

Cosmogony and Literacy in the Bengali "Book of Light"

THE ANNUAL BENGAL STUDIES LECTURE

With the generous support of Dr. Pauline Mazumdar

FRIDAY,
MARCH 29, 2019
5:00 - 7:00 PM

Room 208N,
North House,
Munk School of Global
Affairs & Public Policy,
1 Devonshire Place

SPEAKER

Thibaut d'Hubert
University of Chicago

CHAIR

Christoph Emmrich
Director,
Centre for South Asian Studies

REGISTRATION

<https://uoft.me/BengaliBookOfLight>

Reception to follow

Once considered the "primordial source of all books" and a proxy for the Qur'ān itself, the Persian and Bengali versions of the Nūrnāma (Book of Light) virtually disappeared from the religious landscape of contemporary Bangladesh and West Bengal. The Book of Light narrates the creation of the world by God through the body of the Muhammad of light. This creation story played a key role in shaping the popular understanding of Islamic cosmology, language, and the significance of the written word in Bengali Islam. With this lecture, I will address the topic of vernacular literacy and multilingualism in Bengal between the 17th and 19th century through the study of the Nūrnāma tradition. A fresh look at the textual tradition that surrounded the transmission of this creation story reveals ways to conceive of vernacular Islam beyond categories of elite vs. popular, or orthodox vs. heterodox.



THIBAUT D'HUBERT is associate professor in the department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations (SALC) at the University of Chicago. He published several articles in periodicals and collective volumes, and contributed entries on Bengal for Brill's Encyclopedia of Islam, THREE. In his book titled *In the Shade of the Golden Palace: Ālāol and Middle Bengali Poetics in Arakan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), d'Hubert studies the encounter of Persian, Sanskrit, and vernacular poetics in the courtly milieu of the frontier region between today's Bangladesh and Myanmar. He is also the co-editor with Alexandre Papas of the volume *Jāmī in Regional Contexts: The Reception of 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī's Works in the Islamicate World, ca. 9th/15th-14th/20th* (Handbook of Oriental Studies, Leiden: Brill, 2019).

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