

The background is a complex, repeating geometric pattern in shades of blue, white, and gold. It features intricate star and polygonal motifs, characteristic of Islamic art. Overlaid on this pattern are three orange-outlined squares that form a larger, irregular shape. The word 'PROGRAMME' is centered in white, uppercase, sans-serif font within this shape.

PROGRAMME

Perspectives in Motion: Conceptual Fields from the Global South

Workshop

2-3 December 2024

Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient

Kirchweg 33, 14129 Berlin

A workshop organised by the research unit Contested Religion and Intellectual Culture

Abstract

How can empirically based research on processes, forms and fields of conceptualization feed into processes of decolonization? What relationship do we establish between conceptualization and decolonization? How are concepts, theories, philosophies, and theologies produced in the postcolonial (and often still-colonized) world, independent from, in parallel to, and in tandem with, hegemonic concepts from the Global North? What does theory from the Global South offer epistemologies rooted in Global North contexts? How are concepts not only coined and shaped in non-European epistemologies but also set into discourse with other local concepts, and thus crafting conceptual “fields” in which theory is generated and practiced in a self-referring economy of ideas? How do non-European languages lend their own sensibilities and semantic architectures to alternative modes of conceptualization?

This workshop invites scholars working in various geographies of the Global South, or postcolonial contexts, to push forward new perspectives on how conceptual fields emerge, how they work and are deployed, and whether and how they might be universalizable “from below” in scholarly discourse across geographies. Building on recent interventions and debates (see Menon 2022; but also Taiwo 2022; Banerjee et al. 2016; Comaroffs 2012; Kresse and Sounaye 2022) and also older approaches and their insights and critiques, this workshop searches not only for concepts unavailable in the North, but for alternative epistemological systems and perspectives—“conceptual fields”—to remake the study of intellectual history, anthropology, religion, and more. Both explorative and prospective, this workshop seeks to set the ground for a fresh and critical engagement with processes, modes and objects of conceptualization; it also aims to nurture our ability to theorize beyond Euro-secular epistemologies.

Monday, 2 December 2024

9:45-10:00

Introductory remarks

Arpan Roy, Kai Kresse, Abdoulaye Sounaye

10:00-11:30

Panel I

Discussant: Mehdi Ayachi

“What Is the Place of ‘African Traditional Religion’?”
(Benedikt Pontzen)

“African Pentecostalism Engaging African Realities”
(Loreen Maseno, Maseno University)

11:30-11:45

Coffee Break

11:45-13:15

Panel II

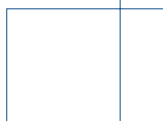
Discussant: Leila Almazova

“From ‘Millet’ to Nation and Back: Interactions of Local, Regional, and Global Conceptual Fields in the Evolution of Turkish Conceptions of Nationhood”
(Deniz T. Kılınçoğlu)

“Boundaries of the power of concepts: How religious and pre-revolutionary discourses among Muslim Tatars of late Imperial Russia shaped their conceptual fields”
(Diliara Brileva)

13:15-14:45

Lunch Break



14:15-15:45

Panel III

Discussant: Hilal Alkan

“Tracing Islamic Knowledge Production in Francophone West African Newspapers (1990-Present)”

(Frédéric Madore)

“Defining Liberal Islam: Between Western Epistemic Complicity and Islamic Authenticity”

(Mehdi Ayachi)

15:45-16:00

Coffee Break

16:00-17:30

Key Note

Discussant: Arpan Roy

“Translating the nafs: Eastern Christianity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam in a Contemporary Arab Orthodox Text”

(Aaron Elridge, University of Toronto)

Tuesday, 3 December 2024

09:30-11:00

Panel IV

Discussant: Kai Kresse

“Hawa: breathing with/in Ecologies of War and Sanctions”
(Sana Chavoshian, University of Saarland)

“Bahari yetu (Our ocean/genre) and weaving her-story”
(Jasmin Mahazi)

11:00-11:15

Coffee Break

11:45-12:45

Panel V

Discussant: Ahmad Moradi, Free University of Berlin

“Reading Mahdi Amil on Sectarian Thinking and Political Palestine”
(Aaron Elridge, University of Toronto)

“Global South as a ‘Placeholder’ Sensibility: Ashis Nandy and Cultures of Memory”
(Arpan Roy)

12:45-13:45

Lunch Breakk

16:00-17:30

Panel VI

Discussant: Frédérick Madore

“Swahili conceptual fields, central to understanding society”
(Kai Kresse)

“Boko: Europe, Intellectualism and Religiosity in Hausa Context”
(Abdoulaye Sounaye)

15:15-15:30

Concluding Remarks



Keynote: Translating the nafs: Eastern Christianity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam in a Contemporary Arab Orthodox Text

Aaron Elridge

This talk reads fiery writer and reclusive Orthodox Christian ascetic Spiro Jabbour's work *al-ī tirāf wa al-taḥlīl al-nafsī* (Confession and Psychoanalysis). Composed in Homs in 1990, the text draws on the resonance between Freudian psychoanalysis and the hesychastic writings of Orthodox Christian monasticism—John Climacus, Maximos the Confessor, and Gregory Palamas among others—to counterpose the healing of the nafs (at once the soul and the psyche) to its ambivalence under terms of destruction and dispossession. The text works grammatically to rearticulate something missing, a “sufi” ethic of Arab Orthodox Christianity, effected in the text through a retranslation of *mystikos* in an anonymous invocation of Ibn ‘Arabi and his spiritual posterity. In the interstices of translation across Eastern Christianity, psychoanalysis, and Islam, the text coordinates the jawf or gap at the heart of collective and individual life as that which addresses one as the ineradicable problem of “the counterfeit” and the non-knowledge of the unconscious.

Swahili conceptual fields, central to understanding society

Kai Kresse

In our discussion within the unit about the relevance of exploring (key) concepts in society, we have commonly emphasized the need to pay particular attention to the dynamic (progressive, processual) character of meaningful relationships involved in social context; to the multiple layers of semantic fields of terms; and to similar aspects denoting specificity and dynamism in the (potential and real) usages for people's orientation, i.e. for those using, working and thinking within their everyday lives as well as in extraordinary situations. It was because of this consciousness and sensitivity built in our group discussions that we favoured terms like ‘conceptualization’ (processes) or ‘conceptual fields’ over the use of the term ‘concept’ only. For similar reasons, Saba Mahmood (2005) used the term ‘grammar of concepts’ in her related stimulated discussion on shame (*haya*) and patience (*subra*) among pious young women in Cairo (building on Judith Butler's work on performativity and agency).

With this in mind, I would like to try to (re)approach the East African Swahili context here with a view to such conceptual fields, grammars, and processes that matter crucially for an understanding of society. Building on my own earlier work, while also discussing comparable work in African studies and anthropology for its



relevance, I shall discuss the historical category of dependency relations in society, marked by the term *utumwa*, meaning serfdom (and historically also slavery) in relation to *uungwana*, the category of proper civic behaviour, gentlemanliness, and commendable self-composure or -presentation. As a second, somewhat different positioned field, I shall look at the conceptual sphere for healing by focusing in on *uganga*, a term that is often used generically for healing that is not following a secular scientific medical procedure – including highly acceptable forms of Islamic healing, *utabibu* – but which is also often used with negative connotations, not only pointing to a lesser and inferior status of modes and methods of ‘healing’ but often also pointing to wrongful and/or superstitious rituals of a kind of ‘witchcraft’, for which *uchawi* is the common term.

I aim to discuss these two conceptual fields with a view to the relevant shifts and processes, and will seek to spell out a sense of the conceptual ‘grammars’ involved. Hereby, I draw from conceptually conscious and sensitive approaches by Michael Lambek, John Janzen; Wyatt MacGaffey, Rowland Abiodun, D.H. Johnson, and others -- as well as some key positions in African philosophy (including Kwasi Wiredu and Paulin Hountondji) and common discussions within the field of Swahili studies as relevant reference points, here also in relation to the regional understanding of *utu*, i.e. what it means to be human on the whole.

NB marking Swahili society as post-slavery society...

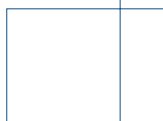
Utumwa – *Uungwana* (- *ushenzi*)

Uganga – *utabibu* – *uchawi*

Boko: Europe, Intellectualism and Religiosity in Hausa Context

Abdoulaye Sounaye

This presentation offers some reflections on the concept of *boko*, focusing on the ways in which it constructs Europe and articulates a critique of both schooling and intellectualism in Hausa contexts in West Africa. *Boko* is usually associated with the secular, and most importantly, the Euro-secular episteme that imposed itself onto many through a system of thought (modern rationalism), a social practice (school and schooling) and political project (modern state). It is one of those Hausa concepts that emerged within the European colonial context to nurture intellectual culture, trigger emancipatory politics and boost religiosity.



From “Millet” to Nation and Back: Interactions of Local, Regional, and Global Conceptual Fields in the Evolution of Turkish Conceptions of Nationhood

Deniz T. Kılınçoğlu

In the Ottoman Empire, social and political governance was structured around the so-called ‘millet system,’ where a millet referred to a specific denominational community represented by its religious leader. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Ottomans, like the rest of the world, encountered a new Western European concept and its sociopolitical order: nation. This new concept was translated into Ottoman Turkish in different ways throughout the long 19th century. However, in time, especially after the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the good, old Ottoman term ‘millet’ came to dominate the conceptual field of Turkish social communication, later accompanied by its Turkic sibling term, ‘ulus.’

Different social and political groups have responded to the consequent epistemic reconfiguration in various ways, each reflecting their contending visions of nationalism and nationhood. For example, ‘Islamists’ have insisted on adhering to the Ottoman concept, highlighting the implicit Sunni-Muslim essence of the Turkish nation. In contrast, ‘Westernists’ have advocated for a complete overhaul of the social, political, and epistemic framework in line with European epistemological models. Despite their apparent differences, these diverse epistemic and political fields have continuously interacted with each other and with various external epistemic fields, from Muslim-Brotherhood-brand Islamism to French-style radical secular republicanism. Moreover, recent studies suggest that the Turkish nation-building model of the 1920s inspired some prominent nationalist movements and leaders in Europe, such as the Nazis and Adolf Hitler. This indicates that the interaction among these epistemic fields defies the conventional assumption of unidirectional influence running from the North to the South.

This paper explores the intricate relationships between various conceptions of ‘nation’ in Turkey and the societal, regional, and global interactions of relevant epistemic fields in this context. Adopting a broad conceptual-historical and epistemological perspective, it aims to shed light on the social and political implications of these epistemic interactions within Turkish culture and politics.



Boundaries of the power of concepts: How religious and pre-revolutionary discourses among Muslim Tatars of late Imperial Russia shaped their conceptual fields

Diliara Brileva

The central concept within the religious discourse of Muslim Tatars in the Russian Empire—an important part of which was the periodical press—was the concept of millet, which can be loosely translated as “nation,” along with its derivative term taraqqi-e millet (“progress of the nation”). Social issues discussed in the press were framed in relation to the destiny of the millet. The most pressing issues, deemed critical for the millet’s future by contributors, included religious education, the general economic welfare of Muslims, and the position of women within Muslim society. Religious questions raised in the press were similarly presented as crucial, requiring reflection and resolution primarily for the sake of the millet and its progress. Employing the Islamic dichotomy of the elite and the masses (khasa and ‘amma), the religious discourse revolved around concepts of religious elites, which initially took shape in theological treatises and later found expression in the pages of periodical publications. However, the final years of late imperial Russia, on the eve of the autocracy’s collapse, were marked by the emergence of an anti-religious discourse tied to pre-revolutionary underground movements. This discourse rejected religious knowledge and its authority. The working and peasant classes, who lacked religious knowledge and did not employ the language of the religious press, could be identified in Islamic terms as ‘amma. They articulated their grievances through satirical journals, using the terms zulm (despotism) and zalim (despots). This paper examines the boundaries of contact/distinction between the different discourses of Muslim Tatars in late imperial Russia that co-existed during the final decade of the empire.

Tracing Islamic Knowledge Production in Francophone West African Newspapers (1990-Present)

Frédéric Madore

This paper examines how Francophone Muslim intellectuals in West Africa develop autonomous conceptual fields through Islamic publications. Drawing on a corpus of 1,500 Islamic periodicals from Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, and Togo (1990-present), we analyse how Western-educated Muslim writers navigate multiple epistemological traditions to generate new theoretical frameworks that transcend simple categorisations as ‘Western’, ‘African’ or traditionally ‘Islamic.’

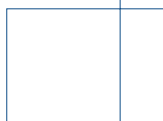


The concept of 'intégrisme' (integrism), originally used to describe Catholic fundamentalism, illustrates this complex dynamic. In the 1990s, while state authorities and Western-educated Christian elites often weaponised the term to stir up fears of 'Muslim integrism' and 'fundamentalism' by drawing parallels with the Algerian civil war, Francophone Muslim intellectuals developed sophisticated counter-narratives. Their writings show how they navigated between Western-derived secular discourses, Islamic theological concepts and local African political frameworks to produce new understandings of religious commitment and political engagement.

Using computational methods such as topic modelling and word embeddings, combined with close reading, we extend this analysis to trace broader conceptual transformations in Francophone Islamic discourse. We examine how concepts such as *laïcité* and democracy are reinterpreted by Muslim intellectuals, who draw on both their Western secular education and Islamic knowledge to develop hybrid interpretive frameworks. Similarly, concepts such as *ummah*, Islamism, jihadism, Wahhabism and *bid'ah* take on new meanings as they are reframed through this dual intellectual heritage and local context. These semantic shifts reveal complex processes of conceptual translation and adaptation resulting from the authors' ability to navigate multiple epistemological traditions, challenging both Western secular frameworks and traditional religious authorities.

The study also maps South-South knowledge circulation networks between West African countries, the Arab-Islamic world, and other Muslim communities in the Francophone world. By examining how writers engage with multiple centres of Islamic thought - from Al-Azhar and France to local institutions - we show how these media outlets create autonomous spaces for intellectual exchange and conceptual development.

This research contributes to the understanding of 'concepts, theories, philosophies, and theologies are produced in the postcolonial world' by providing empirical evidence of how francophone Muslim intellectuals in West Africa create new conceptual fields that engage with, but are not determined by, hegemonic frameworks. It shows how religious discourse can contribute to decolonial knowledge production by offering alternative epistemological systems.



Defining Liberal Islam: Between Western Epistemic Complicity and Islamic Authenticity

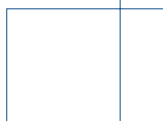
Mehdi Ayachi

When and how did the category of “liberal Islam” emerge within Western academic fields, and how does it contribute—like so many other constructs, such as “political Islam” or “everyday Islam”—to obscuring the practices and experiences of Muslim actors by framing them within simplistic and often problematic dichotomies, such as West/non-West, secular/religious, universal/singular, and liberal/non-liberal Muslim? This intervention explores these questions through ethnographic research conducted in the Sultanate of Oman, particularly among Muslim labeled within the Omani religious field as “rationalists”—a term they reject as a pejorative, externally imposed label created by opponents to discredit them. How, then, should we name them? Anthropologists must tread carefully, aware of how easily naming can slip from neutral description into theological assertion. Through this exploration, I aim to challenge Western-centered epistemologies that reduce Muslims to one of two categories—either “liberal” allies of Western ideals or “authentic” custodians of traditional values—advocating for a descriptive language that respects Muslim’s own self-understandings and captures the diversity and nuance of their lived experiences.

Hawa: breathing with/in Ecologies of War and Sanctions

Sana Chavoshian (University of Saarland)

This paper places hawa at the center of an engagement with the senses, material effects and affective resonances that rise in the relation between subject and object. Hawa is a Persian word with Arabic roots, which I loosely translate as “breath,” to keep both its connotation as ‘air’ and its close connection to one’s self as the center of ‘desires’. It has a material pertinence, enveloping the atmosphere, as well as a rich philosophical background as a contested notion in Islamic studies. While mostly referenced in the contexts of desires, I seek a creative reflection on the correlation between the air and desire, breeze and breathers, refreshment and emptiness, and the political and politics. The task here is not to reiterate the post-colonial strategy of constructing vernacular representations in new ways so as to convey the aura of authenticity, dissident nor an exotic repertoire of knowledge. I suggest to use hawa as both conceptual and ethnographic tool in order to reflect on an atmospherically, ecologically, religiously, sexually, and politically marked affective bond between theorizing life and action.



Bahari yetu (Our ocean/genre) and weaving her-story

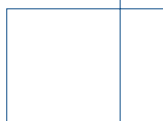
Jasmin Mahazi

I would like to present on my current research project which aims to understand the Swahili concept of bahari, which means 'genre' and 'ocean' at the same time. I argue that bahari is a maritime matrifocal concept that is performed, practiced and lived out primarily during Swahili knowledge practices, such as ngoma music and dance performances and in the making of diverse handicrafts, such as weaving. Following Kwasi Wiredu's call for conceptual decolonization, I draw from these matrifocal knowledge practices that both mold and influence our understanding of the past, in order to draft a her-story of the Swahili speaking Western Indian Ocean.

Reading Mahdi Amil on Sectarian Thinking and Political Palestine

Aaron Elridge

This article engages with Lebanese Marxist Mahdi Amil's theorization of 'sectarianism' (al-ṭā'ifiyya) and 'sectarian thinking' (al-fikr al-ṭā'ifi). Its argument is two-fold. First, it contends that Amil theorizes 'sectarianism' as the specific form of appearance of the "colonial mode of production"; 'sectarian thinking,' in turn, necessarily mistakes sectarianism as the return or survival of 'religion' and therefore the incomplete expansion of modern European capital. This spatial logic, Amil argues, thereby covers over capital's lack of auto-generativity in its relations of domination and exploitation. Second, the article specifically studies Amil's 1980 text *Madkhal ilā naqḍ al-fikr al-ṭā'ifi* and its reading practice. The text identifies 'the Palestinian cause' as an obstacle striating the 'thought-structure' of sectarian thinking. 'Sectarianism' founders on Palestinian political power insofar as the latter is the former's accident and symptom. The symptom of this contingency becomes the necessary site of an overturning of the evolutionary and spatial temporality of primitive accumulation. Palestine's persistent historicity thus bears the mode of action of negating (naqḍ) sectarianism within the reading practice of the text; this breaking with and pivoting is what Amil terms "the political."



Global South as a “Placeholder” Sensibility: Ashis Nandy and Cultures of Memory

Arpan Roy

This paper posits that the Global South, although contested and interrupted in its genealogy, offers a really-existing sensibility in ways of approaching humanities and social science research; albeit a “placeholder” sensibility. Reflecting on a series of essays by the Indian intellectual Ashis Nandy, as well as my own engagement with these essays in a Palestinian context, I discuss in this paper how the discursive “bridge” between Nandy’s India and Palestine has no tangible epistemology, but is rather constituted by a sensibility based on a reference to a non-geography that, in varying contexts, is shorthanded as the Global South, the Third World, or at times the Orient. Strictly speaking, this is not “affect” in the sense of a feeling of belonging to a loosely imagined collective (although it may also be this), but I make a case for the Global South as a place from which—a sensibility—to conceptualize the world.

What Is the Place of “African Traditional Religion”?

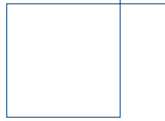
Benedikt Pontzen

What is the place of ‘African Traditional Religion’? This question might seem simple at first sight, but the answer to it is anything but straightforward. I first discuss the prominent answers that academics have proposed to this question. Then, I ask how many ‘African Traditional Religions’ there are as they should be easy to count once one has established their place. Thereafter, I seek to locate the African deity Akonnedi and her history. Doing so, I consider how established academic theories of ‘African Traditional Religion’ fail to live up to the multiple presences of this African deity and her religion. I suggest moving beyond the established academic order of knowledge that seeks to put things into place towards open conversations and exchanges across traditions.

African Pentecostalism Engaging African Realities

**Loren Maseno (PhD), Department of Religion, Theology and Philosophy,
Maseno University**

This essay is about African Pentecostalism and realities on the African continent. It begins by presenting an overview of the recent book African Pentecostalism from African Perspectives: Methods. Ezra Chitando, Lovemore Togarasei, and Loren Maseno (eds.) 2024. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland. The focus of



this overview is, how African scholars, on African Pentecostalism engage African realities and contribute to discourses on decoloniality in the study of world Christianity. Further, this essay highlights one study in African Pentecostalism, where social-scientific integrated approaches were employed to produce creative findings from the bottom-up in Bishop Margaret Wanjiru's Jesus is Alive Ministry, in Kenya. In conclusion, the overview and findings will be discussed in light of the drive towards a more deliberate engagement in decolonizing knowledge in African Pentecostalism scholarship.

Keywords: African Pentecostalism, African realities, Kenya, African perspectives, Decoloniality