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BOOK REVIEWS

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Michael O'Sullivan. *No Birds of Passage: A History of Gujarati Muslim Business Communities, 1800–1975*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2023.

Reviewed by Tanaka Tetsuya*

In *No Birds of Passage*, Michael O'Sullivan explores the history of the Bohras, Khojas, and Memons—three Muslim business communities from Gujarat and neighboring regions in western India—from the post-Mughal nineteenth century through the period of the British Empire to the end of British colonial rule, the Partition, and the late twentieth century. It also analyzes the economic success and consequent distributional conflicts, inequality, and wealth disparity within these communities, which are characterized by their organizational institutions called *jamaats*. In discussing the discursive commercial and kinship network of the Bohras, Khojas, and Memons, the book looks into the significance of the middle power, i.e., the unique intermediate position that these groups attained in the public sphere through close relations with the state authorities under Pax Britannica between the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean, East Africa, and the South China Sea. It provides a highly nuanced and novel insight into correlations between Islamic studies and the development of capitalism by interpreting the transition of *jamaats* from precolonial religious and caste-linked institutions into "corporate Islam" (corporate caste institutions).

Literature on the Bohras, Khojas, and Memons in South Asian studies has often focused on the Shia Ismailis in these communities for their particularly "esoteric" character, although there are also Sunni and Shia non-Ismailis among them—as this book notes. The literature also examines the communities' social customs, which resemble Hindu customs in some respects and are said to be derived from their mythical origin of conversion from Hinduism to Islam across western India. For such reasons, the communities' Muslimness is often questioned by orthodox understandings of Islam, and their legal exceptionalism, which deviates from Islamic law, has been emphasized in previous studies (Khan 1997; Blank 2001; Nejima 2002).

O'Sullivan provides a refreshing and significant description of the three Gujarati Muslim

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merchant castes with his remarkable linguistic skills. Drawing on Arabic, Gujarati, Ottoman Turkish, Persian, and Urdu sources, he pieces together sporadic accounts and scattered information about these communities into a comprehensive history of the Muslim world during the period of the British Empire. In doing so, he concludes that the communities' economic prosperity and middle power did not contravene the ethics or laws of Islam. By interpreting their *jamaats* as corporate Islam, he tries to demonstrate the correlation between capitalism and Islam in modern history. The book's conclusions clearly disprove previous studies questioning the Muslimness of the three groups, who provide historical proof that seeking commercial gain did not fall short of Islamic truths in the capitalist economy of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hence, the book is a must-read not only for scholars of area studies and global history but also for readers interested in the economic history of capitalism and religious studies.

The first part of the book, which contains four chapters, reveals the history of the Bohras, Khojas, and Memons from 1800 to 1914, during which corporate Islam and the middle power emerged. Chapter 1 elucidates how these communities mediated with the East India Company and Indian state authorities to establish the middle power, which supported their economic prosperity in post-Mughal Bombay from 1800 to 1850. Chapter 2 describes the spread of the Gujarati Muslim trading communities as business capitalists, while closely analyzing their legal exceptionalism. It explains how conflicts within and outside the *jamaats* from 1850 to 1880 were arbitrated and judged in the colonial courts of the British Empire. Chapter 3 is based on the contentious debates in *jamaats* over religious authority in commercial networks centering on the Bohra, Khoja, and Memon entrepreneurs of the 1880s, including the communities' perceived sectarian diversity and political unreliability. Chapter 4 discusses how the communities engaged in the outright politicization of business in colonial India and the British Empire in the first decade of the twentieth century—the prime example being the Khoja Muhammad Ali Jinnah, leader of the All-India Muslim League and the first governor-general of Pakistan. However, Gujarati Muslims were not politically monolithic. Many of them joined the Swadeshi movement and devoted themselves to the anti-British movement as Indian Muslims.

The second part of the book, which contains three chapters, discusses the history of the Gujarati Muslim business communities from 1914 to 1947, explaining how corporate Islam faced a series of obstacles from the interwar and wartime colonial order. After 1914, as the scope of free trade narrowed, these groups found it difficult to remain apolitical despite their relative economic success during the interwar period. Chapter 5, which covers the period from the Balkan Wars to the Great Depression—1912 to 1933—describes the process through which these communities became politicized in colonial India and other colonies of the British Empire. Chapter 6, on the newly developed Indian Muslim nationalism, reveals that the Bohras', Khojas', and Memons' endowment as unassailable private property vested in the

jamaats came under close scrutiny. The communities were obliged to participate in discussions on how to transform their endowment for the public good of the imagined Muslim community, and this chapter discusses their resistance and response to the successive amendments of the Wakf Acts from 1923 to 1935. Chapter 7 describes how the Gujarati Muslim merchant castes survived the end of the Raj between 1933 and 1947. The Partition, the political separation of Pakistan from India, had an immense impact on the diasporic groups of Bohras, Khojas, and Memons not only in cities in British India but also in other places in Asia and East Africa. Their choice of whether to remain in Pakistan or India, or to relocate outside the Indian subcontinent, was strongly influenced by the political situation in each country. The number of people from these communities who moved to Pakistan, which was intended to be the homeland of South Asian Muslims, was limited, and even those who migrated were not trusted as "Muslims" by other citizens of Pakistan. Those who chose to live outside Pakistan tended to be viewed as hostile since they had kept good relations with the former colonial authorities.

Finally, Chapter 8 discusses how the Gujarati Muslim communities acclimated and responded to the new postcolonial norms prescribed by the places where they settled as nation-states were formed in Asia and East Africa between 1947 and 1975 with the end of colonial rule. It also discusses how they adapted and responded to the growing xenophobia, especially after 1965.

To highlight the academic significance of this book, especially for readers of *Southeast Asian Studies*, let us return to its title, *No Birds of Passage*. The author strongly disagrees with the allegation that the Bohras, Khojas, and Memons were "birds of passage" in the settlements where they migrated as part of the Indian diaspora during and after colonial rule. In this, he agrees with Aga Khan III—the imam of the Ismaili Khojas—who in 1937 told his people in East Africa, "[y]ou are not birds of passage. Your future is tied with Kenya, Tanganyika, Zanzibar, and Uganda" (p. 9). O'Sullivan provides records showing that Memons from Gujarat were engaged in commerce in Rangoon. For instance, Chapter 4 mentions a Gujarati Memon entrepreneur named Haji Sulaiman who settled in Burma; the population of Memons grew rapidly in Rangoon in 1880. Chapter 5 discusses how a Memon named Mullah Ahmad Daud Efendi was selected to be an Ottoman consul general in Rangoon in 1913. Despite being close to the British authorities in Rangoon, he changed his stance to support the Turkish throne against Britain during the First World War. Chapter 6 contains an interesting story on the intense discussions on the transfer of inalienable pious endowments (*waqf*, *awqāf*) of the Surti Memon Mosque in Rangoon to the banks in the Memons' *jamaat*. These sporadic accounts, written in various languages, were discovered by O'Sullivan, and it will be excellent if his work is followed up by researchers with multilingual skills. If more such accounts are discovered, I will be fully convinced that these communities were "no birds of passage" in Rangoon. This information is new to me. I had some understanding about the untold lives of the Memon diaspora in Rangoon, but I did not

know how significant they were in the modern history of Burma. I would have liked to see further exploration of Gujarati Muslims migrating to Southeast Asia. However, this does not detract from the value of this book.

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