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TITOLO/TITLE: Otherness and the fabric of universals: Historical and anthropological explorations in the Middle East and North Africa.

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ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

A major criticism against European Orientalism has been its alleged tendency to overgeneralise about the region and to describe its inhabitants as fundamentally alien to the West by their culture and religion (Said 1978). This sense of otherness has allowed some to legitimate imperial politics by presenting the 'Orient' as backwards, and has been valorised by others as an alternative to secular modernity (Asad 2009; Sedgwick 2009). Both approaches are based on a shared perspective of Europe and the Middle East as intrinsically opposite, incommensurable entities. And yet, the way in which humans in the region perform and perceive differences, otherness, and commonalities cannot be well understood by means of binary assumptions of difference. To enrich our understanding of how people may live with moral, political, and other differences, this panel invites inquiries about how experiences of strangerhood, figures of strangers, situations of a plurality of values and ways of living, and conflicts between values and groups have been articulated and put to work in past and present times.

Especially in contemporary anthropology, the consideration of others as Others is a fraught topic between the condemnation of othering and the valuation of alterity. The very attempt to criticize the dichotomy between the Middle and North Africa and Europe risks to reproduce its binary logic when it opposes the 'Western gaze' to local forms of resistance or accommodation. We seek to avoid reductive 'frontal comparisons' (Candea 2016) between Europe and the Middle East and North Africa by exploring the plurality of practices in the region. Taking a clue from David Graeber's (2015) proposal to consider alterity as subject to debate and uncertain knowledge, we propose to focus on what may be called 'otherness': open-ended encounters or entanglements between various actors and ideas whereby assumptions about difference play a central role, and ways of relating and communicating need to be established.

This panel seeks to engage with these questions through the study of otherness as a category of practice (Bourdieu 1972) in Middle Eastern and North African contexts. Contrary to the idea of cultures as relativistic islands and to stereotypes about the region as one enclosed against global currents, historical and anthropological research show that life in the region is and has long been characterised by encounters and friction (Décobert 2000). Cultural, religious and linguistic diversity is a common feature of past and present societies in the region, and so is long-distance movement of people in various directions. There are many more travel routes than the Middle Eastern migration to Europe that is at the focus of attention today: from the Arabian peninsula along the Muslim conquest; to and from West and East Africa; across the Indian Ocean; in both directions across the Mediterranean; to the Americas; from the Caucasus and Central Asia; and attracted (and at other times, expelled) by metropolises such as Istanbul, Alexandria, or Dubai. Religious and ethnic plurality remain an ordinary feature of most societies in spite of ethnonationalistic and religious purges. Coexistence often relies on an understanding of society and a practice of social life shaped by hierarchies, stereotypes, and competing claims over truth. Inhabitants of such plural societies daily build up a common ground whereby they articulate differences and refer to shared realities at the same time. People who may view each other as strangers interact and address each other through the reference to relativistic stereotyped differences yet they also presuppose that certain ideas and values can be universally shared among humans

(Amselle 2001). We therefore propose to explore established and emerging practical ways of communicating and relating across differences.

We specifically propose to look at practices of otherness in the tension between forms of relativism and stereotypes on the one hand, which lead humans to deal with each other without taking each other seriously, and what we call the fabric of universals, on the other hand. With the latter, we mean the universalisation of different perceptions about concrete issues. Conflicts and differences are frequently articulated through competing claims towards general truths such as justice, patriotism, or love. Such concrete universals (Vibert 2020; Berriane and Kreil 2022) encourage humans to take each other seriously in the sense of seriously considering, possibly endorsing and adapting, possibly rejecting and opposing their respective views and commitments (Schielke 2019).

This panel invites contributions that look into moments of mutual recognition of difference, and the way relativism and universals structure those moments. We specifically look into the pragmatic crafting of ways to live with people who do not share the same values and moral premises (for example, in migrant metropolises), into the competing claims to universals in situations of conflict and negotiation (for example, in property disputes and value conflicts), and into ways in which figures of strangers and experiences of strangerhood have been shaped (for example, in literary traditions and popular culture).

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PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

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Samuli Schielke is a social and cultural anthropologist writing about contemporary Egypt and the Gulf region. He is a senior research fellow and acting head of the research unit Age and Generation at Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), and primary investigator at Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies. He is author and editor of *The Perils of Joy* (2012), *The Global Horizon* (with Knut Graw, 2012), *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes* (with Liza Debevec, 2012), *In Search of Europe?* (with Daniela Swarowsky and Andrea Heister, 2013), *Egypt in the Future Tense* (2015), *Migrant Dreams* (2020), and *Shared Margins* (with Mukhtar Shehata, 2021).

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