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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

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

**PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S:** AYMUN KREIL AND SAMULI SCHIELKE

**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).

**Organisers: Aymon Kreil (Ghent University) and Samuli Schielke (Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient)**

**The Banished, the Ugly, and the Dirty: Or Othering in Premodern Islam – Asmaa Essakouti (University of Münster)**

The themes of *ghurbah* (strangerhood), displacement, and exile in premodern *adab* attract a great deal of attention in contemporary scholars. Some address it as a proof of openness and inclusivity of premodern Arab culture, claiming that “the category of foreignness had an extremely low profile in the precolonial Islamic world” (Bauer, 2022: 245), or that “aliens were highly regarded and very well received even beyond the means of their hosts” (Attar, 2005: 19). Others, address *ghurba* as an ambivalent experience entangled with feelings of yearning, nostalgia, curiosity, and desire to witness the rare (Gruendler, 2016, 1-41). The current paper aims to add more nuances to this discussion by addressing another side of *ghurba*; the *ghurba* of those who are represented and categorized as others within their own societies and homelands due to their social and ethnic circumstances. In other words, I argue that inclusion and openness was usually reserved to privileged and educated strangers to whom *ghurba* was a choice or an inner spiritual experience, while othering, banishment, and discrimination was directed against strangers from less fortunate backgrounds. To decentre the elite experience, this paper draws attention to traces and figures of social strangers in premodern *adab*, such as the *Ṣa‘ālik* who were banished and forced to leave their tribes in the periplasmic era, the black people who were named crows for their colour and denied high positions, the beggars and criminals, who were exoticized in the Abbasid era but never accepted as equals, and finally, the peasants of the 17<sup>th</sup> century who were described and ridiculed as uncivilized animals by urban intellectuals. The goal of this paper is not to judge yesterday by today’s measures and ideas, but rather to argue that *ghurba*, like any other experience, is a question of class and positionality. In other words, this paper emphasizes the difference between those who could travel and write about wonders and discoveries, and those who were depicted as ugly, different, and exotic. Ambivalence and hospitality can be more easily extended to the former. As for the latter, they can figure as a representation of the exotic, the banished, the other.

**Otherness and Stereotypes in Early Films – Thomas Richard (Université Paris 1 / Université Paris 8 / Boston University / ICL Lille)**

Through the study of a collection of films dating from the colonial period that focus on the Middle East, this paper aims to understand how stereotypes are created, reinforced, and developed on film, as a way to create the other, and to reassert a process of othering. Rather than focusing on imperial cinema of the period, our aim is to focus on more common images : early documentaries, travellers’ touristic films, travel agencies advertisements, para-ethnographic works aimed at a wide audience, all products which, for the most part, follow an economic and cultural frame rather than an overly political or ideological one. These films, nevertheless, aim at presenting what the cameramen deem exotic, typical or peculiar, and as such tend to frame heavily what is presented, as the focus is to film precisely what is “other”, while avoiding what doesn’t fit the stereotypes that they intend to find. At the same time, although, through a variety of

background characters (guides, sailors...), these films offer a glance at precisely a point where the other is not so different, and people who act as in-betweens, crossing the represented gap from one culture to the other. This paper thus aims to explore the roots of the "othering gaze" at stake in the encounter, and how it has shaped such encounters, through the transformation of the cinematic gaze.

**Negotiating the Politics of Belonging in a de Facto State: Encounters with the Others in Turkish Cypriot Dramatic Literature – Rüstem Ertuğ Altınay (University of Milan)**

How does dramatic literature serve as a critical site for negotiating the politics of belonging vis-à-vis others in a de facto state? This presentation explores this question by studying the Turkish Cypriot dramatic literary canon in light of multi-sited archival research. The term "de facto state" refers to polities where a local authority exercises internal sovereignty over its citizens yet is not internationally recognized as the de jure legal authority in that territory. They are often geographies where histories of violence sediment, global power conflicts materialize, and the politics of belonging are characterized by precarity. De facto states are an excellent site for exploring the performative politics of statehood and the complex relationship between artistic performance and the everyday performance of citizenship. These dynamics shape the theatre productions and dramatic literature from these geographies. This presentation analyzes how Turkish Cypriot playwrights position themselves vis-à-vis British, Greek, Palestinian, and Turkish others in their efforts to negotiate the politics of belonging in a de facto state. It shows how their plays explore colonial nostalgia, cosmopolitan fantasies, and decolonial desires as they offer alternative, often conflicting accounts of the past, attempt to intervene in the present, and propose new visions for the future. Contrary to the common assumptions of the decolonial turn in the humanities, this research demonstrates how decolonial cultural production is not always characterized by an unconditional investment in liberatory politics.

**Navigating Tensions: Otherness and Social Recognition in Lebanon's Civil Marriage Debate – Michaela De Giacometti (ENSA-Versailles / EHESS)**

Since the French Mandate era, the quest to legalize civil marriage and establish a secular framework for personal status in Lebanon has been enmeshed in a complex struggle for political power and the acknowledgment of moral diversity. Civil marriage is deeply entwined with political sectarianism, whether advocated as a means to end it or resisted in defense of religious pluralism. This talk delves into the tensions engendered by the contemporary debate on civil marriage in Lebanon, by focusing in particular on the ongoing endeavors to legalize it since 2012. After elucidating the distinctive proposal put forth by Lebanese non-sectarian and secular activists, which seeks to grant couples the right to marry civilly within Lebanon, this presentation examines how it has elicited competing views of marriage, kinship, and the state among secular, religious, and state actors. While religious authorities, both Muslim and Christian, uphold specific notions of family and kinship, secular and human rights activists contend with differing visions for dismantling sectarianism and building a "civil state". Additionally, civil servants emerge as moral entrepreneurs, by both promoting and adjudicating moral and legal norms. Rather than considering these views solely as generators of opposing forces, this presentation aims to elucidate their interconnectedness and the inherent tensions they create. This presentation argues that these tensions provide the grounds for these groups to pursue social recognition and legitimacy while seeking to distinguish themselves from one another.

**Resilience and Resistance: An Anti-Exceptionalist Perspective on Yemeni Political Struggles and Women's Activism - Susanne Dahlgren (Finnish Institute in the Middle East)**

"Women" as a group of people and as an analytical category has long been treated from an exceptionalist perspective. Not long ago, it was normal to write a country's political history through the eyes of men only, with women as a short mention in the index. In Middle Eastern Studies, these practices have been accelerated by the self-imposed limitation that male scholars cannot study women, or that women "belong" to an imaginary "private sphere" that bears little relevance to the realm of politics. In Yemeni Studies, women's activism in transforming polity and society has played little role in how the country's history has been written in Western and Western-educated scholarship. This paper takes a look at women's activism through the readings they have made on stakes in national politics. The talk's argument is not narrowly to see how the groups have been able to promote women's cause, but to see if and when female activists' analysis has proven more long sighted than what the male-dominated political structures have maintained. With case studies from the Yemeni city of Aden, starting from the late British colonial time throughout the Socialist regime period to the

current unified republic and the war, this presentation discusses the women's analyses and suggest that one should listen to women activists: they have usually had it right. This paper is based on long-time ethnographic fieldwork in Aden, and on archival and media sources.

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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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