

The Centre for Modern Oriental Studies in Berlin

How do modern Moroccans view a forty-year-old king with the old Islamic title of Commander of the Faithful, who presents himself on occasion as a young sportsman? What were the experiences of Arabs in Hitler's concentration camps? How does the internet change patterns of authority and communication in the Muslim world? And

what did it mean to live on the shores of the Indian Ocean, for example in Zanzibar, where historically Africa met India and the Middle East? Questions such as these are at the core of research projects at the Berlin Centre for Modern Oriental Studies. The research fellows, most of whom work on projects lasting two to three years, explore the history, anthropology, economy, and present problems of African and Asian societies with a special focus on Islamic societies and their interaction with non-Islamic neighbours. In contrast to the dominant trend that views these regions predominantly with regard to their importance (or otherwise) to Europe, researchers at the Centre aim at understanding the local perspectives. 'The West' obviously does not disappear entirely in such a perspective, but relations among and between regions of Africa and Asia often dominate.

It is therefore appropriate that the current research programme centres on the processes and consequences of translocal movements in this wide area. Its historical perspective allows for historicizing the flows of people and goods, as well as the processes by which the historical actors cope with change. Thus, studying the Indian Ocean raises questions similar to those which have been discussed with regard to the Mediterranean and help, in very similar ways, to overcome the regional divides that area studies and the creation of academic departments have tended to erect. One might even argue that the same holds true for the study of other 'natural' divides such as the Sahara.

In order to avoid at least some of the problems of earlier generations, the Centre tries to cooperate closely with colleagues from the areas being studied. The Centre particularly invites younger colleagues from these areas to apply within the framework of the research programmes. Furthermore, the Centre regularly hosts guests from the regions both for longer research stays and for numerous workshops and conferences organized by the different projects. It is our hope to further intensify this type of cooperation with colleagues from the region in future years.

The Centre for Modern Oriental Studies is uniquely placed for such studies, because it is one of the few institutions combining regional expertise on different parts of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East with different disciplines. Created as an independent research institute to continue some of the research of the former East German Academy of Sciences in a new framework and in close cooperation with academics from the Western part of Germany, the institute has developed into a lively institution that sees itself as a pioneer in promoting interdisciplinary and transregional cooperation. Researchers work in groups, which is in itself a novel experience for many in the humanities.

Activities and services

As with any genuinely academic institution, the Centre's workshops and publications are at the core of its scholarly output. The Centre edits a monograph series that is currently being revised to become a refereed series accepting manuscripts from outside the Centre. A second series of working papers comprising bibliographical studies, source editions, etc. is published in a printed edition but might be turned into an internet publication. Both series feature books in German and English on topics such as *The Transformation of Asian and African Societies under Colonialism* (ed. Heidrich 1994), *Responses to*

The Berlin Centre for Modern Oriental Studies (ZMO) was founded in 1996. ZMO is dedicated to the historical, social, and cultural study of the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. Apart from conducting its own research programmes the institute promotes the development of research networks on national and international levels.

Globalization in Asia and Africa (eds. Füllberg-Stolberg, Heidrich, and Schöne 1999), and *Space on the Move* (eds. Deutsch and Reinwald 2002). The most recent publication investigates the role of Afro-Americans in the relations between the US and Africa (Füllberg-Stolberg 2003). *The Orient*, a bulletin produced twice to three times annual-

ULRIKE FREITAG

ly and distributed for free, offers information about current activities of the Centre. The Centre's website is now being developed into a space for publication, in addition to providing information on the Centre and links. It also hosts a valuable database that provides access to institutions that boast know-how in the wider area of matters relating to Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

The Centre runs a regular lecture series and organizes sessions to inform the public about Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Roundtable talks provide the researchers with a more informal opportunity to meet academic visitors or discuss work in progress. In addition, the Centre organizes occasional public events either at its seat or at other venues, often in cooperation with other institutions in Berlin. Many of the Centre's research staff also teach Islamic and African Studies, anthropology, and other subjects at the Free University and Humboldt University in Berlin.

Thanks to funding from the city, the Centre is housed in a mansion built in the early twentieth century. Besides providing office space for researchers and accommodation for academic visitors, the building houses the Centre's library of some 50,000 volumes and 90 journals. It comprises a number of valuable donations, in particular the library of the founding director, Professor Fritz Steppat, with his large Arabic language collection.

Funding and organization

The Centre is currently funded mainly by two institutions: the city of Berlin provides the physical and institutional infrastructure, while the German Research Council (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) has committed itself until 2007 to supporting the research programme. Thus, the approximately 20 researchers at the Centre need to apply for their projects jointly through the Centre. While this occurs in regular cycles that are advertised, the Centre also supports individual researchers in their applications to other funding organizations. The Centre's Advisory Council, consisting of prominent academics in the main subjects and regions represented at the Centre, plays an important role in the development of the research profile.

Future plans

The Centre is currently undergoing a dynamic phase of development. This is due to the fact that the position of director had been vacant for some years after the untimely death of Professor Haarmann in June 1999. The Centre is seeking new ways of publicising its results and communicating them to wider audiences. It also plans to intensify and broaden its international cooperation, which, hitherto, has functioned mainly on the basis of individual contacts. For example, the Centre is hoping to build cooperation with young Turkish historians on the topic of urban history in the framework of a joint project with the Freie Universität and the Institute of Advance Studies, Berlin. The Centre hopes to expand its historical breadth to include researchers working on topics concerning periods as far back as the sixteenth century in order to challenge the notion of modernity being brought to the Islamic world in the nineteenth century. It would further like to widen its scope of research to include Central Asia and Southeast Asia, the latter currently being covered for the first time in the Centre's history.

For further information please consult the Centre's website: www.zmo.de or send an e-mail: zmo@rz.hu-berlin.de

Ulrike Freitag is director of the Centre of Modern Oriental Studies and professor of Islamic Studies at the Free University in Berlin.