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Article (Published Version)

Marsden, Magnus and Henig, David (2019) Muslim circulations and networks in West Asia: ethnographic perspectives on transregional connectivity. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 10 (1). pp. 11-21. ISSN 1879-3665

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# Muslim circulations and networks in West Asia: Ethnographic perspectives on transregional connectivity

Journal of Eurasian Studies  
2019, Vol. 10(1) 11–21  
© The Author(s) 2019  
DOI: 10.1177/1879366518814668  
journals.sagepub.com/home/ens  


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## Abstract

This article explores the concept of West Asia in relationship to recent work in the global history of Islam that points toward the existence of transregional arenas of historic significance that incorporate many of Asia's Muslim societies. Recent anthropological work has also brought attention to the dynamic nature of the relations and cultural connections between peoples living in regions that once formed part of expansive arenas of interaction yet were divided by imperial and national boundaries, as well as the ideological conflicts of the Cold War. Against this political and historical context, we deploy West Asia as a geographical *scale* that brings to light interconnected forms of life that have been silenced by traditional area studies scholarship. We compare our field work experiences with two different networks made-up of Muslims that span different axis of Muslim Asia. We argue that “West Asia” brings attention to influential connections, communities, and circulations that both bear the imprint of deeper pasts as well as the influence of emergent and shifting transregional dynamics in the present. Furthermore, by emphasizing connective dynamics that move beyond the rather conventional focus on east–west relationships, the category West Asia also encourages scholarship to highlight multiple yet hitherto little explored inter-Asian north–south connections.

## Keywords

Afghanistan, Islam, Sufism, the Balkans, trade, West Asia

## Introduction

In what way can the category of West Asia be analytically productive for understanding Muslim circulations and mobility, past and present? And can West Asia as a geographical scale reconfigure the hierarchies of attention, omissions, and silences that have been engendered by the dominant area studies discourse that has compartmentalized Muslim Asia into discrete regions? In this article, we seek to initiate a conversation between the ethnography of West Asia and historical work on the connections that existed between diverse parts of Muslim Asia.

An especially notable account of the historic connectedness of Muslim Asia we want to engage with is to be found in Shahab Ahmed's (2015) recent book *What is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic*. The book's bold formulations regarding the need to challenge conceptions of Islam that emphasize the importance of theological coherence—in

terms of doctrine, law, and orthodoxy—at the expense of the great capacity of Islam to embrace the values of ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradiction has brought new energy to the field of Islamic studies. An element of Ahmed's argument, however, that has been less commented upon is the book's premise concerning the existence of what he labels in *What is Islam?* as “the Balkans-to-Bengal complex.” This concept also implicitly points toward a different kind of critique of

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area studies. Namely, it gestures at the “geographies of ignorance” (Van Schendel, 2002) that have been implicit within mainstream Islamic studies and that have eschewed many Muslim regions from its sphere of study. Indeed, the tendency to treat certain contexts as central to the Islamic tradition and its reproduction and others as peripheral continues to result in an uneven distribution of scholarship on “the Muslim world.”<sup>1</sup> In this article, we suggest that scholarly representations of Afghanistan and the Balkans are just two contexts that have been affected by such intellectual peripheralization. We argue, however, that geographic scales—such as the Balkans-to-Bengal complex<sup>2</sup> and that of West Asia that are more complex and inclusive than those commonplace in the field of Islamic studies help scholars to go beyond the conventional geographies of area and religious studies. We suggest that they allow for the inclusion of regions previously considered peripheral to the wider dynamics of Muslim Asia into the understanding of the *longue durée* flows of Muslim circulation. Indeed, looked at from this perspective, “the Middle East” appears less as the center of wider trends and developments in the Muslim societies of Asia than existing at the fringes of the complex networks and flows of knowledge that cut-across multiple Asian settings.

### The Balkans-to-Bengal complex

Ahmed used this transregional category to refer to the lands of Islam that stretch between present day Bosnia-Herzegovina, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, down and across Afghanistan, North India to the Bay of Bengal. He depicts this vast arena as sharing a powerful commonality in terms of the influential role that Sufi ideas and values, often expressed in poetry written in both Persian and Turkish, have played in its cultural dynamics. By doing so, Ahmed paints a multidimensional picture of Balkan-to-Bengal’s interconnections, exchanges, and articulations within rather than claiming that the transregional space is defined by “a remarkable similarity in culture” (p. 73). The Balkans-to-Bengal complex is a historically formed shared paradigm of Islamic life and thought, a hermeneutic arena with a shared vocabulary, an inter-referential array of sensibilities and expressive motifs, and other transregionally mutually intelligible modes of self-expression and exemplary modes and mechanisms of being Islamic. Ahmed emphasizes the extent to which this transregional arena is not some unchanging culture area but is, rather, historically dynamic and politically contested. The Balkans-to-Bengal complex as a semantic space (ca 1350–1850) was historically disintegrated, first, with the rise of nationalism and the nation-state in the latter half of the 19th century, and, then, second, as a result of the rise of modernist Islam and the emphasis it placed on textual legalism. Ahmed also brings attention to the extent to which such forms of Islam have an “impoverished memory” of the rich inter-referential milieu of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex (p. 527).

Ahmed, of course, is far from being the only scholar to have posited the historic existence of over-arching yet culturally complex arenas of Muslim life in the early modern period. Most obviously, Marshall Hodgson (1970) developed the term “Islamicate” to refer to the forms of culture shaped by Muslim and non-Muslim actors alike in an area stretching between the Nile and the Oxus that he conceived of as a space of “Islamic dominion.” More recently, Gagan Sood (2012) has brought attention to the existence well into the 18th century of an arena that he refers to as “Islamicate Eurasia.” While the activities of the traders whose correspondence Sood (2012) has explored were “continental in scope” they also “never extended beyond mainland Eurasia and the Mediterranean basin, omitting notably those parts of the world incommensurate with Islamicate politics” (p. 155). According to Sood, the intensive security concerns of the Russian and British empires, and the gradual insertion of “well-defined sovereign borders” resulted in Islamicate Eurasia being “supplanted by global empires, nation-states, and multilateral associations” and ultimately “being divided between the Middle East and South Asia” (Sood 2012, pp. 168–169).

Such historical work raises two sets of issues for anthropologists conducting ethnographic work on Muslim life in the contexts that previously belonged to the Balkans-to-Bengal complex and/or Islamicate Eurasia. First, these studies raise questions concerning how anthropologists might understand and analyze the inter-connections between these societies and civilizations. In the context of what at the time was widely referred to as “the end of the Cold War” for example, there was a resurgence in interest by anthropologists and scholars in other disciplines about the value of the category of “the Persianate world” for shedding light on the connections and circulations of cultural forms between regions and countries divided by national and ideological boundaries (e.g., Canfield, 1991, 2008). The term Persianate sheds light on the wide geographical influence of Persianate modes of cultural production and political thought beyond Iran and into settings ranging from Central Asia to India (e.g., Alam & Subrahmanyam, 2012; Marsden, 2008). A key problem with the term, however, is that it tends to ethnicize a complex interaction between different linguistic traditions important across this space. As a result, several scholars developed the concept of “Turko-Persia” to give a greater sense of the heterogeneity of languages and cultures in this arena (Djalili et al., 2008). In turn, however, such an approach fails to grant sufficient significance to the role-played by Arabic texts and knowledge across this region, as well as to the capacity of the region’s scholars to contribute to intellectual debate within and beyond the region through their use of Arabic (e.g., Starr, 2015). In other words, a model that localizes the region by insisting on the use of a single aspect of culture, society, or politics as a defining factor in its definition—be this a language such as Persian, a religious tradition such as Islam, or a mode of organizing society—inevitably runs into conceptual difficulties and ultimately excludes or

peripheralizes particular communities, cultural dynamics, or histories in relationship to hierarchies constructed by scholarship. To take our example of how this issue has affected attempts to theorize the region in terms of language further, scholarly discussions have recently focused of the dynamics of linguistic traditions (such as Pashto (Green, 2008; Hanifi, 2013) and the Pamiri languages [Ilioliev, 2008) that have been excluded from work on the Persianate world because they have been treated as existing at its cultural and political peripheries.

By moving beyond ethnicity and language, both Ahmed and Sood render possible an analysis of the territories encompassed by transregional spaces as influenced by multiple traditions. As Sood notes, the region, peoples' ability to converse and communicate across multiple languages, and the traditions associated with them are of especial analytical significance. Yet if much scholarship has framed its attempt to think about transregional connections in relationship to debates about the extent and nature of shared cultural traditions and influences, other work has attended more to the analytical suitability of the modern geographical categories that are available to describe places and regions previously located in much more extensive geographies. In this regard, there is widespread recognition of the extent to which categories such as "the Middle East," "Eurasia," and "Central Asia" have imposed a straightjacket on the ability of scholarship to understand that emergent connections between different parts of Muslim Asia are not simply reflective of "globalization" but, in fact, recall the historic centrality of circulations and interactions to all of these contexts.

The second issue that historical works on the connected nature of life in Muslim Asia raises for anthropologists is ethnographic. Is the value to anthropology of accounts and approaches such as those of Ahmed, Sood, and Hodgson merely to offer historical context? Alternatively, might ethnographic fieldwork reveal aspects of identity, community, and everyday life in Islamicate Eurasia or "the Balkans-to-Bengal." That raises questions about the extent to which the transformations in politics, economy, and ideology witnessed by the region in the late 19th century constituted a fundamental historical rupture? Indeed, although Ahmed constructs the category of "the Balkans-to-Bengal complex" as a specific historical phenomenon, in the conclusion of the book, he suggests that the values of ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradiction are important resources for being Islamic that are not historically confined to one geographical or historical construct. *What is Islam?* is, he states, an invitation to transport the theoretical and conceptual base and explore how the values of the complex "bear upon other societies of Muslims in other times and places" (p. 541).

### Scaling West Asia

A great deal of scholarship has demonstrated that the intellectual architecture of narrow geographical categories lies in the context of the Cold War (e.g., Price, 2008). Importantly,

widely recognized too is the fact that spaces that existed between such categories—such as Afghanistan (Marsden & Hopkins, 2012), the Balkans (Green, 2005), the Indian Ocean (Ho, 2006), or Azerbaijan (Yolacan, this volume)—came to be treated in scholarship "borderlands." Such borderlands were either treated as being peripheral to the dynamics of the modern world (Green, 2014) or, alternatively, as exerting an influence on the wider world because of their status as "ungoverned" spaces (cf. Leake, 2016). In the light of the critical and dynamic approach to geography that has arisen from these debates, the category of West Asia is gradually being deployed by scholars as *a geographical scale* that shines analytical and empirical attention on connections that existing within multiple settings across Muslim Asia, perhaps especially those between the Middle East and Central Asia, but also regions that are often if problematically collectively labeled as "Eastern Europe," for example, Ukraine and Western parts of Russia, as well as the Balkans (Ballinger, 2017; Rexhepi, 2017). There is a need not merely for scholarly work to challenge taken for granted regional divisions borne out of Cold War histories. Additionally, scholarship needs to assess the extent to which the forms of connections that do exist between regions conventionally analyzed as sub-regions are helpfully considered not just as either aberrations or a product of post Cold War "globalization" but instead as "the latest iteration of a historical pattern" (see Ho, 2017). It is with this aim in mind that we suggest in what follows that there is considerable scope for pairing thinking on the category of West Asia with a consideration of historic attempts to frame and delimit Muslim Asia's arenas and spaces.

We have chosen to jointly author this article because our historically informed ethnographic work is positioned at different locales in the spectrum of the Balkan-to-Bengal complex/Islamicate Eurasia. This has furnished us with different perspectives on the afterlife and reconfiguration of historic connections in the boxed-up sub-regions of the present. Marsden initially worked in a region of northern Pakistan the popular culture of which was strongly influenced by Persian cultural dynamics, especially in the field of poetic composition. He then turned his focus to predominantly Farsi-speaking communities in Afghanistan. Henig has explored Bosnian networks of Dervish (Sufi)-Muslims that crisscross Southeast Europe and Turkish West Asia.<sup>2</sup> Against this backdrop of conducting fieldwork at locations in Muslim West Asia, this essay seeks to make an intervention about the analytical purchase of West Asia as a valuable category for anthropologists working on Muslim societies today. We suggest that the category West Asia offers scope for bringing to life more complex textures of circulations and networks than even Ahmed's notion of the "Balkans-to-Bengal" complex. The geographic optic of Balkans-to-Bengal is, after all, one that brings the connections between West and East to the forefront of the geographical imagination. A great deal of recent work on Inter-Asian connectivity has indeed focused either on the inland east-west routes

connecting China to Eurasia, or on the maritime routes that link the port cities of the South China sea with those of the Arabian Peninsula and Eastern Africa. The material presented below, however, suggests the importance of a wide range of north–south connections—between Bukhara and Jeddah, or Sarajevo and Mashad, for example—that illuminate the ways in which the analysis of inter-Asian interactions stands to benefit from a perspective that avoids the tendency to rhetorically and empirically fixate on east–west dynamics (see also Ibañez Tirado this volume).

### **De-centering Persianate expressivity: Central Asian émigré merchants across Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey**

This section explores the insights that ethnographic work on long-distance trade and merchants, as well as the “mobile societies” (Ho, 2017) which they form offers into understanding the extent to which West Asia makes-up a coherent context.

These issues are particularly evident in Marsden’s ongoing fieldwork with traders originally from the border regions of Afghanistan and Central Asia, who currently live and work at two different centers of religious and political power in West Asia: Istanbul and Jeddah. Most of the traders claim descent from families who lived in the Emirate of Bukhara until they emigrated across the border to Afghanistan in the mid-1920s. The families migrated as a result of the Bolsheviks launching a wave of policies that targeted both the region’s religious authorities as well as its kulaks, or wealthy peasants. These Bukharan émigrés (cf. Shahrani, 2001; Shalinsky, 1993) lived in Afghanistan until the early 1980s. In Afghanistan, they were especially active in the fields of industry and commerce, playing a pivotal role in the fur and carpet businesses (key pillars of Afghanistan’s economy until the 1970s), as well as developing modern industries such as sugar processing and glass making factories (e.g., Jalallar, 2011). After the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979, many such émigré families fled to Pakistan, fearing that their lands and capital would be confiscated by the communist regime in Kabul, or, alternatively, that their children would be forced to fight against the Soviet Army with the Islamic resistance movements. In Pakistan, they established themselves as carpet manufacturers and traders, especially in the cities of Peshawar, Lahore, and Karachi. In Pakistan, Afghanistan’s Central Asian émigrés also established contact with families who had migrated to British India from Central Asia in the 1920s. These communities of craftsmen and merchants remain active in Pakistan today, albeit in dwindling numbers: the global trade in carpets has undergone a substantial decline and the refugee communities the merchants depended on to provide low-wage carpet weaving labor have increasingly relocated to Afghanistan.

In the late 1980s, moreover, hundreds of families moved from the housing colonies and refugee camps in which they lived in Pakistan to Jeddah (Saudi Arabia). Jeddah was not a city that was new to these families’ geographical imaginaries or indeed past travel itineraries: a small community of “Bukharans” had lived in Jeddah since the 1850s (Kane, 2015). Initially, this small community had acted as middleman agents between pilgrims from Central Asia and official pilgrim guides appointed by the authorities of the holy cities of Mecca and Madina (Kane, 2015). In the 1920s, these Bukharans were joined by thousands of émigrés who fled Soviet Central Asia, and moved to Saudi Arabia (rather than staying in Afghanistan) (e.g., Balci, 2003). During the 50 or so years in which they were based in Afghanistan, Central Asian émigrés families often conducted the pilgrimage to Mecca and used such trips to conduct trade. A Central Asian Afghan who is aged in his 80s told Marsden in his shop in Jeddah in December 2017, for example, that he used to sell handwoven carpets made in Afghanistan to Yemeni merchants in Mecca in the 1960s and 1970s. Another trader, also based in Jeddah, told Marsden that he would sell Afghan silver jewelry in Tehran en route to Mecca; on his return, he would sell abayas that he purchased in Kuwait to buyers in Tehran.

The Central Asian émigrés who arrived in Jeddah in the 1980s constituted a substantial new wave of Central Asian émigré, this time after a 60-year stay in Afghanistan, and a briefer sojourn in Pakistan. The community rapidly established itself in Jeddah and other cities in the Kingdom, especially Mecca and Madina.<sup>3</sup> These individuals and their families filled niches in the economy that had been vacated by the earlier wave of Central Asian migrants who, having eventually benefited from the award of Saudi citizenship and residency, had become active by the 1980s in a more diverse range of economic fields, including as state officials. In particular, the bread and restaurant businesses were important sectors in which Afghanistan’s Central Asian émigrés became active; critical too was the import from China and Turkey of machine-made prayer carpets and cheap clothing. These items are brought by pilgrims visiting Saudi Arabia, as well as by the millions of foreign laborers who live and work there (see Marsden, 2018).

The *kafil* system, whereby foreign businessmen must register their businesses in the name of a Saudi sponsor, means that there is an inherent risk for foreign nationals to do business in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, if earlier generations of Central Asian migrants to Saudi Arabia had successfully earned Saudi citizenship this was not something open to those who migrated to the country in the 1980s, by which point earning Saudi citizenship was essentially impossible. Indeed, as many migrants had entered Saudi Arabia on travel documents they had acquired in Pakistan, or on “pilgrimage visas” they subsequently over-stayed, their position in the country was unstable and insecure. As a result of this wider environment, the most successful of Afghanistan’s Central Asian émigré merchants in Saudi

Arabia increasingly moved their capital to Turkey where they bought homes (mostly in residential neighborhoods in western parts of Istanbul but also elsewhere such as in Bursa). A trader Marsden (2016) knows in Istanbul, for example, owned from the 1970s a business selling watches in Medina. During the mid-1990s he bought a property in the Zeytinburnu neighborhood of Istanbul, a neighborhood to which he also moved his family members. He continued to run the shop in Medina with his eldest son's help until 2016. Due to rising living expenses in Saudi Arabia largely resulting from the introduction of a "family tax" on foreigners living in the Kingdom introduced in 2016, he closed his business in Medina, and opened a restaurant serving Turkish dishes and famous Uzbek-style rice (*palao-uzbeki*) in Istanbul. During the course of living and investing in Turkey, merchants such as this one have either secured access to residency permits (*eqama, ikamet*) or, in fewer cases, Turkish citizenship.

It is interesting to think of these individuals and communities in relationship to both the concepts of the Bengal-to-Balkan complex and Islamicate Eurasia for three major reasons. First, this community has led a decidedly mobile existence over several centuries. In the 18th century, merchants from Bukhara were an active feature of the commercial landscape of Muscovy and Siberia (Burton, 1993; Monahan, 2015). In the 19th century, Bukharans were active travelers, traders, and pilgrims in Ottoman lands (Kane, 2015). As Marsden's fieldwork has demonstrated, these patterns of mobility have continued in the 20th and 21st century. While there have been great changes in the size of population movements, continuities in the geographical configurations of these movements are noteworthy. Today's Central Asian émigrés are very much at home across the Muslim societies of South and Central Asia, the Hejaz and the Arabian Peninsula more generally, as well as Turkey.

There are also parallels to be made between the argument that Sood makes about the subjects of the documents he studied not operating in "parts of the world incommensurate with Islamicate politics." The émigré traders with whom Marsden works often remark, for example, that their people chose to live in Saudi Arabia and there are few greater blessings than living close to the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina. Indeed, those who are now based in Turkey, often express regret at their having had to leave Saudi Arabia. They say that while they were prepared to tolerate the difficulties of life in the Kingdom to live close to Mecca and Medina when either legislation or misfortune made doing so impossible, they were left with no other alternative than to move elsewhere (*rah-i digar nadoshtim*). All of this is not to say that Afghanistan's Central Asian émigrés do not live outside West Asia's Muslim majority contexts. There are, in fact, significant population centers of the community in New Jersey (mostly comprising wealthy families who migrated from Afghanistan to the

United States in the 1970s) and Germany. There is also a smaller community in the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, such families often seek to maintain strong family ties to Istanbul: the elderly parents of UK-based merchants, for example, often prefer to live in Istanbul rather than London, and an ultimate desire to move to Istanbul from the United Kingdom, for example, is frequently articulated by informants in London. It is often remarked by such folk that émigré families are most happy (*khush*) in countries in which they can "hear the call to prayer" and where they are able to maintain everyday contact with their wider kinship networks. In this sense, while scattered and distributed over many different contexts, the affective and commercial centers of this "mobile society" appear to conform to a logic that privileges collective settlement in West Asia's historically Islamic contexts.

Second, these merchants and craftsmen demonstrate cultural competencies strikingly comparable to those described in the work of Ahmed and Sood. A majority of the traders are fluent in the language that was spoken in their family homes during the time they spent based in Afghanistan (most often Uzbek, Turkmen, and/or Farsi). Indeed, many of these family homes were multi-lingual, with children brought up to ethnically mixed parents and speaking both Farsi and a Turkic language fluently. In addition, having lived in Pakistan, most are conversant in Urdu. Since they moved to Saudi Arabia, they also speak, to varying degrees of fluency, Arabic. Likewise, owning properties and spending much time in Turkey, the traders and their children are now almost all conversant in written and spoken modern Turkish. These linguistic abilities are obviously important for their international business activities (indeed those who travel to China for trade also often speak fluent Mandarin and/or Cantonese).

The traders value their ability to use these languages in various spheres of cultural life rather than simply in the world of trade and business. A Turkmen-speaking trader who has a substantial mattress business in Riyadh, for instance, is a regular contributor of Farsi poems to a Kabul-based literary journal. The traders are not complacent about their linguistic capacities. Many recognize, rather, that because their children have been brought up in countries in which Farsi is not generally taught either in schools or religious learning institutions (Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey), the younger generations of the community are quickly losing fluency in the language and, as a result, access to texts and cultural influences long important to them and the communities from which they hail. This brings attention to the shifting role that different cultural influences play across this space, and how these wax and wane in terms of significance and influence over time.

Third, if both Ahmed and Sood emphasize the broad importance of Sufic ideas, institutions, teachings, rituals, and texts to being Muslim in Islamicate Eurasia/the Bengal-to-Balkan complex then this is also a contested

aspect of the histories and lives of contemporary traveler-merchants. On the one hand, it is important to note that these men and their families have both been affected by and acted as the agents of multiple forms of reform-minded Islamization. Ahmed (among others) sees such scripturalist influences as having contributed to the understanding of Islam-as-orthodoxy that is especially visible in this region of the Muslim world today. Some of the traders were active in movements of political Islam in Afghanistan in the 1970s and the 1980s, such as through membership of the Hezb-i Islami, an Islamist party in Afghanistan that was influenced ideologically by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood movement (e.g., Edwards, 1993). Thousands have undergone education in religious schools and colleges in Pakistan (*madrasas*) and universities (*jomi'a*) in Saudi Arabia in which forms of Islam that are hostile to Sufic influences are taught (e.g., Malik, 2007). It is not surprising therefore that the traders often say they abhor the forms of shrine worship that continue to be performed in the parts of Afghanistan in which they were brought up. As with language, so too with religion, there are significant transformations in the cultural elements that bring West Asian societies into one frame of reference.

Ethnographic fieldwork with the traders suggests, however, that the relevance of Sufism to their personal and collective identities take more nuanced forms than appears at first sight. Most obviously, while these merchants are unlikely to visit shrines or attend rituals in Sufi lodges during their occasional return visits to Afghanistan, Sufic influences are visible in their daily lives. As we have seen, some write poetry for Farsi-language journals; Marsden has also attended evenings of music and poetry recital in their homes in Saudi Arabia. The merchants are also avid contributors to discussion forums on Facebook regarding the cultural history of the regions of Central Asia from which they hail, an important element of such discussions concern the greatness of the literary and spiritual figures influenced by Sufism. Finally, the community also continues to act as the safeguards of religious institutions that have a long history in West Asia as being central for the performance and maintenance of Sufi rituals and communities of commensality: Sufi lodges, referred to as *tekke* in Turkish or *taqiya khana* in Farsi (see Can, 2012; Green, 2010). Historically, such tekkes were established as a form of *waqf* (charitable donations of land or buildings) using funds from wealthy merchants. These *waqf* mostly provided lodgings for merchants and pilgrims from Central Asia in cities such as Jeddah and Istanbul. Tekke could be designated as available for use by Muslims generally or by Muslims from particular regions or families. There was also an important charitable element of such institutions. The great grandson of a wealthy Central Asian émigré from Andijan reported to Marsden during a series of conversation in Istanbul (where

he now lives and conducts business) during August 2017 that his ancestor had established a *waqf* in Mecca in the 1920s. The building was designated by its founders as being available for use by all Muslims (a *waqf al muslimin*), rather than his kin or indeed people from their region of Central Asia. It comprised rooms intended for use for a diverse range of activities: there were rooms designated for use as lodgings for pilgrims making the hajj (*musafir khona; haji khona*), and others intended for occupancy by widowers; still more rooms were open for those wishing to organize social and religious events important to Muslim communal life, such as feasts of remembrance (*khairot*).

Today, *tekke/taqiya khana* continue to be managed by Central Asian émigré merchants in Jeddah, Mecca, and Madina. Indeed, in Zeytinburnu (the neighborhood of Istanbul in which many of Afghanistan's Central Asian émigrés have bought or rented homes and also established businesses), two *waqf* (*vakif* in modern Turkish) have been established by groups of traders who pooled together collective resources. These *vakif* are made available to members of the community who wish to use them to hold events, such as marriages and funerary prayers. While members of the community state that they are no longer used for practices such as the collective recitation of the names of Allah (*zikr*), these community spaces are regularly deployed by members of the community for the holding sacrificial feasts (*qorban*), charitable feasts (*khairot*), and other funerary rites, especially *fatiha*, prayers of remembrance. Further research is required to better understand the current social and religious importance of such sites. Nevertheless, the complex and multifaceted way in which tekkes are connected to the collective identity of Central Asian émigrés suggests that it is impossible to discount the ongoing importance of Sufi ideas and institutions to this transregional community.

These Central Asian émigrés inhabit and forge an arena remarkably similar in terms of its geographic contours to Ahmed's Balkan-to-Bengal complex. As importantly, while not themselves being elite scholars or intellectuals, Central Asian émigrés are able to inhabit this space with considerable ease, thanks to their knowledge of the region's great vernaculars: Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and also Urdu/Hindi. Furthermore, the community are also involved in the establishment and maintenance of institutions that have for long been central to facilitating the exchange of knowledge and people across this expansive realm. Finally, the varied and diverse forms of cultural production engaged by this mobile society challenges the notion, commonplace in much of the literature, that long-term residents in Saudi Arabia inevitably act as the exporters of Wahabi or Salafi forms of Islam to their home countries (cf. Farquahr, 2017). As is also the case in Yolacan's paper in this Special Issue on Azeri networks, Central Asian émigrés are helpfully thought of as forming

a “mobile society” that is based on sustained circulations and connections fashioned across different parts of Asia and over long periods of time.

### From texts to textures of circulation

A focus on “mobile societies,” Engseng Ho (2014) suggested, enables us to discover “veins of data that speak to connections with other regions, data that were not seen or were ignored earlier simply because we did not understand the mobile and circulatory processes that generated them in the first place, historically” (2014, p. 889). As Marsden’s case study of Afghan traders shows, the Balkans-to-Bengal complex is an arena of such interactions and exchanges that has been significantly shaped by trade. What is the role of religion in such circulatory processes? This section explores the histories of the underpinning mechanics and infrastructures of exchanges and interactions (Cooke & Lawrence 2005; Gelvin & Green, 2013) between the nodes of Islamic knowledge and practice across West Asia. Whereas the existing body of scholarship focused primarily on circulating texts within the geographical realm of West Asia, we propose, following Ho’s methodological suggestion, a shift in perspective to the textures of circulation. Such a perspective nuances the widely held hierarchical view on the location and relationship between centers and peripheries of Islamic knowledge production and practice. It does so by bringing attention to dynamic flows of knowledge and authority moving in multiple directions: east-west, north-south.

Along with far-flung traders of Muslim background crisscrossing West Asia on caravans, roads, and now shipping routes, a sustained and geographically defined circulation of Islamic concepts, practices and values was often mediated by peripatetic Sufis. For many centuries, Sufism constituted one of the chief mechanics of land-based mobility and interconnectivity in West Asia.<sup>4</sup> Here we can only sketch some of the key historical moments to lay out the ways in which the textures of circulation emerged and have been sustained over time. Historically speaking, Sufism operated in the service of economic, religious, and political proselytization and mediation across West Asia (Green, 2012). An appreciation of this history can also help us to better understand how “the Balkans” entered the arena of interaction in Muslim West Asia. Indeed, the burgeoning network of Sufi lodges, the genealogical chains of successions, the practice of religiously motivated journeying (*ziyaret*, *rihla*; cf. Eickelman & Piscatory, 1990; Flaskerund & Natvig, 2018), and the circulation of disciples and sheikhs played a chief role in connecting the shores of the Aegean, and the Balkan hinterlands with other fringes of West Asian interactions. Over the centuries, Sufism has connected the Balkan Peninsula with places of religious learning as distant and diverse as Anatolia, Crimea, Khorasan, and Samarqand

in Transoxania to name just a few (Algar, 1971, pp. 169–170). In his contribution to this Special Issue, Yarosh demonstrates the similarly important role that Sufi networks played in ensuring circulations of charismatic scholars on the north-south axis between central Russia and the Levant. With the Ottoman conquest and incorporation of southeast Europe into the realm of the Empire, the Balkans-to-Bengal complex as an arena of intellectual, political and transcultural interaction blossomed, and the circulation of Sufis knitted West Asian fringes together. Indeed, as Seema Alavi (2015) pointed out, “[i]mperial networks offered the base on which earlier forms of Muslim connectivity and its repertoire of knowledge and communication skills were easily grafted” (pp. 13–14).

In Ahmed’s account, the Balkans-to-Bengal complex refers to a historical phenomenon that disintegrated at the dawn of the 19th century with the rise of nation-states, border regimes, and nationalization of religious identities across West Asia at large. This development had also severe consequences for Sufis across the then shrinking Ottoman territory. Indeed, the late phase of the Ottoman Empire had already brought about a number of bans and restrictions imposed on Sufi brotherhoods mainly as a result of the Tanzimat reforms (Barnes, 1992, pp. 38–46; Silverstein, 2009). The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire further disrupted the patterns of mobility and circulation. As Piro Rexhepi (2017) argued, “task of cleansing Europe from the Islamic minorities after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire [. . .] contributed to the physical and discursive separation of Balkan Muslims from the larger Muslim world” (thep. 54). Furthermore, in 1925 the newly formed, secular Turkish nation state eventually banned all dervish orders. Although this ban officially continues up to the present day, many Sufi brotherhoods managed to sustain their existence (Silverstein, 2011). A similar fate befell Sufi brotherhoods across the Balkan Peninsula in particular after World War II, when the region came under the Soviet sphere of influence. Since 1945, the newly formed state-socialist governments, with their aggressive communist anti-religious ideologies, took various measures against religious life across the region (Perica, 2002). Positions taken against the Sufi brotherhoods ranged from systematic diminishing of the brotherhoods (Albania, Bulgaria), to banning them in various ways (Bosnia-Herzegovina) or placing them under close surveillance (Kosovo, Macedonia). As a result, the historically formed transregional Sufi webs connecting the Balkan peninsula with Anatolia and West Asia at large were radically transformed not only after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of nation-states, but even more so during the decades of the Cold War. In many cases, these networks either metamorphosed into semi-clandestine networks, or completely disintegrated, only to be revitalized at the end of the Cold War era (Clayer, 2003, 2012; Henig, 2014).

This is also the case of Henig’s long-term fieldwork on Muslim interactions in the Southeast Europe’s post-imperial



borderlands and beyond. Henig's (2016) work with dervishes (Sufis) from the Balkan Peninsula, and especially from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, showed the multi-layered textures of connectivity and belonging to a transregional dervish ecumene that spans across the earlier historical centers of spiritual, theological, and political power in West Asia. These include pre-conflict Aleppo, Bursa, Cairo, Damascus, Istanbul, Jerusalem, Konya, as well as Karbala or Mashhad. During his fieldwork, Henig was able to follow the routes of the newly formed brotherhoods that emerged only in the post-socialist years (Bosnia-Herzegovina), as well as those brotherhoods that have had more than a hundred years of continuity stretching back to the Ottoman era (Kosovo). In both cases, the brotherhoods belong to the same transregional networks of the Rifa'i Sufi path traced through the shared *silsila* (chain of succession) of the sheikhs back to Istanbul, Turkey.

The Rifa'i dervish networks epitomize historically grounded and sustained transregional social formations—recognized by some scholars as *partial groupings*. “Partial groupings” refers to groups or networks of individuals who are geographically dispersed, and connected across geopolitical divides and long distances, and yet nevertheless are embedded in particular localities and formed in relationship to ongoing circulations and exchanges over time (Ho, 2014). In the case of the Rifa'i dervish networks, these are made of long-lasting personal interactions, movements, and historically shaped imaginings. What are the building textures of the Rifa'i networks? And how have these textures enabled circulation and mobility across the geopolitical divides in West Asia over the last century? Three textures of connectivity are especially crucial for addressing the two questions: the sonic, graphic, and genealogical (Henig, 2016).

In his Chitral ethnography, Marsden (2005, 2007) discussed the significance of popular traditional musical performances (*ištok*) as well as complex poetic culture for the ways local Chitralis engage with the Persianate cultural repertoires derived from the Balkans-to-Bengal complex. Such repertoires are equally important for the Rifa'i disciples for their self-articulation and self-construction in regard to what it means to be a Muslim. Indeed, music is a vital means by which Rifa'i dervishes built and sustain connections with their geographically distanced counterparts across West Asia. Rifa'i create, share, and exchange diverse sonic media on the Internet and as portable objects on DVDs, CDs, and USBs, all of which flow within the circuit of dervish lodges (Henig, 2014, 2016). There is communication between the lodges in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Egypt, Kosovo, and Turkey via Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp applications, and weekly updates about *zikr* (*dhikhr*) performances and videos are uploaded online by some of the lodges and shared instantly with others. On their phones, tablets, or laptops the disciples watch videos of other Rifa'i groups or listen to MP3 songs of reverence

downloaded or recorded by themselves in multiple language registers, namely Albanian, Bosnian, and Turkish. The Rifa'i dervishes both, in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, further engage with these sonic forms through the work of translation into their respective national tongues.

The capacity to operate and mediate between multiple linguistic registers widely used and spoken across West Asia is characteristic of Afghan traders, as much as of the Rifa'i dervishes. In case of Henig's fieldwork, this capacity was instantiated in graphic objects and texts that circulate among dervish lodges. Many scholars have observed that traveling texts are a common feature of mobile social groups. It is often the “textual transmigration” that has allowed mobile and partial communities to reproduce themselves across time and space (Ho, 2006, p. 117; Thum, 2014). Among the Rifa'i dervishes, textual transmigration refers to the forms and practices of circulation of texts, documents, and other graphic objects, and how they mediate relations between Rifa'i lodges across West Asia, past and present. The forms of textual transmigration interconnecting the Rifa'i lodges transregionally are manifold. Books, calligraphy, hagiographies, religious manuals, and other graphic objects such as *silsila* (genealogical chain of succession), certificates of deputyship (*hilafet*) granted by a dervish sheikh and written in the languages of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex, including Albanian, Arabic, Bosnian, Persian, and Turkish circulate, are regularly exchanged and translated.

The circulation of spiritual genealogies, genealogical writing contained in hagiographies, and genealogical thought have all been an important social glue for connecting spatially dispersed and historically distant Muslim groups. In the case of the Rifa'i brotherhood, the forms and practice of genealogical thinking helped the Rifa'i dervishes endure and resurface despite geopolitical turmoil and ideological bans imposed on them over the last century. Moreover, genealogical modes of connectivity are closely intertwined with sonic and graphic modes. In Rifa'i lodges, framed copies of *idžazet* (certificates of sheikhood) and *silsila* are displayed on the walls of all rooms in which the sheikhs receive guests. In case of the Bosnian node, new songs of reverence (*ilahija*), sung in Albanian, Bosnian, or Turkish, articulate and celebrate newly forged linkages between the brotherhood, its mother lodge, its sheikhs, and other notable lodges and sheikhs across West Asia. The songs of reverence further convey stories of genealogical links and relations between the prophet, Sufi saints, and local dervish figures, no less important practice of *ziyara* (travel).

Indeed, further to the sonic, graphic, and genealogical modes of connectivity, we need to add also the forms of pilgrimage, and related modes of travel, as well as the textures of connectivity these engender. Despite the emergence of the nation states borders, and hampered opportunities for mobility across West Asia due to numerous geopolitical vicissitudes in particular during the Cold

War, and military insurgencies in the post Cold War era, the practice of ziyara to the tombs of Sufi masters and notable Rifa'i sheikhs continues to be a vital texture in (re-)production of West Asian sacred geographies. This was, for example, materialized during Henig's fieldwork in the movement of disciples across the West Asia region as much as in pieces of cloth brought from pilgrimages to Karbala and Mashhad and imbued with blessing. Following the pilgrimages, the cloth was subsequently cut into three pieces and sent to other lodges, intertwining the lodges in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Turkey and the sacred places in Iraq and Iran within the Balkans-to-Bengal realm.

## Conclusion

It is undeniable that the geopolitical ruptures in the past century have disrupted many layers of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex, and threads of connectivity across West Asia. Rigid national boundaries and the forms of culture politics and distinction these have created have resulted in altering the contemporary relevance of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex. New forms of avowedly "global" religion that have little space for Sufi-influenced forms of thought and experience have had similar implications. Yet Ahmed's attempt to conceptualize this vast space as a coherent part of the Muslim world is attractive intellectually precisely because of the extent to which it is divorced from the circumstances of the present day. As we have sought to show in this article, the forms of connectivity and exchange central to authors such as Ahmed or Sood while attenuated have never been simply extinguished. Indeed, if it is impossible to talk of a grandiose Balkans-to-Bengal complex in the present-day world of the nation-state, then our consideration of two very different type of networks or "mobile societies" suggest that the category West Asia brings into view historically important forms of connectivity. In particular, West Asia focuses attention on continuities and transformations in historically durable patterns of connections between parts of the world too often narrowly distinguished as belonging to South and Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. We have shown the types of networks that connect and fold such regions to one another, and how these arise out of connective histories. We have also sought to emphasize the extent to which they bear the imprint of transregional dynamics that have been activated in more recent times by multiple geopolitical processes, including the Cold War and subsequent dynamics. The Central Asian émigrés families explored in this article, for example, point toward iterations of older patterns of connectivity in the Balkans-to-Bengal context. They also demonstrate the transregional implications of modern historical events, most obviously the Bolshevik revolution, in simultaneously narrowing this geographic space while also insuring the future relevance of aspects of it.

Historical scholarship on the transregional dynamics of Muslim life in Asia has also brought attention to the capacities of actors to inhabit and fill this world, be these capacities manifested as the ability of merchants to craft letters suitable for people from diverse communities or to engage with scholarship in multiple languages. We have also brought attention to the multilingual competencies of Central Asian émigré traders, and the technological savvy nature of the Balkan Sufis who are able to use new technologies to forge connections between contexts divided by Cold War boundaries. Although the Balkans-to-Bengal complex and Islamicate Eurasia no longer constitute an overarching framework of reference of Muslim lives across this expansive arena today, the textures of circulation entwining multiple fringes of West Asia together have not dissolved. The examples we have provided of Sufis as well as traders suggest some of the ways in which West Asia might be deployed as a transregional geographical scale that brings attentions to the interactions between historical and more recent forms of connectedness across Muslim Asia. Far from suggesting that West Asia offers an inherently more authentic lens for considering Muslim life in the region, our contention is that it brings attention to aspects of inter-regional dynamics that have tended to remain concealed from view.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the University of Sussex International Research Partnerships Fund for funding the Inter-Asian Research Dynamics network within the framework of which the conference on which this Special Issue is based was organized. We would also like to thank Paul Anderson, Diana Ibañez Tirado, and Till Mostowlansky for providing helpful comments and criticisms on earlier versions of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The research upon which this article is based would not have been possible without funding from The European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program 669 132—TRODITIES, "Yiwu Trust, Global Traders and Commodities in a Chinese International City."

## Notes

1. On the historical emergence of the concept of "the Muslim world," see Aydin (2017).
2. Although we focus in this article on trading and Sufi connections, there is a huge body of scholarship conceptualizing other forms of transregional connectivities in Muslim societies, including the circulation of legal texts (Gould, 2015) or the centrifugal and centripetal effects of educational hubs on shaping Muslim politics and thought (e.g., Alavi, 2015; Farquahr, 2017).
3. Marsden has not been able to visit either city but was able to speak to merchants based in them during the course of visits they made to Jeddah.

4. For another example of land-based North-South Muslim circulations between India and China, see Thum (2017).

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