

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

Historical Preconditions and Causes for the Political Development of Present-day Myanmar

Passau, 18 – 21 July 2016

H.E. the Ambassador of Myanmar, Daw Yin Yin Myint, kindly agreed to open the conference with a welcoming speech at the Department of South-east Asian Studies, University of Passau. She began with some remarks on Myanmar's place in the world and as a member of ASEAN and named the current issues – maritime, military and security – that are significant for the country within this context. She emphasised the importance of a conference like this for better understanding the unique characteristics of Myanmar as a nation.

Marie Lall took up this theme in her keynote address by stressing that to understand where Myanmar stands today one must know where it has come from. She identified the ceasefires of the 1990s as an important catalyst for the changes in the 2010s, because these gave civil society the breathing space to slowly open up and explore how far it could go. This enabled third force organisations like the NGO Metta to arise and nullified the military's expectation that the NLD would die a gentle death. Egress – an NGO founded by Myanmar scholars and social workers in 2006 to promote democratic awareness – likewise provided an opportunity to educate young adults with the help of EU funding. From “garage schools” with no outside funding, a range of private schools developed. Change was driven by education in the ethnic areas as well as by monastic networks that all remained below the radar.

The Singapore conference on Myanmar in 2006 for the first time brought together people from the extreme ends of the spectrum: from the exile community to the military. This set off the Bangkok process and got people to talk. The final impetus for change came with cyclone Nargis, which opened the door to the normalisation of aid. The 2010 elections showed a consciousness of the significance of participatory politics. The challenges since the elections of 2015 come from the ethnic areas: ethnic voices are now subsumed and there is a certain loss of diversity. The biggest challenge is the peace process, which did not go as planned. For the peace conference in August, “21st Century Panglong”, no roadmap yet exists.

Chaw Chaw Sein started off the first section on “Recent Political Developments” with a reminder that precisely that day, 19 July, was Martyrs' Day in Burma – when Aung San and half his cabinet were assassinated by a former comrade. She asked whether Myanmar can now be called a democracy and affirmed that if we are speaking of an electoral democracy, then yes – but if a liberal democracy, then not yet. Whereas the 2010 elections

were not free and fair, the 2015 ones were, mainly due to the Union Election Commission and its cooperation with civil society organisations.

The development of military rule from 1958 until 2011 was outlined by Uta Gärtner. Her presentation highlighted the changing self-perception of the army from custodians to state builders. They call it the Burmese way, and it is important to be aware of the connection between history and politics. Democracy after independence was chaotic and unintelligible to the mass of the people, especially after the assassination of Aung San. Therefore in 1958 the coup was welcomed, although there was dissatisfaction with its methods. By 1988 this had become open contempt for the Tatmadaw by the population. The history of the army is an interesting one. In 1945 two armies existed: the British-trained ethnic army and the Japanese-trained liberation army. To combine the two was difficult because of mutual suspicions. The independent Burmese army had a strongly anti-communist bent, though that ideology appealed to the rural poor. But the army's anti-communism was less an ideological than a physical necessity to prevent the country from being torn apart. After 1962 and 1974 this became the "Burmese Way to Socialism" and the aspirations of the army turned to hegemony.

Wolfram Schaffar looked at the political changes in Myanmar from a comparative perspective of countries ranging from South Africa through Thailand to Ireland. He discussed the phenomenon of the introduction of constitutional courts as a third wave of democratisation. The interesting fact is that these were introduced (e.g. in South Africa, Thailand or Ireland) to preserve the hegemony of the elite, because these courts can overrule parliament. In 1958 the introduction of a constitutional court in South Africa was sought to be prevented, but then introduced subsequently in 1993 to secure the economic status of the white minority. In Myanmar similarly the constitutional court acts as a means to control parliament, and the state counsellor in his role *vis-à-vis* the president acts as a chancellor.

Yin Myo Thu followed up with a highly technical but very informative paper on the political economy of foreign assistance. She concentrated on foreign institutional aid and its effectiveness. "Institutional design aid" is officially aimed at good governance, and Myanmar has introduced strategic plans and commissions for long-term and short-term state building to whom the ministries should be answerable. One of these is the Myanmar Peace Centre. But aid effectiveness depends on the system of the country and on the relationship between the ministries and the commissions. There is no doubt, however, that international institutional design that is modelled on institutions in Western countries increases the flow of FDI and international credibility, even if the consequences within the country are more equivocal.

The relations between ASEAN and Myanmar were the focus of Carole Ann Chit Tha. She emphasised the strongly independent status of Myanmar, with no foreign military bases and a decided emphasis on non-interference; Myanmar therefore joined ASEAN in order to gain international recognition. One question is the attitude of the new government to ASEAN, considering that Aung San Suu Kyi and ASEAN governments regard each other warily. Aung San Suu Kyi has not yet visited any other ASEAN countries, except Singapore and Thailand – and shortly Laos – to discuss the topic of migrant workers.

Seng Raw Lahpai finished the first day's sessions with a paper on the representation of the non-Myanmar in the new Myanmar. After a short digression on terminology she backed the demands of the various ethnic groups for greater representation, as the First-Past-the-Post electoral system does not allow for an equal representation of minorities. Minority parties and minorities in general have lost out in the elections because the NLD refused to field local candidates. Another problem is the township-based constituencies that led to vast distortions of popular will because of widely diverging population figures (the urban constituencies were smaller and more numerous).

The second session, on "Historical Preconditions and Legitimation", started on 20 July with an in-depth talk by Jacques Leider on the issue of Rakhine State and the Rohingya problem. He first analysed the term *rohingya*, a term not documented in early literature, which came into fashion only at the end of WWII to describe Muslims in Rakhine State. Thus, Leider asked whether the issue can be considered anti-Muslim rather than ethnic. In fact, Bangladeshi businesses see a lot of potential in Rakhine and therefore want a negotiated solution with Myanmar. This leads Rakhine Buddhists to claim discrimination and a lack of support as they feel overwhelmed by Bangladeshi business interests.

Hans-Bernd Zöllner then discussed the visual perception of developments in Myanmar and began with a brief discussion on the swastika as an ancient Buddhist symbol which only later took on political overtones. He also mentioned the shoe controversy as a religious controversy from the early 20th century. Myanmar remained secular for long years under the junta, before 1988–2011, when religion was brought back in. He calls present-day Myanmar a constitutional democracy, which under Aung San Suu Kyi might yet become a monarchical democracy.

Tilman Frasch raised the question of how Myanmar saw the outside world and interacted with it from the time of Bagan onwards. He rejected the opposition between *akye* ("downstream") and *anya* ("upstream"), where *anya* denotes the "real" Burma. This dichotomy, he said, must be seen as a false one. Burma adopted Buddhism from India, but is the least "Indianised"

of the countries of Southeast Asia. He outlined three episodes of Buddhist ecumene where indeed the relations with the outside world were quite close: the Bagan empire, the late 18th century, and the present.

The paper by Mo Mo Thant described the social work of nuns from 1948–2010. Buddhist nuns in Myanmar are called *Thilashin*. In the following centuries the question arose as to whether they, though termed “daughters of the Buddha”, are part of the *Sangha* or not. *Thilashin* renounce normal life but contribute to society, though they should not be concerned with secular life and issues. The government’s policy of nationalisation took social welfare out of their hands to some extent, but they are still involved in health care for women and children.

Juliane Schober emphasised the interaction of women, race and religion. Women in Burma are often seen as intermediaries between the majority and ethnic minorities. This thinking is influenced by a colonial discourse. Burmese civil law is administered according to religious legal texts, which establish otherness as well as astonishingly long-lived ethnic identities. Women are blamed for what goes wrong in both politics and religion as they are assigned to embody the nation. Women in Burma do counter this discussion. They argue, for example, against faith-based bills which deny agency to women or against limiting the number of children a woman can have.

Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam discussed the perception of history as it applies to Asia and Burma in particular. History can tell us who we are, by remembering and forgetting, but in order to be forgotten, something must first be remembered. This implies that rulers and elites try to collect historical sources in order to dominate memory and control history – and thus the present and the future. In Myanmar, the very term for history has changed since colonial times from *yazawin* to *thamaing*, a shift which indicates a programme of interpretation. Historiography in Burma still relies very much on inscriptions and secondarily on chronicles. Both the military and the NLD try to mould history – and themselves – according to a certain view of this history which emphasises varying aspects of the political and religious tradition. The junta saw itself as defender of the faith in the line of the kings of Pagan of old. And many in public life still think nostalgically about Aung San, whose assassination was a rupture and left a void that cannot be filled.

The presentation of Alexey Kirichenko linked up with that theme and discussed the sources of Burmese history and their usage. In Burma there is no holistic approach to sources; their preservation is always appropriation. They are preserved not in order to be interpreted, but to be reified. Often terms are deliberately falsified in editions (e.g. from *talaing* to *mun* and from *myanma* to *bama*) by the University Historical Research Commission. Inscriptions are physically relocated to the centre in order to be controlled.

They are placed in concrete to prevent them from being worked with. But inscriptions can never be seen in isolation; they must be considered together with palm leaves and other perishable materials.

The third session, on 21 July, focused on “Media and Communication in the New Burma”. Oliver Hahn analysed the media landscape and the role of international actors in assistance for media development. He described his recent guest professorship in Yangon, where he also looked at the current media scene. The print media in particular still struggle to reach the remoter areas of the country. There is still, despite the abolition of censorship, strong self-censorship and post-censorship in the media, not least because the media in Burma are still strongly politicised. As in other parts of the world, the importance of social media is steadily increasing.

Ma Thida related her personal experience with censorship and imprisonment. She was strongly critical of the media legislation in Burma even after the abolition of censorship. There are still other ways of controlling information. Media owners have too much control over editorial content. The cartelisation of print media by political agents and cronies further impedes freedom of expression.

Finally, after three days of inspiring and fruitful discussions, Rüdiger Korff summarised the proceedings with a view towards further work to be done. He emphasised that one has to investigate what role the law must play in regulating freedom in Burma. Referring to current experiences in Thailand, the questions are whether laws are implemented equally and whether the courts, especially the constitutional court, are politicised. The importance of laws lies as well in their function to limit the power of elites and regulate political procedures.

The conference was attended by 20 speakers, of whom six came from Myanmar. Without the funding of the Fritz-Thyssen-Foundation this would not have been possible.

Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam / Rüdiger Korff

Weingartener Asiengespräche

Asien im Fokus: Souveränität, Sicherheit, Nachhaltigkeit?

Weingarten, 18 – 20 November

The 2016 edition of the Weingarten round-tables on Asia focused on the meanings and implications of “sovereignty”, “security” and “sustainability” in Southeast Asia, while also considering relevant related concepts and phenomena such as stability, migration and territoriality. Organised and chaired by Heike Wagner (Academy of the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart), Claudia Derichs (University of Magdeburg), Martina Padmanabhan (University of Passau) and Stefan Rother (University of Freiburg), the conference was attended by approximately 50 participants.

In his preliminary remarks Stefan Rother warned his audience against methodological nationalism, a mindset based on a conception of the nation state as a hermetically closed system and centred exclusively on the premises and perspectives of the researcher’s own national context. Moreover, he criticised one-sided discursive practices on migration security, which fail to address the protection *of* migrants, focusing exclusively on the protection *from* migrants. Such practices were particularly widespread in Southeast Asia, he stated. In a similar way, Claudia Derichs challenged oversimplified and narrow understandings of “security”. She pointed out the valuable contributions likely to be made by alternative concepts such as “human security” or certain feminist approaches. Alternative perspectives on security could be particularly fruitful with regard to sustainability issues, she underlined.

In her talk “What Role for the US and the EU in the Security of East/Southeast Asia?” Gabriela-Maria Manea (University of Freiburg) outlined the EU’s and the US’s security policies in the region. She emphasised the contrast between the perception of the EU as a civilian and normative power and the contested but enduring hegemonic position of the US. According to Manea, the EU lacks a clear political vision of the role it could and would be willing to play in Southeast Asia in the years to come.

Jürgen Rüländ analysed the continuing conflict among the countries adjacent to the South China Sea. The aggressive territorial claims put forward by several states, notably China, have a catalytic effect on the armament tendencies in the East Asian area. Despite ASEAN’s attempts to unite the smaller Southeast Asian countries and to settle the conflict, it remains doubtful whether the organisation can successfully counter China’s territorial ambitions. A further increase in mistrust towards China seems indeed more likely. Rüländ said he also expected an even greater number of external actors to become involved in this regional conflict.

The interrelation between migration, sovereignty and security was examined by Mandy Fox (University of Passau). In her talk “The Legacy of the Past: Ethnoreligious Challenges in the Rhakine State and Their Implications for the Peace Process in Myanmar” she outlined the unresolved conflict between the Buddhist population of the Rhakine State and the predominantly Muslim Rohingya group. The latter, perceived as “illegal Bangladeshi immigrants”, are denied citizenship and all related rights, facing at times violent persecution. At the national peace conference held in Myanmar’s capital Naypyidaw in 2016 the subject was intentionally left aside. Fox discussed the complex interests and involvements of the conflict’s three main players: the Rhakine population, the Rohingya group and the national government.

Claudia Derichs delivered a talk on “State Appropriation of Religion” in Southeast Asia, elucidating the role of religion as an instrument of power in the region. Derichs chose a comparative approach examining the appropriation of religion, namely Islam, by state actors in Malaysia and Indonesia, two countries with different regime types. In both countries religious marginalisation is oriented along intra-religious rather than inter-religious lines. Paradoxically, tolerance towards extremist groups is being legitimised with reference to state stability. This observation is as accurate in the authoritarian context of Malaysia as it is with regard to the democratic regime of Indonesia, Derichs found.

The Indonesian example remained the centre of interest when the participants turned towards sustainability issues in Southeast Asia. Martina Padmanabhan pointed out research prospects in the field of organic farming in Indonesia. She explained that it was crucial to adopt a transdisciplinary approach in order to assess organic farming’s potential for societal transformation. Local stakeholders with non-scientific backgrounds should be involved to a larger extent. According to Padmanabhan, the “intra-face” model allows a discursive determination of the exact meaning of “sustainability”, of the importance of different players and of promising strategies in the implementation of sustainable development measures. She stated that the rural population was in general frequently viewed as backward. Changing this attitude towards the rural population would be vital in order to make organic farming a locally-rooted and socially-supported movement, Padmanabhan argued.

A stronger involvement of the local population is also one of the core principles of the UN’s environmental project “Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation” (REDD+). Kristina Großmann (University of Passau) showed how direct contact between international and local players strengthens the position of local NGOs and civil society groups

while simultaneously causing “frictions” between the two levels. The REDD+ project does not sufficiently consider local specificities in land use practices, Großmann explained. Taking into account local ontological foundations of and traditional rights to land use would be vital in order to promote a non-essentialist understanding of sustainability. She pointed to the danger of further consolidating the elitist character of the sustainability discourse.

Sustainability issues were further discussed in two of the three workshops held by the conference chairs. One workshop was focused on the interrelationship between sustainability and democracy. The workshop’s participants discussed whether sustainability measures were easier to implement in authoritarian than in democratic systems. Participants of the second workshop explored major lines of conflict in the field of sustainable coal production. Principles of environmental protection and social justice were rarely considered in this sector, they found. This workshop provided several interesting links to the screening of the film “Samin vs Semen” attended by all conference participants. The film exposed the social and environmental costs of cement production in Indonesia. The third workshop concentrated on questions of state sovereignty in the light of significant migration flows in Southeast Asia. Participants studied in particular the example of the Philippine state’s attempt at exercising state sovereignty over its citizens residing abroad.

One last topic addressed in the course of the conference was the interrelationship between religion and security. Friederike Trotier (University of Frankfurt) explained how religion served a security purpose, not only on the political but also on the individual level. In the personal sphere religion frequently provides “moral safety”. Using the Malaysian planned city Putrajaya as an example, she illustrated the two dimensions of religion’s security function. The city, having been planned and built in accordance with ideals and principles of ethnic and religious “purity” and a shared identity, satisfies its inhabitants’ individual needs for “moral safety” while at the same time exhibiting and reinforcing the ethnic and religious foundations of the state. An increasing demand for “moral safety” through religion has contributed to the development of a “religion of prosperity”, Trotier argued. With the rise of a middle class in Indonesia, the demand for religious consumer goods has, for instance, increased dramatically.

In the course of the conference’s numerous talks and debates the concepts “security”, “sovereignty”, “sustainability”, “migration” and “democracy” were discussed with regard to their meanings and implications, their interdependencies and the frictions among them in Southeast Asia. Traditional conceptions of security were repeatedly subjected to critical reflections, stressing the wide variety of possible security concepts. Participants

also questioned the conventional understanding of sovereignty. Despite the importance generally attributed to sovereignty in Southeast Asia, the concept is being challenged by significant migratory movements. On the whole, discussions were very lively and the conference format allowed participants to engage in fruitful exchange and interaction with each other. Next year's edition of the *Weingartener Asiengespräche* is to take place from 3–5 November 2017 and will focus on: "Asia in the Plural: Political, Social and Cultural Diversity in Transition".

Aurelia Hoffmann