

## **Panel Proposal : Cultures and practices of resilience in Kurdistan**

For

The XIII Conference of the Italian Society for Middle Eastern Studies  
(SeSaMO).

MIGRANTS:  
COMMUNITIES, BORDERS, MEMORIES, CONFLICTS

### **Panel Coordinators:**

Servet Erdem (University of Oxford)

Francesco Marilungo (University of Exeter)

#### **1) Panel Description.**

This panel focuses on the ethno-geographical/cultural region called Kurdistan, including autonomous enclaves with limited international recognition (Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq and Rojava Cantons in Syria) and the regions of Turkey and Iran historically inhabited by Kurds.

Kurdistan is a region deeply influenced by the arbitrary lines on the map drawn after the Sykes-Picot agreement. In fact, one can claim that Kurdistan is one of what can be called the “border-countries” in the world. It has no borders; it is in itself a totality of intersecting borders. A geographical, historical, demographical and political paradox, for which Kurds have borders intersecting throughout their country without ever encircling it. Thus, border crossing, migration, displacement, forced migration, taking refuge, are all like every day activities for the Kurds.

In many ways, migration has always been a very common phenomenon in Kurdish society: to begin with, seasonal migration has traditionally been critical in Kurdish rural economy, (Romano 2000); furthermore, by the 1950s and 1960s major changes took place in rural Kurdish areas, bringing about a vast flood of Kurdish rural-urban migration in the metropolises of the Middle East such as Istanbul, Tehran, Baghdad, and Damascus, (Romano, 2006: 112). Resulting in some major social and political changes, this migratory movement brought Kurds in close contact with the nationalist ideologies of their “others” (Turkish, Arab, and Persian) raising awareness of cultural differences and unequal economic development (Van Bruinessen 1992: 32). Since the 1980s, however, there has been a steady and increasing move of the Kurdish refugee communities to European countries, caused mostly by the internal war between the state power and Kurdish guerrilla forces, particularly in Turkey and Iraq. According to White (2000: 121) only in Turkey at least two million Kurds have been forced out of their villages and cities between 1993 and 1999. With the Kurdish community dispersed all around the Middle East and Europe, the territorialization of Kurdish claims for autonomy or a state of their own has now become ever less plausible (Romano, 2006: 258). As “the Kurdish diaspora had become a key instrument for the advancement of Kurdish national identity, and for its internationalization,” the Kurdish question too “had ceased to be an internal question to each country in which a Kurdish community found itself, and was ceasing to be a purely regional question. It was finally a European question, and arguably an international one.” (McDowall 455-56).

Ever since the Sykes-Picot partition of Kurdistan into four parts, notions of borders, cross-border migration, displacement, exile, loss of the environment, trauma and longing became very central in the daily lives of Kurds, as well as in their imaginary and cultural production. Recent scholarship has showed the high relevance of the spatial element (Gambetti and Jongerden 2015; Gambetti and Jongerden 2011; Jongerden 2007) for a more all-encompassing understanding of Kurdish culture. To this end, both the geo-political features of Kurdistan and the cultural productions that bring together not only the divided Kurdistan but also the fragmented Kurdish identity have become more pronounced in the work of scholars, (O’Shea 2004; Ahmadzadeh 2003; Öktem 2004; Scalbert-Yucel 2013; Scalbert-Yücel 2010; Scalbert-Yücel 2009; Gambetti 2010; Galip 2015, among others).

In this perspective, this panel focuses on various aspects of Kurdish culture with a specific emphasis on the urgent need for re-defining, re-framing and re-narrating the Kurds' position –as well as deconstructing the imposed national definitions, geographical frames, and historical narratives arbitrarily attached to them. In particular, in this panel we would like to hold literature, art, performance and in general any kind of cultural production as specific keys to enter crucial aspects of Kurdish imagination, perception and fruition of Kurdish lands which are often contested, fragmented or marginalized. In fact, from a political perspective, cultural production is a way of gaining internal cohesion at home, along with recognition and legitimation abroad, while also keeping imaginatively connected a fragmented demography. Simultaneously, such a creative production becomes the repository of the traumatic memories of conflict, migration, displacement and exile experienced by Kurds in the last century.

We aim at papers focused on disparate aspects of Kurdish cultures and practices, able to show Kurds' cultural resilience and agency in reaction to the socio-cultural restraints imposed by the military and institutional frameworks in which they live. In specific, we expect panelists to analyze the recent shifts in the “real-and-imagined” (Soja 1996) space of Kurdistan and Kurdish imagination. In other words, presenters, through the analyses of Kurds' cultural productions, should aim at highlighting how the engagement in the decolonization and re-symbolization of the lived environment as well as of the imagination, contributes in creating a new geography, relatively more attuned to their everyday practices, perception of identity and political ambitions.

## **2) Panel structure:**

The panel aims at hosting six presentations, including the two panel coordinators. It is envisaged as a multidisciplinary panel with topics ranging from literature to anthropology, from urban studies to political history and other disciplines.

Panel coordinators welcome the idea of having a discussant in the panel, although the name of a potential discussant is yet to be confirmed at the time of this submission.

### 3) Research dissemination:

Panel Coordinators plan to expand the presentations into articles and collect them editing a Special Issue of the Kurdish Studies Journal.

(<http://www.kurdishstudies.net/about>)

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