our identities. That shared struggle is something I don't have in common with comfortable Muslims who've never known anything else.

She is joined in this work by Angelica. A self-described "proud Puerto Rican *Muslimah*" who ran for political office in the east of the island, Angelica advocates for LGBTQI rights in Puerto Rico, the US, and the *ummah* alongside her outspoken sister in the faith. In a telling photo posted on their respective social media profiles, Angelica and Sumayah pose together at a march held in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in solidarity with the victims of the PULSE Nightclub shooting in Orlando, FL, in June 2016. Angelica helps hold a flag with the COEXIST symbol written in rainbow font, bearing the representative logos of various religious traditions. Next to her, Sumayah wears a rainbow hijab and holds up a sign for the "Sociedad Islámica de Puerto Rico." With the post, Angelica proudly proclaimed, "*Unidas por el amor*"—"United for love." Asked why she not only attended the rally, but proudly—and publicly—posted about it, Angelica said that Puerto Rican Muslims and the LGBTQI community had to stand united against all forms of hate. For her, the tyranny of Islamophobia and attacks against the LGBTQI community are inherently linked. "To end Islamophobia, we have to stand against all kinds of hate crimes," she said.

Sensing these potential solidarities, and acting on them, could be said to be a characteristic hallmark of Puerto Rican Muslim philanthropic activism over the years. Indeed, it might even be viewed as a necessity for Puerto Rican Muslims, who straddle multiple constituencies and simultaneously feel marginalized from the resources of power available in each. Like Sumayah, Angelina, and their work with SIPR, many Puerto Rican Muslim philanthropists and activists seek out partners wherever they may be found—among urban renewal initiatives, umbrella Islamic

organizations, or activists advocating for sexual and gender rights. Put together, these may seem a strange coalition. Nonetheless, when analyzed according to their respective contexts and understood according to Puerto Rican Muslims' multiple marginalizations, the odd coalitions and collaborations begin to make much more sense and, as intimated above, come off as much less idiosyncratic and much more imperative. Thus, these collaborations are both compulsory and creative. There are, in other words, Puerto Rican Muslims' own form of *bregando* insofar as they not only find a way of dealing with the problem through their philanthropic activism, but leverage what resources, partnerships, and possibilities they have available to them "to fight the system, get around it and keep moving."

Conclusions and Areas for Further Consideration

In a book of poetry reflecting on her faith, Puerto Rican identification, and Puerto Rican Muslims' multiple marginalizations, poet Díaz (2020) wrote:

With oppression manifest, comes insight, Puerto Rico thrust into darkness,
only to see the light. But Boricuas have hope, we have been in worse
situations, battling for independence against imperialist nations.

It is this sense of defiance, of resilience, of Boricua Muslim pride, that motivates not only Díaz's poetry, but also the philanthropic activism of organizations like Alianza Islámica, the Three Puerto Rican Imams, and Sociedad Islámica de Puerto Rico. Thus motivated, they go beyond philanthropy and embrace the role of public advocate to grow awareness and prioritize the issues they believe lie at the heart of their sociality's manifest oppressions.

Looking to effect widespread change rather than just attempt to ameliorate an immediate problem, their work is *both* reactive *and* proactive. It is not just about dealing with a problem, it can, in the words of Casanova-Burgess, be creatively finding a way to fight the system, get around it, or somehow keep moving. Like *bregando*, it is an inventive art of resilience and resistance that expands Puerto Rican Muslims' "moral imagination" (Payton & Moody, 2008), taking a broader view than the immediate issues at hand and seeking to change systems themselves. Thus, Puerto Rican Muslim activists become force-multipliers, catalyzing new partnerships, and generating intersecting alliances through shared marginalizations and frictions—with Black Muslims, Palestinians, or the LGBTQI community. In building these coalitions, they create and shape novel conversations and bring fresh, wider-ranging, visions to what "Muslim philanthropy" is and could be at both communal and personal levels.

I suggest they enlarge the *ecosystem of the possible*. Not finding help in traditional institutions and organizations and being impatient to ignite measurable change, Puerto Rican Muslims *bregando* their way through, discover a way to work it, hustle around, and find a pathway to address shared challenges that appear intractable. They are a prime example of "other philanthropic logics" that require deeper introspection as to what counts as "philanthropy" in the first place (Mottiar & Ngcoya, 2016, p. 151). With that said, their philanthropical activism is also marked by a series of tensions in praxis, wherein their collaborations are marked by friction and practical hurdles. Beyond being hard-fought, their work can also

be short-lived or limited in scope and impact. These observed difficulties among Puerto Rican Muslims working at the intersection of multiple identifications and socialities undergirds the findings of others such as Jibrin and Salem (2015), who argue that while theories of intersectionality often promise much, expectations can often be too high for practitioners to reasonably reach.

Nonetheless, I submit that by taking up relatively small but categorically complex cases like that of Puerto Rican Muslims and their philanthropic activism in multiple locales and periods of time, we might better appreciate and apperceive the plurality, changeability, and entanglement of concepts like “Muslim philanthropy” in historically specific, intersecting perspective. While undercooked, incomplete, and in need of further discussion, I believe the ethnographic anecdotes shared above help reveal textured, everyday responses to some of the key questions that form the discourse around the idea and concept of “Muslim philanthropy” in the US. Moreover, they invite more reflection on the possibilities of intersectional, philanthropic activism around critical issues of racial, gender, economic, and political justice.

From here, I would welcome further research that questions how Puerto Rican Muslim philanthropic activism compares to other forms of Muslim philanthropy more broadly or in the Caribbean and its environs. Furthermore, we might continue to probe the challenges present in such intersectional philanthropy or to what degree notions of justice come to bear on Muslim philanthropy in the Americas. For now, it is enough to say that Puerto Rican Muslims’ philanthropic activism offers distinct opportunities to better apperceive the lived realities of Muslim philanthropy in the US, the Caribbean, and the Spanish-speaking Americas. Despite being a relatively small sociality, Puerto Rican Muslims’ categorical complexity and experience of divergent affective tendencies in their everyday life presents us with an opportunity to simultaneously broaden understandings of the constitutive geographies of global Islam and perceptions about what counts as “Muslim philanthropy.”

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Social Welfare Services and Dawah in “Autochthonous” Islamic Centers in Colombia

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Abstract

In various cities throughout Colombia, Islamic centers provide welfare services to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Some organize food distributions in the streets of deprived neighborhoods, while others receive recipients directly on their premises. In each case, the aim is to help people in the name of Islam, including non-Muslims. What are the objectives of the welfare activities developed by Islamic organizations? What are Muslim actors' motivations and expectations for their charity work investments? What is the relationship between philanthropy and dawah? This article takes up these questions through empirical case studies in Colombia in order to discuss how several Islamic centers in the country, whose aim is to attract “autochthonous” Muslims—those not descended from migrants or colonists—concretely organize charitable practices and examine the actors' motivations as well as the theological and ideological rationales that underlie them.

Keywords: *charity, Islam, Muslims, Colombia, welfare*

In recent years, several Muslim communities and Islamic centers in Colombia have begun to carry out philanthropic activities in various areas for both Muslims and non-Muslims. As part of these charitable activities, some communities organize food pantries in disadvantaged neighborhoods, while others receive beneficiaries directly on their premises. The leaders of the Islamic centers express concern about social issues such as poverty, crime, and education. In each case, a common narrative insists on the duty to help people who are impoverished and add value to society. In this context, charity work is implemented in the name of Islam to answer the call of Allah and follow the example of Prophet Muhammad.

Preliminary observations reveal that most of these charitable activities reach a majority of non-Muslim beneficiaries, which seems to indicate the inclusion of a broader public beyond community boundaries. Nevertheless, other concerns besides philanthropical intentions may be behind charity services, which are generally seen as an effective means of expanding a religion's influence and attracting people to the faith (Colonos, 1994; Bastian, 2017). This background observation motivates this article to first analyze the welfare practices carried out by Muslim groups in

the name of Islam in Colombia. In this particular Latin American context, Muslims constitute a very small minority, estimated at only 10,000 followers⁴ (Castellanos, 2010), and are located far from the religious and cultural centers of the Muslim world. The fact that the majority of Muslim communities in Colombia provide welfare services or engage in charitable work raises several questions. What are the goals of the welfare activities developed by Islamic organizations? What are the motivations and expectations of Muslim actors through their investments in this field? Finally, in the context of Colombia and beyond, what is the relationship between charity and *dawah*?⁵ To answer these questions, this paper discusses the different ways that Islamic centers provide charitable services in several regions of Colombia, while also exploring the actors' motivations and the theological and ideological rationales that underpin them.

Faith-based welfare activities in diverse Muslim-majority societies have been extensively investigated (see, for instance, Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2008; Harmsen, 2008; Jawad, 2012) as well as Islamic social work in the context of non-Muslim societies (Martens, 2014; Barylo, 2017, Brodard, 2023b). In addition to critically reflecting on this available literature, it was necessary to conduct research in three Muslim communities in Colombia. After a brief reminder of relevant articles on the subject and a clarification of some methodological aspects, I therefore examine case studies that allow for an analytical reflection on various issues related to the link between religious activism and philanthropic work, such as the relationship between *dawah* and welfare activities. In short, this paper sheds light on the link between Islamic activism⁶ and philanthropy in Colombia, particularly in Muslim communities characterized by a high proportion of autochthonous converts or direct descendants of converts.

The Development of Islam in Colombia: Foreign Islamic Organizations' Activism and Autochthonous Conversions

Muslim constituencies in Colombia and other Latin American countries are the result of both more or less recent migration phenomena and individual or collective conversion processes.⁷ Some literature addresses Islam in Latin America from a transnational and comparative perspective (Delval, 1992; Logroño Narbona et al., 2015; Chitwood, 2021), while other contributions focus on the study of specific Muslim communities, for example in Mexico (Ismu Kusumo, 2004;

⁴ This number must be interpreted with caution, as there are no precise statistics on the number of Muslims in the country. Moreover, given the ongoing nature of conversions/reversions, as well as "exits" from Islam, estimating the number of Muslims is particularly delicate in the Colombian context.

⁵ *Dawah*, an Arabic word meaning "invitation," is used in this context to refer to the effort of spreading and preaching Islam to non-Muslims. In some Islamic organizations, it can also refer to spreading the "orthodox" interpretation of Islam to Muslims.

⁶ Borrowing Hamid's (2016) definition, Islamic activism refers to "Muslim faith-based religious collective action" (p. 9), which can include both charity work and *dawah* among other spheres of investment.

⁷ The phenomenon of conversions to Islam in Colombia, which is not the focus of this article, deserves to be fully addressed in another issue. It relates to diverse motivations including spiritual quest, political engagement, social relation, and cultural influence, among others.

Cañas Cuevas, 2006; Medina, 2014; Garcia Linares, 2020). Regarding Colombia, it remains difficult to find research studies that trace the overall development of Muslim communities in the country over recent decades, which can be explained, among other things, by the recent and rapidly evolving nature of Muslim congregations in the country. Nevertheless, there are several contributions based on case studies focusing on local communities, specifically in Buenaventura (Valencia Potes, 2014; Castellanos, 2014, 2018), Bogotá (Castellanos, 2010), Maicao (García Flórez, 2007, pp. 70–75), and Cali (Murillo Potes, 2012; Tello Neira, 2013). In these cases, the historical evolution of Islam and former Muslim organizations in Colombia must be considered so that the current context and challenges can be understood better. On the one hand, an early Muslim presence in northern Colombia stemmed from important migrations from Lebanon during the second part of the 20th century, principally in Maicao. On the other hand, other Muslim communities were formed either through collective conversions, such as in Buenaventura, or following more recent migrations from various Muslim-majority countries (e.g., Pakistan, Morocco). If many Islamic centers gather both Muslim migrants and local converts, a few congregations concentrate almost exclusively on converts or their direct descendants, which justifies the use of the term “autochthonous”⁸ to refer to these Muslim congregations.

The case studies in this article focus on such autochthonous local Muslim congregations for the reason that they gather a large majority of Muslims of Colombian background, either men and women who converted to Islam or their offspring. These autochthonous Muslim communities are not representative of the Islamic centers of the country, many of which are still directed and frequented by a majority of migrants and foreigners. Therefore, a distinction between the majority autochthonous Muslim congregations and the others gathering migrants seems to make sense to analyze potentially diverging dynamics of activism and welfare in the name of Islam. In this regard, the three case studies concern Islamic centers led and frequented by local Muslims of Colombian origin, although *mezquita* As-Salam in Medellín still is supervised by a *shaykh* from Egypt.

Although these cases do not represent the country’s Muslim reality in its entirety, they do reflect a significant trend in the organization of the Colombian Muslim community. These three case studies can therefore be used as a basis to address some of the broader research questions mentioned above. As they indicate concrete practices and discourses, they will allow us to reflect on such issues based on firsthand, qualitative evidence. In this regard, field observation and interviews were needed for each case study, mostly based on ethnographic methods like participant observation and informal interviews with both leaders and community members. Only through immersion in the field could accurate data be collected, especially in the Colombian context in which only a few academic studies have been realized about Muslim congregations (García Flórez, 2007; Castellanos, 2010), especially in the related areas.

⁸ This adjective remains relative and debatable, as descendants of migrants can also claim to be autochthonous in Colombia since they are born there. In this context, it distinguishes between Muslims coming from a Muslim-majority migrant background, and the ones who are converted or direct descendants of converts.

Following a brief discussion of the methodology, I share insights based on my observations in Buenaventura, which remains a “hot spot” of Muslim activism in Colombia and whose members often come from the Afro-American Shia Muslim community. The first case focuses on the Fundación Islamica Kauzar in Cali, which is actually an outgrowth of the pioneering Afro-Colombian Muslim community. To keep with examples of autochthonous Muslim congregations, I then introduce *mezquita* Abu Bakr, located in a deprived suburb of Cartagena on the Caribbean coast. Finally, I consider the recently developing Muslim community of *mezquita* As-Salam in Medellín, which has become a major actor in *dawah* and social activities in the region over the last couple of years. In each case, the purpose was to develop an understanding of the welfare activities as well as the perception of *dawah* and wider activism at the social and political levels.

Methodology

Due to insufficiencies in the literature related to various Muslim communities in Colombia and more particularly their engagement in philanthropy, it was necessary to collect data and reflections on recent trends, discourses, and practices within Muslim congregations themselves. Concretely, the field study first involved repeated visits to numerous Islamic centers and mosques throughout the country, particularly those extending the scope of their activity beyond ritual alone. To be accepted within these communities, ethnographic immersion and participant observation were required. My identification as a Muslim strongly contributed to gaining such access, particularly given the characteristics of both the social environment and studied object. Indeed, Muslim communities in Colombia, particularly in deprived areas, can be considered as “difficult” fields, whose specificities involve suspicion from the interviewees, relational tensions, proselytism, or surrounding danger potentially exposing the researcher to mistrust, misunderstanding, and hostility (Bouillon et al., 2008). In this regard, shared social experiences, common religious beliefs, and cultural affinities tend to reduce the symbolic distance between the researcher and the informants, which significantly improve the researcher’s integration and legitimacy in the field.

From 2020 to 2022, I undertook fieldwork in several *mezquitas* and Islamic centers throughout the country, during which I conducted interviews with approximately 40 people who attended these congregations or who were direct witnesses to the developments of the Muslim organizations involved.¹⁰ In this regard,

⁹ *Mezquita* means mosque in Spanish.

¹⁰ In Colombia, I conducted fieldwork (observation and interview) within various Muslim communities in the following places: Maicao (*mezquita* de Omar Ibn Al-Jattab), Santa Marta (Asociación Islamica Santa Marta), Barranquilla (*mezquita* Othman Ben Affan y Musallah El Musulman “La Finca”), Cartagena (*mezquita* de Muhammad y *mezquita* Abu Bakr), Bogotá (*mezquita* Abu Bakr Alsiddiq, *mezquita* Al Qurtubi, *mezquita* Estambul, Tabio [Dergah]), Medellín (*mezquita* As-Salam y *mezquita* de Belén), Cali (*mezquita* An-Nur y Centro Islamico Kauzar), Pereira, Buenaventura (Instituto Silvia Zeneb, *mezquita* del barrio Rockefeller, and the Sunni community), and Guapi (*mezquita* local).

dozens of hours of informal interviews¹¹ with imams, community leaders, and other Muslims, mostly converts, constitute the bulk of the data collected for this research. Due to the sensitivity of the topic¹² and the profile of the interviewees, almost all the interactions were carried out in informal settings without simultaneous recording (Kaufman, 1996). Beyond the classical dichotomization between overt and covert participant observation (Soulé & Richet, 2010), my approach maintained that the researcher, even when they clarify their identity and their purpose in the field, tends to be identified differently by the actors, who often fail to understand the scope of the research and its consequences for the organization (Brodard, 2020b). Similarly, the difference between the insider and outsider are often not as clear as it seems, as the researcher can partially be perceived as a member of the group and at the same time a stranger. To sum up, as it happens in many ethnographic research studies, I suggest that the classical boundaries between insider and outsider as well as overt and covert approaches remain blurry and ambivalent, depending on each context of observation and interview. Nonetheless, these issues have characterized many ethnographic research studies (e.g., Halloy, 2007) without compromising the quality of the collected data.

“Autochthonous” Muslim Congregations in Colombia and Charity Work

The Pioneering Muslim Community of Buenaventura

Buenaventura is considered a disadvantaged city even though it hosts the country’s most important port on the Pacific coast. Its majority Afro-Colombian population¹³ has felt unjustly treated and marginalized for decades (Castellanos, 2018, pp. 20–21; Valencia Potes, 2014, p. 19). Many suffer from the problems associated with poverty and displacement caused by various forms of violence. In this particular social context, the preaching of African Americans from the Nation of Islam in the United States met the political and ideological expectations of some locals. According to Oscar Valencia Potes (aka Shej Munir) (2014), who currently leads the Shiite Muslim community in Buenaventura, the Nation of Islam began to have a slight influence in Buenaventura following the arrival of some Afro-American sailors coming to the port for their work, but also through local migrants returning from the United States having come into contact with the Nation of Islam there (p. 60).

However, the first collective expressions of a “Muslim” community began in the late 1950s, when a Panamanian came to teach a group of more than 20 people. He propagated the ideas of the Nation of Islam, which he had previously

¹¹ Interviews conducted in informal and comprehensive modes (Kaufman, 1996) constitute an important part of the ethnographic work and usually take place during participant observation. As the nature of the interactions often do not allow the researcher to record the talk, it is necessary to take precise notes of each interview following each sequence of fieldwork.

¹² Several Muslim congregations’ leaders and followers explained that they had already faced prejudice due to their faith and identity, related to global Islamophobia and suspicion from terrorism. Some sayings indicated that they fear being investigated by authorities (police or intelligence), also they had nothing to hide.

¹³ Buenaventura is the Colombian city with the highest percentage of Afro-Colombians, estimated at 85% of the population (De Roux, 2010, p. 10).

studied while living in New York. The new community continued to grow and gain members through classes and lectures that focused more on political aspects related more to Black supremacy than on the specificities of religious doctrine or practice per se. The group of about 200 followers eventually formed an official structure in 1974, named the Comunidad Islámica de Colombia (Castellanos & Neira Manrique, 2009, p. 4). It was the first Muslim organization in Colombia.

In the late 1970s, a Guyanese Muslim met with the Buenaventura Muslim group and taught them Islam according to the Sunni tradition, trying to show them the contradictions between the Nation of Islam and what they considered “orthodox” Islam. At the same time, leaders of the Muslim community of Buenaventura traveled to Maicao and Bogotá to visit other Muslim groups in the country, which eventually reinforced the turn toward Sunnism. But a new turning point came when the Muslims of Buenaventura approached embassies for help and funding. Following the community request, the Iranian embassy of Bogotá committed to building a lasting relationship with Afro-Colombian Muslims by helping them open a school for underprivileged children, the Silvia Zaynab Institute, and providing scholarships for converts to study Islam in Argentina and Iran.

Following this, the community turned once more away from Sunnism, definitively embracing Shiism according to the official interpretation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Fatima Institute, the second school run by the Muslim community of Buenaventura, was founded in 1993. Other young people converted to Islam at this time, and several men and women went to Qom in Iran to study Islamic theology. From the Pacific port, the community eventually expanded to the nearby and larger urban center of Cali and to a lesser extent to other peripheral areas such as the small town of Guapi. The Afro-Colombian Muslim community originating from Buenaventura is estimated to be at least 600 individuals, an important part of whom live in Cali (Giovanni Castellanos, 2018, p. 3).

The Fundación Islámica Kauzar in Cali

The large city of Cali (population 2.2 million) currently hosts two Islamic centers: the *mezquita* An-Nur led by the Sunni community (Tello Neira, 2013) and the Centro Islámico Al Kauzar, affiliated with the Shia and located in a privileged neighborhood in the south of the city. The Centro Islámico Al Kauzar was created in 2003 due to the growing number of members from the Muslim community of Buenaventura, many of whom had migrated to the provincial capital for study or work opportunities (Giovanni Castellanos, 2018, p. 62). In the 2000s, Cali’s Shiite Muslim community comprised around 60 people, mostly Afro-Colombians (Murillo Potes, 2012, p. 90). Sheikh Abdul Karim¹⁴ is currently the director and Imam of the Centro Islámico. He converted to Islam in 1987 in his hometown Buenaventura, later studying Shiism in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Qom, Iran. He returned to

¹⁴ From his original name Javier Orobio, Abdul Karim converted to Islam in 1987 in Buenaventura. He later studied Shiite Islam in Argentina, then in Iran (Qom), before returning to Colombia and settling in Cali, where he currently heads the Al-Kausar Islamic Center.

Colombia and settled in Cali, where he runs the local Shiite Muslim community, which is now estimated at around 100 people (Giovanni Castellanos, 2018, p. 62). In spite of its attachment to the Muslim community of Buenaventura, Cali's congregation has gained autonomy over the last two decades. It attracts almost exclusively Colombian converts and children of converts, including some who are not considered Afro-Colombian.

A regular group usually comes a few times a week for prayers and courses, which generally end with a shared meal. The small number of worshipers and their consistency with attending the activities brings a sense of unity and togetherness among the few dozen of Muslims who attend the center weekly. In addition to prayers and religious holidays, the Islamic center organizes courses and occasional charitable activities. Among the latter, food distributions in the streets take place several times in the year on specific occasions, such as Christmas time.

For example, before December 24, 2021—or Christmas Eve, a Christian religious holiday—the leader of the mosque urged members of the congregation to participate in a food pantry so that poor children and adults could enjoy Christmas with traditional seasonal foods and other items.¹⁵ In this regard, some volunteers brought food in packages to the mosque kitchen, loaded them in a couple of cars, and drove the care packages out to deprived areas in the city center. In these areas of exclusion, called *ollas*, thousands of marginalized people—including a large percentage of individuals with substance abuse issues and without homes—live on the street. When I observed the distribution, Muslims distributed the food and item boxes to dozens of kids and adults quickly and with care. Many among the recipients were under the influence of drugs at the time of distribution. Although they seemed to ignore the Islamic affiliations of the distributors, many of the beneficiaries—all non-Muslims—recognized the religious identity of the group as they thanked them through various traditional formulas, invoking God's blessings on the givers. The Muslim leader himself explained that most people thought that they were a Christian group, totally ignoring what Islam was about. However, he immediately added that this does not matter, as the objective of the activity was not to advertise Islam but simply to help needy fellow humans by showing mercy (*rahma*) to them. Furthermore, he explained that these kinds of activities are useful for himself and his fellow Muslim brothers and sisters, in the sense that it makes them “face reality” by meeting the poor and becoming aware of all blessings bestowed by God in their life.

To sum up, it can be claimed that such welfare activities are inspired by the purpose of spreading compassion and helping people in need, regardless of any *dawah*-related or strategic considerations. Moreover, the charitable activities are seen as a part of local Muslims' own religious self-fashioning and pious practice, reflected in the comment about how doing such work is *useful* for the Muslims' own spiritual development.

¹⁵ One interesting aspect here is that this Muslim group did not hesitate to portray their action as a Christmas gift, whereas others Muslim organizations may be very reluctant to undertake any project closely or distantly related to a Christian event.

The Mezquita Abu Bakr in the Suburbs of Cartagena

On the other side of the country, in the impoverished neighborhood of la Boquilla, in the suburbs of Cartagena (population 1,087,599), is *mezquita* Abu Bakr. Built between 2002 and 2004 (Ziabari, 2016), it was initiated by Ibrahim, a Muslim convert from the region. The small community counts only about 20 to 30 members. All are Colombians, although the mosque occasionally hosts foreign Muslim visitors. Ibrahim explains that he knew Islam from a political perspective during the period of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Influenced by communist ideas related to the struggle of oppressed people for liberation and equality, he found in Islam a message in line with both his sociopolitical aspiration and spiritual needs. Only later did he discover the spiritual dimension of Islam that convinced him to become a Muslim. Questioned on his doctrine, Ibrahim explained that he does not appreciate divisions between doctrines and would rather call himself “just a Muslim”, neither Sunni nor Shia.¹⁶

Little by little, Ibrahim organized a community center in the distressed neighborhood where he is still living, building a small mosque, which loudly broadcasts the call to prayer five times a day. Though this is common practice in Muslim-majority countries, it is quite rare in the Americas. Due to the diffusion of the call to prayer (*adhan*) through the mosque’s loudspeakers, the whole neighborhood is aware of the mosque’s presence. Rather than receiving backlash, Ibrahim said the community started to hold “respect” for the few local Muslims, though this was not the case at the beginning (Ziabari, 2016). Indeed, Ibrahim recalled a time when the new Muslim community faced suspicion in the neighborhood. What helps, Ibrahim said, is the fact that the members of the mosque are involved in daily social services for the local community. In addition to its daily prayers and religious activities, the mosque organizes daily food distributions for impoverished children living in its surroundings. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of these children are Christian and their families do not express any particular interest in Islam. The fact that free meals are offered by the mosque is perceived as something positive, even vital, for families that often cannot provide more than a daily meal to the children. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that despite these regular social services organized over a long period of time, conversions to Islam have remained very limited and the Muslim community has apparently not grown in number. In line with this observation, the Muslim leader explained that fighting poverty and social problems is an objective in itself, as Islam commands its followers to feed the hungry and help the needy unconditionally.¹⁷ In this regard, Ibrahim does not consider welfare projects as tools

¹⁶ Although he studied Sunnism and apparently follows this doctrine, Ibrahim does not want to emphasize this denomination. He insists that he holds respect for Shiism and that Shii Muslims are welcome in “his” mosque.

¹⁷ Ibrahim explains that he received a proposition to work in Cartagena’s main mosque, which he considers to be very well funded. He rejected the offer because of some disagreements related to his vision of what a mosque should be and what the funds should be used for. In this regard, he insisted on the need to have mosques in deprived neighborhoods (like the one that houses the Abu Bakr mosque) rather than in the city center, in order to have a positive social impact on the needy. He added that as a Muslim, his primary mission is to take care of the poor children who live nearby through the meal distribution he provides every day or other further projects (Personal Interview, March 19, 2021).

to do *dawah*. Rather, he considers doing social work and helping the poor children as its main purpose, which goes in line with the values of his faith.

According to Ibrahim, the sustainability of the food distributions for the children and even of the existence of the Muslim congregation remains a constant struggle. He argues that funding is insufficient, and the lack of means does not allow him to offer as many meals as necessary to the many hungry children in his neighborhood. Moreover, the mosque's attendance and activities remain weak due to the low number of worshipers, as the few members of the congregation show little motivation to practice and study Islam beyond daily prayers. According to the regular members of the congregation, only an increase in external funding by Muslim donors would enable the Islamic center to extend its food distribution to more children and diversify its welfare projects. Indeed, the hope is that further means would allow the mosque to offer free education and other activities to the children of the neighborhoods in addition to the supply of daily meals.

The Mezquita As-Salam in Medellín

Situated roughly between Cali and Cartagena, Medellín is the second-largest city in Colombia and one of its most popular destinations for foreigners. Although an Islamic center has already been active in the neighborhood of Belén for about two decades (Buitrago, 2013), the launch of a new mosque in 2017 (Campos Zuluaga, 2019, p. 42) in Guayabal, near the metro station Poblado triggered important changes for the local Muslim communities, which have seen recent growth. Although it was first initiated by the same Muslim community, the new *mezquita* As-Salam quickly gained in independence and began promoting its own ideological views and agenda. In contrast to other mosques in the country, *mezquita* As-Salam is open every day from dawn to night and hosts all five daily prayers. In addition, it organizes the Friday prayer followed by a shared meal and a Saturday religious class, also accompanied by a meal in the evening, which attracts dozens of Muslim men and women, almost all of them newer converts. Indeed, although the mosque attracts a mixed congregation¹⁸ for Friday prayers, its other activities bring together a very large majority of converts of Colombian or Venezuelan origin.

A few months after the mosque's foundation, Egyptian Shaykh Mohammed Ali Matar became its imam and started to insist on the priority of *dawah*, arguing for the need to spread Islam in the city and beyond (Campos Zuluaga, 2019, p. 50). Previously, the Shaykh served as the imam of Valledupar's mosque, in northeastern Colombia. Following his arrival, *mezquita* As-Salam quickly became very active in developing various projects such as religious courses, the active promotion of prayers, community meals, educational workshops, and welfare activities. The

¹⁸ The weekly Friday prayer, due to its mandatory ritual nature, is attended by a wider variety of Muslims, including a small majority of Latin Americans (Colombians and Venezuelans converted to Islam), numerous recent migrants from Muslim countries (mostly Pakistan and Arab countries) who have settled in Colombia, as well as several Muslim "travelers" who stay in Colombia for a few weeks or months for various reasons (coming from the USA, France, and other countries).

latter include food distributions in the street, delivery of free meals inside the mosque during the weekend, and material support to individuals and families newly converted to Islam. He is helped by a small team of young Colombian Muslims dedicated to working for Islamic *dawah* in the country.

Rather than emphasizing their philanthropic aspects, the emphasis of these activities is placed on spreading Islam. Mohammed Ali Matar and Yusoof, his main assistant,¹⁹ have made it clear that the purpose of social welfare services is to attract people to the mosque so that they hear the Islamic message.²⁰ In front of the Shaykh, Yusoof summarized the mosque's mission as "an enterprise of *dawah*, with our own style."²¹ In this regard, *dawah* appears as the end that justifies social welfare activities, with the latter thus serving as a means for the purpose of disseminating Islam. The success of the Islamic center's involvement is then measured by the number of conversions, regularly shared via digital videos²² and used for fundraising purposes. A common critique leveled by Muslims from other backgrounds points to the opportunism of what they see as possible "pseudo conversions," which might serve the purpose of obtaining material goods or free meals from the community.²³ Indeed, in the field, some scenes can be seen where social activities undertaken by the Islamic center result in collective conversions to Islam, captured on video, without any follow-up of the new converts' life journey.²⁴

¹⁹ Yusoof, a Colombian convert to Islam from Medellín, is in charge of the mosque's administration and management (at least during the period of my survey). At the time, he was the main assistant to the Shaykh.

²⁰ Following the Shaykh's charismatic authority, the other active members of the congregation also insist on the salience of *dawah*, which they all see as a priority. In my observations, the narratives of the Shaykh and the other committed members of the Islamic center were very similar, which can be explained by the fact that the leader is supported by restricted numbers of active volunteers who tend to strongly acknowledge his religious legitimacy.

²¹ The words he used in Spanish were "una empresa de *dawah* con nuestro propio estilo" (field observation in mezquita As-Salam in Medellín, Colombia, on December 10, 2020).

²² These videos have been shared on social media, mostly in WhatsApp groups. In some cases, they served as evidence sent to the founders to show people converting to Islam by saying the required testimony (*shahâda*). Regarding the case of *mezquita* As-Salam in Medellín, numerous videos have been shared on various social networks, such as WhatsApp groups and Facebook accounts, including that of the Islamic Center (<https://www.facebook.com/MezquitaAlSalam>) and of its imam. Many of them highlighted people converting to Islam by reciting the *shahâda*, while others show groups of people listening to the talk of Islam in a square. In Cartagena, the central mosque's imam asked some of the congregation members to record a video of a couple of Colombians reciting their *shahâda* for the first time.

²³ Three different interviews conducted in various contexts highlighting the same point. First, a convert Colombian woman who was previously active with *mezquita* As-Salam as well as with other Muslim congregations in the city explained being very disappointed of the charity work, which she considered as an alibi for extending the mosque's influence and attracting new people to its doors. Secondly, a Muslim activist from another Colombian city considered that the mosque's leaders use social work as a tool for proselytizing, without worrying about the welfare of the local population. Thirdly, a European Muslim who had tried to work with the Islamic center ended up judging it very negatively, saying its leaders "bought conversions with packets of rice."

²⁴ In 2021, a video recorded by the staff of the *mezquita* As-Salam and shared on WhatsApp shows a few dozen Colombian women, newly converted to Islam, gathered in the mosque for an event. All of them are wearing exactly the same clothes (jilbab of the same color), which would seem to indicate that these clothes were lent to them for the occasion. Another point that casts doubt on the seriousness of their commitment to Islam—or their conversion—is the fact that many of these women were not seen again in the mosque after the event.

Social Work as a Means for Proselytizing or as an End in Itself?

These three case studies, though distinct, highlight the different kinds—and ends—of social services undertaken by Muslim actors in Colombia. Despite the similarity in appearance of these charitable activities inspired or justified by Islam, their underlying motivations and visions differ significantly. But before critically considering the case of philanthropic action in the context of Colombian Muslim communities, it is necessary to consider the broader context of social activism in the name of Islam in other countries. In non-Muslim majority societies, research in western Europe (Barylo, 2017; Brodard, 2020a), the United States (Cantori, 2021), and the United Kingdom has helped develop the concept of “Islamic social work” to refer to this particular form of engagement (Warden, 2013). In various European countries, Muslim organizations show concern for undertaking welfare social activities in line with Islamic teachings (Martens, 2014). If “helping” others or providing welfare social services to the needy is usually justified by actors through religious references, the questions of “how” and “why” remain complex and often under-explored, despite some recent studies on the matter (Barylo, 2017; Mittermaier, 2019; Kayikci, 2020; Brodard, 2020a). In the European context, Muslim FBO’s actors usually conciliate religious and civic social values, as documented in both a study on female Muslims volunteers in Belgium (Kayikci, 2020) and research on charity Islamic organizations in France, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (Brodard, 2023a, pp. 155–166), while a study of Muslim charity in the context of Egypt demonstrated the prevalence of religious motivations driving social activism (Mittermaier, 2019, pp. 3, 97). In this regard, it is important to critically examine the motivations and objectives behind the involvement of Muslim congregations or Islamic centers in charity work according to their context.

The case studies from the Colombian context illustrate that the vast majority of beneficiaries of the social projects are by and large non-Muslim. This is in stark contrast to many cases in western Europe, where the trend is the other way around, with beneficiaries tending to be Muslim (Barylo, 2017; Brodard, 2020a, 2022). This Colombian exception, which may be found in other Latin American countries as well, must be understood in light of two intertwined circumstances. First, the Muslim population in the areas concerned is extremely small, and any action in the public space will naturally reach a non-Muslim population more easily. Second, the case studies introduced earlier involve autochthonous Muslim congregations, and thus Colombians who are likely committed to working locally with their people. The latter aspect is particularly obvious in the Afro-Colombian Muslim community of Buenaventura and Cali, whose history has consistently shown a central concern for the political and social struggle for justice and liberation of the oppressed (Castellanos & Neira Manrique, 2009; Valencia Potes, 2014). Therefore, in those particular contexts, it is expected to find Muslims struggling for justice and social development beyond the boundaries of their religious denominations, pointing to a more universalist or inclusivist understanding of social work. It would be difficult not to draw a comparison with the US context, where the African American community stands out for its consistent commitment to social welfare and civil rights. Through a long history of civic engagement combining Islam and social activism (Brodard,

2014, pp. 6–8), African American Muslims have demonstrated a larger involvement in both welfare services and social justice activities than “immigrant mosques,” despite having fewer financial resources (Bagby, 2022, pp. 18–22). In addition to the different social realities between African American Muslim converts and those from migrant backgrounds, there is also a divergence of views on the role of Islam in their lives and how their faith shapes their relationship with society: “for many African-Americans, conversion to Islam has meant parting with mainstream culture, while Muslim immigrants have tended toward assimilation” (Elliott, 2007).²⁵ Despite the divergence in context, this gap should be considered in future studies of Afro-descendant Muslim communities in other American countries.

To return to the question of motivation and purpose related to charitable engagement in the public space, it is important to note that Islamic centers and Muslim leaders opt for different or diverging views and objectives, which hinders any possibility of generalization. Nevertheless, these case studies highlight that some insist on welfare services for anybody with an unconditional understanding of aid, whereas other Islamic organizations consider charity as a means principally for the purpose of *dawah*. When interviewing Muslim actors in the field to understand the motivations and reasons for their charitable involvement, one notices that some emphasize charity and compassion in an altruistic perspective motivated by faith, while others insist on the need to transmit Islam to people unaware of the religious “truth”. In Medellín, a converted Muslim woman recalls the time of the Musallah de Calasanz, explaining that she and her then-husband used to go out to help the young people in the neighborhood by engaging in conversations with them and providing them with food to prevent them from falling into delinquency. She then goes on to explain that, for her, Islam is about love and helping others. She adds that she never urged these young people to convert to Islam because the idea was simply to show them kindness and love.²⁶ The same woman later expressed criticism toward the As-Salam mosque and its leaders, whom she accuses of using social work as a means of proselytism without considering the needs of the local population. Nonetheless, Yusoof, one of the leaders of the *mezquita* As-Salam, does not consider the use of charity work for the purpose of proselytism as an issue. While explaining a future project that would involve distributing a drink, a sandwich, and a booklet introducing Islam to the poor on the streets, he confidently stated that “the objective is to do *dawah*”.²⁷

The factors distinguishing the two perceptions²⁸ and positions do not seem self-evident at first, for the simple reason that they both claim to apply the

²⁵ Despite the very specific context of the United States, this quote from an article in the *New York Times* may spark some further reflection: “For many African American converts, Islam is an experience both spiritual and political, an expression of empowerment in a country they feel is dominated by a white elite. For many immigrant Muslims, Islam is an inherited identity, and America a place of assimilation and prosperity” (Elliott, 2007).

²⁶ Interview in Medellín on April 6, 2021.

²⁷ Informal interview in the *Mezquita* As-Salam in Medellín on December 11, 2020.

²⁸ Obviously, there’s no total dichotomy between these two visions, but they do represent ideal types that are concretely reflected in certain narratives collected in the field.

teachings of Islam and assert to act within the framework of their supposedly common faith. But on closer inspection, it soon becomes apparent that the leaders involved in these charitable or proselytizing projects have diverging religious understandings. It can therefore be surmised that a variety of Islamic discourses contribute to shaping different practices in the field, although there are, of course, other factors motivating actors' practices. Competing views on Islam and its role in society, fomented as much by the sociocultural environment, life experience, and feelings of belonging to a particular religious current, shape how Muslim actors see their responsibility in their surroundings and how they approach their non-Muslim neighbors. In this regard, some genuinely believe that salvation comes only through religious conversion and therefore consider *dawah* as their essential duty, relegating social welfare engagement to a mere means to a greater end. Conversely, other Muslim leaders understand that Islam commands the believer to help the poor unconditionally and to contribute to the common good because of the duty of compassion and altruism mandated by God. This difference in understanding stems from the fact that the stakeholders belong to various religious movements, whose teachings and ideologies must be carefully considered as they shape concrete behaviors in the field.

Profile of Leaders and Strategic Positioning of Islamic Centers

Nevertheless, beyond religious and ideological narratives, a series of other factors play a role in shaping the definitions and orientations of charity among Muslims in Colombia. Indeed, investments in social work and/or in *dawah* highly depend on strategic considerations, including fundraising and political positioning. In Europe, Islamic organizations providing welfare and social services significantly depend on external funding, both from private donations and statutory entities. It has been shown that orientation toward an inclusive opening of social services to a wider public or, conversely, toward a restricted community-based approach is mostly shaped by funding and partnership opportunities (Brodard, 2022). In this regard, Muslim actors tend to adapt their charity practice to broader sociopolitical expectations, which remain tied to the institutional and political context around them.

Another crucial aspect that helps explain differences in terms of distinguishing, or collapsing, charity and *dawah* practices in the name of Islam concerns the identifications and profiles of Muslim communities' leaders. When overlooking the Muslim congregations in Colombia, as well as in other Latin American countries, one may differentiate between the communities led and frequented by local Muslims and the ones led or supervised by migrant Muslims.²⁹ *Fundación Islamica Kauzar en Cali* and *mezquita Abu Bakr* in the suburbs of Cartagena are supervised by local, autochthonous Muslims, who show concern for their fellow citizens as well as the

²⁹ As mentioned above, a similar distinction takes place in the US context. If the North American history of Muslim communities is long and dense enough to state such distinction, the lack of hindsight on the recent developments within Muslim communities in Colombia prevents making such strong conclusions, even though the question can be raised.

local environment. They insist on the need to tackle poverty and social problems while considering the importance of political engagement not only for Muslims but for society as a whole. Influenced by theologies of liberation (Gutiérrez, 1973; Boff & Boff, 1987), a theological and social movement that emphasizes the role of religion in advocating for the liberation of oppressed and marginalized groups, they believe Islam should play an active role in addressing societal injustices and promoting a fairer, more equal, and just society. In this regard, their Islamic discourses are contextualized in light of sociocultural realities and local issues.

Conversely, other Islamic centers consider that the foremost purpose of the involvement of mosques in the country is to *spread Islam as a religion*. In this regard, *dawah* becomes an end that justifies the means, including welfare social services. *Mezquita* As-Salam is led by Shaykh Mohammed Ali Matar, who explained having migrated from Egypt to Latin America with the clear intention to “do *dawah*”, to preach Islam. Shaykh Matar is also an influential member of a network of around 15 imams, mostly from Egypt, who have been trained in Quito, Ecuador, in the Spanish language to do *dawah* in Latin America. Headed by Shaykh Muhammad Mansour, who has been active for several years at the mosque in Mexico City’s Polanco district, this network of imams is expanding in various Latin American countries, particularly in Mexico and Colombia, where the group is supposed to already supervise four Islamic centers.³⁰ The network is centered on both a shared motivation and project focused on spreading Islam in Latin America through preaching. It is said to have significant financial resources, which explains its rapid rise and takeover of places of worship in various regions of Colombia and Mexico.³¹

Shaykh Matar explained clearly that the organization’s central objective is to spread a proper understanding of Islam in a context where it remains largely unknown. In this regard, the fundamental purpose of proselytizing overshadows other concerns for the local population’s welfare or even social development. From this perspective, salvation and deliverance can only be understood through conversion and compliance with Islam, which is considered the sole salvific religion for humanity. Therefore, what matters most is to be Muslim and to follow Islamic teachings. Other dimensions of life, such as welfare, are considered secondary from this point of view. It can then be argued that the idea of welfare is understood in this perspective only in the context of religious conversion.

Officially, the group’s representatives do not present themselves as Salafi, but simply as “Sunni,” seeking only to convey “authentic Islam” to Muslims regardless of their doctrinal affiliations. However, several members of other Muslim organizations perceive them as Salafi due to their religious interpretations (strong criticism against Sufism, rejection of the mainstream traditional theological

³⁰ These are *mezquita* As-Salam in Medellín, *mezquita* An-Nur in Cali, *mezquita* Abu Baker en Valledupar, and the Centro Islamico de Pasto in Pasto.

³¹ It was not possible to identify the source and nature of these financial resources. Moreover, due its opaque nature and the discretion of its members, the “organization” appears to be more of an informal network than a hierarchical structure, although some elements tend to support the hypothesis of the latter.

schools—i.e., Asharism and Maturidism), and identifying markers³² (e.g., specific clothing for men such as *qamees* and ankle-length trousers, long beards, use of the jilbab and niqab for women, clear gender segregation). Furthermore, their social circles include many self-identified Salafis. Given these factors, we can surmise this network is Salafi on the basis of its discourses, religious teaching, and stance toward other Islamic traditions and local communities.³³ Analyzing its networks, we can also observe that *mezquita* As-Salam has relations with local Salafi figures like Muhammad Isa Garcia in Barranquilla as well as with organizations affiliated with transnational movements like the Akedemi Bunyan untuk Studi Islam in Indonesia.³⁴ For some reason, *mezquita* As-Salam and its network officially deny that they are doctrinally affiliated with Salafism, as they refuse any labeling excepting “Sunni.” Nevertheless, it could be identified as what Sadek Hamid (2016, p. 141) proposed as “methodological Salafism,” whose adherents claim to follow the Quran and Sunnah directly, without the mediation of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), any schools of law (*madhab*), and dogma (*‘aqeedah*). Furthermore, the group’s relationships and contacts are restricted to organizations promoting Salafism, such as Huda TV Channel and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY). Moreover, as I observed, it tends to comprehend Islam as a collection of principles and norms at its core, which have to be observed regardless of context, paying little attention to local sociocultural specificities. For such organizations, *dawah* is not only aimed at spreading Islam to non-Muslims, but also implies the promotion of a so-called “authentic” interpretation of Islam among professing Muslims who are considered misguided. This understanding of *dawah* aimed not only to non-Muslims but also to Muslims recalls the practice of various transnational Islamic organizations such as the iERA, an Islamic missionary group founded in the United Kingdom by Anthony (“Abdur Raheem”) Green in 2009 (Baz, 2016), but also other Salafi actors in non-Muslim countries like the United Kingdom (Farquhar, 2017) and France (Arslan & Marlière, 2014).

Finally, the prioritization of *dawah* explains the relegation of other aspects of community engagement like social work to simply serving as a means designed to serve a higher purpose. This approach considers that Islam has to be applied “as it is” without contextualization related to Latin American societies. Beyond the Salafis’ scope, we have observed a similar tendency in Chiapas with the

³² Similar trends in style and dresses have also been observed in other contemporary contexts of Salafism’s expansion, such as in Indonesia (Hasan, 2018, p. 246).

³³ Salafism and Wahhabism are controversial notions still used by both researchers and religious actors with very different meanings. In this paper, the term Salafism is used to refer to an ongoing religious phenomenon characterized by recurrent and interconnected features despite its divisions in several tendencies (Haykel, 2014, pp. 38–39). Some commentators use the term Wahhabism as synonymous, in reference to religious doctrine formulated by Ibn ‘Abd-ul-Wahhab (Farquhar, 2017, pp. 6–8).

³⁴ The leader of the *mezquita* As-Salam in Medellín sent Colombian young Muslims to the Akedemi Bunyan untuk Studi Islam in Indonesia, an Islamic Institution linked to Salafism. This institution has links with various organizations, including the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, or WAMY, which is considered an influential component of the Salafi movement (Schulze, 2022).

Turkish organization Suleymanciler,³⁵ where the interpretation of Islam conveyed in this Mexican region is such that it is taught in Turkey without explicit intent to contextualize religious practices and discourses (Brodard, 2023b, p. 21). Therefore, the ideological and theological profile of some imams and community leaders helps explain the orientation of their activities and speeches, in particular the direction of nonprofit philanthropy or, on the contrary, calculated proselytism.

Conclusion

Through the above cases, I have shown that some Islamic centers promote charity and aid for all, while others instrumentalize social services for the ultimate purpose of *dawah*. Not surprisingly, orientations given to charitable practices undertaken by Muslim congregations, in Colombia as elsewhere, depend on multiple factors. Among these, the cases above illustrate the need to distinguish between ideological and religious considerations and more pragmatic and strategic ones. In the background, sociocultural and political contexts will often exert a significant influence on the orientation of Muslim actors' choices. Although research on the nexus between Islam and philanthropy in Colombia is still in its nascent stages, mainly due to the very recent and highly evolving nature of Islamic charity work in these contexts, the case studies above already point to a few conclusions.

First, I suggest that "autochthonous Muslim communities" (Brodard, 2023b), as compared to Muslim congregations led by foreign figures, seem to have distinctive attitudes, discourses, and views at the level of both religion and activism. Although they usually stay affiliated with specific Islamic movements and ideologies from abroad, Islamic centers led by Colombian Muslims tend to shape their own religious practices and discourses through the prioritization of certain standards and principles over others and more flexible interpretations of other aspects (e.g., the salience of social engagement benefiting the local community including a majority of non-Muslims, versus the relativization of the importance of "ritual" religious elements considered a priority in other religious circles, such as the consumption of "halâl" meat, the wearing of the veil, or gender separation norms).³⁶ Beyond the influence of an "Islam imported from abroad," local "autochthonous" Muslim communities contextualize Islam in the light of their local social, cultural, and political contexts.

Second, although the limited number of cases prevents any broad generalizations, it is arguable that "autochthonous" Muslims often show a stronger concern for their local environment, tending to consider that Islam must contribute to tackling social problems like poverty and injustice in their country. The leaders

³⁵ The Süleymanî, founded in the 20th century by Shaykh Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan, is one of the Turkish Muslim organizations that has transnational networks for preaching and teaching Islam abroad (Akgönül, 2005).

³⁶ Concrete examples of this trend can be seen, for example, in the Muslim community of Buenaventura, in the tolerance of the consumption of meat from non-ritually sacrificed animals, with the exception of pork. It can also be seen in the flexibility of injunctions concerning women's dress, in particular the wearing of the veil in the Muslim congregations of Buenaventura, Guapi, and Cartagena, just to name a few.

and main actors of the Islamic centers of Buenaventura, Cali, and La Boquilla in the suburbs of Cartagena have all developed substantial charitable initiatives, while insisting on the crucial duty for Muslims to contribute to the development of society and to help the needy regardless of religious adherence.

Third, interviews showed that ideological and religious beliefs often underpin decisions and orientations in terms of charity practices: some understand *dawah* as the higher purpose of any investment justifying to use of charity work as a means, whereas others argue that welfare activity is an end in itself, as Islam teaches its followers to spread compassion and kindness to others, therefore opting to help those in need “unconditionally,” including when they are not Muslim. This link between certain interpretations of Islam and social and political commitment has already been addressed in previous research (Solano Urrutia, 2020), but deserves further investigation. Although positions and approaches of Muslim organizations involved in social work or charitable activities depend largely on their understanding of Islam, strategic and pragmatic concerns also remain highly influential.

In this regard, funding opportunities and organizational strategies can in some cases lead to the instrumentalization of social welfare for proselytizing, as appears to be the case in the context of *mezquita* As-Salam in Medellín. In that context, the prioritization of *dawah* justifies the means of charity to attract new people to the faith. In parallel, *dawah* is encouraged by foreign donors who require evidence that their money has been used to spread of Islam.³⁷ This double relation, which helps explain the potential orientation of some faith-based organizations toward an instrumentalization of social welfare services to attract new converts, is nevertheless hindered by both altruistic and religious values promoting philanthropy unconditionally that influence the practices of some Muslim actors.³⁸ In any case, the factors predisposing one to a preference for religious preaching or altruistic benevolence remain complex and multifaceted, preventing any clear-cut generalization. Continued observation, quantifiable studies, as well as some comparative research would be helpful to improve our understanding of the complex relation between charity and proselytism, particularly in the context of Muslim communities in Latin American countries.

³⁷ This tendency was explained by several Muslim leaders in Colombia and Mexico. Some activists carefully count the number of conversion testimonies (or *shahâda*) and record them on video in order to show evidence of the impact of their presence in the field when they communicate with (potential) donors.

³⁸ Indeed, it cannot be argued that all the motivations behind the engagement in charity work stand for strategic interests. No serious elements allow us to doubt the sincerity of activists acting in the name of their faith and mercy for their fellow humans, except when they themselves indicate the opposite.

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Muslim Arab Beneficence at a Hemispheric Crossroads of Exceptional Rule

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Abstract

Divided into two parts, this article first locates Muslim Arabs at the tri-border during authoritarian military rule in Brazil (1964–1985), Paraguay (1955–1989), and Argentina (1976–1980). Between the 1950s and 1980s, I show that Muslim Arab traders-initiated charity and community work amid the liberal exceptions made by illiberal regimes. From the 1990s to the 2010s, the second part of the article turns to the counterterrorist liaisons of democratically elected governments that targeted Muslim Arab beneficence. With the near erasure of their history, Muslim Arabs became potential terrorist financiers amid the illiberal exceptions of ostensible liberal regimes. Put together, this article’s two parts reveal the transformation of Muslim Arabs from local benefactors into foreign suspects, neither fully absolved nor formally incriminated, in a still unfinished hemispheric history of exceptional rule.

Keywords: *beneficence, tri-border, Muslim Arabs, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay*

Beneficence marks benefactors and beneficiaries in broader social orders that elevate or eschew them. Derived from the Latin “beneficentia,” this community-building practice had been common among the hundreds of thousands of Arabic-speaking migrants to the Spanish- and Portuguese-language dominant Americas since the late nineteenth century. By the 1920s and 1930s, Muslim Arab migrants in Argentina founded the Sociedad Árabe Islámica Alauita de la Angelita (Arab Islamic Alawi Society of Angelita), the Sociedad Drusa de Beneficencia (Druze Society of Beneficence), and the Sociedad Yabrudense Musulmana (Yabrud Muslim Society) (Cazorla, 2003; Devoto & Míguez, 1992; Montenegro, 2009). Concurrently in Brazil, Muslim Arab migrants established the Sociedade Alauíta de Beneficencia (Alawi Society of Beneficence), the Associação Druza Beneficente (Druze Beneficent Association), and the Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana (Muslim Beneficent Society) (Safady, 1966; Duoun, 1944; Pinto, 2010). These and other Muslim charity institutions were part of an “age of associations” that lie at the “roots of Middle Eastern internationalism” (Arsan, 2012, p. 166).

Self-styled Muslim Arab-led beneficence continues today at the trilateral

border between Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina, called the *tríplice fronteira* in Portuguese, *triple frontera* in Spanish, and *tri-border* in English. Since the mid-twentieth century, mostly Muslim Lebanese and some Muslim Palestinians and Syrians opened retail and wholesale stores in the city of Foz do Iguaçu, on the Brazilian side, and in Ciudad del Este, on the Paraguayan side, while hardly any resided or worked on the historically underdeveloped Argentine side, in Puerto Iguazú. With profits from import-export businesses on the Brazilian and Paraguayan sides of the border, Muslim Arabs founded and ran charity and community institutions during two distinct periods. In the first period, between the 1950s and the 1980s, their beneficent institution-building took shape amid liberal exceptions in otherwise illiberal, authoritarian military rule. In the subsequent second period, from the 1990s to the 2010s, they faced greater surveillance in ostensibly liberal democratic regimes that made illiberal counterterrorist exceptions. Today, Muslim almsgiving at this border is seen as potentially maleficent finance among authorities in the US and some member states of Mercosur (the Spanish acronym for the “Common Market of the South”). Despite a century-long hemispheric history, Muslim Arab beneficence is met with suspicion by authoritative powers at this border.

By way of a response, Muslim Arabs find that “a colônia é muito acomodada” (the community is well-accommodated / complacent, in Portuguese). Muslim Arabs imply that their long-time presence on the Brazilian and Paraguayan sides of the border, where they live and work, could neither erase nor be erased by images of them as suspects that they felt were more common in Argentina and the US. In the larger book that this article draws on I argue that Muslim Arabs accommodate, or fold into, state exceptions that enact or suspend laws and norms by fiat, fulfilling a “manifold destiny” (Karam, 2021). As the focal point for this article at hand, Muslim charity work is one of the folds troubling the US exceptionalist myth of “manifest destiny” that still overshadows this hemisphere. Though targets of unending investigations for three decades, and not found guilty of any maleficence, “Arabs at the tri-border” remain as terrorist finance suspects in congressional committees, financial oversight bureaus, and intelligence agencies in and beyond Washington, DC. Based on 15 months of historical anthropological research on each side of this border as well as in the US, the book and this article not only reclaim the more than half-century border presence of Muslim Arabs, a “people without history” that Wolf (1982) endeavored to redeem. To paraphrase Ho (2004), the coeval goal is to critique the states that erase or rewrite the history of such people, revealing the authoritarian past of a still ongoing counterterrorist present.

Divided into two parts, this article first locates Muslim Arabs at the tri-border during authoritarian military rule in Brazil (1964–1985), Paraguay (1955–1989), and Argentina (1976–1980). Between the 1950s and 1980s, I show that Muslim Arab traders-initiated charity and community work amid the liberal exceptions made by illiberal regimes. From the 1990s to the 2010s, the second part of the article turns to the counterterrorist liaisons of democratically elected governments that targeted Muslim Arab beneficence. With the near erasure of their history, Muslim Arabs became potential terrorist financiers amid the illiberal exceptions of ostensible liberal regimes. Put together, this article’s two parts reveal the transformation of

Muslim Arabs from local benefactors into foreign suspects, neither fully absolved nor formally incriminated, in a still unfinished hemispheric history of exceptional rule.

Authoritarian Legacies

Muslim Arabs' first community association, the *Clube União Árabe* (Arab Unity Club) was inaugurated on the Brazilian side of the border in 1962 ("Clube União Árabe de Foz do Iguaçu," 1978). Through the following decades, the club was monitored by Brazil's *Serviço Nacional de Informações* (SNI, National Intelligence Service), the "hegemonic" instrument of "national security" at a time of authoritarian military rule in Brazil (Carvalho, 2023; Serviço de Informações da Superintendência Regional da Polícia Federal no Estado do Paraná, 1983; Serviço Nacional de Informações, 1983; Assessoria Especial de Segurança e Informações de Itaipu Binacional, 1986, 1988). Repeatedly reporting that the club served "cultural and recreational ends," SNI reports expressed not alarm but rather routine information-gathering, containing details that suggest Arabs might have reported on their own community organizing, if only to remain on good terms with the status quo (Serviço de Informações da Superintendência Regional da Polícia Federal no Estado do Paraná, 1983; Serviço Nacional de Informações, 1983; Assessoria Especial de Segurança e Informações de Itaipu Binacional, 1986, 1988). The club's founding members, with businesses on Brazilian and Paraguayan sides of the border, "modeled" the organization as a "country club," with "social, cultural and sporting" activities for some 150 families, most of whom were Muslim Lebanese but also included some Muslim Palestinians, Syrians, and others ("Estou com todo e qualquer movimento de libertação," 1988). The club's name evokes the Arab nationalism of Egyptian president Gamal Abd el Nasr (1956–1970), captivating not only Muslim Arabs at the border, but also Brazilian and Paraguayan heads of state. Around the time of its founding, Brazil's president, Jânio Quadros, visited Nasr and allegedly hung his picture on the walls of the presidential office, and in the following decade, military heads of state restarted "advocating closer relations with Arab nations" (Sochaczewski, 2014, p. 76; Comissão de Relações Exteriores, 1961). Meanwhile, the Paraguayan military head of state, Alfredo Stroessner, bestowed on Nasr the highest national honor, the Mariscal Francisco Solano López medallion, and Stroessner also declared three days of official mourning on the Arab nationalist leader's death in 1970 (see also Skidmore, 1968, p. 199; "El gobierno nacional dispuso ayer tres días," 1970; Karam, "On the Trail and Trial of a Palestinian Diaspora," 751–777). This Arab community-building not only inflected a vision of a Middle Eastern homeland but also South American governments' rapprochement of it.

Muslim Arabs registered this and other community associations in what anthropologist Hull (2012) called a "regime of paper documents," including facsimiles and photocopies, adapting to an authoritarian bureaucracy (p. 1). In 1978, in order to formulate a "charter" for what became the Sociedade Beneficente Islâmica (Islamic Beneficent Society), some of the earliest migrants such as Mohamad Barakat, Ahmed Rahal, and others in Foz do Iguaçu consulted with the Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana in São Paulo, founded by Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians decades previously (Castro, 2013, p. 30; Pinto, 2022, p. 185; Truzzi,

2018). Mohamad Barakat received a faxed copy of the former's charter sent from São Paulo and asked one of the Brazilian employees at his business to "retype the charter, switching 'São Paulo' to 'Foz do Iguaçu'" in order to obtain civic, not-for-profit status from Brazil's then military government. Mohamad Barakat convinced the then president of the Clube União Árabe, Mohamad Rahal, to found this Islamic philanthropical organization. Rahal, whose export firm distributed a well-known beer, Skol, initially expressed reservations about compromising support for the country club. But Barakat reasoned that the duly registered "Islamic" beneficent association would attract donations from Muslim-majority Arab member states of OPEC (Organization for Petroleum Exporting Countries). This strategy resonated with Argentine, Brazilian, and Paraguayan military regimes' own diplomatic efforts toward Middle Eastern and Islamic states (Preiss, 2013; Tawil Kuri, 2021; Saddy, 1983, 2016).

In particular, Shia Lebanese coalesced around the aforementioned association, the Sociedade Beneficente Islâmica (Islamic Beneficent Society), reflecting the Brazilian government's own rapprochement toward Tehran after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, despite the demonization of the self-proclaimed Islamic government by Washington, DC (Beeman, 2005; Vizentini, 2012; "Brasil não apoiará as sanções contra o Irã," 1979; "Brasil não vende uma arma sequer ao Irã," 1983; Yanakiew, 1985). In 1984, this Islamic Beneficent Society hosted Sharmard Kanani Moghaddam, the Iranian ambassador, then posted to the Brazilian capital of Brasília, as well as the Mullah Mohammed Tabatabai, who "enjoyed prestige and respect among Shia Muslims spread across the Three Borders" ("Entrevista com o Embaixador do Irã," 1984; Serviço Nacional de Informações, 1984). Tabatabai was based in the city of Curitiba, within driving distance of the tri-border. Kanani and Tabatabai prayed with Shia Lebanese "at a location on the Rua da República do Líbano" (*sic*, an avenue named after the "Republic of Lebanon") in the neighborhood next to the Friendship Bridge where many Muslim Arabs ran commercial outlets. Kanani and Tabatabai later spoke about Islam and Iran to a "packed" audience in the "Diamond Salon" at the Hotel Salvatti in downtown Foz do Iguaçu. "A Muslim Shia from Ciudad Presidente Stroessner" in attendance declared: "he (the Iranian diplomat, Kanani) came here because we asked" and "with the Mullah (Tabatabai), we are more united, following the teachings of Islam in all senses and praying five times a day" ("Entrevista com o Embaixador do Irã," 1984; Serviço Nacional de Informações, 1984). Tabatabai was born in Najaf, Iraq, and recounted to the newsweekly *Veja* that he was "sent to Brazil by the Ayatollah Khomeini" to ensure Islamic precepts of *halal* in Brazilian meat exports as well as to "publicize the basics of Islam" ("Um jogo definido," 1984; Serviço Nacional de Informações, 1984; Centro de Informações da Polícia Federal, 1986). Though the Brazilian foreign ministry asked its Iranian counterpart for a replacement, the Shia Lebanese public embrace of Iran at the border dovetailed with Brazil's "institutionalized" diplomatic relations with and increased exports to Iran (Barreto, 2012; Farah, 2009; Preiss, 2011; Agência Central, 1985; Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 1985). These ties with Tehran cultivated on Brazil's side of the border and the capital of Brasília hardly drew any concern in Washington, DC, even at the time of the US Iran-Contra scandal.

Also accommodating to an authoritarian military regime, the Centro Cultural Beneficente Islâmico (Islamic Beneficent Cultural Center) was organized by Ali Said Rahal and Ahmad Ali Osman. In 1982, they and others convened a meeting, likewise on the Avenida República do Líbano (Republic of Lebanon Avenue), which outlined the not-for-profit charter of this “charity, cultural, and social service” center and fundraised among 15 founding members with commercial businesses in Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad Presidente Stroessner (Secretaria da Receita Federal do Ministério da Fazenda, Cadastro Geral de Contribuintes, 1982; Centro Cultural Beneficente Islâmico de Foz do Iguaçu, 1982). Months later, this center sponsored page-long articles about “Islamic culture” in a well-known local newspaper, *Nosso Tempo*, that stood in opposition to military rule (“A cultura islâmica,” 1982a, 1982b; “Para compreender o Islamismo,” 1982; “Condenado pela espúria Lei de Segurança Nacional,” 1982). The articles stressed Islam as a “universal brotherhood” and cited verses of the Quran as well as ideas from Pakistani theologian Sayyed Abul Ala Mawdudi alongside British convert Marmaduke Pickthall. One Muslim-Lebanese-owned business, *Kamalito Magazine*, advertised on the same page but stopped doing so because Brazil’s Federal Revenue Service sought retribution on “the businesses that advertised in the newspaper,” according to *Nosso Tempo* editor Juvêncio Mazzarollo (Personal Interview, December 6, 2008). Having accommodated authoritarian rule, the founding members of the Islamic Beneficent Cultural Center made a formal request for the Foz do Iguaçu military government to donate property in order to build a mosque and community center for families with “school-aged children” (“Letter from Ali Said Rahal,” 1982). Approved by the city council and signed by the military-appointed mayor, the municipal law “authorize[d] the Head of the Executive Branch of the Municipal Government to donate a plot of land to the Centro Cultural Beneficente Islâmico of Foz do Iguaçu” (Câmara Municipal de Foz do Iguaçu, 1982, 1983).

Authoritarian Brazilian intelligence monitored Arab and Islamic civic associations through a sectarian, geopolitical lens. In 1984, the SNI reported on the disconnect between “a Sociedade Islâmica de Foz do Iguaçu, cujos membros são Xiitas e apoiam o Irã” ‘a Sociedade Islâmica de Foz do Iguaçu, whose members are Shia and support Iran’ and “the Centro Cultural Beneficente Islâmico de Foz do Iguaçu, formado por Sunitas que se ligam ao Iraque” ‘the Centro Cultural Beneficente Islâmico de Foz do Iguaçu, formed by Sunnis that are attached to Iraq’ (“Atividades de organizações árabes no Paraná,” 1984). Indeed, Shia members of the Islamic Beneficent Society tended to empathize with the ideals of the self-declared Islamic revolution in Iran, in addition to defending Palestinian self-determination (“Entrevista com o Embaixador do Irã,” 1984; “Sociedade Beneficente Islâmica de Foz,” 1989; “Eng. Mir Hussein Mussaw da República do Irã,” 1990; “Simpósio,” 1990; “Alimentos à população carente,” 1990; “Sociedade Islâmica distribui alimentos,” 1990; “Delegação Iraniana em Foz,” 1990). In 1984, during the visit of the Iranian ambassador and religious leader mentioned above, *Nosso Tempo* featured a photograph of some one hundred *muçulmanos xiitas* (Shia Muslims) marching on the main thoroughfare of Avenida Brasil in Foz do Iguaçu with posters of Ayatollah Khomeini, banners calling for the return of “Jerusalem,” and pictures of the Dome of the Rock (“Entrevista com o Embaixador do Irã,” 1984, pp. 1, 12). Meanwhile,

the mostly Sunni founders of the Centro Cultural Beneficente Islâmico “didn’t want anything to do with Shia” and allegedly leaned toward Sadaam Hussein’s brand of Arab nationalism (M. Barakat, Personal Interview, June 5, 2009).

Whether Sunni or Shia, Muslim Arabs accommodated military rulers and civilian aspirants at the Islamic Beneficent Cultural Center’s ceremony to lay the cornerstone of the future “Mosque of Foz do Iguaçu” (“Mesquita em Foz,” 1983; “Com embaixadores e sheikhs,” 1983; “Muçulmanos constroem a primeira,” 1984). At the ceremony in 1983, the president of the Foz do Iguaçu city council Arialba Freire took the podium. As a member of the permitted political opposition and married to a career military man critical of the coup that deposed the democratically elected government nearly 20 years previously, Freire spoke “in the name of Foz do Iguaçu” and emphasized “the participation of the Arab community in the development” of the border. Her mention of Arabs as agents of development recognized the board members present, including Ali Said Rahal as president; Mohamad Ali Omairi, vice-president; Kamal Oman, secretary; Ahmad Ali Osman, treasurer; and others from the Barakat, Rahal, Safa, and Safadi families. This cornerstone-laying ceremony also welcomed diplomats from the Arab League of States, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, and Saudi Arabia; and a half-dozen religious leaders from Curitiba, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro; as well as officials of the Foz do Iguaçu city and Paraná state governments. The MC was Mohamad Abouferes, a representative of the Islamic Conference of South America and the Caribbean, part of the Saudi-supported Muslim World League.³⁹ Hundreds of onlookers celebrated what was called the *comunidade islâmica fronteira* (Islamic border community, in Portuguese).

After the earliest charity and community associations were founded on the Brazilian side of the border, the Centro Árabe Islâmico Paraguayo (Arab Islamic Paraguayan Center) came together on the Paraguayan side, in Ciudad del Este (Pinto & Montenegro, 2008, p. 7). The founder recalled that he never experienced a brush with the Paraguayan dictatorship under Alfredo Stroessner or the subsequently elected heads of state that belonged to the same political party. He and his acquaintances steered clear of criticizing “military men,” especially when an internal military coup deposed Stroessner and continued the rule of the dictatorship’s political party in 1989. At this time, the mosque’s founder idealized a 19-story residential building whose forefront houses the green-domed Mezquita del Profeta Mohammed (sic, Mosque of the Prophet Mohammed). The internal military coup was led by Andrés Rodríguez (1989–1993), who became Paraguay’s first elected president (Nickson, 1989). Integrating the military into the new police force, the *Policia Nacional* (Loveman, 2019; Sondrol, 1992), which harassed Arab and other storeowners, the founder of the mosque in Ciudad del Este did not express fear of reprisals. Located in the *microcentro* (downtown) of the Paraguayan border city, the mosque began to be built in 1993 and opened in 1994. After the mosque opened, the adjacent 19-story building was constructed floor by floor. As most

³⁹ For the first meeting, see Sakr (1977). On the Muslim World League, see Landau (1990).

Sunni continued to congregate in the mosque in Foz do Iguaçu, Shia frequented the mosque in Ciudad del Este.

In gaining greater visibility, Shia Lebanese at the border, like Brazilian and Paraguayan state authorities, expressed empathy as well as indifference toward Hizbullah and AMAL, self-styled resistance movements that took shape during Israel's 19-year-long occupation of Lebanon that started in 1982. Respectively identified with each movement, the son of Fadlalla, from Beirut, and the shaykh of the Shia mosque in São Paulo, Mohsen Bilal Wehbi, came for the inauguration of the Mezquita del Profeta Mohammed in Ciudad del Este (M. Barakat, Personal Interview, June 5, 2009; Fawes, Personal Interview, December 4, 2008).⁴⁰ Yet the mosque's founder emphasized that he built the mosque for the "Muslim community," the Ummah, of the border, not for any political party or movement. The mosque founder's own father, for instance, arrived in the Paraguayan border town after Israeli incursions in their Lebanese hometown of Khiara, in 1983 and 1984. When the Israeli military invaded their house to detain the father, the latter fled and found shelter with his son and daughter-in-law who had just settled at the border. Not only in the case of the founder of the mosque in Ciudad del Este, suspicions that Shia Lebanese could be organizing or fundraising for Hizbullah or any armed resistance had to do with their forced departure from then Israeli-occupied Lebanon.

Though downplayed or overlooked, Shia beneficent work on the Paraguayan side, in Ciudad del Este, brought about the Centro Educacional Libanés (Lebanese Educational Center), often called the Colégio Libanés (Lebanese School). According to Pinto and Montenegro (2008), the school began to be organized in 1992 when a Catholic priest from Qabrikha secured "the donation of land and afterwards the economic collaboration of some Arab merchants" (p. 7). Eventually, the school was linked to the Asociación Beneficente Islámica del Alto Paraná (Islamic Beneficent Association of Alto Paraná), integrating educational materials approved by the Supreme Islamic Shia Council in Lebanon. A key figure in the school's development was Ziad Fahs, born in Qabrikha and educated in Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran. In 1992, Fahs arrived on the Paraguayan side of the border, working with Lebanese and Paraguayan officials for an accredited curriculum (Shahimi, 2000). With official recognition from Paraguayan and Lebanese government education ministries, the Colégio Libanés is now authorized to transfer credits and coursework between Paraguay and Lebanon (Franco, 2002, p. 214, Montenegro, 2009, pp. 299–300). Such institutional ties were likely mitigated by the AMAL movement and political party that drew the sympathies of "various Shia leaders of Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad Presidente Stroessner" since AMAL's head, Nabih Berri, publicly visited the border in 1986 (and returned a decade later, not discussed here) ("Líder guerrilheiro da AMAL visita Foz do Iguaçu," 1986).

⁴⁰ MYA conceded in an interview to reporter Goldberg (2002).

Counterterrorist Liaisons

Having engaged in beneficent-institution building amid the liberal exceptions of illiberal bureaucracies in Brazil and Paraguay, Muslim Arabs at the border were denied the greater enfranchisement that democratic turns in each state should have afforded. The political straits of Muslim Arabs narrowed amid the Argentine state's failure to prevent and prosecute still unresolved violence against the Israeli embassy in 1992 and the AMIA Jewish community center complex in 1994, each perpetrated in Buenos Aires. Though hardly any Muslim Arabs lived on the Argentine side of the tri-border, in Puerto Iguazú, they became convenient scapegoats for frequent miscarriages of justice. Examined in greater detail in the book that this article draws on, Argentine authorities pointed fingers at Muslim Arabs on the Brazilian and Paraguayan sides of the border in efforts to distract attention from their own institutional failures to ensure justice. As one of many instances, in late 1994, Argentine special forces declared an "operation of war at the border" that targeted Muslim Arabs temporarily crossing over from the Brazilian and Paraguayan sides ("Operação de guerra para caçar terrorista," 1994). The Argentine *Gendarmeria* of Puerto Iguazú arbitrarily arrested six Lebanese as suspects, and after one week, all six were released.⁴¹ Such "operations" targeted hundreds of Muslim Arabs during the second half of the 1990s, leading one business leader on the Paraguayan side of the border, Hussein Taiyen, to reflect that Argentine officials "couldn't clarify the attack" on AMIA, so they "wanted to transfer the problem to the Triple Border..." ("En Ciudad del este, todos los árabes somos el Hizbullah," 1998).

Muslim Arabs seemed more like foreign suspects than local long-time benefactors in the conspiracy theories that posed as foreign policy and investigative news after September 11, 2001. Naturalizing the de facto suspension of the civil rights of Muslim Arabs, mainstream media alleged that none other than Bin Laden visited the mosque in Foz do Iguaçu.⁴² In fact, the mosque had been founded with pro-democracy forces at the twilight of military rule, as mentioned earlier, but such history was erased by corporate media's repetition of state-backed, and unsubstantiated, counterterrorist claims.⁴³ As one response, the Foz do Iguaçu mosque's communications director, Omar, recounted an interaction he had with a reporter from a global news agency. The foreign correspondent first asked for a phone interview, but Omar insisted on a face-to-face meeting. After a few days, the reporter arrived and confessed that he expected to land on a dirt airstrip, and travel through the jungle until reaching "Taliban-type soldiers" at the tri-border. He deleted that news story and published a more balanced report. But the note was hardly

⁴¹ For Argentine coverage, see "Galeano reclamó informes sobre libaneses detenidos" (1998). For Brazilian coverage, "Suspeitos de terrorismo são presos em Iguazu" (1994); "Libaneses presos na Argentina são libertados" (1994).

⁴² For some examples of the rumor itself, see "Bin Laden Reportedly Spent Time in Brazil in '95" (2003); "Bin Laden esteve em Foz do Iguaçu e até deu palestra em mesquita" (2003); Policarpo (2003). For some examples of the response, see Bevervanso (2003a, 2003b); "Dirigentes islámicos de Foz desmienten afirmación sobre presencia de Bin Laden" (2003).

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noticeable amid the flood of media coverage that took at face value unsubstantiated claims made by counterterrorist authorities in a seemingly democratic public sphere.

Muslim Arab charity fundraising became emblematic not of beneficent engagement but rather of a nefarious conspiracy. Two Muslim Lebanese at the border, Ali Kazan and Sheikh Sayyed Bilal Mohsen Wehbe, were alleged to have “raised more than \$500,000 for Hizballah from Lebanese businessmen in the TBA [Tri-Border Area]” after Israel bombed Lebanon four years previously, according to the US Treasury Department in 2006 (Machado & Ramos, 2010). Indeed, in the 2000s, the US Treasury had listed Kazan as a Specially Designated National (a euphemism for a suspected terrorist financier) and later added Wehbe. But at the border, most associated each of them with organizing civic associations and running educational institutions. According to Reda Soueid, Wehbe assisted the Islamic Beneficent Society in Foz do Iguaçu, raising support for the Escola Libanesa Brasileira (Lebanese Brazilian School) that opened in Foz do Iguaçu in 2000 (Resende, 2000). Wehbe appointed Kazan as director of that school, but the US list of terrorist finances distorted Muslim Arab charity and fundraising at the border. In the 1990s, Ziad Fahs, mentioned earlier, claimed that on the occasion of ‘Ashura, traders donated some US\$800,000 for the Centro Educacional Libanés in Ciudad del Este (Shahimi, 2000, pp. 178–180). The illiberal exceptions made by liberal democratic institutions led to the near-erasure of the long history of Muslim Arab alms-giving at the border and across the hemisphere.

Muslim Arabs speculated that government authorities could twist any act of charity in order to vilify their beneficence as terrorist finance. In the late 1990s and 2000s, some Lebanese-owned stores at the border made room near cash registers for small donation boxes whose proceeds were destined for war victims in Lebanon and Palestine. In these taken-for-granted containers, customers would place small bills of Brazilian and Paraguayan currency (reais or guaranis), whose worth relative to the US dollar was low. Immediately after 9/11, however, Paraguayan authorities raided the stores in Ciudad del Este and confiscated the boxes, and some storeowners that had the donation boxes on countertops suddenly found themselves accused of being potential financiers of terrorism. “That’s how they [government authorities] fabricated the connection” between Muslim Arab-driven charity and alleged terrorism, explained a local Shia sheikh, “collecting money in these small boxes for families in Lebanon turned into ‘financing Hizballah terrorists’” (S. Khalil, Personal Interview, July 19, 2007).

In the 2000s and 2010s, public-spirited collections diminished amid fears of what Jamil Ibrahim Iskandar called Islamophobia, which for him meant “Muslims becoming synonymous with terrorists” (Carvalho, 2007). According to Iskandar, mainstream media reportage that associated Islam with terrorism at the border increasingly worsened after 9/11, though it began a decade earlier, as previously explored here. He concluded that, “the community is reluctant in expressing its culture and religion.” This unease was especially evident when the group’s religious leader Sheikh Khalil floated the idea of dinner fundraiser to benefit victims of the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006. He got the idea from a similar event in Curitiba that raised a humble sum of money for war relief in Lebanon. But most at the border feared that any act to raise funds for the homeland would be twisted as “financing

Hizbullah” (S. Khalil, Personal Interview, July 19, 2007). Khalil explained that many lack any sympathy for Hizbullah, despite assumptions to the contrary. Though the president and religious leader concurred that migrants continued remitting “money to family members in the Middle East,” some shied away from fundraising under such surveillance.

The Clube União Árabe in Foz do Iguaçu, the first civic association at the border mentioned at the start of this article, temporarily closed its doors under such circumstances in the 2000s. Previously, the club had made local news for board elections and commemorative galas (“Edital,” 1999; “Nadia e Fadia Jebai” e “Turbante do Mohamed Ismail,” 2000). Twenty or so traders had served as major patrimonial donors, each contributing R\$50,000 to provide the club’s financial basis of some R\$1,000,000 “or 500,000 dollars” (then estimated currency exchange values) (Nasser, Personal Interview, August 17, 2008). But the club’s regular members stopped giving amid US-derived suspicions of charity donations, exacerbated by corporate media and the well-publicized US Treasury Department list with names of “specially-designated” Brazilians and Paraguayans of Arab origin. Indeed, Clube União Árabe regular members failed to raise even a modest sum requested by the board of directors to keep the club’s doors open. Given the fact that Arabs at the border would not make minimal contributions to maintain a nonprofit entity with civic ends founded decades previously, one Sunni Muslim Arab businessman rhetorically asked, why would they be sending millions of dollars to “terrorists in the Middle East?” (Nasser, Personal Interview, August 17, 2008).

“The community feels very watched,” emphasized Sheikh Khalil from the Islamic Beneficent Society (S. Khalil, Personal Interview, July 19, 2007). Khalil recalled a visit from a young man with Lebanese parents, born in Brazil, who “speaks Arabic well.” The young man gave his card and asked to be contacted if any questionable activity arose. “If I discover something,” reasoned Khalil, “I’m going directly to the police. Why would I call this man?” (Personal Interview, July 19, 2007). With mosques and religious gatherings open to the public, Khalil explained, “I’m not afraid of informants. I’m afraid of the informant who lies, who adds or invents things.” Khalil, and everyday Arabs, drew attention to the role of unaccountable informants with vested interests in pointing fingers. Hardly absolving state authorities, many Muslim Arabs at the tri-border shared similar perspectives regarding unaccountable intelligence gathering in ostensibly accountable and democratically elected, governance.

While both Shia and Sunni Muslims shied away from philanthropy in Foz do Iguaçu, Sunni Muslims in Ciudad del Este began mobilizing for a new mosque in 2011, when the Paraguayan state was led by progressive Fernando Lugo, the first president that interrupted the six-decade long rule of the Colorado political party that remained in power even after an internal military coup had deposed the dictator himself (“Avanza construcción de mezquita en el Este,” 2013). One of the organizers, Khaled from the well-known department store La Petisquera, called the new mosque a “contribution to . . . Ciudad del Este as well as a destination that people like to visit” (“Comunidad árabe inaugura mezquita como un símbolo de arraigo en CDE,” 2015). At the ground-breaking ceremony in 2012, Lugo’s vice-minister of culture, Hugo Brítez, characterized the mosque in similar terms. “This city will have a new icon,” he began. “It will be a meeting place, not only for the exercise of

faith, but also . . . for those who visit us from afar” (“Comunidad árabe construye mezquita y fortalece presencia en la frontera,” 2012). Community organizers and state authorities alike spoke of the new mosque in terms of tourist development, citing the example of the aforementioned mosque in Foz do Iguacu that attracts thousands of tourists each month (“Comunidad árabe inaugura mezquita como un símbolo de arraigo en CDE,” 2015). Accordingly, Sunni Lebanese organizers avoided publicly discussing the previously mentioned Mezquita del Profeta Mohammed where Shia Lebanese had prayed in Ciudad del Este during the past two decades. Khaled emphasized that in the new mosque, “podrá entrar cualquier persona, chiita, sunita, como así como el musulmán puede entrar en cualquier iglesia” ‘anyone can enter, Shia, Sunni, and so on, like a Muslim can enter in any church’ (“Mezquita construida por la comunidad árabe va cobrando forma,” 2012).

In 2015, Paraguayan president Horacio Cartes (2013–2018) of the Colorado political party inaugurated the new mosque (“Cartes inaugura mezquita de USD 1 millón en CDE,” 2015; “Prefeito participa da inauguração da mesquita Al-Rashdeen Alkhaulafa de Ciudad del Este,” 2015; “Mesquita de Ciudad del Este, Paraguai,” 2017, p. 130). The Sunni Lebanese organizers chose the official name of Alkhaulafa Al-Rashdeen (Rightly-Guided Caliphs or Rulers, in Arabic, a phrase not customarily used by Shia), but the mosque is usually referred to as the Mezquita del Este (Mosque of the East, in Spanish), some blocks south of the microcenter. The Ciudad del Este mayor, Sandra McLeod of the same Colorado political party, and the Foz do Iguacu mayor, Reni Pereira, among others, participated in the inauguration of the mosque that Said Taijen called a “símbolo de la pluriculturalidad cosmopolita” ‘symbol of cosmopolitan multiculturalism’ in Paraguay. Muslim Arabs continue to mobilize amid what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam called “the burdens of representation” (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 48).⁴⁴

Muslim Arabs’ charity and community-building at the tri-border is part of a long history of Islamic philanthropy across the hemisphere and world (Logroño Narbona et al., 2015). For more than six decades, Muslim Arabs at the tri-border have mobilized resources to support community-building and to help those near and far. Their charity work in the borderlands between Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina began under liberal exceptions to illiberal rule, spanning the 1950s through the 1980s. Muslim Arabs established beneficent associations and social clubs during this time when illiberal autocrats and bureaucrats suspended civil rights and scrutinized any social gatherings in order to allegedly safeguard what was considered national security. However, since the 1990s, Muslim Arab philanthropical activities and institutions became subject to illiberal exceptions enacted by liberal democratic authorities that otherwise ensure political enfranchisement. For the past three decades, Muslim Arab charity and community institutions have come under state scrutiny, not actually absolved and yet not formally charged with any wrong-doing. Their resilience reveals a hemispheric history of exceptional rule that few have pieced together and none would wish to bear the brunt of.

⁴⁴ See the mosque’s website, <https://mezquitadeleste.org.py/>.

Muslim Arabs inhabit a historic crossroads where the authoritarian past meets the counterterrorist present of a shared hemispheric America. Never put into the same frame of analysis, these two time periods are experienced as uninterrupted forms of exceptional rule by Muslim Arabs at an American border where many states vie for power and leverage. Accusations of terrorism have an authoritarian legacy in much of South America, with US complicity too. During the so-called “lead years” of military rule, counterterrorist accusations were levied against neither Muslims nor Arabs, but instead in relation to anyone perceived to question the status quo, above all, communists and anyone perceived to share sympathies. Under the authoritarian military regimes that ruled in Brazil (1964–1985), Paraguay (1955–1989), and Argentina (1976–1980), Muslim Arabs opened businesses and founded beneficent associations that generally steered clear of the reigning powers. But instead of experiencing democratic enfranchisement during since the 1990s, as occurred elsewhere on the continent, they faced increasing counterterrorist surveillance led by democratizing member states of Mercosur as well as the US. After the still unresolved attacks against the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, on March 17, 1992, and the AMIA community center complex, on July 18, 1994, and then once more following September 11, 2001 in the US, Muslim Arabs on the Brazilian and Paraguayan sides of the tri-border were investigated, again and again, but never absolved by state powers. Muslim Arab beneficence is witness to this hemispheric history of exceptional rule, from the authoritarian past to the counterterrorist present.

Muslim Arab beneficence remains at these hemispheric crossroads of authoritarian and counterterrorist politics. It may be tempting to think that Muslim Arabs could more freely engage in civic and community philanthropy in the authoritarian past rather than the counterterrorist present, and/or that the de facto suspension of Muslim Arab civil rights at the tri-border since the 1990s is not surprising given the counterterrorist logics that globalized after 2001. But I think that Muslim Arabs’ more than half-century-long institutional presence at the border where Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina meet reveals an understudied illiberal arc of this hemispheric America. Muslim Arab beneficent institutions could be critiqued in intersectional terms of class, gender, and race, being run by upper-middle class men who generally see themselves as white. Instead, this article focused on the entanglements between state exceptions and Muslim Arabs’ beneficence that grew accustomed to them.

Muslim beneficence reveals the tenuousness of democratic order in the hemisphere. All but silenced in apparently democratizing politics since the 1990s, the Muslim Arab border presence attests to a still-to-be-concluded illiberal experiment of this hemisphere. Muslim Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians bore witness to this hemisphere’s political arc of extraordinary measures that state powers enact for an indeterminate time. Instead of undergoing what specialists today diagnose as the backsliding of democracy, Muslim Arabs have been accommodating more than six decades of exceptional rule.

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Practitioner Perspectives

“We Carry All These Different Hijabs”: An Interview with Hazel Gómez

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Hazel Gómez

Community Organizer

Abstract

Hazel Gómez is a board member for Rabata, a network of female Muslim scholars dedicated to educating Muslim women around the world. Gómez, who is also a community organizer, has been involved with Rabata for many years, studying with various scholars through the organization’s academic institute. In this interview, Gómez highlights how her faith plays a central role in the philanthropic and civic work she does, especially as it pertains to integrating Islamic principles and teachings into her community organizing. Gómez specifically cites a saying of the Prophet Muhammad that highlights the importance of ensuring people have basic rights such as a home, clothing, food, and water as well as a Quranic injunction that different people, from different places should “get to know one another.” This interview was conducted by Ken Chitwood via Zoom on December 2, 2022. It has been edited for clarity and length.

Keywords: *community organizing, dawah, zakat, waqf, solidarity*

Interview

Chitwood: Thank you so very much for being willing to speak today and share a little bit about Latino Muslim philanthropy in the US. Why don’t you start by telling us a bit more about you and your work?

Gómez: I’m a Chicagoan living in Detroit, as I like to say. My community organizing actually started in Chicago over 15 years ago at the Inner-city Muslim Action Network (IMAN)—a community organization that fosters health, wellness, and healing in the inner city by organizing for social change, cultivating the arts, and operating a holistic health center.

When I moved to Detroit, I discovered Rabata, an organization of female Muslim scholars educating Muslim women around the world. I have been involved with Rabata since before it was Rabata. I was part of the initial cohort of students with Shaykha Dr. Tamara Gray. Now, I’m a board member after all these years.

For me, Rabata is more than its Ribaat academic institute [offering courses, workshops, and retreats focused on training women in Islamic sciences]. But that's where I began to study and establish myself in the foundations of Islam as a Muslim woman, learning from other Muslim women. It is really phenomenal to have studied with various scholars and to hear the perspective of Muslim women, their scholarship, and their interpretation. It's a different route than is usually offered in Islamic education.

But Rabata has many different branches. We have a convert care coordinator who helps new Muslims bring their whole selves to Islam. In one year, she talked to over 100 women around the world. Through mentorship we help new and veteran converts who might feel isolated, lonely, or down and out to feel connected to a community and be comforted by the Quran.

We also have various chapters across the world, from Malaysia to London, to here in Michigan and Toronto. Our sisters are just all over, *subhan Allah*. Last year, early last year, we were connected to a sister named Dawn who is building a masjid all on her own. A Muslim woman building a masjid on her own! And her community is mainly women. She has around 50 women who have converted to Islam already. Rabata is a space for empowering Muslim women like Dawn.

I'm really grateful our work is faith-driven, very faith-rooted. That means when I work in organizing, even outside the Muslim community, my foundations are in Islam. My foundations in the Islamic sciences really come to the forefront in all I do. I would describe myself as a "faith-rooted community organizer." Those foundations come from Rabata, which means they come from Muslim women, who have so much experience as scholars and professionals and mothers and wives. We carry all these different hijabs and I'm grateful to be able to learn from them and know that I can do it too. It's possible.

Chitwood: You mentioned how your training in Islamic studies directly influences the community organizing you do. Could you give a couple of examples of principles that inspire you to do the particular work that you're involved in?

Gómez: Just two weeks ago, the organization that I work for—Dream of Detroit [a mosque-based nonprofit aiming to revitalize its community]—hosted a community organizing workshop called "Muslim Lead." Our goal is to promote housing justice as well as provide community organizing trainings, support the arts, and bring together Muslims from the metro Detroit area as well as the residents of our neighborhood. The executive director built the program, but asked me to revamp it, specifically wanting me to add more teaching based on Islamic principles that highlight different aspects of political advocacy and principles of community organizing. For example, there's this saying of the Prophet (peace be upon him, PBUH), where Uthman ibn Affan reported that the Prophet (PBUH) said, "**There is no right for the son of Adam other than these things: a house in which he lives, a garment to cover his nakedness, a piece of bread, and water**" (Sunan al-Tirmidhī 2341).

That's a prophetic saying that speaks directly about dignity. So, as we're doing this organizing training, we're talking about moving from services to organizing to political advocacy, really emphasizing how it all builds toward guaranteeing human dignity—in the community where I live. It's all grounded in an Islamic framework.

As we organize our training, and do our work, we are constantly asking ourselves, “What does our faith say about this? What are the rights of people in our neighborhood according to Islamic tradition?” Here, we emphasize how we cannot get people to organize unless their basic needs are met. These are their *human* rights, right? These are the rights of the sons and daughters of Adam. When we share that at our trainings, some people share how they’d never heard that prophetic saying before. That’s what we are there to do, to build strength and resources for people to see themselves in justice work from an Islamic—a faith—perspective.

I also share my own experiences. When I moved from Chicago to Detroit, I saw a lot of grassroots, but also a lot of “mud roots.” What I mean by mud roots is people don’t even have the resources. When I tried organizing here, I had to start by fostering basic human rights for individuals in my neighborhood. One of their rights is a home to live in. In this country, and particularly around Detroit, there have been so many illegal foreclosures on predominantly Black homes. So, we start by providing a home to live in for individuals who have lost theirs.

And that’s when another prophetic principle comes into play: Abu Sa’eed al-Khudree (may Allah be pleased with him, RA) said: I heard the Messenger of Allah say, “Whosoever of you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then [let him change it] with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart—and that is the weakest of faith” (Hadith 34, 40 Hadith an-Nawaw). Essentially, that means that we all have a role to play in forbidding wrong and pursuing the good. Some people just want to live comfortable lives, because “Hey, capitalism!” They want to pursue the American dream. But as Muslims we are called so much deeper than that. We have a responsibility to do something—with our hands, our tongues, or at least with our hearts.

These are just two examples of principles that we incorporate within our curricula for community organizers—specifically when I train Muslim women. One of the places I do that is with Muslim Women’s Institute [a faith-based, community service organization, working within a multi-faith frame, focused on the following areas hunger relief and food security, health education, transitional needs of new immigrants], which is really phenomenal. I was one of the trainers during their last cohort and had the opportunity to meet Muslim women: young Muslim women, early 20s, you know, late teens who are starting their organizing, who may not have foundations in their faith, to show them that our faith has these principles. It can be eye-opening for them.

Too often Muslim activists try to substitute their religion with activism. If that makes sense, great. They feel compelled, like they have to do something. I get it. But maybe they haven’t been shown how their faith can speak to this injustice. How their faith can fuel their drive to do something. And so, they go out and seek to do good, but they neglect their religion. I say to them, you still have to pray. You still have to fast. You still have to do all these things as a Muslim, that’s not going to substitute your activism. It’s going to support it. You can’t spend your whole day doing this work and missing your prayers. You’re doing it wrong. I’m very candid with young women who I mentor, to make sure that they’re doing their five pillars so that they can stand up against injustice, not in spite of standing up against injustice.

Chitwood: You've brought up how Islamic principles as well as sayings, sources, and traditions from the Quran and the Sunnah motivate Muslims to contribute to civil society. But would you say there's a particular "Muslim philanthropy?" Or do you not really think in those terms when it comes to the work you do and that you see others doing?

Gómez: When I hear the term "philanthropy," I think of Muslims with access. Muslims who are able to give to projects. And by Muslims with access, I think of established South Asian and Arab communities and their access to social, financial, and institutional power and resources. When I think of philanthropy within the Latino community, I don't think there is enough of it, but it is also because we don't have access to the same resources.

At the same time, when I think of philanthropy within the Latino Muslim community, I think of charity and not solidarity. As a community organizer, I try to encourage people to move beyond charity into solidarity. Money is important. Money keeps the ball going. Money allows us to build these houses and rehab these houses for people without housing in Detroit. We need the money and the resources to do that. Don't get me wrong. But if it's only out of pity or some sense of required charity, then I don't need your money. As Muslims, we should have higher purpose with why—and what—we give.

My brothers Imam Wesley AbdurRazzaq Abu Sumayyah Lebron, Imam Jose "Yusuf" Rios, and Imam Daniel Abdullah Hernandez, when they started the Three Puerto Rican Imams project (<https://3puertoricanimams.org>) raising funds after Hurricane María in 2017 [a devastating storm that killed some 3,000 people on the archipelago], they found it really difficult. There were Muslims who were sharing this sentiment, like, "There aren't any Muslims in Puerto Rico!" But there are *humans*, right? There aren't too many Muslims in Puerto Rico, okay, but there are human beings. Allah (*subhana wa tala*, SWT) says in the Quran that he made us into nations and tribes so that we may get to know one another (Q 49:13). But the way that this country is set up, we're automatically segmented and segregated. The Muslim community kind of unfortunately follows that segregation too. We need each other. We need each other's support. We need each other's solidarity. Not only because we are Muslims.

That applies on our side too. Latinos are not always in community with the broader Muslim community. We could also do more to connect with South Asians and Arabs and give to their projects. But, of course, we're going to give to our own first because we know each other. And, we know, the "powers that be" don't understand our lack of resources.

So, in the end, it's like, okay, broader Muslim community, get to know us so that you can love us so that you can know that we are brothers and sisters not only in faith but in humanity—because *we are people*. Our pain is your pain. So yes, you should give to hurricane victims in Puerto Rico, you should give to earthquake victims in Mexico. Solidarity through philanthropy is a way to get out of our bubbles to genuinely get to know one another. The question is how do we get the broader community to see us? Do we have to wave our hands so that they can see our people are hurting? How can we inspire them to allocate resources to help our people in Puerto Rico and Mexico? We need more awareness so that we can have more access.

Chitwood: How do you think Muslims in the US can start to build that kind of solidarity with one another?

Gómez: Building relationships is one of the hardest things to do in philanthropy. It has to start as people genuinely getting to know each other. And that includes getting to know each other's backgrounds and stories. How many times do people within the community assume I'm Mexican (because all Latinos are Mexican, right?!) and then they find out I'm Puerto Rican. But I am *also* Mexican. I'm very Puerto Rican. I'm very Mexican. I'm very Muslim. I want to be known as a whole person.

One thing I've been very grateful for is there have been a few conferences where there's a segment for Latino Muslims to share these kinds of stories and experiences. I think that is a starting point for us to build relationships, to connect. When people come to these panels, some of them are shocked, like, "Oh my God, there's Latino Muslims!" And we're like, "Yeah, there are third generation Latino Muslims, born and raised in the faith. Not everyone's a convert!" But it's good, even so, that it opens people's eyes.

Not everyone has access to diversity. Not everyone leans into the diversity they have access to. But these kinds of conversations allow people to lean in. To ask questions. To get to know us. To check your negative stereotypes about Latinos (yes, even Muslims have them) at the door. Because they know what it is to be a minority, so they can understand how we are treated as minorities. Like, we're not all the same just like you're not all the same. You get it. You've been there. You've been mistreated. So have we. That's where solidarity begins.

It sounds so simple, but we have to start with the question how do we get people in a room together? Well, having these conferences, really investing in Latino Muslims and having these panels, having time for one-on-ones is good. But also, our local communities can do better, making space and creating opportunities for connection on a more regular basis. Here in Detroit, for example, the Latino community lives in one part of the city. We can feel somewhat segregated from other communities (Black, South Asian, White, etc.). As Muslims, we should be breaking out of those segregated bubbles, have conversations with one another—Muslim-to-Muslim, Muslim-to-non-Muslim. Just listen and learn.

It sounds so simple, but like I said before, it's actually a lot more difficult than it seems because we have to take the time to be with each other and really listen to the issues that people have. For example, right after Hurricane María I posted something on Facebook about how my family was affected by it. And I was grateful to the three Puerto Rican Imams who called from Puerto Rico, checking in on my family. They got food for them and everything. And then my cousin Manuel calls me back and he was like, "You know, *Dios te bendiga*, or may Allah, may God bless you." And I was like, "No, I'm just I'm glad you are there. That you're okay." That's the kind of thing I am talking about. Caring for one another. Caring for each other's families. Caring for the other's concerns and problems.

God bless Imams, but when you're going down a list of countries at the end of your *khutbah*, maybe you can just add that we should love Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Paraguay, Panama, Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Costa Rica, El Salvador, and not just Pakistan, Palestine, or places like that. If you can just add these countries to the end of your *khutbah* or when you're making an appeal to

give. There was one imam, may Allah bless him, from Naperville, who messaged me and told me that after my Facebook post about this he added Puerto Rico to the end of his *khutbah*. That meant a lot. Because, you don't know who was sitting in that crowd that just needed to hear a religious figure on the *minbar* acknowledge that Latinos exist. It's little moments like that, could just open the door to so much conversation and understanding. Where Allah has placed each and every one of us is absolutely important, because we're meant not only to learn where everybody is at right now, but where they are *from*.

Chitwood: How do terms and concepts like *dawah*, *zakat*, or *waqf* take on flesh among Latino Muslims? How are they related to the philanthropy and solidarity you spoke of?

Gómez: Let's start with *dawah*. *Dawah* within the Latino Muslim community is strong. Depending on where you are in the country, it's stronger than other places: like New York, New Jersey, Houston, Chicago. But in general, it's strong wherever you find Latino Muslims.

Now, some people have asked me whether we should move beyond *dawah*, to add community organizing and political advocacy—so that we can get Latino Muslims more politically active. But I've spoken to some of these *dawah* leaders and, I get it, but they see that as mission creep. And I understand that. But all that means is that we need new organizations. We've a lot of organizations doing online *dawah*. Great. We need more organizations in the community. Then you learn, people don't just need *dawah*. Like, I don't go into neighborhoods with pamphlets. I'd rather sit and have coffee with someone, get to know them. That way I can better serve them and meet their needs. That's just the way that I am. So, I think depending on where you are in the country there's a lot more opportunity to make those kinds of community connections.

That will then give more purpose to our *sadaqa*. It would help us move beyond charity to solidarity, like I mentioned earlier. *Sadaqa* is not just about crowdfunding for a particular project or initiative. Some of these efforts fail because we haven't built the relationships yet. If we can build connections, then we can build more of a base for giving.

Now, when it comes to a *waqf*, I don't think we're anywhere near that. I was in conversation with this Puerto Rican brother who is involved in philanthropy, and we asked ourselves, "where, or who, would even start this? Where would it go?" I would love to have conversations with someone about what is needed to build a Latino Muslim legacy here in the US, or down on the US/Mexico border, or beyond the borders to other Latin American Muslims. But we're not even there yet. If we're barely on the *sadaqa* train, if we're barely able to raise \$1,000 out of a \$10,000 project we are nowhere close to being able to set up a trust. You know what I mean?

And then *zakat*. What I love about *zakat* is that this is money ordained by God. It is God's money, right? It's not your money. It's meant for God's purposes. The thing today is that most *zakat* is being geared toward institutions: building a mosque, fixing a mosque, furnishing a mosque. Now, okay, but this is just one of the eight requirements listed in the Quran. We have to remember that you not only have to meet certain requirements to receive *zakat*, but you also need to meet requirements

to give *zakat*. And these requirements include people who are destitute, people who are seekers of knowledge. These are also God's purposes for *zakat*.

I may sound like a broken record, but this returns us once again to the need to be in relationship with people to know if they qualify according to these requirements. The fact that so many *zakat* initiatives focus on buildings and institutions is a sign that they are disconnected from the needs of the people in their neighborhood, in their city.

I myself have been a recipient of *zakat*, *subhan Allah*. Allah knows I needed that one time. It was a divine blessing. I remember, my grandmother asked me, "Why did someone give you that money?" And I told her, "because God inspired them to." That made an impact on her. Then she told me, "then go buy some groceries!" But more than God's inspiration, it was because this person personally knew me. We were friends. They were in a relationship with me. That's how they knew I needed *zakat*. There have been a lot of other Latino Muslims that have been the recipients of *zakat*. It's told them they are loved. It's been a blessing. It's a beautiful feeling to be seen. When it comes to *dawah*, *sadaqa*, a future *waqf*, or *zakat*, they all require relationships to know how best to put them to use.

And it's not just money. It's time as well. *Sadaqa* is not just about money, it's about giving your time. For Latino Muslims who maybe don't have money, they can give their time. Muslims with more financial resources have to remember this. Like, I've seen wealthy Muslims ask a Latina Muslim who is a housekeeper or something why she isn't giving more money. Giving more time. How do you have the audacity? Probably because you don't know her. You don't know her circumstances. You don't know her story and how much she has to work for what money she has.

Chitwood: On that note, are there any particular elements of Muslim women's philanthropy that you want to highlight in our conversation?

Gómez: Yes, there is! Shaykha Dr. Tamara Gray always reminds us at Rabata that women in general, but Muslim women in particular, need to work toward our financial freedom. This is an area where I'm pushing myself to learn more and pushing myself to understand better. That way, I can give more and focus on sharing funds that benefit women—Muslim women, non-Muslim women—directly. That can be especially powerful for Latina women, for Latina Muslim women.

Chitwood: How might different Latino Muslim organizations, or Latino-led Muslim organizations, do more together?

Gómez: I think that there's a lot of people who are doing things on their own. There are lots of people across the country who are doing things locally. That is very important to me. But I think it's just letting people know what you're doing on a local level. Maybe then it can pique someone's interested and they will say, "Hey, I know I know someone who can provide the resources for you to continue to move forward." Maybe that means being a part of the larger organizations in order to be heard. But a lot of people are just kind of doing things on their own. That's just been my observation. I could totally wrong. But people are just trying to get things done.

Chitwood: What does the future hold for Muslim philanthropy in the United States

and among Latino Muslims in particular? What should the future look like, from your perspective?

Gómez: I think that Muslim philanthropists, the people who have access, need to go to the communities where the individuals are—where Latino Muslims are getting work done. Go to them, see the work that is being done. See what’s happening on the ground, the things that are happening, the things that they’re working on, see where their soles walk every day.

That way, when they feel inspired to give, they have been in a relationship with those individuals, they are seeing the effects of the hard work and the hard work that they’re putting on the ground in order to what the benefit of \$20,000 can do for a particular organization, a particular community.

It’s also not just the nonprofit sector. A lot of the stuff that’s getting done is not always under a 501(c)3. That’s because when you want to start a 501, you have to pay the \$700 application. Do I pay the \$700 application, or do I use this money for a program? Most people will choose to use the money for a program if they have limited resources.

And I understand, like I said about *sadaqa*, you can also give your time if you don’t have the money. Building a nonprofit takes time. It sounds so cliché, but good work can start with just one person giving their time, their money. Then, there could be a ripple effect. This really just reminds me of the importance of being present and really genuinely getting to know one another. We are not saviors. But God has placed us here for a reason, to just do our part.

As a broader Muslim community, we have to ask ourselves how we can follow that Quranic injunction to get to know one another. Right? Like, what does that mean? How can we really put that into practice? That’s the overarching goal for me. If we do that...oh, man, I could just imagine how much we can move from charity into solidarity. And genuinely care and genuinely love each other.

Muslim Philanthropy in Brazil: Interviews with Philanthropists in São Paulo

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Abstract

The main purpose of these interviews is to explore the development of Muslim philanthropy in Brazil as well as the role of dawah and its relation to philanthropy. The interviews deal with specific terms such as zakat, fitra, sadaqah, and waqf to explore how they are interpreted and applied in Latin American contexts. The interviews were conducted with the person in charge of Centro de Divulgação do Islam para América Latina (CDIAL, Center for the Promotion of Islam in Latin America) and the director of affairs at Al-Madina School in São Bernardo, São Paulo, Brazil. This paper also provides some perspective on how the Brazilian government provides facilities for Islamic institutions, the way Muslim nonprofit organizations spend their zakat, and how they manage to help others in Brazilian civil society. Both through interviews and the author's personal involvement, this paper offers multiple first-person accounts of Muslim philanthropy in Brazil.

Keywords: *Philanthropy, Brazil, dawah, zakat*

Introduction

Charity, known as *zakat*, is the third pillar of Islamic religious practices (*arkan al-din/al-Islam*). Zakat is considered an obligatory act of worship, which requires every Muslim who owns wealth greater than, or equal to, a predefined limit or value (*nisab*), to donate approximately 2.5% of that wealth to people in need. Amounts smaller than the *nisab* are not subject to the payment of alms. The *nisab* has two basic conditions. First, it has to be in excess of the urgent, or basic, needs for a Muslim, such as food, clothing, accommodation, vehicles, and tools for a Muslim's respective craft. Second, the *nisab* is typically measured over a specific period, often a lunar year, to account for any fluctuations in wealth throughout that period. This is due to interpretations of the *hadith* of Aisha, where she is supposed to have said: "There is no zakat on money until the year has passed on it." Beyond this condition, there is the *zakat* of crops and fruits; where *zakat* is due on the day it is harvested; (He is the One Who produces gardens both cultivated and wild and palm trees, crops of different flavors, olives, and pomegranates similar "in shape,"

but dissimilar “in taste.” Eat of the fruit they bear and pay the dues at harvest, but do not waste. Surely He does not like the wasteful) (*Qur’an* 6:141).

For Muslims, *zakat* is meant to serve as a means to reduce poverty, bridge the wealth gap, and promote solidarity and compassion among Muslims. It is also considered a way to purify one’s wealth and seek blessings from Allah. Many Muslims give *zakat* during the Islamic month of Ramadan, as it is believed to be a time of increased blessings and rewards. Moreover, *zakat* is different from other forms of voluntary charity, known as *sadaqah*. While *zakat* has specific rules and criteria, *sadaqah* refers to any form of voluntary giving or acts of kindness, apart from the obligatory *zakat*. Both are a significant aspect of Islamic financial practice and play crucial roles in shaping Muslim communities and societies. The intention of both *sadaqah* and *zakat* is to ensure the equitable distribution of wealth between believers and to foster a sense of social responsibility and compassion.

Muslim Philanthropic Infrastructure in Brazil

Among Muslims in Brazil, philanthropy is widespread in multiple sectors of civil society: in education, culture, food, as well as for and among impoverished communities. For example, there are numerous Islamic schools and institutions built by philanthropists from Middle Eastern countries, like Kuwait or the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Immigrants and their descendants in Brazil have played a significant role in constructing its Muslim philanthropic infrastructure, being responsible for 120 institutions in São Paulo alone. These institutions include Islamic centers, religious associations, and charitable organizations. Some institutions have grown and developed, while others have remained relatively small. The same applies to Arabic-Islamic magazines (publications) and schools.

Support and subsidies from abroad, thanks to the maintenance of relations by the Islamic community in Brazil with Arab countries such as Egypt, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, have brought collaboration and funding for mosques and Islamic centers in Brazil. While these institutions have received support from local community members, they also have relied on external donations from Saudi Arabia, the Islamic World League based in Mecca, and the support and assistance of the Brazilian government itself.⁴⁵

Many imams are selected, trained, and sent by Arab governments to serve in South American countries such as Brazil. One example is Ismail Hatia, a South African who arrived in Brazil in 1956. He built a mosque in Campinas and also ran a language school. When Hatia settled in Campinas, there were 50 Muslim families in desperate need of a community organization to help them practice their faith. Currently, the Campinas mosque has well-organized weekly sermons every Friday. Another example is Ahmed Sale Al-Muhayri. In 1974, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Dawah in Saudi Arabia sent Al-Muhayri as a *da’ia* (missionary) to the

⁴⁵ See <https://cdial.org.br/acao-social-islamica-na-periferia-de-sao-bernardo-do-campo/>.

state of Paraná in Londrina. He founded the King Faisal Mosque and wrote several works in Portuguese and Spanish.

Early Philanthropic Initiatives in Brazil

In 1987, Islamic cultural work in Brazil took a significant leap when the Lebanese immigrant Ahmed Ali Saifi founded the Center for Islamic Dawah in Latin America (CDIAL). Saifi's initiative originated from the creation of the Muslim Youth Movement in 1965, along with a group of his friends. After more than a decade of dedication and work, around 1977, Mr. Saifi assumed the leadership of the Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana de São Paulo.

In 1978, with the support of the Muslim Youth Movement, the Abu Bakr Al Sidik Association was founded with the aim of representing and engaging the growing Islamic community in Brazil and Latin America. It also sought to promote religion through social activities, camps, classes, and international seminars that involved members from across the continent. The association provided books, pamphlets, and promotional materials in Portuguese, Spanish, and Arabic to these communities, as well as the construction of mosques around the country. It has organized an annual international congress since 1981.

Another significant moment in the development of Islamic cultural work in Brazil was in 1979, when Lebanese immigrant Hossain El Zogbi founded the Union of Islamic Institutions in Brazil, a process that took place with the approval and endorsement of the Islamic World League in addition to several Muslim-majority countries' embassies. This organization managed to secure financial support for the construction of more than 30 mosques in various parts of Brazil and bring *du'at* (Islamic preachers) through the support of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in Egypt, the Islamic World League, and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in Saudi Arabia.

Ali Kettani (related to the author) also played a role, as an expert on Islamic minorities and advisor to the Islamic World League (*Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami*), as well as a professor at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. He visited Brazil several times to meet with Muslim leaders there.⁴⁶ During his first visit from December 18 to 25, 1974, as a delegate of the Muslim World League to the Muslim community in South America, Kettani discussed with the leaders the means necessary for organization and encouraged them to form a federation and establish ties with the descendants of other immigrants from Spain, Africa, and/or Syria. He then visited the states of Rio de Janeiro, the Federal District of Brasilia, and Paraná (Curitiba, Londrina, Paranagua).

Professor Kettani also pursued *dawah* in non-majority Muslim countries more broadly. He began his involvement in this field since his entry into the University of Lausanne, Switzerland and later in the United States. He established several Islamic centers through which he aimed to promote Islamic teachings. Upon settling in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, he was appointed as an advisor to the

⁴⁶ See the attached annexes

Muslim World League in Mecca. He proposed to them to conduct a comprehensive survey of Muslim minorities worldwide. The first work he classified in this regard was the book “Muslims in the Communist Camp.” In 1973, he conducted a general survey of the number of Muslims in Europe and the Americas on behalf of the Muslim World League. This resulted in the publication of several reports, including “Muslims in Europe and America” in two volumes, and “Muslim Minorities in The World Today” in English (with an abridged version in Arabic). (See Appendices 1 and 2)

As part of his efforts to preserve the Islamic presence in the West and spread Islamic teachings, Ali Kettani also participated in training and development courses for leaders and preachers organized in various universities and Islamic centers around the world, including Malaysia, Trinidad, Guyana, Suriname, and the Netherlands. One notable organization that hosted such events was the “Dawah Academy,” an offshoot of the Islamia University of Islamabad in Pakistan. Hundreds of preachers from different countries graduated under his guidance. Additionally, he played a key role in organizing Islamic associations in Australia under the name of the “Union of Islamic Associations in Australia,” which now comprises over 800,000 Muslims. The number of people who embraced Islam through his efforts or influence surpasses calculation.

Beyond the efforts of individuals, charitable societies played an important role in the development of Brazil’s Muslim philanthropic infrastructure. The first Islamic Benevolent Association in São Paulo was inaugurated in 1929, along with a mosque, the first in Latin America. It was after World War II that the construction of this mosque began in 1952. It was initially called the Muslim Benevolent Society in Rio de Janeiro, founded in 1951 by a group of immigrants on a 40m² area in the city center. Serious supervision began in 1956 when the Islamic Congress in Cairo sent a delegation headed by Abdulllah Abdulshakur Kamel. At that time, there were 14 Islamic institutions in Brazil, with the majority located in São Paulo, Brazil’s economic capital and thus, an important hub for migrants seeking economic security and business opportunities. Prior to 1956, there were only three weekly active Islamic associations. That was until contact was established with the Islamic Congress institution in Cairo, resulting in the formation of an additional 14 Islamic institutions.

To acknowledge and reward these Islamic activities and efforts, the first Islamic congress of Islamic institutions in Brazil and Latin America was held in São Paulo in September 1970. The congress was attended by various delegations and representatives from Islamic institutions in Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, and Venezuela, as well as official delegations representing the governments of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Iran. The congress produced several recommendations, including the formation of an Islamic Council to guide the Islamic movement in Brazil and Latin America, since they considered Brazil the strongest center of Islamic activity on the continent.

Later, on December 19, 1979, the Federation of Muslim Associations of Brazil (FAMBRAS) was founded during an assembly held in Brasília. Representatives of significant Muslim associations in Brazil attended and expressed full support. The main leader and organizer of FAMBRAS was Hayy Hussein Mohamed El-Zoghbi. Actually, FAMBRAS and CDIAL are the most important Islamic entities in Brazil.

Between February 1 and 10, 1981, a camp for young Muslims took place

about 60 kilometers between São Paulo and Campinas. It was attended by the mayor of São Paulo, government officials, leaders of the Muslim community in Brazil, the Secretary-General of the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), as well as speakers from North America and Saudi Arabia (i.e., Islamic University of Medina), and other participants. A total of 140 young people and students from Muslim societies and communities in South and Central America participated. The governor of São Paulo at that time, Paulo Salim Maluf, of Lebanese Christian origin, showed his sympathy for organizing the camp by providing transportation and a meal in honor of the participants.

Muslims could also be found in Rio de Janeiro, Brasília (the country’s capital), Paranaguá, Santa Catarina, Campinas, Cuiabá, and Foz do Iguacu. Some imams were sent and supported by Dar al Ifta’*e* in Riyadh or the Rabitat Al Alam Al Islami (the League of Islamic World) in Mecca. The number of mosques built up until 1981 totaled 10 and were located in São Paulo, Curitiba, Londrina, Paranaguá, Brasília, Guaíba, Barretos, Jundiai, Campinas, and Guarapuava. The number of mosques and *mussalas* (prayer halls) has grown by 20% since 2015, driven by the arrival of refugees and the ongoing conversion of Brazilians to Islam in the last decade.

Based on data provided from Ali Kettani’s personal research (from the years 1956 to 1981) and the Atlas of the latest demographic census of 2010 in Brazil,⁴⁷ it is evident that the establishment of Islamic institutions in Brazil experienced a significant increase since 1981, with notable growth between 2005 and 2010.

Below is a table that demonstrates the increase in the number of Islamic institutions in Brazil over the last seven decades:

Year	1956	1979	1981	2005	2010	2016
Number of institutions	14	24	27	70	115	127

Breaking these numbers down further by region, we can note that during the first period (1951–1958), the Islamic Club of Brazil was founded in 1956 in São Paulo, followed by the Muslim Benevolent Association of Paraná in Curitiba in 1957. In 1991, the Southeast region had the highest concentration with 25 associations, particularly in the state of São Paulo. Muslims in the Southeast region began organizing themselves in the early 1960s, with a total of eight associations, especially in the regions of Goiás and Mato Grosso do Sul (three associations in each). The Southeast is followed in concentration by the southern region with 14 associations, particularly in the state of Paraná, where Muslim presence can be traced back to 1950. Later, in the 1970s, Muslims in the northern region had two associations, while in 1980, the Northeast region stood out with two additional associations. The organization of Muslims started initially in all regions of Brazil and

⁴⁷ See <https://www.ibge.gov.br/geociencias/cartas-e-mapas/mapas-municipais/27440-mapas-municipais-pa-ra-fins-estatisticos.html?edicao=27441&t=acesso-ao-produto>.

later expanded to additional states. Speaking specifically about Bahia, the Islamic Center of Bahia (CIB) was founded in February 1991, thanks to the historian Cid Teixeira (1924–2021), a specialist in the history of the Malês, through a delegation from São Paulo that established contact with him. Its president is Nigerian migrant Ahmad Abdul Hameed, who has been leading the community since 1992.

It is worth noting the Summaya Bint Khayyat Mosque, founded in 2012. It is the former Mussala Ar-Rahmah located in the small municipality of Embu das Artes in São Paulo. This *mussala* was the initiative of Brazilian Muslim César Kaab Abdul, who dedicated a small part of his own house to gather Muslims living in the area and perform *salat*, as there is no mosque nearby, and the nearest one is a three-hour drive away. The mosque today is an extension of this same *mussala*, still located in Kaab's house. What sets this mosque apart and makes it unique is that it is the first and only mosque in Brazil located in a peripheral area, Embu das Artes, a municipality of São Paulo. Its main mission is to spread *dawah* in the streets of São Paulo and its peripheries.

In summary, Islamic charitable societies are present throughout Brazil, with the largest concentration of Muslims in São Paulo, Brasília, Rio de Janeiro, Curitiba, Rio Grande do Sul, and Foz do Iguaçu. We will now detail the names of the religious institutions that are also responsible for leading the mosques, the work of these mosques, and their role within the Islamic community and Brazilian society as a whole.

List of Islamic Charitable Societies and Islamic Cultural Centers in Brazil

SBMRJ

The Muslim Charitable Society of Rio de Janeiro (Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana do Rio de Janeiro), was founded on January 1, 1951, by a group of immigrants who gathered to perform *salat al-jumu'ah* (Friday prayer). Initially, its activities were limited to prayer and Islamic rituals like marriages and funerals. SBMRJ was declared a Public Utility by Law 3765 on June 3, 2004. It consists of the following departments: education, welfare and social work, financials, and women's work. The role of Muslim women is visibly present in SBMRJ. According to fieldwork conducted by Silvia Montenegro, the association's secretariat is managed by a woman around 60 years old, of Arab descent, who converted to Islam four years ago (Benlebha & Montenegro, 2013). In fact, SBMRJ served as the prototype for grassroots Islamic organizations, followed by all subsequently created Islamic organizations. However, after the Six-Day War in 1967 and the discrediting of the Nasserite model of Arab nationalism (led by Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser), even the SBMSP (Muslim Charitable Society of São Paulo, or Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana do São Paulo) followed the SBMRJ model. The latter represented the best means of building a Muslim community from the grassroots level (the individual) to the highest level (the national Muslim organization representing all Brazilian Muslims). The SBMRJ website⁴⁸ includes

⁴⁸ See <https://sbmrj.org.br/>.

various sections covering the definition of Islam and its pillars, the Quran and its precepts, women in Islam, the history of Islam, and a virtual library that allows free book downloads (a total of 13 books). It is worth emphasizing that in 2015, a new plot of land measuring 525m² was acquired to build a new center and meet the needs of the growing Muslim community. Specifically, on December 17, 2015, state approval was obtained for the construction of an Islamic cemetery in Itapecerica, covering an area of 60,000m².

FAMBRAS

The Federation of Muslim Associations in Brazil (Federação das Associações Muçulmanas do Brasil) was founded in 1979 by Hussein El Zoghbi as a Muslim association that supports the creation of an entity aimed at strengthening the unification of various Islamic institutions in Brazil. FAMBRAS was the first institution to introduce the concept of *halal* certification in the country. In 1981, FAMBRAS began to structure Brazil's *halal* market. Today, Brazil is the largest exporter of *halal* meat in the world.⁴⁹

CCBI

CCBI the Cultural and Beneficial Islamic Center of Foz do Iguaçu (Centro Cultural Beneficente Islâmico de Foz do Iguaçu). The construction of the Foz do Iguaçu Mosque (Omar Ibn Al Jattab) began in 1981 when the cornerstone was laid. It was inaugurated two years later in 1983. The mosque is known for its beauty and is open to both Muslim and non-Muslim visitors who can visit the mosque during designated visiting hours. Interestingly, the city's tourist guide, published by the tourism office, includes a visit to this mosque in its suggested itineraries.

CCBI receives periodic donations from *Jornal do Libano*, a digital newspaper covering issues in Lebanon and Brazil in Portuguese.⁵⁰ In 2022 the cultural center received a donation of 40,000 medicines from the *Jornal*. The donation from Atef Manah and Ali Tiba marks a series of donations that the newspaper will make to Lebanese communities in Brazil. Each donation will bear the name of a Lebanese individual who stood out within the community. Donations for Lebanon is coordinated with the Lebanese diplomatic corps in Brasília. The donation had a symbolic handover, and shortly after, the boxes were sent to the Health Department and will be distributed for public healthcare at the city's,³⁹ Health Units and the Municipal Hospital Padre Germano Lauck. Atef Manah and Ali Tiba were known for their work not only within the Lebanese community but also for helping all those in need. The name of the donation was chosen based on the legacy left by these two Lebanese individuals.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Interview with Ali Saifi, CEO of CDIAL Halal was published in <https://magazinebbm.com/blog/brazil-is-the-biggest-halal-food-supplier-in-all-over-the-world-2266>.

⁵⁰ See <https://www.jornaldolibano.com.br>.

⁵¹ See https://www.mesquitafoz.com.br/solidariedade_libanesa.

LJIBB

The Beneficent Islamic Youth League of Brazil (Liga da Juventude Islâmica Beneficente do Brasil) was founded on January 12, 1995, with its headquarters in São Paulo. The Beneficent Islamic Youth League Pari Mosque is a nonprofit civil organization that operates in the religious field. It has individual members of various nationalities (as stated on the homepage).⁵² Its president is Ali Mohamed Abdouni. The LJIBB works to disseminate the concepts of Islam, consolidate Islamic religious values, foster an Islamic personality that contributes to the development of Islam in Brazil, provide humanitarian aid and social assistance to those in need and in difficult situations, seek solutions to social problems such as alcoholism and drug addiction, and elevate the cultural and social level of its members. The board of directors from 2013 to 2015 consisted of nine members, all of Arab origin, and three *shuyukh* (Islamic scholars), one of whom was of African origin named Juma Momade. Among the philanthropy actions of LJIBB, they distributed basic food baskets in the Canindé Community⁵³ and organized the Islamic Book Fair.⁵⁴

UNI

UNI Refers to the National Union of Islam (União Nacional Islâmica) and is headquartered in São Paulo, in the Bras neighborhood. It was founded in 2005 by a group of combined Islamic entities in Brazil, and its president is Yamal el Bacha, who is of Lebanese origin. The UNI is the largest Islamic organization in Brazil and has 15 associated groups.⁵⁵ The institution carries out its work through its associated entities and has a consistent presence in social activities such as community actions, dissemination of Islam, celebration of Islamic religious days, education, guidance, and support for Brazilian youth who have converted to Islam.

⁵² See <http://www.ligaislamica.org.br/>.

⁵³ http://www.ligaislamica.org.br/galeria_liga_islamica/2010.09.18_distribuicao_cestas_comunidade_caninde/liga_islamica_galeria_cestas_basicas.htm.

⁵⁴ http://www.ligaislamica.org.br/galeria_liga_islamica/2009.07.25_primeira_feira_livro_islamico/liga_islamica_galeria_feira_livro01.htm.

⁵⁵ The 15 associated identities are

1. Associação Recreativo e Cultural Islâmica de São Miguel Paulista - SP
2. Centro de Divulgação do Islã para a América Latina
3. Conselho Superior dos Teólogos e Assuntos Islâmicos do Brasil
4. Liga da Juventude Islâmica Beneficente do Brasil
5. Sociedade Beneficente Islâmica do Litoral Paulista
6. Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana de Santo Amaro
7. Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana de São José dos Campos
8. Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana de Taubaté - SP
9. Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana dos Membros da Confraria Chaizulia Yachrutia
10. Sociedade Cultural e Beneficente Islâmica de Mogi das Cruzes
11. Sociedade Islâmica Brasileira de Guarulhos - SP
12. Sociedade Islâmica de Campinas
13. WAMY- Assembléia Mundial da Juventude Islâmica
14. Associação Islâmica de São Paulo
15. Sociedade Islâmica de Beneficência Abu Baker Assadik.

CDIAL

The Center for the Dissemination of Islam in Latin America (Centro de Divulgación del Islam para América Latina) is led by its president, Ahmad Ali Saifi, who is of Lebanese origin. Its headquarters are located in San Bernardo do Campo, São Paulo. The CDIAL is a charitable, independent, cultural, and social Islamic foundation that works to disseminate knowledge about Islam and aims to present the true Islam to non-Muslims. The CDIAL focuses on teaching the Arabic language, as well as Quranic studies and the dissemination of Islam.

WAMY

The World Assembly of Muslim Youth is a nongovernmental organization established in 1973, with its headquarters in Saudi Arabia. The Brazilian chapter of WAMY organizes seminars for Brazilian converts and serves Islamic youth in particular. It also organizes a range of social, cultural, and educational programs (see above, for example).

ILAEI

The Latin American Institute of Islamic Studies (Instituto Latinoamericano de Estudios Islámicos) was founded on May 15, 2008, at the headquarters of the Islamic Charitable Society in Maringa. Its website is available in three languages: Arabic, Spanish, and Portuguese. The Latin American Institute of Islamic Studies is an institution dedicated to the teaching of Islamic Sciences, both at its headquarters and beyond. Its aim is to train prominent leaders in the Latin American region, based on the principles of modern science (as stated on the institute's homepage).⁵⁶

Islamic Educational Institutions in Brazil

As evidenced by the ILAEI, education has long been an emphasis of Muslim philanthropy and contributions to civil society in Brazil. This is in part due to the fact that the Muslim immigrant community seems to have grown significantly during the third and fourth waves of Arab migration: 1941–1970; 1971–2000.⁵⁷ The Brazilian Muslim community appears to have witnessed a significant increase during the 1970s to 1990s, with the number of large mosques doubling by the late 1990s. Additionally, descendants of previous Muslim migrations, including Afro-Brazilians, returned to embracing Islam and became more actively involved. São Paulo is becoming a center for Islamic propagation, not only in Brazil but also in all Latin America.

As the number of Muslim immigrants and the Arab-Islamic community in the country increased, along with mosques and Islamic centers, there arose a need to establish educational institutions for subsequent generations. Islamic schools

⁵⁶ <https://ilaei.com/site/es/principal/>.

⁵⁷ https://biblioteca.ibge.gov.br/visualizacao/periodicos/552/cd_2010_agrn_if.pdf.

were founded to teach both Arabic and Islam to the descendants of Arab Muslims as well as others. The first Islamic school was founded in São Paulo in 1929 (Escola Islâmica Brasileira) in Vila Carrão, which played a significant role in educating Muslim children and teaching Islamic culture and religion.⁵⁸ The school has capacity for 1,000 students, and the official Brazilian curriculum is taught along with the Arabic language and Islamic religion.

Another Islamic school is located in Sao Paolo districts A, B, C, and D and is part of the Abu Bakr Al Siddiq Association. There is also the Islamic school of the Islamic Association of San Miguel Paulista and in 2010, the Colegio Islamico Brasileiro⁵⁹ was inaugurated in São Paulo, by Association Mesquita Do Bras. There is also the new Ibin Sina School⁶⁰ created and founded in 2019 by a group of Muslim entrepreneurs with the aim of providing education for children and young adults based on Arab and Muslim culture.

Interviews with Muslim Philanthropists

To add further texture to the brief overview of Brazilian Muslim philanthropy above, the following includes interviews conducted with a responsible representative of CDIAL and with the director of Islamic Affairs at Al-Madina School in São Bernardo, São Paulo (conducted in spring 2023). This interview was conducted with a member of CDIAL who prefers to remain anonymous.

CDIAL Interview

Q: In general, how is Muslim philanthropy and charitable work done in Brazil?

R: Philanthropy in Brazil is based on institutions, associations, and individuals, where the foundation sponsors some preachers in various cities for philanthropy and teaching the Qur'an and the Arabic language, as well as the work of philanthropy conferences for all segments of the Latin American continent; and it is concerned with helping the poor and needy people with food baskets as well as financial guarantees for needy and financial guarantees for needy families. [We also include in our] charitable work in the state of Brazil, coexistence. Islamic associations in every city also contract with preachers for philanthropy and education. They also do the necessary charitable work for the people of the community, as well as on the Brazilian side.

Q: “Islamophobia” has been a persistent issue in Brazil,⁶¹ a country generally known for the coexistence of different religions. What role does your organization play in combating religiously motivated xenophobia?

⁵⁸ <https://www.islamica.com.br/index.php/quem-somos/historia>.

⁵⁹ <http://www.colegiobrasileiroislamico.com.br/>.

⁶⁰ <https://ibinsina.com.br/?fbclid=IwAR00qB7HZIducvoub1rmpSp2mhqPAj5k3qeINMWu7g9NvZ1ou-q5laTq5OTk>
<https://www.facebook.com/ibinsi/about>.

⁶¹ See <https://www.ambigrama.com.br/product-page/i-report-on-islamophobia-in-brazil>.

R: The foundation always spreads the spirit of tolerance and social and peaceful coexistence through continuous meetings with Brazilians and with non-Muslims. Furthermore, the foundation held an international conference attended by more than 30 countries on this subject. The foundation has a close relationship with leaders of other faiths. The foundation, through books, pamphlets, and meetings, publishes the spirit of tolerance and the statement of moderation of Islam. **Q:** Is your charitable work limited to the Muslim minority or does it extend to all segments of society?

R: It also transcends to non-Muslims because we are part of this country and there must be a spirit of solidarity and cooperation, and this in itself is an invitation to explain the truth of Islam.

Q: Do you expect changes in the field of Muslim minorities with regard to philanthropy under the government of President Lula da Silva, who is known for his positions with minorities and marginalized societal groups?

R: Our relationship with the President is excellent and strong and has roots—a history of cooperation in this regard.

Q: What is the relationship between *dawah* and philanthropy in Brazil? How are these terms used and applied among Muslims in Latin America in general?

R: There is a close connection between *dawah* and philanthropy. *Dawah* is one of the ways to achieve philanthropy and philanthropic works; from the result of the *dawah* by explaining the importance of solidarity between Muslims, the duty of every Muslim toward his poor brothers, the Muslim's need for good and good work, and the unity of the nation, as there is a correlation between the two concepts.

Q: How are the concepts of *zakat*, *fitra*, *sadaqa*, and *waqf* interpreted and applied in Latin America?

R: *Zakat* and *sadaqa* are among the largest sources of philanthropy. Therefore, people must be taught the jurisprudence of their religion, which is obligatory, what is supererogatory, and how to spend this money and where. As for the *waqf*, there have been many attempts, and we have organized a large international conference on this subject, and there will be results, God willing, after explaining its importance, the reason for establishing the *waqf*, what is offered, how to supervise it, and so on.

It must be noted that in Brazil, Muslims pay their *zakat* by the intervention of Islamic institutions, those institutions get in touch with businessmen to collect *zakat* from them, each region has its main *sonduq* of *zakat* or *zakat* fund, and all the money collected goes to the fund and then it is distributed mainly in Brazil for other needy Muslims. There is also WAMY⁶² (Assembleia Mundial da Juventude Islamica no Brasil), one of the institutions that collects *zakat*. Its director is Ali Abdouni, a Brazilian Lebanese activist. Furthermore, *waqf* is a large term and it has actually a lot of interest in Latin America. Moreover, the Muslim community represented by CDIAL is trying to extend the work of endowments for specific philanthropic purposes, not only in Brazil but across Latin America.

⁶² <https://wamybr.org/pt/c/prints>.

In this context, a congress was held online January 24–25, 2022, in collaboration with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and 100 participants from 30 countries, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine, the United Arab Emirates, Australia, Canada, Sweden, as well as Latin American and Caribbean countries. The congress dealt with *waqf* and its role in helping Muslim communities, the papers addressed areas of *waqf*, its objectives and importance for minorities, historical and contemporary models of *waqf* and its perspective in law, monitoring and ways of activating it among minorities.

The congress generated many recommendations in this regard:

- The concept of *waqf* and its role in building a civilizational history for Muslims.
- Expanding the culture of *waqf* by modern means of communication.
- *Waqf* is an ongoing charity (*sadaqah jariah*), not interrupted by death.
- The need of *waqf* in building mosques, hospitals, and universities.
- Teaching legal rules of *waqf* in Islamic universities and institutes.
- Holding workshops and sessions for those in charge of *waqf*.
 - Partnerships between Ministries of *awqaf* and *zakat* funds to enhance this practice.

Al-Madina School Interview

The second interview was with Mohamad Ahmed Amamathe, director of religious affairs at Al-Madina School in São Bernardo, São Paulo. The following is a brief interview about his organization and the broader field of educational philanthropy among Muslims in Brazil:

Q: First, tell us about yourself and your organization.

R: My name is. Mohamad Ahmad Amame I am originally Lebanese, but I hold Brazilian citizenship. I graduated from the College of Islamic Dawah in Damascus, Syria, and also from the College of Education in Brazil. The Islamic Madina School is supervised by a group of intellectual young members of the community. It has been active in its new form for nearly ten years, and accepts students from the age of two up to the end of middle school. The school has a total of 200 students distributed across three stages: kindergarten, elementary, and middle school. In addition to the official Brazilian curriculum, the school offers Quranic studies, Arabic language, and religious education. These subjects are officially registered with the Education Directorate in the city of São Bernardo. This city is considered a suburb of São Paulo and has a significant population of the Islamic community, mostly of Lebanese origin. The majority of the students in the school are Muslim, the non-Muslims are very few, but they are committed to the school's curriculum.

Q: How did the idea of establishing the Islamic Madina School in Brazil come about?

R: In the 1990s, after a new wave of migration by intellectual young individuals, they felt a pressing need to establish Islamic schools to accommodate their children. They found that the Brazilian schools were not suitable for the type of education they

wanted for their children. There was already a school considered the first Islamic school in São Paulo, but over time, it became more Brazilian than Islamic. In 1996, an independent kindergarten project began, and there was an extraordinary demand for it, to the point where the space became insufficient for the students within two years. The responsible association proposed transferring this kindergarten to their school and taking responsibility for it. This transfer indeed took place in 1998, and the school started operating in a new form. The building was renovated, a mosque specifically for the students was constructed, and the high school phase was inaugurated. Things were going well, except for the challenge of distant locations, including the São Bernardo area.

The idea of establishing a school in São Bernardo arose, but the resources were not readily available. An alternative idea emerged to introduce an Arabic department in a Brazilian school, and this was implemented for a short period. However, the idea was later transferred to another school, but nothing changed. Eventually, the idea of purchasing the existing Brazilian school, known as the Madina School, emerged. The community purchased the school, and over time, it transformed into a religious and Arabic-oriented institution, in accordance with the needs of the community. It has been operating in this capacity for the past ten years.

Q: How is charitable and philanthropic work generally in Brazil?

R: In Brazil, the work of *dawah* and charity varies between activity and stagnation, especially since the community is not highly interested in cultural and intellectual matters. There is a strong emphasis on trade and commerce. However, this does not prevent the spread of Islam among the Brazilian people and the establishment of mosques in Islamic gatherings.

Q: What are the main achievements of your organization in the field of educating Muslim children about their language and religion to preserve their identity?

R: Indeed, praise be to Allah. The school has become a secure haven for the children of the community, and numerous students who have completed their education in the various stages of the school are continuing their higher studies in Brazilian universities. Furthermore, the presence of students in Brazilian mosques has become apparent and noteworthy.

Q: What are the cultural activities of your organization?

R: Cultural activities throughout the year hold significance, and the school also participates in external events. Most recently, the students took part in the exhibition of the Holy Quran held at the Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq Mosque, the first of its kind in Latin America. Moreover, the students currently have a scheduled visit to the library of São Bernardo city. Additionally, by the will of Allah, the school will host an exhibition next Saturday on literature and poetry in the Portuguese language, presented through an Islamic religious perspective.

Q: Islamophobia has recently spread in the Western world and has also reached Brazil, a country known for its coexistence and religious diversity. What role does your organization play in combating this phenomenon?

R: Certainly, by promoting authentic Islam through our school, we have taken a significant step in combating extremism. Even though our region, Alhamdulillah, has not been affected by this phenomenon, and things are going well.

Q: Do you engage in any other charitable work?

R: Weekly religious gatherings continue to take place in houses, and we also participate in distributing food packages to those in need during Ramadan and holidays.

Q: Is your charitable work limited to the Muslim minority or does it extend to all sectors of society?

R: Of course, we try, in principle, to preserve our capital through the work of community members. The majority of charitable work is directed toward community members, but this does not mean that Brazilian society is excluded from it; rather, its involvement is limited.

Q: Do you expect any changes in the file of Muslim minorities regarding charitable work under the government of President “Lula,” known for his positions on minorities and marginalized social groups?

R: President Lula, throughout his previous terms, has stood by the community and minorities, and these stances are important. However, we need to make greater use of them so that the laws in Brazil can support such matters.

Q: Does *da’wa* fall within the scope of philanthropy? Is philanthropy considered a form of *da’wa*? How are these terms used and applied among Muslims in Latin America in general?

R: The essence is that charitable work should serve as a means of promoting the Islamic call, as aiding in building the body is important, but even more important is building the soul and instilling the values of our true religion. In Brazil specifically, there is great respect for the cultures of different peoples, including Islam. As a school, we have our own rules that are based on Islamic values, and they are recognized and adopted as special laws within our institutions.

Conclusion

The interviews with the CDIAL representative and Mohamad Ahmad Amame from Al-Madina School in São Bernardo provide valuable insights into the landscape of Muslim philanthropy and charitable work in Brazil. Both interviewees underscored inclusivity, with philanthropy extending to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Their emphasis on positive government relations, particularly with President Lula, suggest potential support for philanthropic initiatives. Education was also highlighted as a tool for preserving Islamic identity and combating misconceptions. The integration of *dawah* and philanthropy is also touched upon, with both organizations promoting Islamic values through their charitable activities.

In summary, these interviews collectively portray philanthropy in Brazil as emphasizing inclusivity, education, government relations, and the interconnectedness of *dawah* and philanthropy in promoting Islamic values. They also illustrate the multifaceted landscape of Muslim philanthropy in Brazil, examining its historical

development, institutional foundations, and key players. Through interviews with representatives from Centro de Divulgação do Islam para América Latina (CDIAL) and Al-Madina School in São Bernardo, São Paulo, the above sheds light on the intricate interplay between *dawah*, *zakat*, and the broader philanthropic initiatives within the Brazilian Muslim community.

The philanthropic infrastructure in Brazil reflects a rich tapestry of contributions, with educational, cultural, and social dimensions. From the initial philanthropic initiatives in the late 20th century to the contemporary proliferation of charitable societies and cultural centers, the Brazilian Muslim community has actively engaged in shaping its philanthropic identity. External support from Arab countries, particularly Egypt, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, has played a pivotal role in fostering the growth of mosques, Islamic centers, and educational institutions.

The establishment and evolution of key organizations such as CDIAL, FAMBRAS, CCBI, LJIBB, UNI, and others signify a coordinated effort to consolidate and strengthen the presence of Islam in Brazil. Furthermore, the integration of halal certification by FAMBRAS has not only contributed to religious practices but has also helped position Brazil as a global leader in halal meat exports.

The rise in the number of Islamic institutions, as evidenced by the data presented, reflects the resilience and expansion of the Muslim community in Brazil. The geographical distribution of these institutions across various regions underscores the widespread impact of Islamic philanthropy in the country. Moreover, education has emerged as a cornerstone of Muslim philanthropy in Brazil, with the establishment of schools dedicated to teaching Arabic language and Islamic studies. The commitment to education is seen as vital for the transmission of cultural and religious values to successive generations, fostering a sense of identity among Brazilian Muslims. The ongoing initiatives highlighted in this contribution underscore the commitment of the Brazilian Muslim community to contribute meaningfully to Brazilian society. As the landscape continues to evolve, the interplay between *dawah*, *zakat*, and philanthropy is poised to play a crucial role in the continued development of the Muslim community in Brazil.

Appendix 1

Brazil

01 Dhu-Al-Hijjah 1405
17 August 2985

Ms Lelia Gonzalez
Ladeira de Sta. Teresa. 106 S/101
20.241 - Sta. Teresa
Rio de Janeiro - RJ
BRAZIL

Dear Ms Gonzalez,

It was a great pleasure meeting you in Rome during the conference of the Organisation of International Development. I am enclosing herein, as I promised you, parts of the chapter of my book on "Muslim Minorities in the World Today" on Islam in Brazil as well as some papers on the subject for your information.

With kind regards.

Sincerely,

DR. ALI KETTANI
Director General


Encl:



Appendix 2


بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

**Islamic Foundation for Science
Technology and Development**
Insurance Building - Airport Street
P. O. Box 9833 - Jeddah
Tel. 6322291 - 6322273
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia



مِنْصَةُ الْمَوْجِبَاتِ الْإِسْلَامِيَّةِ

المؤسسة الإسلامية
للعلوم والتكنولوجيا والتنمية
عمارة التأمينات الاجتماعية - شارع المطار
جدة : ٩٨٣٣ - جـ
٦٣٢٢٢٩١ / ٦٣٢٢٢٧٣
الملحة الغربية السعودية



IFSTAD

18 Safar 1408
11 October 1987

Prof. Dr. R.A. Malik
Depto. de Engenharia Mecanica
Universidade de Brasilia
70.910 - Brasilia - DF
BRAZIL

Dear Prof. Malik,

I was indeed very much pleased to receive your letter of September 6 for which I thank you as well as for the enclosures.

I was very impressed by you during our meeting in Brasilia and I wish you success in your efforts for the Muslim community. I am honored to have such a distinguished "disciple" as your goodself concerning Muslim minorities and I wish you success in your project NEMI.

With my most brotherly regards,

Sincerely,

PROF. DR. ALI KETTANI
Director General

علي كيتاني

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Regular Issue Articles

Humanitarian Hindu, Exceptional Citizen

Mona Bhan, Ph.D.

Syracuse University

Purnima Bose, Ph.D.

Indiana University Bloomington

Keywords: *Diasporic Hindutva, Hindu exceptionalism, Hindu humanitarianism, Indian exceptionalism, Hindu Americans, Indian diasporic Islamophobia, Model Minority*

Introduction

Following independence in 1947, the Indian state was swept up in the giddiness of building a new nation through central economic planning. Under the auspices of the Planning Commission and numerous five-year plans, the central government emphasized different aspects of development such as the promotion of agriculture, the creation of a higher education infrastructure, the regulation of industries, the reduction of unemployment, and a push to increase the gross domestic product, among other initiatives. In the first few decades of the nascent state, as Varadarajan (2010) explains, the government distanced itself from overseas Indians, who were experiencing discrimination in other countries, both to cement India's legitimacy as a territorially bound state and to respect the sovereignty of other nations in their treatment of "persons of Indian origin" (p. 54). Many of the four million Indians who had migrated during the colonial period to other British colonies were peasants or members of the business community (Varadharajan, 2010, p. 54). The social character of Indian migration changed in the decades following independence. In the US, the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 abolished hemispheric quotas, sought to reunite families, and prioritized the entry of skilled workers and professionals; this legislation contributed to the changing demographic of immigration. A significant percentage of caste-privileged Indians left the subcontinent to pursue higher education or professional careers in STEM-related areas during the 1960s and 1970s and were described in India as part of a "brain drain" (White, 2019, p. 3). Nonetheless the Indian government's initial dismissal of overseas Indians did not impede these caste-privileged Indian Americans from establishing philanthropic organizations such as the India Development Relief Fund (IDRF) to contribute to

economic development.⁶³

Organizations like IDRF, founded by Vinod Prakash in the 1980s, invoke a Hindu idiom to describe their mission “to give back” to India. Diasporic Hindu philanthropy was directed from the US to the homeland in a desire to contribute to the uplift of the poor, a desire consistent with the Cold War construction of India as a third world country that could benefit from development projects.⁶⁴ Prakash (n.d.) uses Hindu concepts to characterize the US as an arena for dynamic agency, “our adopted land for living and action (*karmabhoomi*),” in contrast to the more passive, feminized space of India, “the land of our birth and ancestors (*matrabhoomi*).” Hindu Americans owe a “debt to Indian society at large” and want “to make a difference in the lives of the less privileged.” Development work oriented to the provision of medical care and education enables them to achieve “one’s contentment (*atmasanthushthi*) in life... a bigger meaning” (Prakash, n.d.). The *matrabhoomi*, motherland, becomes the recipient of diasporic aid projects that allow overseas Hindu sons and daughters of India to reinvent themselves as “brown saviors” to materialize their religious belief through development and to demonstrate their cosmopolitanism (Shankar, 2022).⁶⁵

Two shifts over the last few decades have contributed to a transformation of the ethos of diasporic Hindu philanthropy and its expansion of charitable activities into the United States. The conditions of possibility for this transformation include the political mainstreaming over the last 50 years of *Hindutva* (militant Hindu nationalism) in India, and the government’s liberalization and market reforms of a previously closed economy in 1991. Successes in Silicon Valley of overseas Indians also inspired the Indian government to revise its view of this demographic to be a “brain gain” (White, 2019, p. 4). Increasingly, diasporic Hindu organizations are stretching their geographic and ideological reach by also delivering aid to communities in the United States. Diasporic Hindu philanthropy becomes the means for Hindu India to expand itself outside its territorial borders. The diasporic philanthropic mission is now threefold: (a) to provide material aid and disaster relief to Indians on the subcontinent and marginalized communities in the US, (b) to normalize Hinduism as part of the American religious landscape, and (c) to assert

⁶³ For a thoughtful analysis of Indian American philanthropy directed toward development, see White (2019). Caste-privileged Hindus were not the only ones who were considered part of India’s “brain drain.” For instance, a majority of Christians in India are Dalit-Bahujan but the majority of Christians who emigrated from India to the US are upper-caste (S. Thomas, personal communication, May 19, 2023). For a detailed analysis of how Syrian Christians in Kerala claim a Brahmin identity, see Sonja Thomas’ book, *Privileged Minorities: Syrian Christianity, Gender, and Minority Rights in Postcolonial India*.

⁶⁴ See Ahmad (1992) for an excellent analysis of how the Cold War terms “first world,” “second world,” and “third world” characterize the first and second worlds as subjects of history, and the third world as an object of history, whose identity derives from what agents in the first and second world do to it.

⁶⁵ See Shankar (2022) for a thorough analysis of the ways in which Indian caste privileged communities in the diaspora assume their new role as brown saviors in the global development and poverty alleviation economy and end up reproducing the project of racial capital accumulation. Many of Shankar’s interlocutors consider themselves to be “secular, liberal, and nonpartisan” even though their liberal interventions end up sustaining and reproducing Hindu supremacist politics (2022, p. 439). However, our focus in this paper is on groups that do not eschew Hinduism as the basis of their seva praxis.

Hindu Americans as exceptional citizens by virtue of Hinduism's civilizational superiority. The shift in the orientation of diasporic philanthropy, in other words, is less an accident than a logical outcome of historical processes decades in the making: development has given way to Hindu humanitarianism at a time when India is becoming a Hindu supremacist state.

In this article, we focus on how US-based Hindutva organizations aligned with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) present their sectarian ideology and philanthropic practices as inclusive humanitarianism.⁶⁶ We first contextualize the rise of a dominant ideological strand in India today, Hindu exceptionalism, which presents Hinduism as the only pathway to “an evolved intellect” and appropriates principles of democracy, inclusivity, justice, and scientific inquiry as foundational to the Hindu way of life (Bhatt, 2001, p. 56).⁶⁷ Contemporary formulations of Hindu exceptionalism draw on historic discourses of Hindu racial and cultural superiority from the early 20th century while also harkening back to fears that Hindus are a “dying race” because of the growing population of Christians and Muslims in India (Datta, 1993, p. 1305).⁶⁸ According to the Pew Research Center, the most current census data lists Hindus as 79.8% of the population and puts Muslims at 14.2%, while the remaining 6% of the population consists of Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains (Kramer, 2021).⁶⁹ The specter of Hindu extinction, braided into discourses of Hindu exceptionalism, we maintain, shapes much of what passes as Hindu humanitarianism, or *seva* (service), in the diasporic context. *Seva* initiatives are designed to empower Hindus to reclaim values of peace, plurality, selflessness, and humanitarianism as primordially Hindu and to forge unity among disparate Hindu communities from India and elsewhere. The export of *seva* becomes a way to combat the perceived crisis of Hindu extinction and to present Hinduism as a force for positive social change.⁷⁰

And yet the concept of *seva*, the elaboration of which has become central to diasporic Hindu philanthropy's self-description as an exceptional form of humanitarianism, depends on an implicit comparison of Hindu Americans to other communities of color, who are characterized in unflattering terms as a drag on social services or threats to public safety.⁷¹ Prefigured as the model minority, humanitarian

⁶⁶ The VHP, or the World Council of Hindus, was founded by M. S. Gowalkar and S. S. Apte in 1964 to consolidate and strengthen Hindu society and serve Hindu Dharma. It is responsible for inciting and perpetuating violence against Muslims and other minorities in India. The RSS is a rightwing paramilitary organization aligned with the ruling BJP. For a summary of the different forms of violence enacted by Hindu nationalist groups, see Macher (2022, p. 2). This report maps the financial and organizational infrastructure of diasporic Hindu American groups.

⁶⁷ See Source of Sadhguru (2021).

⁶⁸ See Mukherji (1929).

⁶⁹ The most current data is from the 2011 Indian census. India was supposed to hold a census in 2021, which it has postponed until 2024.

⁷⁰ For example, see Spratt and Stanton (2023) and Itihasika (2023).

⁷¹ “*Seva*” is also transliterated as “*sewa*.” For a detailed elaboration of how Hindu notions of racial and caste superiority are intertwined with conceptions of white supremacy see FCHS Collective (2021).

Hindus slip easily into the role of exceptional American citizens.

Our analysis of diasporic philanthropy is based on close readings of newsletters of Hindu American organizations and YouTube videos of their members. These materials are collectively produced and express official positions of the organizations; they provide an important window into the community's religious beliefs, social practices, and public outreach. Diasporic Hindu philanthropy has become a vehicle to aid the BJP's projection of soft power abroad by normalizing Hindutva in the US while simultaneously saffron washing the Indian government's divestment of citizen rights and its persecution of Muslims in Kashmir and India.⁷² The BJP benefits from the activities of Hindu Americans, who have the authority and credibility of "native informants" and can warn Westerners of the global threat of Islam.

Hindu Extinction

During an inaugural International Religious Freedom Summit that featured U.S State Department officials and representatives from Congress, members of one of the most prominent diaspora Hindu organizations, the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) alleged that Hindus face the grim prospects of "extinction" (McDermott, 2021). Their Director of Public Policy, Taniel Koushakjian, noted the "gathering was an excellent opportunity to spotlight anti-Hindu persecution by state and non-state actors in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and others," all Muslim-majority countries (McDermott, 2021). He elaborated: "it's clear that most people don't know that Hindus face extinction in these theocratic states and that India, as the largest democracy in the world and strategic partner of the US, is the only safe haven in all of Asia for persecuted religious minorities" (McDermott, 2021). The concern over extinction enables organizations like the HAF to advance a contradictory identity of themselves as part victim and part exception, recasting Hindus as a persecuted minority and simultaneously presenting India, and Hinduism more broadly, as a living embodiment of inclusion and democracy.

The HAF builds on prior mobilizations of the Hindutva right wing around the imagined issue of dwindling Hindu numbers in India. "Hindu communal common sense" has been shaped by discourses of Muslim hyper-fertility since at least the 1900s, Datta notes (1993, pp. 1316, 1305). In recent reiterations, such communal common sense is amplified by brazenly Islamophobic statements from India's Hindu political and religious leaders, as well as by the circulation of fake news on social media via accounts that are legitimized by the fact they are followed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself. For instance, fake news attributing 95%

⁷² Kashmir has been experiencing the violent effects of India's occupation since the 1940s. The violence intensified and the obliteration of Kashmiri rights worsened after the BJP unilaterally abrogated Articles 35A and 370 in August 2019. Scholars and activists fear that the abrogation has made Kashmiris even more vulnerable to India's settler colonial politics (Bhan et al., 2022). While Hindutva politics of the BJP has negatively impacted both Kashmiri Muslims and the wider Muslim body politic in India, it is critical to understand that Kashmir is an internationally recognized dispute and Kashmiri demands for self-determination exceed the purview of the Indian constitution (Bhan & Duschinski, 2022).

of rapes in India in 2016 to Muslims and video footage showing doctored images of Hindus beaten up by Muslims bolster charges of Hindu extinction and serve as provocations for Hindus to awaken from their slumber before it is too late.⁷³ These images circulate in India and in the diaspora through the internet and WhatsApp groups, inflaming communal tensions beyond the borders of the subcontinent.

Muslims are also blamed for waging “Love Jihad,” which Tyagi and Sen (2020) describe as a “moral panic” caused by the “alleged seduction, marriage, forced conversion and trafficking of young Hindu girls by Muslim men” (p. 104). Remarking on the similarity of this discourse to the hysteria in the 1920s of Hindu reform groups, including the Arya Samaj, around the conversion and abduction of women, historian Gupta (2009) points out that “the body of the Hindu woman has become a site for both claims to community homogeneity and honour, as well as for cracks within its articulation” (p. 13). Key political leaders of the BJP in their speeches have declared that Muslim men must refrain from wooing innocent Hindu girls or face death. Powered by discourses of Hindu extinction, such threats criminalize interfaith love while regulating female and queer sexualities. The open threats against Muslim intransigence also enable Hindu men to publicly defy colonial stereotypes of Hindu effeminacy and recuperate and reclaim their submerged masculinity (Hansen, 1996).

Pronouncements about Indian and Hindu extinction are strategic political interventions that obfuscate the pernicious crimes of the Indian state against India’s Muslim and non-Muslim minorities, particularly in the last decade. In 2022, the bipartisan United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) designated India as one of fifteen “countries of particular concern” for “systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom”; India joins Afghanistan, Burma, and North Korea on this shameful list (USCIRF, 2022). The USCIRF voiced its alarm over the 2019 Citizenship (Amendment) Act, which fast tracks citizenship for those non-Muslim minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who currently reside in India, but excludes all Muslims, including those from Shi’a and Ahmadi Muslim communities, who themselves are persecuted in Afghanistan and Pakistan because of their faith. In conjunction with the government’s plans to implement a National Register of Citizens, the USCIRF (2022) fears that “millions of Muslims” will be divested of citizenship and subject to “detention, deportation, and statelessness.”

The Indian government’s potential divestment of citizenship from Muslims comes on top of its persecution and detention of critics under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act and Sedition Law aimed at censoring those who advocate

⁷³ See Sidharth (2018). Among majoritarian nationalisms, it has become commonplace for such movements to construct their members as a vulnerable population that is in danger of being overwhelmed by minority groups. Ashutosh (2022) has observed how these movements are protean and draw on “an endless source of enemies” in the creation of an “imaginative geography of fear” (p. 333). In the US, the white nationalist movement warns of the dangers of “Great Replacement Theory,” the fear that immigrants of color are allowed into the country to “replace” white voters. In Israel, we see the periodic anxiety surface that the higher birthrate among Arabs will lead to a demographic tide that will drown Jewish voters at the polls. And in India, such discourses of precarity rely on the mobilization of fear that Hindus will suffer extinction at the hands of Muslims.

for the rights of Christians, Dalits, and Kashmiris (USCIRF, 2022). Additionally, its revocation of Articles 370 and 35A, constitutional provisions that recognized Kashmir's provisional accession to India, has meant an intensification of India's military occupation and intolerable conditions for Muslim populations living there. In India, the stripping of rights occurs in a context in which Christians, Dalits, and Muslims are discriminated against in housing, employment, and the distribution of provisions, monitored in their personal associations to prevent interreligious relationships and marriages, and lynched by frenzied Hindu mobs on the suspicion of consuming beef or slaughtering cattle. Muslims and other religious minorities on the subcontinent are frequently victims of violence by Hindu zealots.

In her article on the ideological affinities between Hindu nationalism in India and "Hindus for Trump" in the US diaspora, Thobani (2019) suggests that the "productive synergy" between "distinct national projects" helps make Hindu supremacy a global project, whose reach extends beyond the "bounds of the Indian nation-state" (p. 747). Breaking from the normative identification of Hindu nationalism with India's territorial borders, some Hindu ideologues call for dissociating Hindu Dharma with the "landmass of India."⁷⁴ In a January 11, 2023, tweet, the Twitter handle Itihasika, frets that the "deep coupling with landmass of India makes Hindu Dharma appear like an ethnic construct." Itihasika laments the construction of Hindus as "Indians" rather than as universal religious subjects from multiple ethnic backgrounds. While other "faiths have successfully made their values universal and global," Hinduism is lagging behind. "The current construct is a recipe for stagnation at best and extinction at worst." If Hindus are to "survive," they must perpetuate Hindu values of peace and pluralism that are key to "enhancing human life experience." "It'll be unfortunate," Itihasika opines, "if other ethnicities don't get to experience [Hinduism's] benefits." According to this logic, if Hindu decline or extinction is to be prevented, it is important to deterritorialize Hinduism so that its message of peace, plurality, and humanitarianism can become grounds to promote Hinduism as a universal religion.

Hindu Exceptionalism

Hindu exceptionalism has a complex historical genealogy and itinerary in modern Indian political discourse. Bhatt (2001) dates its emergence in early 20th-century discourses of Hindu superiority that were the outcome of Western Orientalist discourses that viewed Hinduism as the embodiment and "progenitor" of humanist values, or as "humanity's primal philosophy," ideas that shaped emerging Hindu revivalist movements in India and reproduced discourses of Hindu religious and cultural supremacy (pp. 12, 11, 24). These ideas would assume a political valence

⁷⁴ Thobani (2019) delineates diasporic Hindutva's view of the relationship between territoriality, Hinduness, and nationalism. She explains that the "essentializing association with the geographical terrain of modern India" and Hindus facilitates the diasporic ideological incorporation of religious and marginalized groups "originating on Indian soil" into the "Hindu fraternity." Thus, Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Dalits are figured as Hindu, but Muslims are not (Thobani, 2019, p. 752).

in the mid-twentieth century, becoming part of the ethos of Indian foreign policy. Sullivan (2014) has explained how Hinduism provided a palimpsest for Indian government officials and politicians, who believed that the country's unique role on the world stage, in the three decades following independence in 1947, was to provide moral leadership (p. 641). Such a role, they felt, was legitimized by India's civilizational antiquity, its status as the world's largest secular democracy, and the fact that Gandhi's theories of civil disobedience and protest had become a global export. Notions of civilizational superiority were very much rooted in Hindu ontology and the naturalization of virulent caste hierarchies, as Omvedt (1995) and Yengde (2019) have analyzed. Despite invocations of plurality and cultural diversity that purportedly make Hinduism an exceptionally inclusive religion, Hinduism is the outcome of brahmanic hegemony (Omvedt, 1995). Hindu exceptionalism continues to frame Hinduism, in the words of one of its adherents, as a "gentle, yogic" religion that believes in embracing "the whole of life and human society" (Shastri, 2019).

At the same time, Hindu exceptionalism also informs India's foreign policy. For example, post-Independence, Jawaharlal Nehru trumpeted India as exceptional for charting a third geopolitical way between the US and former USSR in the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement. In the early 1990s with the liberalization of foreign investment, discourses of Indian exceptionalism additionally became articulated with rapid economic growth and the rise of conspicuous consumption, an ironic contrast with the austerity of consumption modeled by Gandhi. With the emergence of COVID-19 in 2020, Indian exceptionalism underwent another transmutation in the pronouncements of right-wing politicians such as Modi that India's lower mortality rate during the pandemic evidenced the superiority of Indian bodies (Bhan & Bose, 2021). Not surprisingly given Modi's fealty to Hindu nationalism, he insidiously conflated Indian bodies with Hindu ones, further solidifying the identification between *Indian* exceptionalism and *Hindu* exceptionalism.

Since Modi and the BJP's rise to national power in 2014, Hindu exceptionalism has become integral to everyday governance and has shaped religious and political subjectivities of the Hindu diaspora in the US. During the Cold War, the US perceived Hindu nationalists as "reassuringly anti-communist" (Rajagopal, 2015). The lingering effects of the Cold War have meant Americans tend to view the RSS "benignly," as a form of "Gandhian volunteerism, or as Hindu revivalism," ignoring the violent, militaristic character of the organization (Rajagopal, 2015). Under Modi, neoliberal Hindutva comes wrapped in an ostentatious display of Hindu pride and sectarian performativity. For instance, several scholars have commented on how Modi's sartorial choices function as "dress performances" (Conway, 2017, p. 161) that are deeply connected to his "populist politics" (Vittorini, 2022). The wearing of saffron clothes in public religious gatherings and during key political ceremonies enables Modi to openly proclaim his Hinduness and to transform Hindu populism into a media spectacle that rallies the diaspora around the homeland (Vittorini, 2022). (The fact that cow dung patties for religious purification ceremonies are now available for purchase on Amazon and Hindutva pop music is a genre of its own illustrates how an unapologetic display of Hinduness has prodded Hindus globally to embrace their religious heritage and new forms of consumption.)

Hinduism's global export and the creation of a diasporic Hindu community have been facilitated by US-based publications such as *Hinduism Today*, which seek to foster solidarity among Hindus worldwide by marketing good deeds, informing readers about current international events pertaining to Hindus, and offering pedagogical instruction on elaborate rituals.⁷⁵ In 2015, *Hinduism Today* bestowed its Hindu Renaissance Award on Modi in recognition of his status as the first "openly devout and practicing Hindu" prime minister of India, who was committed to leveraging Hinduism's exceptional wisdom to "benefit" India and uplift "all peoples of the world" (*Hinduism Today*, 2015). Such overtures to universal humanitarian values of service and empowerment serve to package Hinduism as a religion of peace and inclusion while casting Hindus in the US diaspora as good global citizens. The explicit discursive and material investments in Hindu humanitarianism, we argue below, signal a much wider reassessment of what it means to be a citizen in the US, aspiring to secure a place in US's multicultural polity, and simultaneously to be a devout Hindu subject committed to a Hindu *rashtra* (nation state) in India.

Hindu Americans and Seva

In order to become America's exceptional citizens, many US-based Hindu communities emphasize civic public engagement to reconfigure the image of the Hindu American as an indispensable part of the US political-public sphere. From being hailed as part of a model minority focused narrowly on individual success, Hindu Americans aspire to be perceived as Hindu humanitarians. Earlier formulations of the model minority speak to the processes of assimilation through which Asian Americans have been absorbed into the national imaginary. Now, however, Hindu Americans are strategically promoting reverse assimilation by presenting differently situated individuals from across diverse races and ethnicities, occupations, and regions in the US as self-identified Hindus. In their campaign "I am Hindu American," HAF showcases a range of people, all of them claiming a Hindu American identity, who introduce themselves as actors, teachers, mothers, football players, yoga instructors, and politicians. Launched with the intent to foreground "many Hindu contributions to our daily lives: from yoga to the decimal system," HAF (2018) timed its campaign with Tulsi Gabbard's announcement of a presidential run in 2020. As the "first Hindu candidate from a major political party to enter the race for

⁷⁵ *Hinduism Today* is a Hawaii-based magazine that provides news related to Hindus, which it characterizes as a form of *seva*. From its website: "*Hinduism Today* magazine is a global public service to the family of Hindu faiths, produced by a small monastic community based in Hawaii. The small editorial team produces the magazine for the same reasons that other orders run ashrams, free eye-clinics, or orphanages—as a selfless service to the world" (*Hinduism Today*, n.d.-a). According to the magazine's Wikipedia page, it is distributed in 60 countries and has a circulation of 18,000. The website also boasts it reaches approximately 275,000 online readers in Europe, Africa, India, Malaysia, Mauritius, Singapore, and the United States (*Hinduism Today*, n.d.-b). Some of the pedagogical instructions on rituals seem invented and undercut the fluidity of Hindu religious practices; for example, *Hinduism Today* specifies an elaborate series of steps for conversion to Hinduism, which include renouncing one's former religion to a representative of that faith in the presence of a Hindu witness. Whether "conversion" is even permissible is an ongoing debate among Hindus.

the White House,” a key plank of Gabbard’s campaign was to assert that Hinduism was a “global and universal religion,” and Hindus were “community oriented” individuals who championed the values of “tolerance, non-violence, and freedom” (HAF, 2018). Increasingly, thus, Hindus claim to draw from their primordial wisdom of mathematics, ethics, and philosophy as well as their ethic of *seva* to build the US social and body politic that aligns them well with American civic and political life. For instance, de Estrada (2023) argues how a defining element of right-wing Hindutva’s foreign policy narrative is to reclaim India’s alleged historic status as a *vishwaguru* or “world teacher” based on its spiritual and political superiority. In a bid to subvert existing geopolitical hierarchies, Modi and his allies have repeatedly claimed that India’s “democratic spirit” is a “civilizational characteristic” and that “liberal values” of tolerance and inclusion were not copied from elsewhere but emanated from within the ancient Hindu civilization, a historic albeit unacknowledged legacy that positions Hinduism and Hindu Americans as natural teachers to the world (de Estrada 2023, pp. 438, 435). HAF’s campaign is one such pedagogic attempt to reacquaint the world with Hinduism’s glorious past and portray Hinduism’s “exceptional” inclusivity and capaciousness as inherent characteristics.

Hindutva’s interventions to transform model minorities into exceptional citizens, as well as the Hindu diaspora’s attempts to claim plurality as a Hindu virtue, however, must be analyzed against the backdrop of decades of anti-Muslim rhetoric and Islamophobia in India and elsewhere. Hindu exceptionalism is not only based on a filial piety with a Hindu homeland but is also articulated through the registers of global service, humanity, and citizenship, enabling it to disguise its antipathy toward Islam. After 9/11, the Hindu lobby built on rising Islamophobia and used it to fuel what Mathew and Prashad (2000) call “Yankee Hindutva,” a tech-savvy and mediatized iteration of Hindu diasporic identity that is driven as much from narratives of Hindu pride and proximity to right-wing Hindu groups as it is from acts of “Muslim bashing” on and off the internet (p. 518). Since 2001, a dizzying number of Hindutva organizations in India have proliferated in the diaspora, particularly in Nepal, the UK, the US, and Australia (Andersen & Damle, 2018).

Several of these diasporic organizations include “*seva*” in their title (for example, All India Movement [AIM] for Seva, Hindu American Seva Communities, Seva Foundation, and Sewa International) and many others highlight the centrality of the concept for their charitable and humanitarian efforts in their mission statements. Bhattacharjee (2019) has traced the theological and historical genealogies of “*seva*” and its companion concept “*dana*” (selfless giving) from their appearances in Vedic texts to their transmutations during the colonial and nationalist periods to their transfigurations in the diaspora, highlighting the “dynamic” nature of both concepts, which have grown more capacious over time (p. 77).⁷⁶

During the colonial period, Indian nationalists perceived Christian missionaries as a threat to their cultural integrity because of the inroads they had made converting Dalits and Adivasis. Consequently, Hindu reformist and revivalist

⁷⁶ We are dating the Indian nationalist period from 1885 (the formation of the Indian National Congress) to 1947 (the achievement of Indian independence).

organization began to emulate the missionaries in the creation of institutions to deliver social services such as education and healthcare; they also became active in disaster relief efforts, which had a longer history in India largely based in the benevolence of individual rulers of the princely states who dispensed food staples during famines or temporarily suspended the collection of revenues during economic hardship (Bhattacharjee, 2019, p. 69). In the process, ideas of personal charity became associated with public works.

Gandhi also believed that *seva* was a necessary tool in the struggle to attain “purna swaraj” (complete independence). While not “part of Satyagraha or the direct struggle against colonial rule,” Srivatsan (2015) elucidates the key role *seva* played in the processes of “self-purification, social construction, and Hindu revival” during India’s anticolonial struggle (pp. 28–29). Indeed, by foregrounding *seva*’s political role in establishing the hegemony of the Indian National Congress and those of the national elites in the early 20th century, Srivatsan illuminates how *seva*’s “ethics of care” were rooted in sentiments of charity toward oppressed caste and tribal groups; in other words, they were informed by structural condescension by Hindu elites directed at those deemed to be from a lower social status. Formulations of *seva* rested on Brahmanical notions of caste rather than its abolition and, hence, further undermined the social and political rights of marginalized communities. Because such “caste-Hindu idioms” of *seva* rely on notions of elite charity instead of rights, they remain outside the purview of law, adjudication, or accountability. Even as *seva* activities to an extent helped with the “reconstruction of Hindu ethics” by altering the prior rules of interaction between caste groups, these activities nevertheless maintained “caste Hindu dominance” (Srivatsan, 2006, p. 437). Invocations of *seva* also enabled Hindu nationalist groups such as the RSS to rehabilitate the organization in the public eye after the assassination of Gandhi by an RSS adherent.⁷⁷

In a complete inversion of *seva*’s origins in caste hierarchies, however, US-based diasporic Hindutva groups such as the HAF reframe *seva* to be critical to forging unity *among* Hindus in order to counter stereotypes of caste as endemically Hindu, which the HAF asserts is a Western imposition on Hindu society.⁷⁸ Refuting the notion that caste is a foundational Dharmic principle in Hinduism, the HAF alleges the Vedic term to denote difference is “*varna*,” not caste, with the former being an innocuous framework to understand “human diversity and purpose” (Khanna, 2016). An article in *Outlook India* (2022), a news and current affairs magazine with a readership of 1.78 million, elucidates: the pursuit of *seva* is

⁷⁷ The National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) recently removed references in high school textbooks to Gandhi’s assassination by a Hindu extremist, Nathuram Godse. It has excised Godse’s reason for the assassination, which was motivated by his sense that Gandhi had appeased Muslims. NCERT also eliminated references to the post-Godhra riots in Gujarat in which approximately 2,000 Muslims were murdered in 2002 (Sharma, 2023). While the Indian Supreme Court cleared then Chief Minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi of complicity with those engaged in the pogrom, then-UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw suggests in a BBC documentary, *India: The Modi Question*, that Modi “tacitly encouraged Hindu extremists” and restrained the police from intervening in the violence. Banned by the ruling BJP, *India: The Modi Question* can be streamed from AppleTV and Amazon Prime.

⁷⁸ For more on the objections of Hindu American organizations to references to caste in history textbooks as examples of Western stereotyping, see Bose (2008).

“Hindu Sangathan—consolidation and strengthening of the Hindu society” and the incorporation of those categorized as “insufficiently Hindu” into the Hindu fold. Such forms of consolidation have sustained and indeed reinforced “traditional and regressive hierarchies of caste Hindu society” (*Outlook*, 2022). Caste ideologies that categorize Dalits, for instance, as untouchables and the perception that they are “the lowest of the low have followed them to America” (Ray, 2019). In the now widely publicized CISCO case in which the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing sued Cisco Systems in July 2020 for discriminating against a Dalit employee, the HAF expressed solid support for CISCO systems and blamed the state for conflating caste with religion (Suchitra, 2021). Enforcing Hindu integration, unity, and consolidation through *seva* activities that solidify caste hierarchies while at the same time attempting to disarticulate caste from Hinduism allows the HAF to market Hinduism’s universal philosophy of “selfless *seva*” as an antidote to caste.

Every word carries within it the history of its prior meanings (Volosinov, 1986). In its trans-oceanic and transhistorical journey, the signifier “*seva*” retains the RSS’s record on the subcontinent of establishing *seva* as a marker to delineate Hindus from their “primary ‘enemies,’ Muslims and Christians” (Bhattacharjee, 2019, p. 78). Those attempts survive in the diasporic elaboration of *seva* as a superior kind of religious giving compared to Muslim and Christian forms of philanthropy. More specifically, Hindu Americans define *seva* as “selfless service” that is “impersonal” and offered without any expectation of “reciprocity, reward, protection or patronage.” Shyam Parande, the coordinator of Sewa International, even declares that “*seva* has no equivalent word in English just as there is no equivalent word for Dharma and Karma” to name the fulfillment of one’s obligation to society (Bhattacharjee, 2019, p. 81). *Seva*, then, manifests a version of Hindu exceptionalism so extraordinary that it defies translation into the English language.

It is perhaps this construction of *seva* as an exceptional form of service that accounts for its affective appeal to Hindu Americans. Participation in Hindu American organizations oriented around *seva* enables the civic minded to ostensibly materialize their religious identity through humanitarianism. Sewa International, for example, touts projects that have provided disaster relief in the wake of hurricanes, delivered PPE to Native American communities, and aided FEMA in the distribution of food and in various vaccination drives.⁷⁹ In August 2020, FEMA recognized Sewa International for its contributions to relief aid, prompting Achalesh Amar, the Director of Disaster Relief at Sewa International, to observe: “FEMA’s recognition indicates that we are on the national radar for disaster relief, and that our work is of a quality that merits national attention” (*Sewa News*, 2020, p. 3). Sewa International’s President Arun Kankani adds this recognition is “a major milestone” that “opens many doors for us” (*Sewa News*, 2020, p. 3). The recognition of a Hindu American organization from a federal agency for its exemplary contributions to national efforts signals the transformation of humanitarian Hindus into exceptional American citizens.

⁷⁹ See its 2020 monthly newsletters, *Sewa News*.

Hindu Americans and Exclusionary Belonging

Conceptions of Hindu American citizenship are anchored in deeply exclusionary and racist protestations of “rightful” belonging through which Hindu Americans justify their credentials as “good” immigrants on US soil. Here their organizational materials are revealing. YouTube videos and newsletters such as *Sewa News*, the monthly publication of Sewa USA (the American chapter of Sewa International) targeted at their membership, are explicit about their proselytizing beliefs and political agendas. In their construction of *seva* as selfless giving, diasporic Hindus position themselves against other immigrants and the welfare state; their claim to be exemplary American citizens rests precisely on their status as “givers” to society and not as “takers” of public benefits. Ironically, even as diasporic Hindus reconfigure themselves as good Samaritans, they do so to accentuate the “inherent” virtues of Hinduism rather than as a deliberative process of self-realization fostered through grassroots and community-based work. Humanitarianism becomes an outward expression of their fundamental Hinduness, which is now being harnessed to augment Hindu American influence in the US public-political sphere.

Vibhuti Jha, a member of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS), a sister organization to Sewa International, states in a YouTube video that “Indians are ideal immigrants for living a good life, having good values,” and contributing to society. He recounts a senator telling him: “We love you Indians as migrants to this country because you are professionals; you are educated; you do well in life; you take care of your families; you take care of your children; you have family values; you are least problem on the law and order side and you ask for nothing” (Jha, 2020). Jha (2020) responds to the senator by stressing that these characteristics emanate from a “belief system that believes in giving.” While the senator and his or her political party remain unnamed in this video clip, the quotation references several stock phrases used by conservative politicians, including “family values” and “law and order.” Through invoking a “belief system that believes in giving,” Jha alludes to “*seva*.” In the context of a video sponsored by the HSS, the implicit allusion to *seva* serves to conflate “Indians and Hindus” and not so subtly contrasts them with other immigrant groups and communities of color. Apparently believing these communities tap social services, Jha also implies they commit crimes.

Hindu conceptualizations of humanitarianism or *seva*, therefore, reinforce citizenship’s neoliberal reincarnation—while the Hindu American diaspora demonstrates entrepreneurship, responsibility, and care, the state’s social welfare policies are construed as “dole outs” for less ideal immigrants (Black, Latines, and Muslims), who are instead deemed in need of management by the police and prison-industrial complex. For example, Ashutosh (2022) has analyzed how the HSS’s 2020 statement following the murder of George Floyd illustrates the contradictions of diasporic Hindu nationalists, who, on the one hand, grudgingly acknowledge the systematic racism directed against African Americans, but who, on the other hand, are unable to view their fellow citizens outside the paradigm of law and order (p. 334). Likewise, Shambuka (2021) points to how “Hindutva Democrats” distance themselves from earlier upper-caste Hindu associations with whiteness to express

solidarity with racial minorities in the US (p. 9).⁸⁰ Several Indian American political candidates have used the “savvy language of racial justice” to “endear themselves to social and political movements” that challenge white supremacy in the US while adhering to and reinforcing Hindu supremacist agendas in the US and India (Shambuka, 2021, p. 9).

Elsewhere in the discourse of diasporic Hindu philanthropy, the casual racism of Jha’s allusions to other communities of color or the appropriation of social justice agendas by Hindutva Democrats morphs into a paternalistic benevolence. Sewa International USA touts its Stop Diabetes Movement (SDM) program focused on teaching yoga and “cyclic meditation” in 10-day camps to facilitate “a paradigm shift in [participants’] food habits and lifestyle” (*Sewa News*, 2017a, p. 2). In the first five years of the SDM camps, Sewa International has held 40 camps and trained 500 people, who reported experiencing a “significant drop in Fasting Blood Sugar and HbA1C levels” (*Sewa News*, 2017a, p. 2). These camps are targeted to the “inner city urban poor” and communities of color (*Sewa News*, 2017a, p. 3).

Particularly telling and cringe-worthy is the description of yoga outreach to the Latine community in San Antonio, Texas. The campaign was aimed at “elderly Hispanics” at a city community center, where Dr. Hetal Nayak, yoga trainer and physician, commenced holding twice weekly classes. *Sewa News* reports:

Most of the seniors had never heard about yoga in their lives, and thus the deep relationship that Dr. Nayak now has with her students did not have a very smooth start. In the beginning the students resisted yoga as the concept of silent meditation and quieting of the mind before actually doing any workouts was alien to them. There was also a clash of culture of sorts, as this was the first time they were “working out” without loud music, and the focus was more on the self than outside. (*Sewa News*, 2017b, p. 2)

The blunt acknowledgement of a rocky start and culture clash suggest the program was imposed on the neighborhood center by outsiders rather than the result of an invitation from community members. Sewa International’s account constructs the Hispanic community as distinctly *not* cosmopolitan: they “had never heard about yoga in their lives.” According to the article, introspection and quietness are foreign to these elderly individuals, who much prefer the stimulation of loud music and interactions with others. They are represented, in other words, as unruly children, who resist instruction that will benefit them. The use of the word “alien” additionally conjures the dehumanizing term “illegal alien” popular with critics of immigration and often directed at Mexican migrants.

Sewa International’s stated intention with this program is to facilitate “a silent revolution” to enable “elderly Hispanics to take control of their health and well-being” (*Sewa News*, 2017b, p. 2). The article includes several testimonials from participants, who credit the classes with teaching “patience” and “meditation” and offering them a respite from muscle cramps and other physical discomfort (*Sewa*

⁸⁰ See Macher (2022) for information on the ties between diasporic Hindutva organizations and the Biden-Harris administration (p. 46).

News, 2017b, p. 2). Cumulatively, the references to the laudatory intentions to improve health, the participants' initial reluctance, and the positive health outcomes paint a portrait of crusading Hindu Americans bent on saving members of the Latine community from their lifestyle choices in an almost comedic version of the colonial-era ideology of the white man's burden and civilizing mission. The yoga initiative represents a positioning of diasporic Hindus within American multiculturalism that produces hierarchies; those closest to practices now commonly associated with whiteness, such as yoga, bask in its shadow as exalted national citizens.

Yoga as Soft Hinduism

We deliberately invoke the proselytizing zeal of Christian missionaries in relation to Sewa International's yoga workshops. The comparison acknowledges the dimensions of religious belief that become actualized through repetitious, embodied practices. In her study of the mainstreaming of yoga and mindfulness in US public school curricula, Brown (2019) remarks on the North American public perception of these activities as devoid of religious meaning. Arguing yoga and mindfulness are both "secular and religious," Brown explains that participants in such programs often describe "having 'religious' or 'spiritual' experiences," which she points out can result in a change of affiliation over time (p. 1). The receptiveness to yoga in the US, in part, emanates from its deliberate disarticulation from its religious roots, including linguistic references to Hinduism, by its practitioners, contributing to the perception that yoga is a secular practice (Brown, 2019, p. 6). The absence of Hindu references in the discourse of yoga helps obscure its religious elements from members of text-based faith communities such as Christians and Muslims, who are accustomed to verbalizing belief through language. Brown reveals how some Hindu American advocates of yoga programs "code switch": "they market programs as fully secular, then report back to community insiders that they have won a 'Vedic Victory' or skillfully used 'Stealth Buddhism'" (p. 299).

Our point is not to profess that yoga is essentially Hindu, thereby denying the dynamism of religions and cultural practices and ignoring how new meanings can attach to rituals through contact among cultures. As manifest in the US, contemporary forms of yoga draw from exercise cultures and fitness regimes that emerged in the late 20th century (Holpuch, 2013). Rather we want to suggest that Sewa International, and like-minded Hindu American organizations, use yoga workshops as a form of outreach to non-Hindus. By inculcating dietary prescriptions, yoga exercises, and meditation, practices associated with present-day Hinduism, these organizations normalize Hinduism as part of the pluralistic religious landscape of the US. They also create importantly *de facto*, non-South Asian practitioners of exercises associated with Hinduism, who may be tempted, like Julia Roberts, to convert to the religion through this introduction to yoga (Kulkarni, 2018).

In their use of yoga as a means of outreach, Hindu American groups are following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's lead in his crusade to popularize yoga globally. Recall that he lobbied the United Nations General Assembly in 2014, proposing the establishment of an International Day of Yoga. The request came at the tail end of a speech beseeching developed countries to share funds and technology

and pledging India's intent to do likewise with less fortunate countries. Entreating his audience to "change [our] lifestyles" and avoid "reckless consumption," he imaginatively presented yoga as an antidote to climate change in a truly novel marketing campaign:

Yoga is an invaluable gift of our ancient tradition. Yoga embodies unity of mind and body; thought and action; restraint and fulfillment; harmony between man and nature; a holistic approach to health and well-being. It is not about exercise but to discover the sense of oneness with yourself, the world and the nature. By changing our lifestyle and creating consciousness, it can help us deal with climate change (as cited in Pangambam, 2014).

Noticeably absent in Modi's UN address are references to Hinduism, an absence consistent with the promotion of yoga workshops by Hindu Americans; instead, he characterizes yoga as an "ancient tradition" and offers it as India's "gift" to the world (Pangambam, 2014).⁸¹

As we noted earlier, Hindu American organizations engage in code-switching and present different representations of yoga keyed to specific audiences. Even as they strip references to Hinduism in relation to yoga to American audiences, they explicitly describe yoga as Hindu and acknowledge its potential as a form of soft power to members of their own communities. "Yoga has gained admiration and captured peoples' imagination across the world," Singh and Srivastava (2014) write, "and thus has become a source of India's soft power. An article in *Hinduism Today* declares that the "record 175" cosponsors of Modi's UN resolution to dub the summer solstice as "International Yoga Day" "marked a widely acknowledged chapter in India's soft power story" (Ramabadran, 2021). All three authors bemoan the commodification of yoga and urge its rearticulation with its Hindu roots. Singh and Srivastava suggest "The Indian government can open studios abroad to train interested people in yoga, yogic therapies and Ayurveda ... to ensure that yogic practices are practiced as described in the Vedas. Collaboration with the Indian diaspora should be encouraged to disseminate yoga training abroad, in regions where it is not yet popular." These quotations support Prachi Patankar's (2014) argument that caste-privileged Hindus have either erased or appropriated the "richly diverse indigenous and local spiritual practices," including yoga, to strengthen a "Brahmanical form of Hinduism."

A number of Hindus have praised the HAF's "Take Back Yoga" campaign precisely for restoring and popularizing Brahmanical versions of Hinduism. Writing from Chennai, Ramabadran (2021) applauds the HAF's "Take Back Yoga" campaign aimed at emphasizing the "importance of the real roots of yoga" in "Vedic wisdom." He approvingly quotes Suhag Shukla, the HAF's executive director, who warns of the "deliberate delinking of yoga from its religious and spiritual Hindu roots," a consequence of the "successful commoditization and marketing of yoga" (Ramabadran, 2021). The name of HAF's campaign, "Take Back Yoga," also

⁸¹ Singh and Winter (2023) contend that the BJP and Modi's Hindu ideologues are strengthening Hinduism's civilizational politics internationally in forums such as UNESCO by producing "heritage imaginaries" of India as a Hindu nation.

rhetorically echoes the feminist campaign to “Take Back the Night,” a misleading association with a progressive movement against sexual violence. Indeed, the recurrent theme of returning yoga to its Vedic roots underscores the socially and politically conservative agenda of Hindu American groups: their insistence that yoga quintessentially represents primordial Hinduism obscures Islamophobic and caste ideology. As part of its “Take Back Yoga” campaign, the HAF (2021) released an animated short that grounds yoga in Hinduism by emphasizing Sanskrit terms, revealing how specific poses represent bodily devotion to Hindu deities and borrowing Modi’s characterization of yoga as a “gift to humanity.” As Hindu humanitarianism becomes a global export from India, and Hinduness is reconfigured as a global ethic, the Hinduization of citizenship has meant shrinking rights and justice for its substantial population of Muslim and caste-oppressed minorities.

Conclusion

In this article, we explored how Hindu immigrants increasingly rely on discourses of Hindu exceptionalism to carve out a space in US’s multicultural politics even as they play an active role in materializing the idea of India as a Hindu *rashtra* (nation state). Narratives of civilizational pride are now key elements of Hindu American diasporic identity and are purposefully deployed by many right-wing Hindu organizations and individuals to assert their status as ideal citizens of the US polity. As earlier narratives of poverty and socioeconomic suffering in India are replaced with tropes of resurgent Hindu pride and heritage, diasporic Hindus reframe themselves as “givers” rather than “beneficiaries” of Western largess. We described how Hindu immigrant groups have relied on civic public engagement that draws on the concept of *seva* to present themselves as culturally and religiously predisposed to good works and humanitarian citizenship. Instead of individual success as a key determinant of their model minority status, Hindu immigrants now increasingly use the trope of community service and engagement to present Hinduism as inherently virtuous and capacious. In a context of entrenched Islamophobia, such reassessments are meant to package Hinduism’s virtues as a gift to humanity. While Hindu Americans in the US invoke Hindu exceptionalism to reinvent themselves as ideal citizens, they perceive Muslims in India as roadblocks to realizing Hindu glory and Hindu exceptionalism. For Hindus, Indian American civic exceptionalism functions as a declaration of ethno-religious identity in the US even as it aligns with global Islamophobia and abets the elimination of Muslims from Kashmir and India.

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Islam and the Orientalist Vision in *Padmaavat*

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Abstract

This essay argues that Sanjay Leela Bhansali's 2018 Bollywood historical film Padmaavat is part of a wider media-informational atmospherics of contemporary Hindu pride and Islamophobia, drawing on advertised energies of disaffection and ethnological stereotyping around the figure of the Muslim. In the process, it constructs a "double shift" Orientalist prism of race perception to view a splendid "Aryan" Hindu past as well as a dark interval of Islamic rule in India marked by a Semitic, Turko-Arabic pathology. The film is part of an overall Hindu nationalist project of constructing a moral memory (contra history) in the era of the digital image that can not only reinvent the past, but also re-texture and re-canvas it, making purported pictures of a glorious Hindu bygone appearing as not just nove, but also tactile and sensuous.

Keywords: *Hindutva, Bollywood, digital image, historical film, Orientalism, global Islamophobia*

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's 2018 Bollywood historical *Padmaavat* begins with an acknowledgement and disclaimer. The text states that the film is inspired by Malik Muhammad Jayasi's 16th-century Awadhi epic poem *Padmavat*, which is a work of fiction. As such, it makes no claims about historical authenticity or accuracy and is not intended to disrespect the beliefs, feelings, or sentiments of any persons or communities. It declares that *Padmaavat* has no agenda to promote "Sati" or any such practices. Nevertheless, it has been pointed out by various scholars and critics that Bhansali's hugely controversial epic is not, for the most part, drawn from Jaisi's poem and that the film quite unabashedly demonizes Emperor Alauddin Khilji (r. 1296–1316) of the Delhi Sultanate while glorifying Rajput culture and *Jauhar*, the ritualistic honor suicide of Rajput women. This demonization of a Muslim ruler and glorification of a Hindu martial race comes in a particular political context of Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) ascendancy in India. This essay locates Bhansali's film in a wider media-informational atmospherics of contemporary Hindu pride and Islamophobia in the contemporary Indian milieu. That is, in a wider cultural landscape of Hindu nationalist mythography that includes not just other recent Bollywood neo-historical films like *Panipat* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2019), *Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior* (Om Raut, 2020), *Samrat Prithviraj* (Chandraprakash Dwivedi, 2022), or Bhansali's own earlier film *Bajirao Mastani* (2015), but also

an entire spectrum of media products in the age of the digital, from YouTube videos to memes circulated in WhatsApp.¹ This phenomenon presents a new age Hindu *will* to the past to restore an authentic Hindu masculinist self that has seemingly been obscured by a history of Muslim conquest, betrayal, and treachery. Bhansali's film is a particularly symptomatic instance of this cultural turn. I argue that, accordingly, *Padmaavat* uses a "double shift" Orientalist prism of race perception to view a splendid Hindu bygone as well as the "dark interval" of Islamic rule in the subcontinent.

Padmavaat begins around the final decade of the 13th century, with the romance and eventual marriage between Rawal Ratan Singh, the ruler of Mewar, and princess Padmavati, the daughter of Gandharvasena, king of Sinhala (present Sri Lanka). There is a parallel narrative track that depicts the rise to power of Alauddin in Delhi, who begins by impressing his uncle Emperor Jallaluddin Khilji, marrying his daughter Princess Meherunnisa, and proving his mettle as a military commander by defeating the Mongol invaders. Following that, he wrests the throne by assassinating his uncle cum father-in-law and ruthlessly eliminating rivals. Alauddin is aided by Malik Kafur, his loyal slave, lover, and cunning advisor. Meanwhile in Chittor, the capital of Mewar, Rani Padmavati—presumably of Buddhist-Dravidian origins, but fair, statuesque, and "Aryan" in appearance—easily merges into the ceremonial, highly Sanskritized interiors of the royal Rajput household. The two tracks intersect when a betrayer to the Rajput cause goes to Alauddin Khilji's court and tells him about Padmavati's unparalleled beauty. The megalomaniac Alauddin believes that he has *haq* (right) over every *nayaab cheez* (unique thing) in the world. He therefore brings a formidable army and besieges Chittor. After a long stand-off, the wily Alauddin calls for a truce and then treacherously abducts the Rajput Rawal when he comes, unarmed, to the Sultan's camp to dine. But the fearless and intelligent Padmavati goes to Delhi and rescues her husband from captivity with the help of two brave generals, Gora and Badal. An angry and desperate Alauddin Khilji attacks Chittor with the entire military might of the Sultanate. Ratan Singh is treacherously killed from behind after winning a duel with the emperor. The film ends with all Rajput men fighting the imperial forces to the death and the women of Chittor, led by Padmavati, immolating themselves in a sacrificial pyre. A morally and libidinally defeated Alauddin gets only an empty fort, ashes, and a mountain of dead bodies as the spoils of victory.

The separation and polarization of Hindu-Muslim worlds in the visual and aural treatment of the film is stark and has been written about extensively.² The cinematic Chittor is sumptuous, sun-kissed, or bathed by the golden light of a million lamps. The town is devoid of any signs of caste discrimination and bereft of scenes of production; the peasantry is nowhere to be seen. Lovingly displayed in breathtaking dimensions with panoramic long and wide shots, Chittor is adorned with magnificent architectural patterns, opulent decor, and exquisite filigree work.

¹ See Basu (2023).

² See, for instance, Gehlot (2019), Shandilya (2019), and Roy (2018)

Life is splendid and full of ceremonial majesty. It is marked by Sanskritized speech, decorative, mannered, or choreographed movements, elaborate vegetarian cuisine, proprietary and gendered segregation of bodies, and a strict hierarchical ordering of gazes and privileges of access.

In contrast, the oriental world of the Sultanate in Delhi is a construct of a *fin de siècle*, darkly romantic mode of thinking and imagining the oriental other as figure of civilizational and racial decadence, as repository of libidinal and psychotic excesses below the radar of a normative human ethical consciousness and reason. The imperial court of Delhi—which, historical logic would tell us was much richer than the provincial kingdom of Mewar—is stark, stony, dirty, and full of intrigue in the shadows. There is no administration in this world, only the arbitrary will of the tyrant. There is no trade or visible revenue generation, only plunder and loot. There are no stable kinship ties or an actual Islamic culture and society, only a militarized tribe of potential parricides (Allauddin assassinates the emperor and himself survives an assassination attempt after becoming emperor) under the absolute command of the despot. There is no sign of genuine intellection or the arts; the iconic Sufi mystic, poet, historian, and polymath scholar Amir Khusrau (1253–1325)—whose immense contributions to subcontinental cultures over the ages are comparable to Virgil’s or Dante’s in the West—for the most part remains just a fawning apologist of power.

The cinematic Alauddin Khilji is brash, uncouth, cruel, devoid of table manners and fashion sense; he is stripped of all markers of a classical Persianate culture of which the historical one would be legatee. He composes bad verse and compels Amir Khusrau to laud them. He has a strange fetish for caged birds, applies perfume on himself by dousing his slave girl with *attar* and then rubbing his body against her, devours meat like a savage, smears his face with his own blood before a battle, and has a penchant for displaying severed heads of enemies. Alauddin’s craft and intelligence, apart from the fact that he is a better chess player than Ratan Singh, can only take the form of lowly treachery. He is all instinct.

Yet all of Alauddin’s quirks—as the oriental despot who owns all riches, all destinies, and all women—may be explained as various expressions of a primal sex drive that determines his being. He fornicates with a slave girl minutes before his marriage and knifes a man when he protests. After attacking and sacking Devgiri, he claims the kingdom’s Rajput princess for his harem. Alauddin makes her stand on a water pool, with chains wrapped around her and two heavy metallic torches occupying her hands, and then pours a bowl of pearls over her head to salute her for arousing his desire. He treats his own queen Meherunissa with sadistic psychological violence, returning to her at one point with her father’s head on a spike, and then commanding her to make unparalleled love to him. But from the Hindu nationalist moral perspective that dominates the film, the greatest expression of an imputed Turko-Arabic pathology is the emperor’s implied homosexual liaison with his slave Malik Kafur who bathes him, caresses him in public, and has full access to Alauddin’s bedchamber whether he is in bed with the queen or a slave girl.

Desire in Alauddin’s camp is thus always queer and triangulated. Its expression is tyrannical and violent. Ratan Singh is a bigamist too, but his relationship with Padmavati is presented in the film as one of consent and romantic ardor, marked

by ethical restraint, and delicate equipoise. Conjugal love therefore merges into the overall moral economy of movement and speech. When the new queen leads a group of women in the “Ghoomar Ghoomar” song and dance sequence—quite easily the film’s centerpiece spectacle—it is, by custom, only Rawal Ratan Singh who can witness it, and no other male in the fort. However, we should not understand the difference between the interiors of Alauddin Khilji’s palace or camp (the two are often indistinguishable) and that of the royal house in Chittor in terms of a modern European bourgeois notion of “privacy.” Ratan Singh, like Khilji, “owns” women (before the final battle, Padmavati asks for his permission to perform Jauhar since she cannot even die without his consent). Yet the difference between the rule of the Rajput Rawal and that of the Sultan lies in the impeccable cinematic staging of a high Hindu “tradition” in Chittor that becomes synonymous with the proper and proprietary staging of Hindu women themselves—when and where they speak, sing and dance, perform conjugal duties, make public appearances, visit the temple, or enter the burning pyre. The space that Khilji commands becomes pathological in contrast precisely because there are no such temporal and spatial orderings.

Consider a sequence of events toward the beginning of the film. It opens to a framed interior space with the pool where Alauddin, in mid-long shots and close-ups, torments and molests the chained princess of Devgiri. A soldier comes and informs him about Emperor Jalaluddin Khilji’s arrival. As Alauddin steps out of the pool, a wide shot and a pan to the left reframes the picture and reveals the out-of-field to be the public court itself, where he has also kept his loot from Devgiri piled up. It is in that very same space and in the same hour of the humiliation of a Rajput princess in broad daylight that Alauddin meets and takes an instant liking to his new slave lover Malik Kafur and then, within minutes, assassinates Jallaluddin to become the emperor of Hindustan. It is through such convergences between lust, betrayal of kinship, and avarice for wealth and power that *Padmaavat* becomes a passion play with an internalized cosmos of primal Hindu-Muslim polarizations rather than a historical film in the generic sense.

From a standard historical perspective, there could, of course, be many general objections to the *Padmaavat* story. The historical Alauddin Khilji (1266–1316) was certainly an absolutist ruler, with a penchant for the ruthless that, by modern standards, would indeed qualify as tyrannical and cruel. A Turko-Afghan by lineage, Khilji had to consolidate his sovereignty by destroying the powers of the older Turkish nobility and squelch intrigue among his own relations. There is evidence to suggest that he was an iconoclast and a temple destroyer, but perhaps to justify conquest, loot fabulous wealth, and to satisfy the Sunni orthodoxy of his regime (while not bending to their will and imposing Sharia throughout his empire) rather than as a personal religious mission, since he also wanted to establish a new religion. Allauddin, who repulsed the mighty Mongols twice, in 1297 AD and 1303 AD, had ambitions to be a second Alexander. It would be very difficult to argue that he was—as it is in the film—devoid of civilizational finesse, discipline, and was totally led by intoxicants and libidinal urges. The actual Allauddin instituted prohibition of alcohol and drugs in and around Delhi. To maintain a formidable standing army and protect his empire, he did sack rival kingdoms, but also put in place price control measures, agrarian reforms, and a revenue collection system

that, in essence, was followed by central powers in the subcontinent across the centuries, including the British colonial administration. His forays into Rajputana could be understood as entirely strategic, to reinforce the left flank of his empire and gain access to the ports of Gujarat—not just to control sea trade with the West, but also to ensure a critical supply of Arabian steeds to the army. The rulers of the North Indian heartland who would come later, like the Mughals and then the British, would do exactly the same. The historical Khilji did indeed besiege Chittor in 1303, but around that time had also conquered Ranthambhore, Malwa, Siwana, or Mandu in Rajputana, apart from overrunning most of the Deccan and South India, up to Madurai. He presumably did so without being motivated by lust and without being lured by legendary beauties at every station.³

On the other hand, while Ratan Singh is a historical character, there is no historical evidence that the legendary Padmavati actually existed. She makes her first significant appearance in Jayasi's 1540 poem, written almost two and a half centuries after the 1303 siege of Chittor. Contemporaries like Khusrau do not mention her, even though Khusrau describes the siege of Chittor and the *Jauhar* at Ranthambhore in vivid detail in his text *Khaza'in ul-Futuh*. Nor do chroniclers who immediately followed in the 14th century, like Abdul Malik Isami, Ziauddin Barani, or Ibn Battuta, write about Padmavati. It was only after Jayasi's poem that the legend merged with chronicles of the past in the works of Persian historians like Firishta or Hajiuddabir and bards of Rajputana like Hemratan. The stories, oral and written, acquired a definitive modern textualization in the era of print capital in the hands of James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajas'than* (1829); thereafter it traveled to Bengal and entered nationalist discourse via figures like Kshirode Prasad Vidyavinode and Abanindranath Tagore. In its long career, the story takes many forms in various accounts from contesting parties across the centuries. In Firishta's work, it is not clear whether Padmavati was Ratan Singh's wife or daughter. In some texts Padmavati is not a proper name accorded to an individual person, but a signifier to designate an ensemble of exceptional feminine qualities. In Tod's version, Padmavati is married to Bhimsingha, the uncle of the ruler of Chittor, who is Laxmansingha, and Ratan Singh is nowhere to be found. In other tales, Ratan Singh is the younger brother of Laxman Singh, the Rawal of Chittor. He is, indeed, heroic most of the time, but in some other narratives he is also a weak and cowardly king who is captured and humiliated by Alauddin Khilji.⁴

There can also be other broader questions pertaining to the matter of Rajputs being presented as a homogenous ethno-religious "Hindu" identity. Perhaps the most important one would pertain to the historicity of Muslim Rajputs who, via formations like the Muzaffarid dynasty of Gujarat (15th and 16th centuries), also periodically fought against the Delhi Sultanate. These historical queries, nevertheless, are moot because the film does not claim to be historically accurate. However, even when it comes to fictional inspirations, the historian Baijayanti Roy (2018) has pointed out

³ See, for instance, Lal (1950) and Chandra (2007).

⁴ See Lal (1950, pp. 120–130). For a detailed study of Padmavati's many figurations, see Sreenivasan (2007).

that *Padmaavat* is much more faithful to the colonial, 19th-century enframing of the legend by Tod than to Jayasi's poem. In Jayasi's allegorical epic, it is Hiranman, a talking parrot, who tells Ratan Singh about Padmavati's beauty. The Rawal of Chittor sets out to win her hand and finally does so after crossing the seven seas and undergoing many adventures illustrative of the human condition, including a battle with Padmavati's father Gandharvasen. These adventures occupy a major part of the epic and Alauddin Khilji makes his appearance in the poem much later. Ratan Singh is killed not by the forces of the Sultanate, but in a battle with another Rajput prince, Devapala of Bhelnar. Padmavati and the women of Chittor perform *Jauhar*, and when the vainglorious Sultan finally reaches Chittor, he finds nothing there. Jayasi's Alauddin reflects on his futile quest and the nature of human desire. At the end, the poet declares that in his allegory, Chittor becomes the body, Ratan Singh the mind, the Island of Sinhala the heart, Padmavati human wisdom, and Khilji stands in for lust, which is *maya* or illusion. The sultan finally realizes that eternal wisdom can be obtained only through love and not by force.⁵ Roy points out that in subsequent renderings of the legend, especially in the Sisodia tales of Mewar collated by Tod, Devapala vanishes from the picture as does Nagmati, Ratan Singh's first wife. That is, just as, in Bhansali's film, Hiranman the talking parrot disappears along with the magical-mystical apparatus, and there is no Rajput rival called Devapala.

Padmaavat resolutely occupies a 19th-century vantage point of envisioning and reconstructing the past. Yet in departing from history and claiming the imaginative license for doing so, it also calls history itself to judgment. In a particular scene, when the siege of Chittor has just begun, Alauddin Khilji—in an act quite unconnected from events at play and tasks at hand—tears up certain historical documents, some written by Khusrau. "I am punishing that history that does not feature Alauddin's name. It is my desire that history remembers me, and me alone," he declares. Much later, during an exchange with Ratan Singh, Alauddin mocks the Rajput prince for his idealism, saying that there can be no ethics in love and war. Ratan Singh replies that wars won without ethics bring no glory but only make dark chapters in history. Alauddin declares impetuously that as victor, he will burn such histories. Ratan Singh retorts that all histories are not written on paper that can be burned. This assertion in the film has a wider resonance in the cultural realm where Hindutva fantasy and mythography are now being sacralized as memory. It was the thought of such a sacralized memory that prompted the Education Board in the state of Rajasthan—then ruled by the Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—to revise the standard ten history textbooks to declare that it was Maharana Pratap (who had to escape from the battlefield) and not the Mughal emperor Akbar who won the battle of Haldighati in 1576.⁶

Let us see how this logic of "history" is taken to its conclusion in the film. When the protracted climax begins with the duel of the two main male protagonists, the scene is intercut with Padmavati addressing the womenfolk of Chittor in the

⁵ See Roy (2018) and Lal (1950, pp. 120–130).

⁶ See, for instance, Kumar (2017).

interiors of the fort. In a steady and determined voice, she locates the conflict—an impending doom for the Rajputs in practical terms—in a different register of temporality. In doing so, she raises the ongoing event to a level of messianic time-reckoning that reframes the defeat in the here and now. She says that all ages have epochal conflicts between good and evil, like the one between Rama and Ravana in the Ramayana, or the great war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas in the Mahabharata. Chittor would triumph today because truth always triumphs and because Rajputs have always sacrificed themselves to protect the motherland and Dharma. At this point the film cuts away, with a sound bridge, to the site of the duel. Rawal Ratan Singh decisively wins the one-on-one battle with Alauddin Khilji, but just as he is about to dispatch the emperor at his mercy, Malik Kafur treacherously shoots arrows at him from behind and kills him. The outraged Rajputs attack the imperial army to meet their destiny. As the dying Ratan Singh lifts his head to catch a last glimpse of the sun, there is another sound bridge and a cut back to Padmavati who says that even if all Rajput soldiers bravely perished, the enemy would not win because there would be another battle to be fought by the women of Chittor. Padmavati invites her companions to join her in *Jauhar*, self-immolating themselves in the holy fire and thus defeating the lusty enemy by denying him even a shadow of their existence. Bodies will turn to ashes, but honor will remain immortal; that would be the greatest defeat of Alauddin's life.

What follows is an elaborately designed, spectacular lead up to the ritualistic mass suicide of the Rajput women, now dressed in bridal finery. It is choreographed by way of mannered movement in sync with operatic chanting that rises to a crescendo, and marked by rhythmic camera movements, and a geometric distribution of architectural forms, heights, and spaces set to a tempo by stylized editing and slow motion. The actions of the women led by Padmavati—including an expectant mother and an adolescent girl—are crosscut with Alauddin's desperate and wild run along the ramparts of the fort. At the end he is unable to catch even a glimpse of the legendary beauty and his "defeat" is complete. It is a defeat because within the parameters of the film, Alauddin's war is not politics pursued by other means, but only the bestial and the libidinal pursued by other means.

This chain of events and the finale is part of the overall design of the film as a passion play that internalizes the clutter of history into a different cosmology of justice. The film creates and heightens a Hindu *moral memory* to displace and indict history as that which is written by Islamic conquerors, that which is inherently corrupt, and that which says that Alauddin won the battle of Chittor. Instead, within the internalized moral cosmology of the operatic passion play, Alauddin, stripped off all historical markers of a political presence, is reduced to a cipher of Turko-Arabic pathology and perversion. As I have said earlier, this moral memory and its theodicy of justice are not features unique to this film; in recent times they have been industrialized in a particular Hindu nationalist cultural dispensation of contemporary India that I have called Hindutva 2.0.⁷ The film, accordingly, must

⁷ See Basu (2020, pp. 150–208; 2021, pp. 176–190).

willfully depart from history because it seeks to present a moral debt of Hindu *memory* that a perceived *history* of Hindu defeat and Hindu emasculation cannot remit.

Re-texturing the Past: Toward a Theory of the Contemporary Bollywood Historical in the Age of Hindutva 2.0

Padmaavat comes to us in a special diffusion environment of informational and affectional energies that may be called Hindutva 2.0. In present-day India, this ecology comes with media protocols, ritual values, spectacles, and powers of perception management; it becomes a chamber of resonances rather than a closed book of the world, cutting across various formations of mass culture like Bollywood, television, social media, consumerism, yoga, *vaastu*, astrology, herbal medicine, Disneyfied tourism, fashion, pop spiritualism, or artful living. In its exemplary forms, this urban and advertised sense of Hinduness is increasingly incipient, erotic, and neurological; it is meant to be felt in the pith and marrow of being. The ecology increasingly creates a metropolitan normal—an electrified commonsense—by which a caste Hindu urban existence becomes the only form of life worth living in a world in which both desire and precarity are democratized. In this ecosystem, the Hindu nation does not have to be narrated into being, it can simply be *advertised* in terms of distributed spectrality, spectacle, and embodied sensations. It is in this industrial realm of advertised energies that *Padmaavat* can present a moral memory that is not reliant on a classic modern narrational integrity based on historical truth or realism. The film becomes part of an abstracted choral effect of Hindutva 2.0 that tends to suffuse all touchpoints of metropolitan as well as traditional life of the nation, exiling or segregating Islamic forms of life, language, remembrance, or poesis from the same.⁸ It can do so in various propositional, aesthetic, or affective registers of the cinematic: fashion in attire and jewelry, architecture, interior decoration, cuisine, cleanliness, bestial and normal sexuality, rituals, music, dance, a purported ethnopsychology of Islam, and a Hindu spiritual appropriation of Buddhism.

Bhansali's film becomes part of an overall cultural *will to a Hindu past* that has become prominent in popular Indian film and media assemblages.⁹ This impulse includes long-standing generic forms like the historical epic (*Panipat*, Ashutosh Gowariker, 2019), Hindu fantasy/fairytale films like the deliriously successful films of S. S. Rajamouli's *Bahubali* franchise and a faux-historical like *Padmaavat*. The obsession with the bygone has acquired a critical breadth of ambition and application, lending its presentist and anticipatory energies to relatively new Bollywood templates of the period film that can take up a range of subjects from the Indian field hockey triumph at the London Olympics of 1948 to espionage or military achievements in the 1971 war with Pakistan or national technocratic achievements like the 1998 nuclear detonation in Pokhran. In such cases, there is a self-conscious ontological pull on the past as the origin of a singular, triumphalist present. The past, it seems, can no longer have a constellation of what Majumdar (2021) calls

⁸ See Bhaskar and Allen (2009).

⁹ See Basu (2010).

“forgotten futures”; rather it must submit its massive weight to a resurgent present marked by the Hindu Bomb, imminent superpowerdom, and visions of double-digit neoliberal growth.

Let me highlight three distinguishing features of the Bollywood neo-historical in this light. First of all, these films are pan-Indian and diasporic in scope now and not just regional. In earlier decades, Hindi cinema historicals were largely low-budget affairs, often in provincial languages.¹⁰ That is not the case with *Padmaavat* and other such sumptuously mounted contemporary spectaculars. The militarisms of the Rajputs and Marathas, often complexly intertwined and at odds with each other at different points in history, now come across as unified expressions of an uninterrupted national zeitgeist that, no matter what historians say, has been in place for millennia. The cinematically resurrected legend of Padmavati and the valiant Ratan Singh is thereby automatically inducted into an expanding pantheon of the neo-Hindu memorialization project that seeks to recruit proto-modern Hindu “freedom fighters” like the 17th-century Ahom general Lachit Borphukan who fought the Mughals, or Uyyalawada Narasimha Reddy (1806–1847) from present-day Andhra Pradesh, who fought the East India Company¹¹. These relatively obscure figures—now amplified to mythic status—join better known stalwarts like Peshwa Baji Rao I (1700–1740) and Sadashivrao Bhau (1730–1761) to potentially create a “Manhattan effect” in the skyline of a monumentalized nationalist mythography. This expansive cultural project seems designed to saturate an industrial realm of memory and fill up blank spaces in Hindu time reckoning. That is, to dispel the idea that it was only a few figures like Maharana Pratap of Rajputana (1540–1597) or Chatrapati Shivaji of the Marathas (1630–1680) that stood up to the Mughals and other Muslim conquerors on behalf of the otherwise meek and emasculated Hindus. The new hagiography presents an uninterrupted temporal as well as territorial continuum of righteous and masculine caste Hindu valor against Islamic trickery, betrayal, and tyranny. In other words, the battle for Indian/Hindu freedom did not begin with the consolidation of a nationalistic consciousness in the late 19th century carried forward by figures like Gandhi and Nehru, culminating in the decolonization of 1947. Rather, it began with the second battle of Tarain in 1192 when the Ghurid forces of Muhammad Ghuri defeated the Rajput confederacy led by Prithviraj Chauhan, leading to the establishment of Muslim rule in North India. The Hindu battle for freedom and “nationalist” recognition has thus continued relentlessly for eight centuries and Chittor’s battle against Khilji at the dawn of the 14th century was a part of that. In the Hindutva providential imagination, that struggle can end only with the cultural and political reinstitution of a pure Hindu India absolved of all civilizational imprints of Islam.

The second distinguishing feature of contemporary Bollywood historical film is that along with the monumental, it attempts to consolidate the picture of what Nietzsche would call an antiquarian Hindu historicism. This is done by constructing a sumptuously decorative high Hindu cine heritagism—exactly the

¹⁰ See Mukhopadhyay (2013).

¹¹ See Agarwala (2021); a film on Narsimha Reddy was made in 2019.

kind seen in *Padmaavat*—suffused with rich ceremonials, mannered movement and speech, and hierarchical protocols of customary caste behavior. Like all modern constructions of a Hindu Being, this one too is centered on the primary imagination of the Savarna woman as civilizational artwork that either needs militant Hindu protection or *Jauhar*-like Dharmic deliverance from the bestial lust of the Muslim invader. The overall schizophrenic historical scenario is fortified by the import of alluring objects, outlandish military tactics, and exotic animals mythical or foreign. It is in this light that we can locate the spectacular ostrich in *Padmaavat*, the Aryan horse and the unicorn in *Mohen-jo-daro* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2016), or the African tusker elephants, chess with live human pieces, a gigantic cannon, and Ninja-like stealth war that decorate the setting of *Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior* (Om Raut, 2020).

Thirdly, digital technology offers a breathtakingly expanded bandwidth of cinematic visualization to contemporary Bollywood, something that was once denied to filmmakers of the Global South. In an earlier, analogue dispensation of cinema, it was only Hollywood that could plausibly part the Red Sea. Today, digital Bollywood can mount the titanic battles of the Indian epics. The digital accords augmented affectional powers and qualities to the image to not just *re-textualize* the past, but to re-canvas and *re-texture* it. As Manovich (2001) put it two decades ago, cinema has now been absorbed into animation in the age of New Media, in which “Synthetic computer-generated imagery is not an inferior representation of our reality, but a realistic representation of a different reality” (p. 202). Space can now be modeled in 3-D animation and characters then “rendered” into space. Computers fill in movements pertinent to “animatable” capacities of models, with the whole process smoothed by image compositing, blending, and retouching. The digital offers enhanced, micropunctual grading options when it comes to light, transforming luminosity itself into malleable “clay.” Face and body motion capture programs like Bespoke, animatronic technologies, digital rotoscoping, key frame animation, vertical editing, crowd-building software, and fractal landscapes animate, invent, or radically transform an old, analogue relationship between camera and the world. Composition tools like the Inferno allow manipulation of backgrounds and details within a frame, with the frame itself populated by digitally animated 2-D and 3-D objects with liveliness, stochastic powers, and unique gravitations of their own. Dolby-Digital, FHX, and other technologies offer an acute, burrowing intensity of sound that is felt and not just heard.¹² Drone technologies facilitate what Whissel (2006) calls the new verticality of 21st-century action cinema, offering commanding heights, cosmic sweeps, and breathtaking powers of ascent and descent that are, of course, beyond the capacities of industrial aerial photography that had begun when D. W. Griffith filmed the battle scenes in *Birth of a Nation* (1915) on hot-air balloons.

It is under this much augmented and varied 21st-century techno-imagistic horizon that contemporary Bollywood historical film and the operatic chambering of the passion play in *Padmavaat* must be located. The historical landscape here is

¹² See, for instance, Jenkins (2014), Purse (2013), and Eliot (2014).

imaged in a realm of possibilities where the sword might be real, but its glint digitally imposed and the aural swish accentuated or otherworldly. The gush of blood can be calibrated in accordance with an overall balletic choreography of fast and slow motion; the desert as setting might be an actual one transformed by coloration while the swirling dust might be entirely virtual. Digital sparks and a golden luminosity greet queen Padmavati as she approaches the fire to immolate herself. All objects, bodies, spaces, and the elements great and small, from grains of grass to gathering thunderclouds may likewise be imbued with epic animations, strange gravitations, strong musculatures, and otherworldly lusters. This is how mythic remembrances become tactile, voluptuous, and resonant. The cumulative and operatic effect that we see in *Padmaavat* is a graphic and hardcore version of what Sobchack (1995), more than a quarter century ago, likened to a carnal experience of history in film.

The digital image, therefore, allows the monumentalization of valor beyond betrayal, defeat, and death. At one point in the film Rawal Ratan Singh reminds his loyal but deeply worried general Gora Singh about the virtues of the Rajput. The Rajput is the one who keeps all worries at the tip of his sword. He is the one who warms his moustache while walking over embers and fights the stormy sea in a flimsy boat; he is, all in all, “The one whose beheaded carcass continues to fight the enemy.” Later, this metaphorical construct is literalized in the film, at the level of the graphic rather than that of the realistic. The valiant Gora Singh and a small contingent of Rajput soldiers fight the Sultanate army to the death to give Ratan Singh the chance to escape from captivity. After a great battle against impossible odds, Gora is decapitated from behind, as per standard depictions of Muslim treachery. His headless, tottering carcass, however, continues to wield his sword for quite a few moments.

Orientalism

The feelings of disaffection, fear, and abomination toward Islam that we see in contemporary Bollywood historicals come from a range of sources—a long-standing Orientalist cast of modern Indian historical thinking as well as from a global Islamophobia after 9/11. One can think of a deeper genealogy of Hindu nationalism that begins with the late 18th-century Indological invention of “Hinduism” as a *religion*¹³ in the modern anthropological sense and proceeds with an Orientalist modernization that identifies a Hindu people, as a demographic and eventually an apex political identity. Hindu nationalists of the early 20th-century readily embraced this Christological self-construction by which for there to be an organismic Hindu nation, there had to be a “Semitic Hinduism” or a secular equivalent of that in Hindutva as political monotheism. That would mean compressing immense, eclectic varieties of polytheistic, henotheistic, monist, theistic, pantheistic, atheistic, or animist pieties involving a pantheon of 330 million gods into a singular edifice

¹³ That is, in a core etymological root-sense of the word, as *reliq*, or that which binds and relegates. “Religion,” in that sense, as Asad (1993) has shown, was constructed as an anthropological category within the parameters of European secular introspection and the modern expansion of empire. See Asad (1993, pp. 27–54).

of faith headed by alpha figures like Rama or Krishna. Parallel to this would be the construction of Islam as the other homogenous political religion and the Muslims as a different people and nation.¹⁴

The crucial point here is that the construction of Hindutva as political monotheism is indistinguishable from the metafiguration of Islam as competing political monotheism in South Asia. In hard Hindu nationalist discourse, the immense varieties of Islamic piety, philosophy, poesis, and culture in the subcontinent are increasingly compressed into a singular, totalized specter of pathological terror as opposed to the Hindu sublime.¹⁵ The majority of Muslims in the subcontinent have been Sunnis following the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, but then there have been Shias, early Qarmatian groups and their remnants, the eclectic Sufi spread from Sind to Bengal, the Ahmadiyyas who recognize a final prophet succeeding Muhammad, the Dawoodi Bohras, Khojas and other Ismailites, the Navayats of Konkan, the Mappilas of Malabar, the Kayam Khanis of Rajasthan, and dozens of faiths that reside between Hindu and Muslim orthodoxies.

Historically, royalist Islam in India—from Khilji's Delhi Sultanate to the Mughal dynasty—has always been afflicted by tensions between the orthodoxy of a Sunni clergy (*Sharia*) and the popular mysticism of the Sufis (*Tariqa*) or radical disavowals of all earthly authorities by Ismailis or Qarmatians. With the advent of the Chisti, Suhrawardi, and Firdausi sects between the 12th and 15th centuries, it was the many *Sufianas* of Khusrau or Jayasi that emerged as the prime missionary force of Islam in the subcontinent. Later ones like the Sattari, the Quadiri, or the Naqshbandi, impelled by the pantheism of the Andalusian scholar and mystic Ibn-Arabi (1165–1240), entered richly syncretic and vernacular commerce with Hindu devotional sects. Active in the Punjab, they would contribute to an affective universe that would birth, among other things, the Indic monotheism of Sikhism.¹⁶ All in all, Ahmad (1981) has postulated three registers of Islamic practice in India. The first would be marked by traditional scriptural governance of a pan-Islamic kind; the second set by local, customary deviations in religious behavior, including birth or death rituals or popular celebrations of Muharram; the third would unfold to an eclectic cosmology, including Muslim saints, Hindu gods, and a vast spectrum of beliefs pertaining to deliverance from disease, famine, misfortune, or malevolent spirits.

The Hindu nationalist construction of a spectral Islam as the jealous 'other nation' must paper over these immense varieties. This mode of Hindutva historicism

¹⁴ See Basu (2020) for an elaboration.

¹⁵ See Khan (2021) and Jalal (2008). Jalal points out that modern reckonings of Islam are overdetermined by Arabic culture, even though some of the key innovations of early modern and modern Islamic thought have taken place in the subcontinent, which is home to more than a third of the total world Muslim population. Among other important distinctions, South Asian Islam never severed its connections with the mystical Sufi traditions based on the ethical writings of Ibn Miskawayh (11th century), Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111), and the poetry of Jallaluddin Rumi (1207–1273). The *Wujudi* line of thinking entered into intellectual and devotional commerce with the Bhakti traditions as well as formations like Kashmiri Tantrism. See Ricci (2011) for an account of the cultural and linguistic mutations involved in Islam's move from an Arabic world to the east and the south. For a comparative analysis of Hindu and Muslim nationalisms in the subcontinent, see van der Veer (1994).

¹⁶ See, for instance, Brunner and Lelyveld, (1988).

is scrupulously borrowed from the colonial framework of James Mill (1773–1836)¹⁷, it is marked by an abiding fixation about Aryanism, Sanskrit, and a defense of caste on those lines inspired by Friedrich Max Muller (1823–1900), and a set of 19th-century European preoccupations about the rise and fall of civilizations and racial degeneration. It is in this context that it may be hypothesized that the aesthetics of coloration, architecture, attire, or light and dark that separate the Hindu and Muslim worlds in *Padmaavat* have a built-in race imaginary that has been central to the 19th-century construction of Hindu genesis. The splendor of the golden Hindu couple in the film is, in essence, an Aryan one, in stark contradistinction to the figuration of Allauddin Khilji as pathological Turko-Arabic usurper. The “Aryans” were not a “race” in the modern bio-political sense; they were an assorted linguistic group speaking what has been variously identified as Indo-European languages. But the Aryans did become a “race” from the mid-19th century, within the auspices of a certain form of Orientalist Indology.¹⁸ They became so within the auspices of a wider epistemological turn, in which a xenological scientism of race after Darwin—the scientific racism of Arthur De Gobineau or Robert Knox, including Social Darwinism, or craniology and phrenology—replaced religion, culture, or civilization as the index of colonial difference.¹⁹

Roy (2016) has pointed out that early in his career, in 1847, Max Muller’s romantic Orientalist scholarship, compounded with his Lutheran faith, prompted him to float the Aryan Invasion Theory. The Aryans, according to him, had conquered dark-skinned savages and settled in India, forming a magnificent civilization that subsequently declined due to miscegenation and the tropical climate. The ongoing Victorian rule was, therefore, a resumption of Aryan civilizational activities in South Asia after the dark Islamic interregnum. Caste, for Max Muller, was the defining criterion to select an Indian elite to be differentially included, as lesser cousins, in a reconstituted modern spiritual aristocracy of the Aryan family. The task for Max Muller’s ethnological philology and Protestant vision was therefore to valorize an abstracted Vedic Monotheistic Brahminism and the social order it advocated. Roy connects this vision to a German 19th-century project to trace its people’s Teutonic ancestry to Vedic/Indo-German/Indo-Aryan civilizational roots that were older than the Greco-Roman and the Judeo-Christian.²⁰ In later decades, racial anthropology took over the Aryan question from philology.

This postulate of deep Aryan origins of the Hindu draws from a mid-19th-century climate of romantic Orientalism, Neo-Platonism, and a general swarm of antinomian energies that touched Nietzsche and inspired Theosophists like

¹⁷ I allude to the periodization logic that proposes an ancient golden age of the Hindus followed by the dark “middle-ages” of Islamic rule and then a renaissance of the Indian civilizational self under British colonial tutelage in Mill’s *The History of British India* in 3 volumes (1818).

¹⁸ See, for instance, Trautmann (1997), Robb (1995), van der Veer (2001), Ramaswamy (2001), Jaffrelot (2010, pp. 123–143).

¹⁹ See van der Veer (2001, pp. 145–150).

²⁰ For a good part, this casting of the Rg Veda as the original Aryan Bible untainted by Semitics also entailed issues of race and ethnicity that went in the direction of appropriating the Aryan discourse by jettisoning the Indian from it.

Madame Blavatsky (1831–1891). The world itself was Hindu in the beginning and the Aryans were the root race with a universal monotheme. It was the Aryans, Blavatsky had declared, who had gone to Egypt and built the Sphinx and the pyramids.²¹ Her antinomian assertion was within a greater tradition, including now relatively obscure works like Edward Pococke’s *India in Greece* (1856) or James Francis Hewitt’s two volume *Primitive Traditional History* (1907). The vision of Aryan/Hindu colonization of the world was readily carried forward in the Indian nationalist discourse, from Dayanand Saraswati’s *Satyarth Prakash* (1875) to Har Bilas Sarda’s *The Hindu Superiority* (1906) and beyond. This impulse deeply influenced the general pattern of modern Indian self-reckoning; it can be found not just in Hindu nationalism, but also in figures like Gandhi and Nehru.

Hindutva ideology, which began by selectively borrowing institutional forms, race mythologies, and providential enthusiasms from European fascism, imbued religious difference with the dimension of race. Early Hindu nationalists from B. G. Tilak (1856–1920) to V. D. Savarkar (1883–1966) subscribed to the Aryan Invasion or the Aryan Migration Theory, but in recent decades, this has been replaced by the “Out of India” thesis with increasing volubility and programmatic vigor. This may be described as a double shift Orientalism. In the first move, what is disavowed is the general contempt of Western Aryanism (Hitler and the Third Reich included) toward the Hindus as a degenerate, impure, lost, and fallen branch of the original race. Instead, in Hindutva mythic imagination, India becomes the cradle of the master race, and the font of human civilization. This providential narrative comes with a double bind of time, bookended between past glory and imminent restoration of India’s status as *Vishwaguru*, teacher of the world. Such worldly ambitions apart, the discourse of Aryanism also variously justifies the “science” and necessity of caste hierarchy, endosmosis, and institutes a naturalized superiority of the Aryan north over the Dravidian south, which would include Padmavati’s Sinhala.

In that case, how can this peculiar race imagination exclude the Afghan-born Allauddin Khilji from the legacy of the Aryan? After all, in standard Hindutva discourse, ancient Afghanistan was eminently a part of “Greater India” or *Akhand Bharat*. The Kandahar province was known as Gandhar in ancient times and the Mahabharata’s Gandhari—queen of the Kuru clan and the mother of a hundred Kaurava princes—hailed from there, as did other important characters of the epic like Shakuni and Shalya. According to this discourse, the great error that the Aryans of ancient Afghanistan made was to abandon the Hindu religion and turn toward Buddhism. That destroyed their war-like qualities and the country eventually fell to Islam.²² The exclusion of Khilji from the Aryan inheritance has to do with the second move of double shift Orientalism. The cinematic Allauddin Khilji becomes the other not just because he is a Muslim, *but because he is therefore, in essence, a Semite* in an Orientalist perception marked by confused essences. In becoming Muslim, the Afghan loses his Aryanness because he is seen to be gripped, body and soul, by a

²¹ See Blavatsky (1977), especially chapter 14.

²² See, for instance, Golwalkar (1966, pp. 81–83), Hindutva ideologue and second supremo of the right-wing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

Turko-Arabic pathology. This pertains to an often-overlooked division along racial lines in greater Orientalist discourse Said (1979) points to in his magisterial study. It is the distinction between the “lower orient” of *l’empire du Levant*, which came into being with Herodotus and Alexander, and of which T. E. Lawrence wanted to declare himself prophet, and the “higher” golden Orient of Schlegel, one that had produced the Upanishads, the Avesta, and Sakuntala. The former belongs to the Semite, while the latter to the Aryan.

Said (1979) points out that in the broad trajectory of Orientalist discourse from Dante or Marlowe of the Renaissance to Silvestre de Sacy and Ernest Renan in the 19th century, or H. A. R. Gibbs, Louis Massignon, and Bernard Lewis of the 20th, there were certain commonalities in the overall Western perception of Islam and the Turko-Arab world. In the extreme end, Islam was a fraudulent version of Christianity, or an eastern heresy with Mohammed as the debauch interloper replacing Christ as analogue in Mohammedanism. Later, in the hands of Massignon, for instance, it would become the religion of Ishmael in biblical terms, the monotheism of people excluded from the divine promise made to Isaac (Said, 1979, pp. 267–268). Islam, therefore, could be understood as a creed of juvenile resistance to the father; it was a political instrument rather than an authentic religion, and the Koran and the Hadith, accordingly, were sufficient to explain all phenomena in all Arabic societies. Islam was totalizing and a violent cultural synthesis, a race as well as a psychological impelling that gripped all aspects of human life and imagination.

This sociology of Islam becomes synonymous with the ethnology of Arabia en tout. Islam was a recalcitrant expression emerging from the barrenness and intolerance of the circumcised heart to which God could present himself only as a void. This same Arab mind and heart had inherited the philosophical legacy of Greece without knowing what to do with it. Christianity was born among the Semites, but it was in Europe that it flourished (along with the gradual whitening of Jesus). The Arabs, in that sense, were merely “Jews on horseback” (Said, 1979, p. 102). In the depths of the Orientalist vision that we see in Bhansali’s film, *Khilji*, the invader of the Aryan world, is, in essence, a Semite with a hooked nose. He is despotic and sensual, fundamentally incapable of peaceful commerce or economic rationalism. *Khilji*’s empire and his sovereignty in *Padmaavat*, almost unconsciously following a Renanian ethnological imperative, is reduced to “tent and tribe” at every step (p. 105). He is also the fascinating, exotic Flaubertian figure of bizarre jouissance, his life and society a veritable tableau of queerness and sensuousness driven by pure instinct. *Khilji*’s habitat is a world of exotic objects, sadomasochism, macabre movements of passion and cruelty, conspiracies, and of harems, veils, and eunuchs. It is one of ill-breeding, carnivorousness, alcohol, coarse textures, and bad hygiene. Within this Orientalist framework, the difference between the ethical love of the golden Rajput couple and the Turkish lust of Allauddin *Khilji* becomes analogous to that between mind and flesh, between St. John and Salome, or between St. Anthony and Salammbo (Said, 1979, p. 180).

In Said’s (1979) elaboration, the self-other relation is much more complicated and takes a mitigated form when it comes to major Orientalist evaluations of the Aryan world eastward from Persia. The vision is still patronizing and imperial, but with key differences. A critical comparison between present abject condition

of Iranians or Indians and their glorious pasts could be variously attributed to Islamization or Islamic conquest, racial degeneration, or the birth of otherworldly or pacific systems like Buddhism. However, in the Orient—which, till the 19th century, meant only India and the Bible lands—the lapsed Aryans of the far side were viewed much more favorably than the Semites of the Levant. For the German romantics, the “Indian religion” was essentially an Oriental version of German-Christian pantheism. The Bhagwad Gita, for example, could be understood as *preparatio evangelica*—an expression of natural religion that helps a vast chunk of humanity approximate the wisdom of Christ through the conduit of Krishna, much like the way the pagan works of Plato or Virgil anticipated Christian reason. The German intellectual Franz Lorinser, in his 1869 translation, would say that the Hindu book was not just derived but partly plagiarized from the New Testament. At its best, the “good Orient” of the East—not so much its present decadence and idolatry, but its ancient treasures unearthed by Europeans—could be a spiritual cure for the materialism and avarice of the West.²³

To sum up, the double shift Orientalism of Hindutva proceeds as follows. In the first move, it turns the European Orientalist claim on the Aryan orient on its head. It was not the tutelage of the colonial modern, but a revival of the original Hindu genius that would restore authentic Aryanism and India’s natural preeminent position in the world. Hindu India could certainly draw on the material and scientific paraphernalia of the West, but only as gross instruments for an entirely different reason and spirit. It was only the new Hindu who could lead the world toward a final humanization of nature and prevent capital and technology from becoming cold monstrosities.²⁴ In the second move, Hindu nationalist discourse aggressively constructs the contemporary specter of Islam in the racist terms of a 19th-century Orientalist determination of the Semite, assembling it with images and sensations of a present-day global Islamophobia. The figure of the Muslim therefore always, essentially, remains a “Mohammedan” of an imputed Turko-Arabic pathology, temporally locked out of modernity, exiled from a Persianate culture and ecumene, and incapable of participation in civil society and a civilization redefining itself in terms of original Aryan inspirations. What is elided in this globalizing process across temporal and spatial imaginations are the many eclectic varieties of Islamic culture and their massive populations in South Asia, East Asia up to the Pacific rim, or in sub-Saharan Africa that dwarf those of West Asia. The Muslim in *Padmavaat* and other films of its ilk, therefore, remains a perpetual outsider and invader in relation to the subcontinent, with the cinematic bestiality of Khilji overwhelming, obscuring, and literally burning the historical poesis, Sufi mysticism, music, and the chronicles of Amir Khusrau.

Said (1979) reminded us of the strength and resilience of Orientalist

²³ See Basu (2021, pp. 93–95). For a monumental study of the modern career of the Bhagwad Gita, see Bandyopadhyay (2016).

²⁴ There was also always a schizophrenic side to this revivalism that was not entirely satisfied with the spiritual East-material West dialectic. Right from the beginning sections of the Hindu right also claimed that the purported Hindu golden age had achieved (and lost due to the great Islamic derailment) all the wonders of modern science and technology; from 19th-century Darwinism to present day aviation and nuclear power.

discourse and its contagious powers as a wide “battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections” (p. 8). Decades after decolonization and the formation of independent nation-states in the Global South, Orientalism retains its grip on forms of contemporary consciousness and memory. It continues to invent primal identities and put in place primal distinctions between identities, especially in the age of a purported “clash of civilizations.” Writing about three decades after the Holocaust and about a decade since the assassination of Dr. King, Said had noted in 1978 that while it was no longer fashionable to write on the “negro mind” or the “Jewish personality,” it was still possible to invoke the “Islamic mind” or the “Arab Character” in the bureaucratized language of peace management, or in anthropologies of security or foreign policy (p. 262). Today it is quite clear that the increasingly Hindu majoritarian India of the present wishes to enter this clash of civilizations and place itself in an international continuum of power stretching from Washington to Tel Aviv. In accordance with that, dominant representational and affectional machineries of Hindutva 2.0 and films like *Padmaavat*, with varying degrees of sophistication and cultic rawness, newly weaponize the old Islamophobic stereotypes of Orientalism. In the process, the contemporary film and media environment does exactly what Said had cautioned formerly colonized people about “the dangers and temptations of employing this structure upon themselves or upon others” (p. 25).

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Book Reviews

Islamic Ethics and Female Volunteering: Committing to Society, Committing to God

Kayikci, M. R. (2020). *Islamic Ethics and Female Volunteering: Committing to Society, Committing to God*. Springer.

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What do you do when you are inundated by questions about whether you can be trusted with European values, whether your loyalty to your religion is more than that toward Europe? Or, what if you evoke debate simply because of what you wear? This is the bind many of Europe's Muslims find themselves in. To navigate these tensions, some Muslims root their contemporary sense of being and belonging in the past—narrating tales of how their identities were forged *in* and *of* Europe (Hussain, 2021). But what of the present? How might European Muslims find a middle ground and negotiate how they experience religion in the public sphere today? This is the subject of Merve Reyhan Kayikci's book *Islamic Ethics and Female Volunteering: Committing to Society, Committing to God*.

At a time when there is an “ongoing and never-ending debate” about the compatibility of Islam with European values (p. 4), Kayikci's book provides refreshing insight into the everyday lives of a group of Muslim women volunteering in Brussels and Antwerp. These women use volunteering—conceived as a modern, liberal, and secular sphere of activity—to fit in and counter the label of “orthodoxy” often imposed on their community. What makes this book a necessary read is its focus on the everydayness of Muslim lives, instead of dealing only in binaries between the “good liberal individualistic European Muslim” and the “bad traditionalist extreme Muslim.”

The introductory chapters take a deep dive into Turkish associations active in Europe and the controversies surrounding Islam and Muslims on the continent, interlacing both with specific lived experiences from the volunteers themselves—most of whom are of Turkish descent and children of labor migrants. This is done in a way that makes historic incidents or events more relatable to the present. For example, Asli, who volunteers in Antwerp, started wearing a headscarf and nearly all her colleagues and boss were critical of her. She says, “The audience of the Good Muslim is not just God, but the whole public” (p. 221). This conscious tension of what it means to *be a Muslim* in Europe runs throughout the book, albeit implicitly. Each chapter engages with various ways in which Muslim subjects are in constant conversation with two traditions—the liberal secular order and tradition of ethics and the supposedly non-liberal Islamic tradition of ethics.

In the existing literature, the author points out that volunteering is looked at as “a secularized modern institution,” based on the impulse to *do good*. Even when Christian churches are involved, the form and content of volunteering remains “secular” (p. 3). The work these volunteers do—such as baking goods and cakes, raising money for charitable programs—is the same as other volunteer organizations, contributing to multiple publics and holding up a common, shared civil society ideal. However, Muslim voluntary activity consciously breaks away from the “liberal” and “secular” definition of volunteering (p. 3) in two respects: first, these women do not look at volunteering as a timeline-based project, but a lifelong endeavor of feeling responsible. Second, while the form and content of their work is secular—in that it contributes to shared spheres of Belgian public life—these women volunteer for *razay-e-ilahi*, or God’s consent.

Volunteers Kayikci profiles try to embrace their religion in a way that is “compatible,” or that merges, with broader Belgian society “peacefully.” As one of Kayikci’s volunteers says: “The Belgians do not want or need you to be better Muslims at the end of the day. They want you to be integrated. This way (by volunteering), we can do both” (p. 78). Each of the women profiled in Kayikci’s book identifies as a devout and pious Muslim, wearing visible markers of the religion, such as a headscarf. For most, the headscarf has created tensions in their social engagements at work, their children’s schools, or in their own education. Volunteering, in a way, has provided a space where they can confront these tensions on their own terms. They wear their religion on their sleeves while engaging and helping their community with utmost “goodness, kindness, altruism and forgiveness” (p. 224) in such a way that their presence, and by that extension, their headscarf, is no longer “contentious,” Kayikci argues (p. 313). Thus, not only are they working on issues for social betterment, but also on their public image *as Muslims*.

With that said, Kayikci’s interlocutors consciously do not organize events that explicitly reference Islam or are held in an Islamic setting like a mosque. For them, *ibaada* (personal worship) and volunteering are complimentary, in the sense that a good Muslim is one who sincerely does her *ibaada* and at the same time is committed to responsibilities to greater society. To experience religion in a more unrestricted way, to do *ibaada*, they hold their own “discussion groups,” called *sohbet*. *Sohbet*, which means conversation in Turkish, are spaces where these women come together to discuss a predetermined subject from the Quran, Hadith, a sermon video, or texts featuring Quranic commentary or jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The aim is to work on “self-making in the pious trajectory” (p. 75), which can be understood through the words of another volunteer Meral: “... being respectful and compassionate ... not teasing and making fun of the other ... not breaking another person’s heart, not calling them names or reprimanding them ... tahkiki iman (true piety) lies in sorority,” she said. The practice of the other half—volunteering—is what fulfills their sense of duty to society as a whole.

While their efforts will be perceived as “modern” by European secular logics and thus, more acceptable to Belgians and Europeans at large, perhaps showing Islam in a “good” light, what is also noteworthy is the burden of proof these volunteers must carry while living in Europe. As long as they are willing to leave behind their religious traditions and pick and choose those that are “compatible,”

they will stand a chance to survive. As the author says, “the question is how to make sure that Muslims are a certain kind of Muslim—one who lives in a way that is loyal to Europe and its values.”

The above stories and analysis are augmented by Kayikci’s succinct and non-jargony prose. The book also does a good job in making Islamic values and Muslim vocabulary, terms like *zakat*, *sadaqa*, and *sadaqai jaariya* (the three forms of giving in Islam) and *rizk* (God’s allocation of resources), more accessible to a non-Muslim audience, which in turn invites a wider section of society into new ways of thinking about voluntary practices and perspectives.

Altogether, Kayikci’s monograph does well exploring the ambiguities and tensions of the Muslim lives she profiles, disturbing and upending simplistic narratives about what it means to be a European Muslim. Considering how giving to the needy is an important part of Islamic tradition, this aspect should be interrogated in a sustained manner that highlights the role Muslim philanthropy plays in civil society. Such research will be more reflective of the Muslims than the often reiterated “West and the Muslim rest” (Phillips, 2009) narrative. Kayikci’s work is a vital step in the right direction and can act as an example of what might be interrogated in other contexts across the globe.

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Charity in Saudi Arabia: Civil Society under Authoritarianism

Derbal, N. (2022). *Charity in Saudi Arabia: Civil Society under Authoritarianism*. Cambridge University Press

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In *Charity in Saudi Arabia*, Nora Derbal challenges the existing literature on Saudi Arabia's civil society, giving space and voice to some of its more underappreciated actors. The book includes a mix of personal experiences, ethnographic observation, and detailed descriptions of four civil society organizations (CSOs) and their evolution from 2009 to 2020. In the aftermath of the 2009 flood in Jeddah, the author observed how individuals, organizations, and other civil society actors managed the response to a natural disaster beyond the state's interventions, focusing on how religious values and charity are intertwined with everyday piety in an authoritarian state. Jeddah offers a particularly interesting case due to its multicultural nature and its link with pilgrimage for Muslims at large.

Derbal illustrates the everyday rhythms of CSOs in Saudi Arabia and their charitable activities beyond Islam, authoritarianism, and the nation-state—even if the latter continue to influence CSOs' activities and behaviors. She wrote, "Whereas the Saudi nation-state frames welfare as a privilege of citizenship, many charities continue to assist Saudi Arabia's poor and needy in disregard of their nationality" (p. 21). Since the welfare system is based on citizenship, and 41.6% is made up of non-Saudis, it becomes evident that a large part of the population is excluded from government assistance (GMI Blogger, 2023). Furthermore, a contradiction appears between the concepts of nation-state welfare and Islamic solidarity. Islamic solidarity, the author claims, is a universal concept with transnational elements that go beyond the concept of nation, sovereignty, and citizenship. Vision 2030 does not solve this problem but emphasizes it. Saudi Vision 2030, launched in 2016, represents the attempt to reform the country around three main objectives: a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, n.d.). In this socioeconomic strategy, human development is stressed as an individual responsibility, removing the role of the state from structural interventions on behalf of the poor. Therefore, charity becomes an "act of citizenship" (p. 298) and a needed form of compensation to avoid marginalization for the population's most vulnerable.

Derbal's ethnographic participant observation in Saudi Arabia from 2009 to 2020 gives the reader the opportunity to understand the evolution of society across a timespan that included important events within and outside the Kingdom, such as the Arab Spring, Vision 2030, and the new NGO law in 2015—the latter changing the status of the 734 welfare associations and charities into NGOs.

The book is divided into six chapters, four of which focus on different case studies. In the first chapter, the author explains how such a bottom-up observation of

CSOs challenges predominant academic views that frame rentierism, Islamism, and tribalism as the main dominant forces shaping the social paradigm in Saudi Arabia. The second chapter is dedicated to the First Women's Welfare Association in Jeddah launched in the name of "cultural progress" in the early 1960s. The religious norms within the organization became a way to attract donors and religious donations (*zakat* and *awqaf*), while a female organization allows women to be more active in social activities. In the third chapter, the author describes the Society of Majid bin 'Abd al-'Aziz for Development and Social Services, situating the organization's mission in terms of development instead of charity.

The concept of development in the Islamic view is concerned with growth toward perfection through the purification of attitudes and relationships (Ahmad, 1994). Therefore, the Islamic approach to development could be said to be comprehensive, including moral, spiritual, and material dimensions. According to Kusuma (2010), it is possible to describe the characteristics of Islamic development as follows: (a) Islamic development includes moral norms, values, spiritual, and material aspects; (b) Islamic development is a value-oriented activity and has the aim to empower the role of the human being in all dimensions of life to reach *falah* both in this world and in the hereafter; and (c) the focus of Islamic development is human development. The intent is to shift the attention from the physical context and structures to the individual who is considered the vicegerent of God and who has several duties to conduct from an economic development perspective. The idea of development elaborated by the Majid Society parallels the Islamic concept as outlined above, but places more stress on contribution to national growth, according to Derbal. Development, as described by the organization, is a "mindset that enables people to achieve a life of dignity and contributes to the flourishing of the nation" (p. 141). For this reason, this organization opposes the concept of charity and dependency culture perpetrated by welfare organizations and the State itself, which legitimizes poverty as a natural condition. Derbal's discussion and empirical evidence on the structural origins of poverty in Saudi Arabia are useful for understanding the entire framework in the country.

The Youth Initiative Group (YIG) described in chapter four illustrates the evolution and changes of volunteer organizations before and after 2015. In contrast to the other two organizations, the YIG is an example of informal civil society in Saudi Arabia. When King Salman ascended the throne in 2015, his government decided to recognize youth as the core of his political agenda. However, this recognition implied a loss of freedom by youth volunteering organizations, with an increase in regulation and surveillance. Despite its popularity and international recognition, in 2016 the YIG closed due to external, unidentified criticism and the interventions of authorities against the group activities. The most interesting aspect of the YIG case is how it challenges Saudi Arabia's welfare concept. As explained by Derbal, the concept of welfare in the Kingdom has been related to citizenship since the introduction of the state-sponsored welfare programs in 2016 available only for Saudi nationals. In this chapter, the author highlights an understudied Saudi reality. Undocumented migrants in Saudi Arabia are normally excluded from social services, protection, and the health system. However, the YIG included them as beneficiaries in the "YIG family." The YIG practices were rooted in Islamic

charitable values, and for this reason, the inclusion of non-citizens in its programs was legitimized by the concept of social justice and redistribution of wealth to the poor and the needy, regardless of their nationality.

With the last case study, the author explores the concept of fun as an aspect of a civil society organization in Saudi Arabia as well as the link between the “exercise of freedom” and charity. “The Hikers” promote outdoor activities to inspire individuals toward active citizenship. Thus, as Derbal argues, it represents a challenge to preexisting Saudi sociopolitical norms and the rigid Islamic morality adopted by clerics. However, Vision 2030 and the new image of Saudi Arabia promoted by the government have “normalized” the organization’s activities.

This last aspect is related to Derbal’s most significant contribution in this book, principally, the deep contradiction created by the government’s vision for a “new Saudi Arabia.” Derbal writes: “The government has justified the oppression and the disrespect of basic civil rights by arguing that it is safeguarding new freedoms granted by the government-driven sociopolitical reform course” (p. 291). Therefore, the question arises, do the more things change, the more they remain the same? This bottom-up analysis of Saudi CSOs and charitable practices under authoritarianism demonstrates that these organizations have, despite YIG’s closure, shown resilience in the face of different political transformations in Saudi Arabia over the last 15 years. They continue to fill gaps left by the Saudi state, which is not still able to include all segments of its population and that promotes economic empowerment while marginalizing rural communities and non-nationals from its welfare provisions.

For those researching Gulf States’ transformations, and professors teaching philanthropy-related subjects and sociopolitical transformations in the MENA region, Derbal’s work marks a significant contribution to dealing with two—apparently—conflicting concepts: civil society and authoritarianism, from a bottom-up perspective. The book leads the way to further studies on charitable practices in Saudi Arabia from a bottom-up and top-down perspective. One of the topics that could be better explored regards the management of zakat by the state and charitable organizations in the country. Zakat is today handled in different ways and for different purposes, all in line with the religious scope of the alms. However, how zakat is managed by state and non-state actors can influence the effectiveness and impact of these funds on poverty alleviation in the medium and long term. The relationship between the Saudi government and civil society organizations, described in this book, defines the space that CSOs have in managing religious funds and, consequently, their power of action in the country.

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