Call for Abstracts

Different Worlds? Ethnography, Religion and Traveling Critique Between Europe and the MENA.

“Connected”, ink on paper, 2017 – Laura Stauth (artist & visual anthropologist)

Workshop date: March 15-16, 2019
Submission deadline: February 20, 2019
Location: Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo (NVIC)
Part of the ERC-funded project ‘Problematizing “Muslim Marriages”: Ambiguities and Contestations’ and the University of Amsterdam.

This two-day workshop in Cairo will bring together scholars based in Europe and in the MENA region who have done research in Muslim majority and/or Muslim minority contexts. The workshop invites scholars to reflect, on the basis of ethnographic fieldwork, on how critique travels across religious and geographic difference.

Since 1989 and even more so after 9/11 and the multi-sited and endlessly adaptable “war on terror”, debates among anthropologists about the role of critique in the study of religion in Muslim majority and minority
contexts have acquired great political urgency. Much deliberation has centered on the potential political instrumentalization and (mis)appropriation of academic knowledge-production about Islam and Muslims in a context of neo-imperial military, political, and economic interventions in the MENA region, on the one hand; and the rise of ethnonationalist and islamophobic politics in Europe, on the other. The high stakes of these debates suggest the enduring significance of Edward Said’s attention to what happens when theories travel across asymmetrical geographies (Said 1983). Two “strands” of the broader debate may serve to illustrate the ongoing discussions about traveling critique the workshop aims to extend.

Anthropologists who work on gender and religion in both the MENA region and Euro-America have posed important theoretical challenges to essentializing orientalist and liberal-feminist approaches to the experiences and life-worlds of Muslim women’s experiences and life-worlds. One approach has been to deconstruct how dominant framings of Muslim women as victims in need of “saving” (Abu-Lughod 2013), or as threats to secular regimes of power that can potentially be assimilated (Fadil 2018), have lent discursive support to imperial projects in the Muslim-majority world (Salem 2013), as well as to far-right political projects (Moors 2005) and economic exploitation (Farris 2017) in Euro-America.

Other scholars have countered, however, that the transferal of such anti-imperial and anti-islamophobic analytical optics to rights-based and NGO-led feminist advocacy in the Muslim-majority world, does not sufficiently take into account the adaptations of international rights discourses by local actors (Elsadda 2018), ignores the institutional power of patriarchal religious norms and risks stigmatizing already vulnerable activists as facilitators of imperial designs (Schielke 2018; Terman 2016).

A second approach in which the geographical “trajectory” of critique has been vigorously disputed is with regard to the theorization of “secular power” and the kinds of ethical subject-formation it fosters. In Muslim minority contexts in Europe, approaches that “provincialize” secular norms through attention to the cultivation of secular subjecthood (Asad 2003; Bracke & Fadil 2011; Mahmood 2005) have articulated trenchant critiques of dominant power relations constructed and reinforced through racist and islamophobic discourses. In Muslim-majority contexts, where secularity does not have the same emic conceptual purchase, a
methodological focus on the “ambiguity” and “incoherence” with which
people negotiate a range of incompatible “grand schemes” (Schielke
2015) may be the more counter-hegemonic approach.

Much of the productive tension in these debates results as much from the
(institutional) positionality of the researcher and the geographic location
of field sites, as from theoretical starting points and methodological
approaches rooted in ethnographic practice (e.g. a focus on the agency of
state institutions, the negotiations of individuals, or a perspective that
seeks to incorporate both). In this workshop we aim to take our
positionalities and ethnographic practice as a starting point to reflect on
the place of critique in our work.

The ‘Problematizing “Muslim Marriages”: Ambiguities and Contestations’
project at the University of Amsterdam would like to take the critical
approaches it has fostered to debates around marriage in Muslim minority
and majority contexts as a productive starting point for a broader
discussion on traveling critique in anthropological practice. Marriage is a
key locus for the contestation and negotiation of religious and gender
norms, majority and minority identifications and the state’s biopolitics in
both Europe and MENA region. Marriage is also a productive site for the
formulation of academic critiques of asymmetrical relationships between
the state, religion, gender and communal identities - theorizations that
do not always travel “smoothly” across geographies and socio-political
contexts.

We invite applicants to reflect on traveling critique from within their own
ethnographic engagements with the intersections of ethnography, religion
and critique between and within Europe and the MENA region. We ask if
these two regions need to be analyzed and conceptualized separately, or
if there should be a global framework to bring ‘different worlds’
together.

**Questions addressed in the papers may include but are not limited to:**

What do critique and resistance mean in relation to the ethnographic
study of religion and religious lives?

In what ways do the meaning and conceptualization of critique change
with the shift of power relations and hegemonies across regions?
How can ethnographic method and the critique that flows out of it account for differential configurations of the religion-secular continuum, as well as for tensions between emic and etic understandings of these concepts across regions and linguistic registers?

How do personal subjectivities and institutional affiliations “travel” in ethnographic work and through its circulation across borders?

Does traveling from Muslim majority to Muslim minority countries shift the understanding of Islamic and Christian texts and practices?

What are the uses and limitations of universal transregional concepts for critique, agency, and resistance?

What are the public roles and responsibilities of ethnographers who navigate across the asymmetrical global flows of knowledge, capital and military power between Europe and the MENA region?

Submission Guidelines

Please send proposals (title, up to 300-word abstract, affiliation, contact details, and a short bio) to Mina Ibrahim (mina.ibrahim@gcsc.uni-giessen.de) by February 20, 2019. The notifications of acceptance will be sent out by March 1, 2019.

Abstracts and presentations can be in English or Arabic.

This workshop is organized by Mina Ibrahim and Rahma Bavelaar and part of the ERC-funded research project ‘Problematising “Muslim Marriages”: Ambiguities and Contestations’ at the University of Amsterdam.