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On modern Muslim subjectivity formation: introduction

1 Background and research questions

This special issue is the result of a series of network workshops held between 2018 and 2020 with participants from Danish and German universities in Aarhus, Odense, Kiel, Hamburg and Bochum, all of whom were junior scholars. Behind the formation of the network were two other initiatives: 1) The Interreg 4a project "Wissensregion Syddanmark Schleswig-Holstein", with funding from which the professors of Middle East and Islamic Studies Lutz Berger (University of Kiel), Thomas Eich (University of Hamburg), Dietrich Jung (University of Southern Denmark in Odense) and Mark Sedgwick (University of Aarhus) set up a lively cooperation which included several interdisciplinary workshops for PhD candidates held between 2012 and 2015; and 2) The Modern Muslim Subjectivities Project headed by Professor Dietrich Jung at the University of Southern Denmark (Odense).

The former project supplied the personal contact and infrastructure for cooperation, and the latter the theoretical framework. The network itself was funded by a 3-year grant from the German Research Foundation (DFG). While the network and its activities have been completely organised by junior scholars from each of the four universities involved, the senior professors continued to mentor these activities and review the articles scheduled for publication.

The purpose of the "Modern Muslim Subjectivities" network was to create a forum for interdisciplinary dialogue and cooperation between young scholars who study Modern Muslim societies and communities. The participants have presented and discussed their individual research projects, which all fall under the scope of

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area studies, anthropology, sociology and history and relate to three main research questions:

1) How can we analyse processes of subjectivity formation among contemporary Muslims through practices and discourses?
2) How do modern Muslims combine the resources of Islamic tradition with models of modern subjectivity?
3) How do they handle the available sources of Islamic normativity (Islamic law, ethical and behavioural rules) in the process?

The network organised four thematic workshops, each of which has shed light on crucial aspects of subjectivity formation in the context of Muslim communities and societies: education, body and spirit, gender, and belief and religious conversion. The workshops were devised by network members in turn, and each workshop introduced the wider network to external specialists within the relevant fields. Thus, workshop participants have built an overview of the state of the art within each field, and the conceptual and theoretical framework has been challenged along the way.

2 Theoretical framework

Scholars of contemporary Middle East and Muslim communities worldwide have come to reject almost unanimously the common-sense dichotomy between Islam/tradition on the one hand and the West/modernity on the other hand. However, finding the appropriate conceptual tools for analysing cultural symbols and practices and describing cultural differences large and small *beyond this dichotomy* has proven a formidable task. One of the most promising fields of contemporary social scientific theory – when it comes to the study of modern Muslim individuals, communities and societies as part of both global modernity and specific cultural traditions – are the related clusters of thought centring on the concept of "subjectivity".

There are a number of major contributions to this concept from within the field of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies. Saba Mahmood[1] and Charles Hirschkind,[2] among others, have pioneered a new approach to the study of contemporary Islamic revivalism by suggesting that scholars need to give attention to the processes of self-cultivation that are involved the formation of pious Muslim subjects, and that an analysis of the specific subjectivity of members of Islamic

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1 Mahmood 2005.
2 Hirschkind 2001.

revivalist movements is not only interesting on the individual level, but also provides the key to understanding the social and political implications of these movements. Mahmood demonstrates the existence of different subjectivity cultures within modern Muslim societies which compete for political and social hegemony. For example, she stresses that the pious subjectivity cultivated by the Egyptian women within the piety movement she studied is fundamentally at odds with the religious subjectivity promoted by the secular-liberal camp and the Egyptian nation-state, while also pointing out that there exist different and partly conflicting conceptions of the Muslim subject *within* the Islamic camp, for example between the piety movement and the followers of the more politicised and activist tendency, such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

By way of a critical appraisal of Mahmood and Hirschkind's work, Samuli Schielke,[3] in turn, has argued that the study of modern Muslim subjectivities must avoid the "illusion of wholeness" (an expression coined by anthropologist Katherine Pratt Ewing[4]), the danger of overstating the coherence of Muslim subjectivities and the risk of confusing the perfectionist and totalising pretensions of Muslim pietism with the much more ambivalent and fragmented ethical subjectivity experienced by most contemporary Muslims, even those who are under the ubiquitous influence of Islamic revivalist movements. In the same vein, Richard Gauvain[5] points out the high drop-out rate in Salafi circles in Egypt, arguing that the process of moral formation that individuals undergo within religious groups often remains incomplete or fails. Schielke's model of Muslim subjectivity is one of a plurality of moral-ethical registers (including, next to religion, social justice, honour and respect, good character, romantic love, and self-realization) and of the prevalence of conflicts and fractures, ambiguities and double standards within Muslim moral selves.

A third approach proposed to the issue of Muslim subjectivity by Dietrich Jung[6] is inspired by Andreas Reckwitz's[7] model of "successive modernities". Reckwitz discerns three formations of subject cultures that have dominated the modern epoch: the morally sovereign bourgeois subject, the peer-group-oriented type of the salaried masses, and the postmodern subject of the creative worker and entrepreneur. Jung, Petersen and Sparre[8] argue that applying this model to Muslim

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3 Schielke 2009a.
   Schielke 2009b.
4 Ewing 1990.
5 Gauvain 2013.
6 Jung et al. 2014.
   Jung/Sinclair 2015.
   Jung/Sinclair (eds.) 2020.
7 Reckwitz 2020.
8 Jung et al. 2014.

societies proves the explanatory value of all three ideal types concerning modern Muslim subject formation and provides important clues as to the various ways in which Muslims combine Islamic traditions with globally available patterns of modern subjectivity. They concur with Schielke's insistence that "regular people" with ambiguities and double standards, rather than the most pious individuals, should be taken as paradigmatic representatives of modern Muslim subjectivity. On the other hand, they share Mahmood's intuition that generalising descriptions of Muslim subjectivities do have an explanatory value, even if they tend to create ideal types that are only rarely found in actual Muslim individuals.

According to our understanding, studying subjectivity does not deny the importance of the normativities salient in the Muslim world, such as the textual traditions of Islamic law, ethics and behavioural codes. All of the approaches provide a key to observing and understanding how traditional Islamic normativities become part of the lived reality of contemporary Muslims, how they are subjected to processes of selection and combined with non-religious sources of morality and normativity by individual Muslims, as well as religious networks and communities.

3 Introduction to the individual articles

Our thematic networks addressed the issue of Muslim subjectivities in modern societies from different angles. The first workshop was organised by David Jordan (Islamic Studies, University of Hamburg/University of Bochum) and reflected on the persistence of spiritual beliefs and practices – both traditional and modern – in a large number of Muslim communities, in spite of the fact that these communities also embrace and practice modern natural science and medicine. On the basis of the presentations and discussions, Jordan wrote the article "Sufism, Subjectivity, and Parapsychology: Refashioning the *Dirbāsha* Ritual Among Sufis in Modern Iraq". Here, he explores the ritual of the *dirbāsha* as an extraordinary miracle performance and its role as a bodily practice in the formation of modern Muslim subjectivities among adherents of the Qādiriyya-Kasnazāniyya Sufi order in Iraq. As part of the ritual, male novices perforate their bodies with swords or skewers without seriously injuring themselves, which is perceived as a miracle and proof of God's powers. Jordan then argues that the bodily experience of God's miracle is constitutive of a religious subject open to modern parapsychological practices.

The second workshop discussed different types and settings of Islamic education and investigated the ways in which different pedagogical agendas contribute to shaping Muslim subjectivities. It was organised by Sebastian Elsässer (Middle Eastern Studies, University of Kiel) and Kirstine Sinclair (Centre for Modern Middle East and Muslim Studies, Department of History, University of

Southern Denmark) both of whom also edited this special issue. Based on this workshop, they have contributed an article each for this issue, namely: Elsässer "Engineering the 'Islamic personality': Muslim Brotherhood education between theory and practice" and Sinclair's "The medicine chest: Education in the light of Abdel Hakim Murad's understanding of modernity".

Elsässer argues that the Muslim Brotherhood's comprehensive educational model for transforming the Muslim mind, spirit and body consists of a broad and heterogeneous range of ideas and practices which, in spite of tensions and contradictions, is held together by pragmatic understandings of the concept of balancing (*tawāzun*) on a theoretical level and a division of labour within the movement on a practical level. The latter implies that only a small elite of party cadres are trained to reach higher levels of an "Islamic personality", while the mass of regular members is mainly expected to fulfil their organisational duties. Hence, the ideal Muslim subjectivity formation is only relevant for the few.

Sinclair also studies Muslim elites, albeit in a completely different setting, as she turns to contemporary Britain, namely Cambridge Muslim College and the understanding of modernity and modern subjectivity formation of the college Dean, Shaykh Murad. The college's aim is to counter fragmentation between the modern non-Muslim, British surroundings and Islam. Thus, the college seeks to mediate between Islamic traditions and modern Muslim lives in the West and in doing so, Shaykh Murad serves as a role model offering a particular and modern approach to instrumentalising the religion in everyday being and practice.

Also contributing to both the workshop and this special issue is Fabio Vicini (Deparment of Human Sciences, University of Verona). The title of Vicini's article is "Rescuing the Muslim collective self: the Nur case in light of the Modern Muslim Subjectivities Project". Here, based on his study of the Nur movement in Turkey, Vicini argues that the domains of religious and civic engagement – often thought of as oppositional – are in fact counter-constitutive. Thus, the article explores the intertwined national views of mass education and modern citizenship and a renewed Islamic emphasis on the need for moral and ethical reform of society. According to Vicini, the Nur movement in contemporary Turkey illustrates how Islamic ethics and modern perspectives on education have emerged as an integral part of the Turkish nation-state.

The third workshop was on gender and sexuality with a special focus on masculinity and was organised by Arash Guitoo (Department of Islamic Studies, Kiel University). The article "'*Are* you gay or do you *do* gay?' Subjectivities in 'gay' stories on the Persian sexblog shahvani.com" was written against this background, and here, Guitoo demonstrates the influence of local-traditional perceptions of sexuality in subjectivity formation among men involved in same-sex sexual practices in contemporary Iran. He argues that the perception of and the explanation for same-sex desire as well as the categorisations of subjects found in

specific blog-entries point to the predominance of local-traditional patterns of thought in the authors' imaginations. The existing conflict between the local-traditional and more modern understandings in the commentary sections, however, shows how modern and local traditional perceptions of masculinity and sexuality overlap and intersect in contemporary Iranian society.

Finally, the last contribution to this issue is by Sana Chavosian (Leipzig Zentrum Moderner Orient, University of Leipzig) entitled: "From military hero to martyr: Crafting singularity and the formation of Muslim collective subjectivity in an Iranian statist ritual". Chavosian takes the funeral procession of Commander Qasem Soleimani in January 2020 in Iran as a point of departure for a primarily ethnographic study of the collective and affective potential of his funeral procession in the Khuzestan province, the site of many battles in the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988) and thus an area marked by intense emotions of resentment and grief. Both these emotions are used to mobilise citizens to honour Soleimani and facilitate a state-envisaged martyr cult and the public rituals for martyrs, thereby enhancing the official Iranian template for subjectivity formation and emotional expressions.

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