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COSIMENA Roundtable
on Knowledge of Nature and Intangible Cultural Heritage

5 - 6 September 2018

in cooperation with the
Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB)

On the 5th and 6th of September 2018, the DAAD Regional Office Cairo's initiative 'Clusters of Scientific Innovation in the Middle East and North Africa' (COSIMENA) in cooperation with the Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB), invited expert speakers and participants from a variety of fields such as cultural studies, urbanism and ecology for a roundtable discussion on interdisciplinary approaches to nature and environmental protection as integral aspects of culture.

In 2003, the UNESCO defined 'knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe' as a core domain for the manifestation of intangible cultural heritage.¹ Engaging with the question of how our understanding of culture intersects with our knowledge of and interaction with nature is thus an essential step towards exploring the multifacetedness of intangible cultural heritage - a step which scholars from a variety of backgrounds, ranging from anthropology to economics, have long since embarked upon within the confines of their respective disciplines.

In recent years, however, a new academic discipline has formed which draws on insights and methods from the natural sciences and augments these with approaches from within the humanities and social sciences. This interdisciplinary approach, called 'Environmental History', draws on scholarship from within a collection of academic fields that includes disciplines as diverse as anthropology, literary studies, cultural studies, philosophy, theology, law, economics and history. It thereby leads us on a unique path towards exploring the relationship between nature and human civilisation and provides us with a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary understanding of the nexus between culture and environmentalism.

Mirroring this approach, the COSIMENA Roundtable focused on bringing together a group of experts and researchers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds to discuss the development of the relationship between knowledge of nature and cultural heritage, focusing on the context of the Arab World.

For two days, this international team of ten scholars and researchers from Germany, Lebanon, Finland and Egypt thus engaged with issues as fundamental as the conception of 'nature' in classic Arabic and Islamic Thought and Islamic views on Ecology, as historically significant as the traditional knowledge of and interaction with nature in Egypt, as contemporary as

¹ Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003, Art. 2, 2.



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sustainable development and the role of nature in an urban context and as philosophically engaging as the rise of Islamic Eco-jurisprudence and the ethical dimensions of wildlife care.

The first day of the roundtable focused on a historical, judicial and literary analysis of the concept of nature in the Arab World. One central feature of the presentations and discussions in this regard was the problematisation of the relationship between humankind and its environment. As Dr. Hans-Peter Pökel from the OIB remarked: "The increasing awareness that human beings are a part of nature and that their actions are affective on their environment, has strengthened the idea that humankind is also responsible for a sustainable living". A notion that, as he admits, increasingly "challenges human cultures and societies".

With regards to the concept of nature and environmentalism in literature, the problems of translation and recontextualization of classical and Islamic scripture by (contemporary) scholars were identified as central issues in the plenary discussions. In this context the question, introduced by Prof. Dr. Krawietz from Freie Universität Berlin of the importance of Islamic scripture and classical Arabic writings in contemporary (non-academic) environmentalist literature and preaching, raised the hotly debated issue of the appropriate level of academic rigour and comprehensiveness such publications should be based on. This revealed a further need for discussion with regards to the intended target audience of such popular, eco-centred opinion pieces and their role in popular education on environmental issues.

In her presentation on Islamic views on Ecology, Laura Wickström from the Abo Akademi University in Finland furthermore elicited an engaging discussion on the difference between Muslim as opposed to Islamic Environmentalism and the need to differentiate between the two. During the course of this discussion, the roundtable participants also identified the need for further analysis and comparison of the ideological variations between different strands of Islam regarding their views on ecology and of the practical differences in their approaches to environmental protection.

The afternoon session of the roundtable continued with a practical perspective on environmentalism in the form of biodiversity and ecological conservation projects in Egypt. As Dr. Abdelwahab Afefe from the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency pointed out, it is very important to involve the local communities in ecological conservation efforts and to incorporate their traditional knowledge of nature: "Protection means protection of local knowledge". This argument was supported by Dr. Hala Barakat, from the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, by reference to the al-Jebaliah Bedouin tribe, whose members cultivate the gardens of the former St. Catherine monastery and nowadays ecological conservation area. According to Dr. Barakat these individuals possess a 'phenomenal knowledge of nature' and an advanced understanding of the advantages of a symbiotic relationship between humans and their environment. The discussion revealed a great interest among the other participants of the roundtable with regards to the cultural sensitivity of Egyptian environmental laws and the issue of how exceptions to prohibitions on certain practices on accounts of traditional cultural practices and economies are being mediated. Additionally, there was a unanimous agreement on the need for enhanced expediency in organising the



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declaration of an area as protected, since Dr. Barakat remarked that often “by the time you have a proper management plan, the [endangered] area would already be completely disturbed”. Further main points which were raised during this discussion were a call for advocacy for the recognition of local knowledge of nature, as well as for the risks and potentials of tourism and the education of the general population regarding the benefits of a healthy environment.

In conclusion for the first day of the roundtable, Prof. Dr. Birgit Schäbler, Director of the OIB, proposed the idea of gathering the contributions of the roundtable in a blog, which found great approval among the other speakers and participants, who also made suggestions for how the discussion could be widened to include even more varied voices in future events on the subject.

On the second day, the roundtable discussions focused on a number of contemporary debates and challenges regarding nature and ecology in the Arab world. As Prof. Dr. Richard Tutwiler from the American University in Cairo pointed out, contemporary urban development in the Arab world in the form of ‘gated residential communities’ or ‘compounds’ presents a primary example of the clash between sustainable living and the culturally highly valued images such as that of the green ‘oasis’. This juxtaposition between sustainable and culturally valued lifestyles was identified by the roundtable participants as a major issue within Egypt but also the wider Arab World and one which necessitates the difficult process of transforming and adapting traditional cultural ideas to contemporary environmental conditions.

As a starting point for a culturally and environmentally symbiotic urban development approach, Richard Hoath, also from the American University in Cairo, presented the AUC campus in New Cairo, which combines mainly natural desert landscapes with only small ‘oases’ sections of artificial greenery, that, together, form a flourishing and diverse natural, yet urban, ecosystem – an achievement which was intensely debated as a model for future progress in culturally and environmentally sensitive urban planning.

Khaled Elnoby from the Migratory Soaring Birds Project in Egypt further demonstrated the multifacetedness and complexity of this conflict between the evolution of environmental protection and the conservation of cultural heritage by highlighting the opposition between legal and cultural legitimacy in the practice of falconry in Egypt. As Mr. Elnoby remarked “natural and cultural entanglement has always been under attack by scholars of heritage”, as it has been notoriously difficult to distinguish between ‘natural heritage’ and ‘cultural heritage’, especially in the case of communities that claim a strong kinship with their environment. As the discussion on this topic revealed, national governments play a key role in making such distinctions, as Mr. Elnoby explained that applications for UNESCO cultural heritage status must be filed by nations states. He also confirmed that lobbying for certain cultural practices, such as in favour of falconry, can be a successful tool to explore for advancing their recognition.

Tatiana Villegas-Zamora from the UNESCO complemented this presentation by providing the international perspective on the processes of recognising certain practices and traditions as



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(intangible) cultural heritage. This raised a discussion on the question in how far the UNESCO's secularised recognition of certain practices as intangible cultural heritage, in particular also those relating to nature, can accurately capture these practices' essence, as it was argued that many of them share a strong spiritual core that is impossible to ignore. This represents an important line of inquiry into the interdisciplinarity and complexity of cultural heritage on a global scale.

The roundtable concluded with a focus on the relationship between nature and harmony, covering a cluster of issues that connected much of the content of the previous presentations and discussions. As Prof. Salma Talhouk from the Amercian University Beirut remarked: "If you want to be in harmony with nature, you first need to be in harmony with yourself". As her presentation and the ensuing discussion showed, this simple premise has a lot of consequences for how we trace the problematic relationship between humans and their environment and for how we identify the primary actors, as well as their interests and needs in this dynamic. Where is nature to be located on the two-pronged tier of rural versus urban areas? Who holds the primary power in terms of potential for environmental protection or destruction? How and to what degree do informal experiences of nature through the family affect a person's outlook on their environment? And how can we retrieve information about the old traditions of former, agrarian communities to learn from their approach to a life in harmony with nature? These are only some of the fundamental question which the participants of the roundtable posed to themselves and each other at the finale of the event, signalling the need to continue their research and collaboration in the field of (intangible) cultural heritage and the domain of practices concerning nature and the universe.

For this edition of the Cultural Heritage Cluster, COSIMENA cooperated with the OIB, who initiated the organisation of the event. In her introductory remarks, Prof. Schäbler emphasised the roundtable's aim of providing a starting point for future research collaborations and projects with regards to the manifestation of intangible cultural heritage in our practices and attitudes concerning nature and the environment. The results of this roundtable event suggest that this goal was indeed well met.

These two days of intensive dialogue and academic exchange witnessed a multiplicity of lively and engaging discussions, which raised important questions about the complexity of the dynamic between human beings, their cultural identities and the environment in which they flourish, as well as about the different angles from which this complexity can and should be approached. These discussions, in turn, conceived ideas and plans for future interdisciplinary research ventures and exchange platforms, such as a blog through which the participants of the event can stay connected and continue to exchange insights from their research. As such COSIMENA is proud to have contributed to another successful foray into the (hidden) depth of human cultural heritage in the MENA region that will hopefully lead to further interdisciplinary academic dialogue and collaboration in this field.

Since its inception, COSIMENA has developed seven issue driven clusters focusing on topics such as urbanism, cultural heritage and health. These clusters act as knowledge hubs and



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platforms of cooperation between scientists and innovators from Germany and the MENA region. Inaugurated in May 2018, the Cultural Heritage Cluster has been a focal point for experts from a variety of different disciplines, who share an academic interest in the manifestation of (intangible) cultural heritage in a variety of different domains, such as oral traditions, traditional craftsmanship and practices concerning nature and the universe.

