Weismann, I., Sedgwick, M. J. and Mårtensson, U. (eds.)


The Islamic past is frequently used in potent ways to support and mobilize worldviews among Muslims and Muslim leaders in the present. By adopting a conceptual framework of myth and memory, this edited collection brings a welcome, coherent perspective to probe its central question of how the Islamic past is exploited to construct or delegitimize social orders in the present. A brief introduction to the volume outlines the theoretical perspective and helps to frame ten individual studies that collectively explore forms of myth and memory in relation to Islam and globalization. While the case studies each deal with very different contexts and subjects—one of the volume’s strengths—the overall theme is often the relevance of information technologies in formations and transformations of myth and collective memory associated with Islam and particularly with Islamic resurgence. The studies examine the formation and impact of myths and memories in both national and global struggles over religious belief, reaching from jihadists to liberal intellectuals in Muslim majority and non-majority contexts. Compression is the main globalization process in focus here, and media technology the facilitator of this process.

The editors contend that “myths and memories provide both the symbols and the instruments around which revolve the global cultural politics of contemporary Islamic movements, states, and of Muslim society at large” (8). It is easy to see the relevance of this approach in regard to social struggles that summon myths of Islamic history and origin that typically center on the Prophet and the early caliphs, and in contested places, such as al-Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem. The theoretical starting point for discussing these issues is Roland Barthes’ notion of myth as an ideology or speech, and Bruce Lincoln’s idea that “myths not only reflect, encode, and help replicate established structures, but may also be employed as effective instruments of struggle against them” (5). Social collective memory is conceptualized according to Maurice Halbwachs’s theory of group remembering and forgetting in self-representation, and the concept of cultural memory shaped by multi-generational tradition as developed by Jan and Aleida Assmann. This is augmented with Hobsbawm’s and Ranger’s emphasis on the cultural politics of memory and subsequent critique that all classes and minorities assert their own versions of the past. The emphasis then attends to how myth and social memory are shaped by, and serve, needs in the present. In this volume, this translates into a background of political contestation and struggles over belief, rights, and status. Some chapters bring these and other theoretical
points into scrutiny and productively modify them. As a collection, the discussions show that Islamic myth and memory are closely intertwined; myths take the form of historical figures, origins, and everyday narratives that are deployed in a process of constructing, negotiating, and transforming collective memories.

The chapters are organized in three parts: the past in the present, sacred places and persons, and preaching. The opening chapter explores the usefulness of the term “Arab-Islamic popular historical memory”. To capture a broad sense of popular memory, it examines numbers of internet searches for historical figures. In Sedgwick’s interpretation, the data show that Arab-Islamic popular historical memory is mainly national, then Islamic, then globally influenced. Prophet Muhammad topped some lists, followed by other widely shared Islamic icons and Western icons. Non-Arab icons included Hitler, Napoleon, and Ghandi among others, suggesting a concern with liberation. The use of historical myths is further explored in Turkey and China. A romanticizing and nostalgic view of the Ottoman past forged in Turkey, well-illustrated by the author Ayverdi (1905–1993) and the Nurcu movement, is shown to be mythical discourse that forms dialectically as critique of the Kemalist ideological break with the Ottoman past, traditional ways of life and imitation of ‘Westerners’. It challenges the dominant narrative, not as a discourse of restoration, but to promote symbols of a political vision for the future. It is also a flexible myth in adapting to influence under religious nationalism and more recently in a discourse of tolerance. Similarly, Zhang Chengzhi uses religious and political symbols to imagine a past and to construct a present in the historical context of Maoist ideology and Islam in China. Zhang’s work has glorified the Muslim Chinese past, especially Jahrrinya sacrifice and resistance, while presenting an anti-Western worldview that ensures his mainstream Chinese (communist) patriotism. Here Tu takes issue with Bruce Lincoln’s work on myth-making as politically narrow and over-stressing ideological struggle. Instead, myth in Zhang’s work, his reconversion to Islam, and subsequent anti-Western political position, is understood by considering his life experiences, his view of conflicts between the West and the Islamic world. Mårtensson unpacks the formation of myth in the context of global legal debates about religion, authority, freedom of expression, and criticizing state power in a chapter that traces the public myth surrounding Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses*. The novel is an exegesis of the myth concerning the Prophet’s satanic temptation also found in Tabari’s early medieval *History of the Messengers and the Kings*, but the public myth of Rushdie’s work has acted to obscure the ancient Islamic notion of critique of boundless state power and the right to express doubt as part of faith.