



## Urban Studies Seminar 2018–2019

### Annual Theme: The Urban Spatialities of Religion in the Middle East, Africa and South-East Asia

Monday, 20 May 2019, 5 pm

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### Spatial Piety: Shia Religious Processions and the Politics of Contestation of Public Space in Northern Nigeria

Lecture by **Murtala Ibrahim** (Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies)

#### Venue

Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient  
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Murtala Ibrahim examines Shia Ashura processions in northern Nigeria, which regularly degenerate into conflicts with either state security forces or the Sunni majority. He looks at how the Ashura procession, as a sacred religious practice performed in a public space controlled by secular authorities, results in a complicated entanglement of the secular and the sacred. Focusing on the politics of contestation of public space, Murtala examines how the regular and visually stimulating Ashura processions become an instrument for the Shia to assert their presence, display their religious identity, challenge secular political order and break social boundaries in the public space. Moreover, he explores the poetic and semiotic meaning of the material components of the procession such as special dressing, images, and flags as well as how these components reinforce cohesive Shia identity, generate symbolic boundary and their efficacy in producing public visibility. Murtala argues that Sunni majority perceive the conspicuous visibility of the Shia minority through their public processions as a threat to what they consider to be the normal spatial configuration of the urban environment. As a result Shia procession has become highly contested practice that generates anxiety and on many occasions elicit hostile backlash from both the dominant Sunni public and state security forces.

**Murtala Ibrahim** received his PhD at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University in 2017. For the doctoral project, he conducted ethnographic fieldwork among the members Christ Embassy and NASFAT in the Federal Capital of Nigeria, Abuja. His research interest is in the emerging new religious groups in the Nigerian urban landscapes, religion and public sphere and the concept of material religion. His latest publication is entitled "The Sites of Divine Encounter: Affective Religious Spaces and Sensational Practices in Christ Embassy and NASFAT in the City of Abuja" (In Dilger et al. (eds.) *Spirit and Sentiment: Affective Trajectories in African Urban Landscape*. Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming in 2020).