

Conference: “Us and them: diasporas for others in the Indian Ocean”

Centre for Interdisciplinary Area Studies, Martin-Luther University, Halle (Saale), Germany

16-17 September 2019

The Indian Ocean - a web of political, economic and social connections that encompasses the shores of China and southern Africa, the Red Sea and Australia - has constituted a world system for at least two millennia; the networks linking the shores of the ocean have facilitated a constant if sometimes irregular movement of peoples, and led to the establishment of diasporic communities across the region. Some of these diasporas have great temporal depth: the Hadramis, for example, who have been present in eastern Africa for centuries, if not millennia; the Gujaratis, who are said to have been responsible for the Islamisation of the Malay archipelago; or the Chinese, who in centuries past appear to have settled in places as far afield as the Persian Gulf and eastern Africa as well as in southeast Asia.

In the nineteenth century, with the expansion of the European colonial empires in the Indian Ocean, there were renewed movements. Some drew upon pre-existing diasporic relationships to travel while others constituted new diasporas. Many of these diasporans have continued to maintain relationships across the ocean, both with each other and with the homeland. These relationships are often instrumental in framing contemporary practices, constituting individual and group identities, and shaping social, economic and political strategies, providing cohesion within and between different localisations of the diaspora. Diasporas that maintain a diaspora-wide cohesiveness in this way may be characterised as “diaspora for others”: diasporas that do not simply maintain bilateral relationships with the homeland, but who also maintain relationships with other localisations of the diaspora, providing for a holistic sense of diasporic community.

This conference calls for papers that consider the contemporary character of Indian Ocean diasporas and their members, looking at diasporans’ relationships with others in the places in which they live, with other members of the diaspora elsewhere, and with the homeland. While we are primarily concerned with diasporas that conserve a sense of diasporic identity, contributions that consider denials of identity, however these may be expressed, are also welcome. Participants may like to consider some of the following questions:

Why and how do diasporic communities construct and maintain a sense of identity as a distinct community, or is this identity imposed upon them - or both?

How do diasporans manage this diasporic identity, regardless of its provenance, how does it serve them, or disserve them? Can people escape from diasporas?

How do collective memories and knowledge of the history of a diaspora shape the worldview of its members and guide their practices? How do diasporans draw upon historically constituted relationships and networks across the ocean in their contemporary activities?

What do diasporans share with one another, with their neighbours (who may themselves be diasporic), and with people from the homeland, and how do these shared beliefs and practices shape practice?

What sorts of practices mark members of a diaspora as being part of the community within which they live, and what practices mark them out as being different? Are these practices voluntarily assumed markers of identity (such as food?) or obligatory practice (such as prayer?) and how do they influence relationships with others?

Can diasporas be attributed a single diasporic identity, or are there different diasporic identities? For example, what do Hadramis from Singapore share with Hadramis from Zanzibar, if anything? And if nothing, what is a Hadrami?

How do different diasporic practices articulate with expressions of a cohesive diasporic identity? Who is us and who is them, and when?

Participants may wish consider (the utility of) concepts such as hybridisation and creolisation, belonging and difference, and problematise the concept of identity (in its various definitions). We encourage contributions touching upon all areas of the Indian Ocean and contiguous regions, continental and maritime, and Indian Ocean diasporas in places further afield, such as Latin America or the Pacific.

Organisation

The conference will take place over two days, **16-17 September 2019**, at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Area Studies (Zentrum für Interdisziplinäre Regionalstudien - ZIRS) Martin-Luther University, Halle (Saale), Germany, and will be funded by ZIRS and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). Meals and accommodation will be provided for conference participants and some assistance with travel costs may be available. It is expected that the conference will result in a publication and participants should bear this in mind when preparing their contributions. Please note that the working language of the conference will be English and all papers should be in English.

Please send the title, an abstract of not more than 250 words, author's name, email and institutional affiliation, to iain.walker@zirs.uni-halle.de before **31 January 2019**. We would expect to advise of acceptance by mid-February.

Venue

Center for Interdisciplinary Area Studies (Zentrum für Interdisziplinäre Regionalstudien)
Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg
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06114 Halle/Saale, Germany

Organiser

Dr. Iain Walker
Zentrum für Interdisziplinäre Regionalstudien
DFG-Project "Remembering, forgetting, imagining: identity strategies in Mayotte"

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