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Introduction to 'Islamic politics and the imaginative: intangibility and critique'

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ABSTRACT

This introduction examines the theoretical and methodological challenges of studying imaginative elements in Islamic politics while proposing new frameworks for understanding intangible realms in political formation. Moving beyond traditional approaches that either dismiss imagination as irrational or reduce Islamic politics to textual analysis, we argue for engaging with imagination as a critical interface between material and metaphysical domains. Drawing on recent anthropological scholarship on affect, dreams, and aspirations, alongside classical Islamic concepts like *takhayyul*, this special issue offers novel approaches to studying Islamic political formations. The collected papers demonstrate how imagination operates as both a realm of critique and a space for political becoming while challenging established disciplinary boundaries between history and anthropology. By engaging with diverse forms of knowledge production – from classical Islamic scholarship to contemporary political movements – this issue contributes to broader discussions about decolonizing academic knowledge while avoiding the trap of reifying new canons. Our intervention suggests ways to understand Islamic politics beyond Eurocentric preoccupations with liberalism and secularism while maintaining critical perspectives on power relations within Islamic traditions themselves.

KEYWORDS

Islam; imaginaries; historicity; political imagination

When Charles Stewart foregrounded 'dreams' as a concern of anthropology and an integral part of historical consciousness, it was quite novel to think about dreams as a realm of ethnographic inquiry, let alone to connect it to historicity and historical imagination (Stewart 1997, 2003, 2017). The significance of intangible realms in the formation, communication, and propagation of collective unconscious processes led a number of theorists of psychoanalysis and subjectivity to fundamentally challenge the inherent atheism embedded in anthropological scholarship (Ewing 1994). Instead, they helped us understand how normative systems, such as religion, gender, nationalism, or distributions of power, such as class and race, cannot be the sole determinants of subjectivation processes nor of identities (Luhmann 2006; McNay 2008; Moore 2011; Ortner 2005; Pile 2008).

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Poststructuralist approaches have focused on ethical practices, including Islam, not as imposed by one's own society or social group (Faubion 2001) but as a product of complex dynamics. To capture this complexity beyond discourse alone, in the last fifteen years anthropologists have turned their scholarly attention to agentive (Mahmood 2001, 2004; Sehlirkoglu 2018), imaginative, emotive (Davies and Spencer 2010; Hage 2009; Lutz and White 1986; Ozyurek 2018), and affective (Fadil 2009; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Stewart 2007; Winegar 2012) aspects of self-formation in order to ethnographically study the areas that are not immediately tangible, such as dreams (Edgar 2006; Ewing 1990; Gonzalez-Vazquez 2014; Mittermaier 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Stewart 2017); hopes (Beyer 2015; Elliot 2016; Jansen 2016; Reed 2011; Schielke 2015a), and aspirations (Chua 2014; Liberatore 2016; Schielke 2009) and thus evade systems of control (Moore 2011). Historians like Elias (2012) have increasingly tracked the development of ontologies of the imaginal and the suprasensory in Islamic history, not only in the realm of philosophical outputs, but in the way they coalesced through the back-door of practice in the arts and sciences, from visual arts to alchemy. Meanwhile, Amira Mittermaier (2011) fuses concerns with selfhood and affect to premises that are assumed by her interlocutors – ones that resonate with contemporary post-humanist thought, though with roots far more profound, in everyday Islamicate process philosophy. That is, she moves beyond self-building to raise the possibility that imaginability is an interface between the immanent domain of the human, and an actually-existing metaphysical 'outside.' This interface opens up unique possibilities to untangle the power relations between humans or between humans and the material. Extending beyond dreams, Taneja (2017), Pandolfo (2018) and others moved in similar directions. Much of this line of inquiry has been captured in Vicini and di Puppo's (2024) agenda-setting introduction to a *HAU* special issue on Muslim ontologies, which seeks to draw out how what they call, collectively, 'vertical' knowledge can reorient the fundamental assumptions in anthropology as a discipline. The articles collectively break down barriers between existential, presential knowledge and the rational-cognitive, the immanent and the transcendent.

One question remaining, however, is that not of ontology or ontologies themselves, but their situation in a pluriversal world, in which webs of material, affective, and cognitive relations are not closed and in which they co-constitute each other on multiple scales. This is a political question. It is at this juncture that the collection of the articles in this special issue offers a systematic study on the imaginative, conceived as the interface of the human with a range of possible 'outsides', that has been a route toward a diverse body of Islamic politics and political formations.

In so doing, this issue takes stock of the above trends and asks how to take them further. It offers a perspective that does not reproduce Orientalist tropes of emotion and imagination as 'irrational', tropes that existing critical scholarship counteract. At the same time this perspective is able to move beyond Eurocentric preoccupations with liberalism and secularism in discussions on Islamic cosmopolitics, and modes of knowing that are textured by them even in critique. It aims to provide a sound theoretical ground on which to delineate more plural ways that Islamic politics (broadly construed) over the past centuries have forged imaginative landscapes and vice-versa. Further, this issue also proposes a strong critique to multiple threads in postcolonial thinking that centralizes Islamic canon as a critique to the Western thinking, as well as efforts at decolonial scholarship that end up centralizing their own new canon. This special issue thus voices

the attempts that aim to provide an *internal* critique to Islam and the Islamic canon without reifying Islam and the relations of power that become embedded within it (Sehlikoglu and Kurt 2024). Methodologically, it is always easier to study canonical Islam, whether in the form of piety movements, or in the analysis of fatwas, for instance. More recently anthropology has tried to capture ‘everyday Islam’, an intervention that undeniably expanded the textual focus; but even then, until very recently, the ‘everyday’ becomes translated through a set of tools derived from Western lineages, such as critical theory. It is at this juncture we choose to remind ourselves that there are times when we anthropologists are asked or expected to think through the politics of ontology rather than ontology itself.

This special issue curates a unique collection of ethnographic and historical research, each one of which critically develops tools that break boundaries between the disciplines of history and anthropology. This is intrinsic to the enterprise. Building on that point of departure we provide the theoretical scope with which to inquire into the metaphysical politics of historical imagination. *Takhayyul* is a heuristic tool and a critical interface (Sehlikoglu 2025), that is, allows one to explore the metaepistemology of history, working through silences and absences beyond the scope of positivist methods and sedimented archives (Polat 2025). In short, the concrete reality of images and abstractions (Marks 2016) in *takhayyul*, as Sehlikoglu points out, makes us integrate virtuality into the ‘reality’ of the historiographical field. While at the same time, doing that gives us a much more fertile set of ways to understand relationships between past, present, and future, between the durable and the contingent or the abstract-conceptual and the concrete, and between the present and the absent.

Through its development among thinkers like al-Fārābī, ibn Sīnā, al-Ghazālī, ibn ‘Arabī, and ‘percolating’ (Ahmed 2015, 31; Berkey 2010, 57; Elias 2012, 219) into everyday conventional knowledge through practice in grassroots sufism or arts and artisanship, *takhayyul* is a category that refuses division into epistemology and ontology (Elias 2012). It is premised on human constitution from beyond the human, from an actually-existing plane of imaginability. With that the case, as several of the essays in this issue highlight, it focuses on the permeable spectrum of the abstract ‘outside – what has been called the *lā-makān*, or *nā-kojā-ābād*, or *‘ālam al-mithāl*, and so on; any metaphysical realm beyond space-time – and the concrete and particular realm in which temporal politics is situated. This means that imaginative landscapes are bound neither by space nor by time in expected ways, and the way that they disrupt the historical time of the colonial modern is a key issue. Shahzad Bashir (2014, 2020), among others, has noted the politics of multiple chronotopia present in ‘Islamic’ genres of literature; all the essays in this special issue discuss the politics of ontology within time, while many reflect on the supra-temporal, imaginal metaphysics of temporal politics directly. *Takhayyul*, then, takes as its starting point that imagination holds nearly infinite possible temporalities, which breaks and moves beyond linearities like causality or teleology. Centering imaginative histories and histories of imagination allow one to critically explore and to fabulate (Hartman 2008) what is meaningful and absurd, epic and tragic, visceral and ephemeral about the pasts and futures conjured up in the present (Benjamin [1968] 2019; Koselleck 2018). The black histories and critiques of the Islamicate world now being written by a generation of new scholars reiterate the ethical and methodological imperative to pay closer attention to what and who

awaits us between the 'real and the *hayali*, the known and the fabled"(Wingham 2021, 177); that is, in the realm of *takhayyul*.

Beyond the canon

Due to their relationships with intangibility, the imaginative landscapes of Islamic politics have been less frequently captured in social scientific methods even if they have formed a realm of creative critique in the margins of what has solidified, since the nineteenth century, as canonical Islam (see Ahmed 2015 for a general account, Caron 2016) for a regional meta-history; see also Bloch (2018), Campagna (2018), Marks (2018) for philosophical attempts at leveraging Islamic 'imaginative' counter-traditions against modern/Cartesian thinking). Such pedagogical concerns and disciplinary constraints lead the scholars in this collection to reach beyond and give words to untranslatable, inexplicable, illegible phenomena that animate Islamic political becoming. And they do so not just from classical/canonical textual perspectives, but also from logics produced collectively, in everyday interactions, historical silences, and conceptual aporias beyond the realm of language: what has sometime been called 'felt theory' (Million, 2008, 2009).

The papers in this special issue both address lineages of critique in, and of, Islamic politics from societies across Eurasia and provide fine-grained investigations into the imaginative forces that create them. They interrogate the other-worldly, to address subaltern dreams, alterity, the power of visions, and cosmologies of colonial subjects that escape imperial constraint. They ask: what lineages of analysis and critique can be discerned from within Muslim societies? What is the form (poetic, aesthetic, musical, artistic, textual, oral, etc.) and content of these critiques? What sorts of worlds, universes, ontologies, and cosmologies do such critique gesture toward? From what sources might imaginative processes and critique draw, sources that lay beyond the tools of the Westernized University (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018)? How can we situate the critique of Islam within Islam and explore the question of dissent, reform, and revolution beyond the remit of Euro-centric concepts and concerns?

Through this intervention, we hope to expand analytical and critical analyses of Islamic formations which often become known to Western scholarship only in the form of political movements. Might the intangible constitute a realm that is affected by, but potentially exists in between, or even exceeds, layers of coloniality that are sedimented onto individual and collective subjects (Anzaldúa 1987; Bennabi 2024)? How do we excavate, in the present, or in the archives, the colonial and postcolonial imaginaries of the rejected, marginalised, silenced?

Undoing disciplinary boundaries

These conceptual interventions are made possible by approaching both history and anthropology with a continuous reflexive approach. This allows us to connect the subjects' imaginative engagements and connections mean for our disciplines. This approach has proven to be a more meaningful one than pushing for separate studies of imaginary realms. There is something *seemingly* transhistorical about the intangible, the social

subconscious, and realms that eludes the methodological conventions in social sciences. Yet, various scholars of Islam – both in the present-day academy, and throughout Islamic history, as we show – have pointed toward the two-way processes by which the embodied and the subjective shape the imaginal with which they form a continuum, thus placing the imaginal within the scope of history as a field. And, the imaginative is understood, transferred, and transcommunicated in historically-existing images, within and across social groups with shared histories – shared by friends, neighbours, rivals, and enemies (Sehlikoglu 2021).

Traditionally, the easiest way to apply the methodologies of social sciences to the study of Islam and Muslims over time has been to focus on texts and textual analysis. In the past four decades, this textual study has gone some way to reducing Orientalist stereotypes of the ‘irrational’ Muslim, but in so doing, it has tended to highlight only specific kinds of logics. Reinhardt Kosseleck and his edifice of conceptual history, especially in relation to his attention to the unsayable and the unthinkable in conceptual history, can attest to the methodological imperative that the field of history engage with *takhayyul* as a heuristic tool (Sehlikoglu 2025), with which to explore the unsayable and the unthinkable of textual, archival history (Koselleck 2018). This is partly why an important proportion of the methodological challenge in capturing the intangible has been developed by feminist scholars: it is a response to practices that recognise data only when they are in particular forms and formats, dominant forms of knowledge about Islam in the social sciences ended up figuring mostly the masculine Islam, the form that is already dominant (Ahmed 2015; Zaman 2020). Since religious knowledge in women’s circles had often been carried in oral forms which are easily neglected by the contemporary methodologies of Western scholarship, feminists shifted the scholarly focus away from textual knowledge (Fadil and Fernando, 2015; Schielke, 2015b; Sehlikoglu, 2018). Black feminist scholars, on the other hand, have demonstrated the methodological rigour and analytic clarity needed to explore the semantics of history and historical texts, recovering the unsayable and the unthinkable of pasts and futures (Hartman 2022; Ltifi 2021).

What this special issue is interested in doing, however, goes beyond capturing what is not textual. Firstly, it is important to note that even when textual knowledge is carried into Western scholarship, the subterranean forms of knowledge that added to those textual forms over time are still neglected in contemporary knowledge (Caron 2016; Elias 2012; Shaikh 2012; Zaman 2020). The dynamics of this process are important. Secondly and more importantly still, the intangible is not only methodologically challenging to capture in scholarly research, it is also analytically strenuous to lay out.

Therefore, this special issue provides a framework for ways in which scholars can focus on forms of Islamic political self- and world-makings and domains of life, that fall beyond the methodological scopes we are expected to prioritise and work within: the ‘messy interfaces’ of human, text, historical sedimentations, and ‘outsides’; the forms of knowledge that individuals create and understand at scales that are beyond the immediately readable, listen-able, and – without the right archival or ethnographic skills – observable. In the process, it creates provocations within history and anthropology as disciplines by drawing on embodied knowledge and felt theory from the Muslim world, in addition to texts, to push on those things which sit at the horizons of these disciplines’ scopes.

Outline

To theorise the ethnographic data explored in the field research or to address the conceptual gaps discovered during historical analysis on Islamic formations, the papers in this collection read classical conceptions of imagination and contemporary discourses side by side. As Shahab Ahmed notes, as do Caron (2024), Meyer (2025), and Majoka and Ewing (2024) in this issue, scholars like Ghazali, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Arabi were practitioners as well as scholars, and classical notions of imagination expressed by them, and others, were inextricable with everyday institutions and lived practice across interconnected Muslim societies (Sehlikoglu 2024).

As a shared concern, the papers offer ways to understand contemporary imaginative references in dialog with classical texts that theorise processes of imagination in society. While Sehlikoglu (2025), Caron (2024), and Meyer (2025) address this dialogue directly, Majoka & Ewing, Bahçeci (2024), and Polat propose ways to trace processes of imagination in Islamic politics historically and socially or excavate historical sedimentations of societies' imaginative landscapes. Caron and Meyer both demonstrate the entanglements between the past and the future in the present, as they are continuously remade and renegotiated through the prism of violence and death. Polat further excavates a historical moment in the *takhayyul* of the ummah, the notion of a Muslim nation, which continues to have parallels in Bahçeci's ethnographic work on Northern Cyprus, and the contemporary politics of religiosity/secularity therein. Meyer and Bahçeci explore, to very different effects, the sediments of memory and subjectivity in the making of Islamic modernity while attending to the practices of remembrance and self-making through singular characters such as Sheikh Nazim and Ahmad Dahlan. Majoka & Ewing and Caron chart the emergence of new subjectivities that refuse binary accommodations and arbitrary boundaries drawn between gendered bodies, im/material worlds, and racialised spectacles of death and dying. Above all, however, these essays trace the politics of ontology over time. Bahçeci's and Polat's accounts highlight the abjection and, to varying degrees, the destruction of earlier ways of being in the face of the historicist nation-state formation; Polat's account further draws attention to the simultaneous consolidation of other ways of being not through the pathways of cognition, but through the material and human 'infrastructures' (Meyer, this issue) conjured by migration. If terms like *takhayyul* (or *tasawwur*, for different authors) index an imaginative process centered on the relational interplay of concrete images, then what of the material *takhayyul* involved in the interplay of bodies, as much as that in the imaginability of juridical-legal space? Karwan, the poet at the heart of Caron's essay in this issue, asks a similar question about the physical environment amidst both physical and imaginal destruction. In sum, these essays invite us to think further about the possibilities that a reengagement with the imaginal holds for both history and anthropology, while prompting us to keep these questions grounded and situated in the political worlds we live in.

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