

Book Reviews

The Middle East and Brazil: Perspectives on the New Global South

Paul Amar, ed.

Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014. 355 pages.

The title at hand is a valuable and timely edited volume that sheds light on the economic, political, literary, social, cultural, religious, and historical connections between Brazil and the Middle East. Whereas the Middle East in this respect primarily means the area historically referred to as *bilād al-shām* (i.e., Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Israel), the book also tackles the historical linkages among Brazil, Muslim Andalusia, and West Africa. Structurally, the volume is divided into three parts, which are preceded by an introduction by the editor.

Part 1, “South-South Relations, Security Politics, Diplomatic History,” includes five papers, the first four of which are more or less straightforward treatments of political history/science. Paul Amar sketches the dynamic strategic changes in policy toward the region and hegemonic American power during the early presidency of Dilma Rousseff (2010-13) in the face of major changes in the Middle East that rendered her continuation of the “handshake politics” that her predecessor Lula had extended toward the now-crumbling dictatorial regimes unfeasible. In the following chapter, Paulo Daniel Elias Farah discusses one of the fruits of Lula’s endeavors: the formation of the Summit of South America-Arab States in 2003. He situates this diplomatic concord within a long history of contacts between Brazil and the Arab/Muslim world as well as the transnational flows of forced and free migration, as epitomized by the presence of enslaved West African Muslims and then, later on, Syro-Lebanese settlers in Brazil.

Carlos Ribeiro Santana’s contribution sheds light on Brazil’s pragmatism in fostering relationships with the Middle East to secure its oil supplies against the background of the energy crises of the 1970s. This thread is also picked up in the following paper by Monique Sochaczweski, which details how these very configurations caused Brazil to abandon its “equidistance” policy regard-

ing the Arab-Israeli conflict in favor of diplomatic measures designed to achieve greater proximity to the Arab nations. Of a more complex nature is the final chapter by Fernando Rabossi, who scrutinizes the dynamics behind the construction of Syro-Lebanese traders in the tri-border region of Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina as notorious supporters of global Islamist terrorism. He admirably demonstrates, by emphasizing the obvious major continuities in migration trajectories and commercial and political engagements, that the tremendous changes in the prevailing stereotypical framings of the local Syro-Lebanese in the era of the “war on terror” – from an avant-garde of regional free market expansion to a major security threat – can only be explained by taking into account the wider discursive shifts precipitated by political complexities and developments on a global scale as well as in the countries of origin and settlement.

Part 2, “Race, Nation, and Transregional Imaginations,” represents more of an anthropological and sociological approach, despite its devotion of considerable space to discourse analysis. The opening chapter by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam posits the idea of a Tropical Orientalism in Brazil. Taking the assumption that Orientalism in the Saidian sense originated historically in the Americas or even before with the Reconquista as their point of departure, the authors interpret contemporary images of the Orient in Brazil against the background of historical Moorish and Sephardi influences and cross-Atlantic cultural links. They then examine how these have been locally submerged, resuscitated, and subjected to positive as well as negative evaluations under varying circumstances. Here the work of the renowned sociologist and anthropologist Gilberto Freyre (d. 1987), the intellectual father of Brazil’s nationalist state discourse of miscegenation (*mestiçagem*), serves as a major reference.

Freyre’s thought likewise represents the main focus of Alexandra Isfahani-Hammond’s contribution, which looks specifically into his treatment of Islam and the Orient. She challenges and complicates his narrative of a “civilizing Orient” by citing the Muslim slave rebellion of 1835 in Bahia. José T. Cairus scrutinizes the debates in the Brazilian press in the aftermath of this so-called Malê revolt and points to the transnational dynamics that characterized both the Islamic resistance and anti-slavery movements in Europe and the Americas. Moving to the early twentieth century, Maria del Mar Logroño Narbona identifies Brazil’s Arab press as part of a transnational intellectual sphere and site of transnational political mobilization. The factual reliability of this assessment is demonstrated by Ottoman and French attempts to either use it for their own political agendas or curb its influence to defend their interests.

In contrast, John Tofik Karam critically examines the efforts of the Syrian and Lebanese states to promote anti-Zionism in the growing industry of “homeland tourism,” which targets Brazilians of Syro-Lebanese descent. His vivid descriptions of organized visits to such places as war memorials and the reactions they engender among the participants show both their success in arousing anti-Israeli sentiments among this specific population, who are otherwise rarely preoccupied with the Arab-Israeli conflict, but also the limits of such endeavors among a community socialized in an environment strongly influenced by nationalist discourses of a “racially tolerant” Brazil. Neiva Vieira da Cunha and Pedro Paulo Thiago de Mello shed light on the conflicts arising between established Syro-Lebanese traders and newly arriving Chinese merchants in Rio de Janeiro’s Saara commercial district, thereby highlighting the complex dynamics of continuing global migratory movements.

The marked heterogeneity of Muslim identities in Brazil is brought into focus through Paulo Gabriel Hilu da Rocha Pinto’s comparison of the Muslim communities of Rio de Janeiro and Brazil’s part of the tri-border region. The complex intersections of local as well as transnational imaginaries of Arabness and Muslimness are shown to canalize into divergent processes of identity formation among a Muslim community in Rio, which primarily consists of Brazilian converts but is led by Arabic speakers. Its counterpart at the tri-border, however, is almost exclusively made up of Brazilians of Syro-Lebanese descent but strongly characterized by its division into Shi‘i and Sunni congregations.

The scope of the book’s final part is well captured in its title: “Literature and Transregional Media Cultures.” Here, Silvia M. Montenegro examines the treatment of Islam in the highly successful Brazilian television series *O Clone* (*The Clone*) and addresses the mixed reactions of the wider public and of different representatives of the local Muslim community. Silvia C. Ferreira then focuses on a subject that has received even less interest than Arabic writing in Brazil, namely, the Portuguese-language literature of local Syro-Lebanese authors that often sought to integrate Arabs into the national fold and nationalist paradigms by portraying them as pioneering peddlers, plantationists, and cosmopolitan figures. In this regard, the novel *O Fogueira* (*The Bonfire*) of the early 1940s is presented as a marked departure from established narratives for its depiction of Arab migrants as quintessentially Brazilian on the basis of an agricultural inheritance resuscitated on Brazilian soil. In contrast, Armando Vargas traces how the country’s Arabic *mahjar* literature has subverted Brazilian nationalist discourses by reinterpreting their

language and images to establish and defend a place for themselves in their new homes.

Daniela Birman explores the appropriation of the concept of Orientalism and the deconstruction of East-West dichotomies in the fiction of Milton Hatoum, son of a mixed Muslim-Christian couple of Lebanese descent living in the Amazonian city of Manaus. Hatoum's propensity to question unitary narratives and stereotypical imaginaries is undoubtedly also due to his own religiously and ethnically mixed background, as well as his socialization in a part of Brazil that is itself routinely subjected to a kind of orientalizing by the dominant Brazilian intellectual culture centered around the metropolises of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. All of this is reflected in his writings. Finally, Wail S. Hassan analyzes the role of Alberto Mussa's work in popularizing Arabic literature in Brazil. More importantly, he presents the latter's oeuvre as part and parcel of a new paradigm of world literature that is predicated on the South-South dialogue and therefore clearly no longer automatically privileges European or American literary canons.

As books on any kind of historical and contemporary linkages between Latin America and the Middle East are still extremely rare, this volume represents a major advance in the field as well as for the study of South-South connections in general, which is likewise still in its infancy. This said, the editor's claim that the book introduces new approaches and methodologies for the study of transnationalism, global culture, and international relations is well-founded. As the potentially damaging comparable invisibility of the contributions of scholars writing in languages other than English steadily continues to increase, Amar deserves credit for making Portuguese-language scholarship available to a wider readership. Indeed, seven of the book's overall seventeen chapters were translated from Portuguese.

As far as the study of Islam and Muslim societies – a field of specific interest for the readers of this journal – is concerned, several points should be highlighted. First, the rapidly increasing literature on Islam in the West has hitherto rarely taken Latin America and the Caribbean into account. This lack of interest seems absurd, given the high proportion of Muslims living in Suriname, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago, as well as the strong Muslim communities in such cities as Maicao (Colombia), Ciudad del Este (Paraguay), and Foz do Iguaçu (Brazil). Again, the present volume represents a noteworthy exception. This is even more so because it includes dialogic and not merely unidirectional perspectives in Iberian-Latin American and Syro-Lebanese-Brazilian linkages, but also on the transatlantic intellectual and social worlds of enslaved and freed African Muslims and how all of these have influenced

local societies, identities, cultures, politics, and scholarly, as well as fictional, writing.

Second, and going far beyond the customary references to Brazil's African heritage, a specifically African-Muslim heritage comes to the fore in several chapters. This clearly testifies to the fact that Islam had made its mark on Brazil long before the arrival of Syro-Lebanese Muslims. Third, the transnational components of Brazil's Arab press, as well as of the Arabic and Portuguese writings of the Syro-Lebanese migrants and their descendants, including their approaches to the Islamic and pre-Islamic pasts of their countries of origin and their constructions of Arab-Christian or Arab-Muslim identities, are emphasized and scrutinized. Similarly, it is noteworthy that such popular formats as the soap opera, often unduly neglected in scholarship despite their obvious impact on public opinion, are recognized as relevant for the study of contemporary Islam and public discourses on it.

A few minor points of criticism are nevertheless in order. First, Shohat and Stam appear to be using the sensitive and debatable term *syncretism* as something that is self-evident. Even if one should subscribe to the usefulness of this concept in the case at hand, its existence is certainly a far more complex phenomenon than the two extremes outlined by the authors, namely, "proof of a lack of hostility on the part of domineering Christianity" versus "a survival strategy (for Jews and Africans) against anti-Semitic and anti-black violence" (p. 143) would suggest. This is particularly the case because so-called syncretistic tendencies can hardly be considered as necessarily only the product of inter-religious encounters in the New World; they certainly also have their own pre-voyage history.

As far as the Malê revolt is concerned, the role of written communication among the rebels in Arabic or *'ajamī* (West African languages written in the Arabic script) appears to be exaggerated and the distinction between Arabic and *'ajamī* – undoubtedly an important one, as both fulfilled different functions for Muslims on both sides of the Atlantic – blurred. Whereas the Arabic/*'ajamī* paper trail left behind by the rebels was undoubtedly awe-inspiring in a colonial and early post-colonial society with extremely low rates of literacy, the number of discovered Qur'anic, devotional, and talismanic texts, albeit clearly testifying to the religious and social significance as well as the unifying role of the written word among the local Muslims, hardly seems to support such fleeting assertions as "most of the Hausa/Malê rebels knew how to read and *write Arabic*" (p. 145; emphasis mine).

Elsewhere in the same context, the statement that "descriptions of rituals of initiation not found in orthodox Islam suggest the existence of Sufi broth-

erhoods” (p. 190) betrays a somewhat questionable view of what “orthodox Islam” is supposed to mean or consist of. The millions of followers of individual Sufi *tariqas* throughout the world would certainly be amazed to hear that they fall outside the confines of “orthodox Islam.” West African Sufis of the nineteenth century would have had similar objections. Finally, the assumption that Syrians and Lebanese migrated to Brazil in the early twentieth century “because they were expelled from their homelands by Ottoman imperial expansion” (p. 229) is completely ill-founded. Apart from the fact that the empire was by then far from expanding, it is by now well established that the chief pull factor was the empire’s ongoing socio-economic deterioration as a whole and particularly in certain areas of Greater Syria after 1860.

Philipp Bruckmayr
Lecturer, Arabic and Islamic Studies
Institute of Oriental Studies, University of Vienna, Austria