**When Asia Was the World: Traveling Merchants, Scholars, Warriors, and Monks Who Created the “Riches of the East”**

Were you surprised to find that *When Asia Was the World*—a book recommended for a reading list on the history of Islam—actually begins with the story of a Chinese Buddhist’s voyage to India? How is your perception of Islam changed when you see the Muslim faith framed in terms of its relations with Asia, instead of with the Western world?

Each of the chapters in When Asia Was the World is based on a first-person historical narrative, with one exception: the shipwreck, off the coast of Sumatra, of the *Intan*, a ship that functions as the “protagonist” of chapter four. Is having material objects “tell stories” a believable device? In what way is their use analogous to written texts, and in what ways are they different? Do you think it is possible to “write history” without written evidence from the past?

In what way do the individual life experiences in When Asia Was the World form a coherent whole? Besides the experience of travel itself, what are the recurring themes and points of intersection between the different chapters? Are there any that do not seem to fit?

Stuart Gordon’s book covers a broad sweep of time, but can it really be considered “history”? 
The House of Wisdom: How Arabic Sciences Saved Ancient Knowledge and Gave Us the Renaissance

Having read Jim Al-Khalili’s book, what would you identify as the most critical events that led to the florescence of Islamic science? In what ways do they resemble other moments of great intellectual creativity in world history, and in what ways are they different?

What is the Mihna? Were its objectives consistent with the overall portrayal of Caliph al-Ma’mun in Al-Khalili’s book? What are some of the implications of the Mihna? How do you account for its occurrence?

When we study the Italian Renaissance, the first question to come to mind usually isn’t “Why did it end?” When we study the British Empire, the first question to be asked usually isn’t “Why did it collapse?” But when we study Islamic science, we are almost immediately confronted with the question “What went wrong?” Why is this so?

Al-Khalili's case for the importance of Islamic science is framed explicitly in terms of its contribution to the “European Renaissance”—the moment in which Western civilization emerged triumphant and the modern world was born. To what extent is this way of imagining Islam’s role in history consistent with—or in conflict with—the larger aims of “Connected Histories”?

Generally speaking, historians attempt to understand people, ideas, and institutions from the past by placing them in their specific historical context—whereas scientists are dedicated to the discovery of consistent and immutable laws that are universally applicable. In what ways does Al-Khalili address, or fail to address, this tension between history and science?
The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Christians, and Jews Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain

In the history of al-Andalus, there seems to be a surprising correlation between rising political disunity (following the dissolution of the Caliphate) and rising cultural florescence. Why might this be? Can you think of other, analogous examples from world history, or the present day?

What role does language play in the history of al-Andalusian culture? What is a “Mozarab”? What does “Judeo-Arabic” mean? And what implications do these terms have for the way we think about identity, ethnicity, and language in modern times?

What do you think about María Rosa Menocal’s insistence on the “uniqueness” of the culture of tolerance of al-Andalus? Is it convincing, or overstated? What is it based on? What lessons, if any, would such a culture hold in regard to issues of tolerance and coexistence in the contemporary world?

Although there is a tendency to see Muslims, Christians, and Jews as stable, internally coherent communities in interaction with one another, Menocal’s book sheds light on tensions, rivalries, and divisions within each of these communities. In al-Andalus, what were some of these divisions, how did they change over time, and what implications did they hold for relations between the different religions?

If you are already familiar with one or more of the literary classics discussed in The Ornament of the World (El Cid, Don Quixote, The Song of Roland), has Menocal’s portrayal changed your understanding of those works? If so, in what way?
Leo Africanus

What do you think about the opening paragraph of Leo Africanus? In what ways does this particular statement of identity—or perhaps “anti-identity”—inform the rest of the book? How does it relate to the overall theme of “Connected Histories”?

In writing this book, to what extent do you think Amin Maalouf was inspired by history, and to what extent was he constrained by it? In what way is this type of book—a novel written in the form of an autobiography of a real person—different from a novel about a purely fictional character, or from a work of history? To what extent does the author of such a book have a responsibility to “keep to the facts”?

How do you feel about the way female characters are represented in the book? What role do they play in the construction of Leo’s identity? How do Maalouf’s decisions about the way they appear in the narrative relate to the earlier question about historical accuracy?

The choice between baptism and exile—or between baptism and slavery—is a recurrent theme in Leo Africanus. How do different people deal with this choice, and what are the consequences of their decisions?

As presented by Maalouf, what are the roles of fate and free will in Leo’s life? How do fate and free will relate to the larger themes of the book?
In an Antique Land: 
History in the Guise of a Traveler’s Tale

One of the most difficult topics addressed in Amitav Ghosh’s book is the issue of slavery in the medieval Muslim world. How does the slavery experienced by Bomma differ from the system of chattel slavery known to us from U.S. history? Is “slavery” even an appropriate term for this institution?

What is the orientation of Ghosh himself to Islam? And to “the West”? Is he an outsider, an insider, or neither? How is his own position, and the ambiguities surrounding it, communicated through his writing?

How does In an Antique Land depict the relationship between history and the present? Is this relationship one of harmony or conflict? Symmetry or contrast? How is it reflected in the book’s title, and in the way the book itself is organized?

Compare In an Antique Land with at least one of the other books in the “Connected Histories” series. In what ways are they in conversation with one another, be it in terms of subject matter, genre, or content? Are there things that the unorthodox style and structure of Ghosh’s book allow him to communicate that the other books do not? Are there ways in which this unorthodox approach makes the book less successful as a narrative and as an example of “Connected Histories”? 