



# Conference Report

## No Country for Anthropologists?

### Ethnographic Research in the Contemporary Middle East

*University of Zurich  
Institute of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies  
1 to 3 November 2018*

*Mustafa Akcinar, Daniele Cantini, Aymon Kreil, Shirin Naef,  
Emanuel Schaeublin*

**E**thnography is the central method of knowledge production in anthropology. According to canonical standards, ethnographic fieldwork should last a minimum of twelve months and enable researchers to develop a personality in a different social milieu and to allow their categories of thought to become unsettled in the process. Based on such long-term immersion, anthropologists write, publish, and circulate texts. War, transnational interferences, uprisings, and a return of authoritarian regimes in the contemporary Middle East create numerous obstacles for ethnographic practice.<sup>1</sup> The conference *No Country for Anthropologists? Ethnographic Research in the Contemporary Middle East* held at the University of Zurich from 1 to 3 November 2018 brought together anthropologists working and/or living in Algeria, Egypt, Europe, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Turkey, the United States and Yemen, in order to discuss obstacles in the way of doing ethnography in the contemporary Middle East. What do they teach us about the current role and the future possibilities of anthropology? Is the Middle East no longer a place where anthropologists can carry out research?

How is anthropology taught in the contemporary Middle East?<sup>2</sup>

In her keynote address (*The Country of Anthropologists: Creativity, Imagination, and Nation-State Power*), Jessica Winegar provided an overview of the current state of anthropology in and on the Middle East, where immersive fieldwork has become newly challenging in the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq and the post-9/11 prevalent political climate marked by the War Against Terror. Many countries of the region limit or prevent access for researchers. The detention of researchers by security apparatuses albeit not a new phenomenon is becoming more common and can be lethal as the tragic case of Giulio Regeni—a doctoral student at Cambridge—shows. In the face of such developments, Winegar suggested thinking of anthropology “as a country” with founding fathers and boundaries. She documented how personal subjectivities define the relationship anthropologists working on the Middle East entertain with the discipline—revealing racist and sexist forms of exclusion within the academy (see Deeb and Winegar 2015). Creativity and imagination are needed for building a “new country of anthropology” with a

collective sense of belonging, more porous boundaries, a wider public circulation of ethnographic knowledge and more collaboration in ethnographic writing. For Wignegar, fieldwork—the act of “being there” with one’s interlocutors without reducing them to objects of knowledge—should be at the heart of this project.

The eighteen papers presented underlined why ethnography remains important against the odds. Many emphasized the need to challenge narratives of “crisis” (dominating both news reports on the Middle East and policy analysis) by foregrounding how violence, fear and repression are part of many people’s everyday lives—rather than extraordinary occurrence. Lamia Moghnieh showed how people in Lebanon develop everyday modes of resilience in the face of the constant presence of violence in their lives. She argued for a broad conceptualization of violence that brings into view both its destructive or disruptive aspects and the various subtle ways in which the presence of violence shapes social interactions and everyday life. Younes Saramifar explored the physical and ethical limits of documenting how acts of killing can become routine and, in some sense, mundane for militants fighting in the combat zones of Iraq and Syria. He described how conciliating different frames of reference—such as academic work environments in Europe and the everyday life of fighters—is very difficult and can be emotionally demanding.

Ethnographic fieldwork unfolds in a creative tension between contemplative distance (observation) and emotional proximity (participation). Political conflict and repression can make moving between the two poles difficult. Emilie Lund Mortensen discussed how being interrogated by secret police (*mukhābarāt*) in Jordan helped her gain a better understanding of the constant fear of Syrian refugees and their ways of moving through the streets as inconspicuously as possible. Erol Sağlam discussed the difficulty of developing emotional intimacy when working with nationalistic, Sunni Muslim right-wingers in Turkey and the task of manoeuvring

around the suspicions and conspiracy theories of his interlocutors. Based on research among Kurdish communities in Eastern Turkey, Mustafa Akcınar highlighted how the crumbling of the peace process between the Turkish government and Kurdish leadership during his fieldwork drastically altered his possibility of access, while rendering his position as an anthropologist moving between Turkey and Europe fragile. Anne-Linda Amira Augustin conducted ethnography in parts of Southern Yemen facing US-drone attacks. The escalation of conflicts within Yemen made it hard for her to develop contact with different groups. Consequently, she primarily focused on the Southern separatist movement for whom she was expected to “take a stand”. Documenting how such pressures play out in the field is key to maintaining analytical distance, in spite of being obliged to focus only on one group involved in a conflict.

Fieldwork can become impossible because of war or because interlocutors come under pressure from local power holders after interacting with researchers. Documenting popular uprisings in different towns in Southern Algeria, Ratiba Hadj-Moussa suggested continuing to “listen” to such places even if the political situation prevents access. This can include following people on social media, calling them regularly, and working with online videos uploaded by activists (see also Peterson 2015). Marina de Regt stressed the need of seeking ways to continue writing about Yemen, where war makes access almost impossible. In attempt to overcome this difficulty, she has been trying to collect narratives of Yemeni women at distance through the activation of existing networks. Gathering such stories is hoped to provide insights into the daily experience of war in the country that could serve as a counterweight to the prevailing expertise focusing mostly on geostrategic issues.

The current situation requires anthropologists to develop strategies and tactics of protection. David Shankland drew upon his own experience of being abducted by drug smugglers in Morocco. Given the increase of such risks in recent years, he

assumed that anthropology departments may either prevent researchers from going to unstable areas or introduce security protocols similar to the ones deployed by humanitarian organizations to protect their staff. As this would restrain the researcher's movements and require regular contact with local security services, it might impede the possibility of researchers participating in everyday life. Based on his research in Kabul, Nafay Choudhury discussed alternative fieldwork tactics increasing the protection of anthropologists: becoming part of local networks, discussing the security situation with well-informed interlocutors, avoiding regularity in one's movements—spending little time in tense places and arriving at unpredictable times—, and staying away from places such as luxury hotels, UN headquarters, and government buildings that risk being attacked by militants.

The risks for interlocutors can be mitigated through anonymization. Writing about “fixers” working with Western journalists in Turkey, Noah Arjomand explored new ways of representation. He divided the lives and experiences of his interlocutors into fragments and reassembled them into new and, partly fictional, personae. Emanuel Schaublin discussed how zakat (Muslim alms-giving to people in need) in the occupied Palestinian Territories tends to be analysed as a security threat. While ethnography allows the documenting of how Muslim giving is part of people's everyday resilience, researchers need to be aware of the possible consequences of their published writing in the wider context of (draconian) counter-terrorist legislation.

Sensitive topics require oblique language to be found for addressing them in the field and in writing. Looking into different periods of state violence in Dersim (a Kurdish-Alevi province in Turkey), Hande Sarikuzu found coffee and tea houses good places to study how the social memory of genocide unfolds in popular rumours that can be studied ethnographically. Researching Islamic authority in Turkish communities in Switzerland before and after the attempted coup against the Tur-

kish government in 2016, Dominik Müller perceived the need of moving beyond the analytical framework prevalent in political and public discourse—which looks at Muslim communities primarily from an angle of “integration” or “security”. In the communities, where he conducted ethnographic research, authority is less a matter of position (e.g. “imam”) than a matter of constant negotiation and embodiment in social interactions. Based on a combination of ethnography and textual analysis of academic and Islamic scholarly publications on bioethical issues in Iran, Shirin Naef illustrated how both anthropology and Islamic jurisprudence offer theoretical tools for reflecting upon ethical questions of this sort. Using the ideas and methods of both sociology and anthropology, rather than studying Islamic discourse from above, she argued—with Rasanayagam (2018)—for an “anthropology in conversation with an Islamic tradition”.

Finally, the question arises how anthropology is practiced in countries (considered part) of the wider Middle East and how anthropology departments in different places could work together. Based on fieldwork in Iran and the experience of teaching anthropology at the University of Teheran, Mehrdad Arabestani discussed how doing ethnography under a regime—whose close-knit dominant political discourse drawing upon Islamism and anti-imperialism claims to be comprehensive—requires a certain ideological disidentification on the part of the researcher. As an anthropologist in such conditions, one can never quite know where the fine line lies between a tolerated imaginary distance from the official discourse and the danger zone where trespassers against the discourse will be caught. The fact that consequences of intellectual deviations cannot be predicted nourishes an already acute sense of academic precarity, particularly among the early career researchers. Drawing upon the experience of teaching feminist ethnography in Pakistani universities, Shirin Zubair analysed the risks involved. Discussing feminist ideas in class can lead to legal charges for blasphemy and push feminist

scholars into exile. Leyla Neyzi discussed the collaboration between a team of Turkish, Armenian, and German researchers in an oral history project on the Armenian genocide. This project was possible during the era of the “Kurdish opening” in the 1990s and 2000s, which started to falter after the Gezi Park protests in 2013. Initially, the Germans used their own ways of “dealing with the past” as a pedagogical model case that can be directly applied to the conflict between Turks and Armenians. This led to tensions in the team, as the conflict in Armenia started to flare up again. An approach assuming that the past remains part of the present—whether in contemporary Germany or in the relations between Armenians and Turks—might have been more fruitful to navigate the changing political climate in Turkey.

At a general level, the conference brought to light how dilemmas, ambiguities and difficulties encountered in the field and in academic institutions are part of what makes anthropology valuable as a practice of knowledge production starting from direct encounters and relations between people. Challenges to do ethnography in and on the Middle East haunt anthropologists regardless of where they are based. Some researchers face legal consequences for breaking rules of conduct that are normally not clearly spelled out and susceptible to sudden change. The accusation that anthropology is a perpetuation of colonial relations of power is sometimes used by authoritarian regimes to prevent researchers from accessing disenfranchised communities. The same political forces also clamp down on local researchers and intimidate anyone producing publicly available knowledge on political repression and injustice. At the same time, ethnographic research in sensitive places (occasionally visualized on maps as red, orange or yellow zones) is increasingly discouraged by European and North American universities. Given these various pressures on ethnographic fieldwork in and on the Middle East, it seems necessary to start writing more explicitly about what anthropologists do in the field and how they work in different

academic institutions. While reflections upon fieldwork will continue to be part of the discipline of anthropology, they should also serve to better connect anthropologists in different parts of the world.

- 1) In this text, we use the term Middle East to describe the entire North Africa and Western Asia region. This conference builds on previous work on anthropological fieldwork in the “Middle East”, see e.g. Asad 1973; Altorki and El-Solh 1988; Dresch 1998; Shami and Herrera 1999; and Kanafani and Sawaf 2017.
- 2) The conference was initiated by the Contemporary MENA

Research Network and hosted by the Institute of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies of the University of Zurich. The organizers thank the Swiss Society for the Middle East and Islamic Cultures, the Swiss Ethnological Society, the University of Zurich’s Graduate Campus, and the Swiss National Science Foundation for their support.

## References

- Altorki, Soraya, and Camillia Fawzi El-Solh (eds.). 1988. *Arab Women in the Field: Studying your own Society*. Syracuse University Press, 1988.
- Asad, Talal (ed.). 1973. *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. London: Ithaca Press.
- Deeb, Lara, and Jessica Winegar. 2015. *Anthropology’s Politics: Disciplining the Middle East*. Stanford University Press.
- Dresch, Paul. 2000. “Wilderness of Mirrors: Truth and Vulnerability in Middle Eastern Fieldwork.” In *Anthropologists in a Wider World: Essays on Field Research*, edited by Paul Dresch, Wendy James and David Parkin. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Kanafani, Samar and Zina Sawaf (eds.). 2017. *Ethnography as Knowledge in the Arab Region. Contemporary Levant: Special Issue*.
- Peterson, Mark Allen. 2015. “New Media and Electronic Networks.” In *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Middle East*, edited by Soraya Altorki. John Wiley & Sons.
- Rasanayagam, Johan. 2018. “Anthropology in Conversation with an Islamic Tradition: Emmanuel Levinas and the Practice of Critique.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 24 (1): 90-106.
- Shami, Seteney and Linda Herrera (eds.). 1999. *Between Field and Text: Emerging Voices in Egyptian Social Science*. *Cairo Papers in Social Science* 22 (2).



# Rapport de conférence

Der Orient in der Schweiz – L'Orient en Suisse

*Université de Zurich le 21 septembre 2018*

La conférence internationale « Der Orient in der Schweiz – L'Orient en Suisse. Neo-islamische Architektur und Interieurs des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts » qui s'est tenue à l'Université de Zurich le 21 septembre 2018 a démontré l'importance jouée par le patrimoine architectural orientalisant dans notre pays. Ce rôle demeure encore assez mal connu et cette première initiative a eu le mérite de porter à l'attention aussi bien des spécialistes que du public plus large la présence d'une tradition architecturale bien ancrée dans le territoire local mais en rapport étroit avec des tendances internationales. Ce phénomène s'inscrit naturellement dans un plus large contexte lié à l'architecture historiciste qui s'est développée dans toute l'Europe, et même au-delà, au 19<sup>ème</sup> siècle. La Suisse y a largement contribué grâce à une forte tradition architecturale, dont les ramifications s'étendaient à divers pays, à travers de riches réseaux de professionnels et patrons qui témoignent de la vivacité et mobilité de ces personnages au cœur d'un siècle qui préfigure et pose les bases de notre globalisation contemporaine.

Cette initiative a été conçue dans le cadre du projet de publication « Der Orient in der Schweiz / L'Orient en Suisse », développé au sein du département d'histoire de l'art de l'Université de Zurich et dirigé par Francine Giese, responsable de la chaire FNS d'histoire de l'art islamique. Ce projet, réalisé en collaboration avec Leïla el-Wakil, de l'Université de Genève, vise à illustrer l'importance de l'architecture néo-islamique au 19<sup>ème</sup> et début du

20<sup>ème</sup> siècle en Suisse. Il trouve son point de départ dans la réévaluation des études pionnières de Jürg Keller, menées sur le sujet au début des années 1980. Le résultat de ces recherches fera d'ailleurs l'objet d'une publication, sous la direction de Francine Giese, Leïla el-Wakil et Ariane Varela Braga, à paraître début 2019 dans la collection « Worlds of Islam », dirigée par la Société Suisse-Asie et publiée par l'éditeur berlinois Walter de Gruyter.

La conférence a bénéficié du soutien institutionnel de nombreux partenaires: l'Université de Genève, la Société Suisse Moyen Orient et Civilisation Islamique, la Société Asie-Suisse, l'Association Alumni UZH, l'Association Culturelle Égypto-Suisse, et de plusieurs donateurs privés. Au cours d'une intense journée de travail, qui a réuni divers spécialistes de l'architecture, de l'art et du patrimoine suisse, ainsi que des chercheurs, conservateurs de musées et professeurs étrangers, a permis un échange et un dialogue fructueux entre diverses perspectives et approches.

La rencontre s'est divisée en cinq sections, qui ont abordé plusieurs études de cas différents mais toujours reliés entre eux. La journée a débuté avec une section intitulée « Visions d'intérieurs », dans laquelle l'importance entre modèles transnationaux et savoir-faire locaux a été mise en évidence, à travers le cas emblématique du Minaret Suchard, présenté par Nadia Radwan (Unibe) et celui des nombreux fumoirs orientalisants helvétiques, traités par Francine Giese (UZH). Dans la deuxième section, dédiée à « Architecture



© DAS BILD DES ORIENTS contact@das-bild-des-orientes.de, www.das-bild-des-orientes.info

et identité religieuse », la Grande Mosquée de Genève, étudiée par Pauline Nerfin (Unige) a été mise en perspective avec les nombreux exemples de synagogues suisses, analysées par Ron Epstein (Zurich), spécialiste de l'argument. La question des rapports entre culture visuelle locale et globale a ensuite à nouveau été mise en évidence l'après-midi, dans la section « Style néo-mauresque local-global » où le cas d'une chambre néo-mauresque récemment découverte à Thun et présentée par Christian Schweizer (UZH) a été mis en parallèle avec les variations ottomanes de l'Alhambra, discutées par Turgut Saner (Istanbul Technical University). C'est ensuite le thème des expositions, où l'Orient a joué un rôle bien connu, qui a fait l'objet de la section « l'Orient exposé », avec les interventions de Leïla el-Wakil (Unige) et Katrin Kaufmann (UZH) qui ont respectivement parlé de l'Exposition Nationale Suisse de 1896 et de la salle néo-timouride réalisée pour la collection Moser au Musée Historique de Berne. La dernière section, intitulée « Un art de décors » a réuni trois interventions tournées vers les arts déco-

ratifs. Ariane Varela Braga (UZH) a traité de la place tenue par les arts islamiques à l'École des Arts Industriels de Genève alors que Sarah Keller (Vitrocentre) s'est penchée sur la production de vitraux néo-islamiques en Suisse. Pour finir, Néjib Ben Ali (Sorbonne, Paris) a reporté l'attention sur le 20<sup>ème</sup> siècle, avec le cas du décorateur Jean Royère et de sa clientèle libanaise. La journée s'est conclue par la conférence en soirée de Mercedes Volait (CNRS-INHA, Paris) qui a ouvert le débat sur des questions actuelles de la recherche, en mettant l'accent sur l'importance de l'étude de la matérialité de ces structures et édifices orientalisants pour une meilleure compréhension du riche phénomène de la production architecturale néo-islamique, et cela non seulement en Europe mais également dans les pays islamiques.

Dr. Ariane Varela Braga (Université de Zurich)