

## Conference Reports

### **Trans-L-Encounters: Religious Education and Islamic Popular Culture in Asia and the Middle East**

Marburg, 26 – 28 May 2016

The international conference *Trans-L-Encounters* was held at the Philipp University of Marburg on 26–28 May 2016. The conference aimed at taking a closer look at the transregional and trans-local (abbreviated in the title as “trans-l”) entanglement of the interrelated phenomena of Islamic religious education and Islamic popular culture. The 27 participants from various disciplines – including Political Science, History, Anthropology, Islamic Studies, Sociology, Postcolonial Studies, Feminist Studies, Cultural Studies and the Study of Religions – met to share their research and examine how religious education and Islamic popular culture translate into diverse forms of knowledge and ways of life in different local contexts.

Renowned anthropologist and scholar of Islamic Studies Gregory Starrett (UNC, Charlotte) opened the conference with an interesting keynote speech that set up two days of intensive interaction. Drawing on Bruno Latour’s critique of modern thought, Starrett reminded the participants to look beyond clear-cut disciplinary understandings of what it means to be, act or function “Islamic”. Instead we should acknowledge the messy connectedness of different cultural, economic, political, psychological and religious dimensions when looking at various trans-local “Islamic” phenomena.

Following these guidelines, the participants, as well as many other visitors to the conference, engaged in discussions of trans-local religious education and Islamic popular culture. In the seven different panels, a variety of empirical examples was presented that illustrated the way in which Islamic people, objects and knowledge circulate in certain ways (and not others) determined by specific power structures, traditions and personal interests. Joud Alkorani (University of Toronto, Canada) explained how the satellite television fatwa-show *Yastaftunak* (“They Ask you for Legal Opinions”) commodifies fatwas and uses the aesthetics of commodity to appeal to a worldwide audience. For Alkorani, these commodified fatwas are productive of a form of consumption that, in a similar fashion to Marx’s commodity fetishism, feeds from the mythical material existence of the fatwa and overlooks the power relations which are driving its production. Thus, the audience of *Yastaftunak*

engages in a “dead”, one-directional relationship with the fatwa; lacking actual agency, the viewers are constituted as religious subjects by a knowledge that is produced by hidden relations of power and property.

Manja Stephan-Emmrich (HU, Berlin) examined how Dubai Style clothing has become fashionable in urban Tajikistan, as many young Tajiks decide to study and work in the Emirates. Combining the aspirations for an internationalised livelihood and economic success with the aim of moral perfection, this Dubai Style has become the contested marker for economic, cultural and social capital among urban Tajiks. It also helps to distinguish a new urban Tajik middle-class identity that is presented as progressive and modern, in contrast to the backward rural traditions.

Those and similar presentations at the conference indicate that we need to understand manifold movements of Islamic people, objects and knowledge as networks with internal flows and breaks instead of conceptualising trans-local connections as an indeterminate open field of endless possibilities. Rather, they are regulated by their own specific practices, discourses and institutions. In such a framework “the Islamic” acquires a variety of meanings shifting between the religious and the profane. As Talal Asad has pointed out in his book *Formations of the Secular*:

When religion becomes an integral part of modern politics, it is not indifferent to debates about how the economy should be run, or which scientific projects should be publicly funded, or what the broader aims of a national education system should be. The legitimate entry of religion into these debates results in the creation of modern “hybrids”: the principle of structural differentiation – according to which religion, economy, education, and science are located in autonomous social spaces – no longer holds (Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 182).

The conference has, furthermore, elaborated that the power relations regulating such “hybrid” trans-local circulations of Islamic knowledge and religious popular culture are themselves subject to change. Several presentations demonstrated the way in which the intellectual and cultural authority of Islamic “centres” such as Saudi Arabia or Iran are challenged on a local and trans-local level. Judith Schlehe and Mirjam Lücking showed how Indonesian students and pilgrims render their journeys to the Middle East meaningful by adopting certain Islamic lifestyles while at the same time rejecting the Arabic culture and customs they encounter there. Those students and pilgrims depict Arabs as being *kasar* (“rude, harsh”) and lay claim to a modern Indonesian Muslim self-confidence by demarcating themselves from “radical” Arab Salafi Islam. In this way, they challenge the religious and cultural authority of the Arab “heartlands” of Islam by asserting the moral superiority of an Asian Indonesian Islam.

In a similar manner, Simon Wolfgang Fuchs presented the way in which the highly influential Shiite Pakistani scholar Mirza Safdar Husain Mashhadi gained local legitimacy by openly acknowledging the leadership role of *'ulamā* based in the Middle East. At the same time Mashhadi was able to carve out spaces of specialised, localised knowledge and thus appropriate or even challenge the religious authority of Shiite centers like Qom and Najaf. Fuchs holds that similar dynamics of closeness and distance are at work in the recent example of Javad Naqvi, who is proclaiming a Shiite nationalist project in Pakistan modeled on the Islamic revolution in Iran. Even though Naqvi is often portrayed as the poster boy of Iranian influence in Pakistan, Fuchs claims that Naqvi – like Mashhadi – also generates local authority by distancing himself to a certain extent from the Iranian state, which in his opinion is not committed enough to exporting the Islamic revolution (to Pakistan).

In his closing remarks after two days of intense and productive work, Gregory Starrett summarised the main questions, topics and conclusions from the event. He emphasised notions of ambiguity and performance/performativity as crucial for understanding a multitude of phenomena of Islamic religious education and Islamic popular culture. Furthermore, he stressed that many of the examples presented during the conference were connected to crisis, be it in a spiritual, cultural or economic sense. Hinting at a crisis of the “core” of Islamic religious authority, Starrett provocatively posed the question: “What if they actually rebuilt the Kabah in Indonesia?”

In summary, a vast amount of fascinating empirical material was presented by the participants during the conference. However, conceptual frameworks still need to be developed further in order to properly connect the many examples of Islamic religious education and Islamic popular culture encountered throughout the conference. While the trans-local aspects of the presentations were clearly elaborated, the links between education and popular culture – between knowledge production and aesthetics – still need to be conceptualised more thoroughly. The conference has shown that, despite all efforts towards interdisciplinary approaches, it is still hard to escape the reign of rigid disciplinary categories with their respective, distinct objects of knowledge, inextricably linked to modernity. Thus, *Trans-L-Encounters* has opened up the field of Islamic religious education and Islamic popular culture to further research, contributing to what will hopefully be a science of proper connectivity between ideas, people and things in the sense of Bruno Latour’s social-technical networks.

*André Weißenfels*