

## Beyond the decolonial?

Noxolo, Patricia; Hamis, Safiya

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# Beyond the decolonial? Decolonial and Muslim feminist perspectives

Patricia Noxolo  and Safiya Hamis

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, UK

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## Abstract

Sidaway's article is provocative in its agenda to go beyond the decolonial. In this commentary, we consider the implications of this move in relation to decolonial geographies and Muslim feminism. We conclude by considering questions of identity and reflexivity that arise from decolonial and feminist perspectives.

## Keywords

black geographies, decolonial, feminist geographies, Muslim geographies, Muslim feminist geographies

This commentary reflects upon the relation between decolonial geographies and Muslim feminism in response to Sidaway's (2022) article, 'Beyond the Decolonial: Critical Muslim Geographies'. The real heft of Sidaway's provocation to go beyond the decolonial is felt towards the end of the article, where he unpacks the thoroughly ambivalent position of Islam in relation to coloniality. Most notably, he proposes that the starting point of Muslim geographies is not to be the wealthy Middle East nations that are often seen as central to global Islam (e.g., Saudi Arabia or Qatar) but the more complex geographies of the places where the majority of the Ummah actually lives (e.g., Sub-Saharan Africa). Sidaway recognises that an Africa-centred Muslim geographies would have to consider Islam (historically at least) as both a colonising and a colonised force, expanding decolonial theory by keeping a steady focus on non-European imperialism. Beyond this, however, a geographical engagement with Islam as it is lived in Africa has to mean a more serious engagement with African scholarship than most current global

decolonial scholarship enables, so that 'Africa' is not caught in the 'colonial trap' (Mekgwe, 2007: 173) of being defined as simply post-colonised, by Islamic or any other forces, or of being constructed simplistically, through colonialist knowledge systems. Some argue that African geographies is not yet decolonised as a field (see Daley and Murrey, 2022). Sidaway mentions the classic writing of Ali Mazrui (1986), who always insisted that 'Africanness', as a continental identity, is an 'invention' from a triple heritage: Islam, the Indigenous heritage, and the West. To find itself, the continent had not only to accept but also to transcend that heritage (Ndlovu-Gatsheni Sabelo, 2015). What we are arguing here is that, even if Muslim geographies is to be minimally decolonial, much more so if it claims to go beyond the decolonial, it cannot be yet another intellectual land grab for Africa.

## Corresponding author:

Patricia Noxolo, School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK.

Email: [p.e.p.noxolo@bham.ac.uk](mailto:p.e.p.noxolo@bham.ac.uk)

The larger decolonial point we are making is about whether knowledge production should still be constructed in colonialist ways, as a set of fields that must be mapped and claimed. Paradoxically, although it is crucial to define Muslim geographies by Islamic concepts, Sidaway points out that *din* does not claim itself as a religion, but as a more holistic recurrence, like rain. The logic of Muslim geographies cannot therefore start from conventional western academic colonialist practices of staking out a field of 'Muslim geographies'. If Islamic scholarship is not just the object of study (as in religious or ethnic studies), but is its grounding, is it possible to avoid the violences (the epistemicides, occlusions, and rebrandings) that are likely to be the consequences of staking out a geographical field called 'Muslim geographies'?

Complexity and inclusion are two ways to push back against potential violences. A very good example can be associated with the way Islamic feminist scholars deconstruct patriarchy from the religion to bring about a different understanding of Islam and the religion. Islamic feminism is a feminist discourse and practice within an Islamic paradigm. Islamic feminism derives its mandates and understanding from the Qur'an, seeking rights and justice for men and women in the totality of their existence (Badran, 2009). Islamic feminism involves more than just women; it involves creating an egalitarian society which encompasses men, women, animals, and environment as well. These Islamic feminist scholars are re-reading the Qur'an and other Islamic texts systematically, exploring the textual basis for alternative methodologies and readings, and making the case for equality, justice, and the creation of egalitarian societies (e.g., Barlas, 2004; Mernissi, 1991; Mir-Hosseini, 2015; Wadud, 1999).

Deconstructing verses such as those of creation from the Qur'an highlight Islam as an egalitarian religion that is focused on equality (Lamrabet, 2016):

O Mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate, and out of the two abroad a multitude of men and women. Be careful of your duty

toward Allah in Whom you claim (your rights) of one another, and toward the wombs (that bore you). Indeed, Allah is ever, over you, an Observer. (Quran, 4:1)

It is important to note that, as for Islam or rather the Qur'anic text itself, nowhere does one find the conception of Eve coming from Adam's ribs (an origin story that is often cited as the entire culture of oppression of women and idea of inequality and inferiority of women). However, it is shocking to see the extent to which religious work and Muslim imagination remain associated with the traditionalist Judaeo-Christian understanding (Lamrabet, 2016). The details of how out of that 'Soul' its mate was created are not given to us in the Qur'an, but rather what is important here is the recognition that all human beings have sprung from the same root and from a single being.

Another example is:

O Mankind! Indeed, we have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Indeed, Allah is All Knowing and Aware. (Quran, 49:13)

This verse emphasises the equality of all human beings, with the indication that the noblest in the sight of Allah is the one with the best conduct (piety), regardless of gender, race, or any other categorisation.

Another important area for discussion in the emergence of Muslim geographies is the Eurocentric understanding of Islam as oppressive to women. Muslim feminists debunk this definition of Islam by deconstructing patriarchy from within Islamic frameworks, using a deeper understanding from within the religion to separate Islam from the oppressive nature of men towards women. It should be noted that the oppressive nature of men in Islamic societies is as a result of cultural norms and oppressive ideologies, but not of Islam (Seedat, 2013; Shaikh, 2007).

To decolonise feminist geography, as a route to establishing Muslim geographies that can go

beyond the decolonial, there is the need to connect with Islamic feminist scholarship and its religious methodology of deconstructing patriarchy from within the Islamic framework. Furthermore, Islamic feminist scholarship provides a relevant description of Islam and Muslims to the world from a Muslim perspective and thereby challenges the definition of Islam and Muslims from a Eurocentric perspective.

We conclude this short commentary by asking why, in opening up the field of Islamic geographies, Sidaway does not feel the need to consider his own positionality in relation to Islam. He has a perfect right not to, of course, and we want to leave it up to him to define his own identity. However, from Black feminist and decolonial perspectives, it is a notable political move *not* to address one's own embodied positionality as it relates to one's topic. It is a move that is enabled by some complex forms of privilege. Numerous Black, brown, and Muslim scholars have noted that their embodied identities are far from immaterial to their research, often directly impacting what and how they can research, as well as whether or not they can become or remain a researcher (e.g., Anwar and Viqar, 2017; Cadogan, 2016; Mohammed and Sidaway, 2013). We have no wish to make reductive assumptions about Sidaway's identity, but if Sidaway had been 'a Muslim man with a prominent beard and tan skin' – an embodied appearance away from which, as Molana (2022: 1552) notes, some of her US students confess that their parents have moved seats on aeroplanes – we wonder whether he would have felt more of a need to show critical awareness of the relationships between his own embodied identity and Muslim geographies.

This is not a personal point but a structural one. As two Black women academics – one Nigerian Muslim, one British Christian – we are not, of course, arguing that these identities confer any special status in relation to geographical writing (even though such a pairing of enunciative positions is notably unusual within geographical knowledge production). We are not arguing that anyone should be excluded from geographical knowledge production on the basis of identity. Instead, in line with decolonial and feminist theorists (e.g.,

Cusicanqui, 2012), we are arguing that, in academic spaces in which whiteness is very often an unnamed space of privileged enunciation in knowledge production, identifying yourself as complexly related to your field and interrogating the intersections of understanding, occlusion, privilege, and exclusion that this complexity brings you (Giwa, 2015), can be *sine qua non* foundations for anything resembling decolonial politics. As Azeekat Johnson (2020: 93) memorably put it, critical dialogue between researchers who interrogate their own identity and difference is 'an implicit critique against knowledge claims that enable the researcher to remain disembodied: rather, dialogue highlights how knowledge is produced through embodied interactions'. Johnson notes that such an awareness of embodied identity is more than a short reflexive statement – for example, when Sidaway embarks on 'situated engagements' with Lefebvre and Bowman, showing how (despite their very different politics) their identity positions inform their stereotyping of Islam, he uses these engagements as a starting point for a much more profound understanding of how exclusionary practice takes place in geographical knowledge production. Nonetheless, Muslim geographies may have a similar issue to Black geographies (see Noxolo, 2022) – since the upshot of geography's historical exclusions is that there are still relatively few prominent Muslim geographers in the academic discipline, is there yet sufficient critical mass for a field that speaks consistently from within, rather than just about, Muslim worldviews?

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#### **ORCID iD**

Patricia Noxolo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3051-1576>

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