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Commission on Anthropology of the Middle East

Anthropology Transforming, Middle East in the Eye of the Storm

September 10–12th 2025

Galatasaray University, Center for Social Research (TAM)

Munevver Soylu Hall (C316)

(Second floor in the historical building)

Galatasaray Üniversitesi

Çırağan Caddesi No:36 34349

Ortaköy/İstanbul

Chair: Soheila Shahshahani

Co-Chair: Paulo Pinto

Executive Secretary: Magdalena Rodziewicz

Regional Representatives:

Soraya Tremayne & Christian Bromberger: Europe

Mary Elaine Hegland: United States and Canada

Paulo Pinto: South America

Tomoko Yamagishi: East Asia

Day 1

September 10, 2025, 09:00 (Istanbul Time)

09:00-09:30 **Registration**

09:30-09:40 **Welcome Note to Participants:**
Prof. Didem Daniş – Galatasaray University
Dr. Soheila Shahshahani – Chair of the Commission

Panel 1: Sports and Games

Convenor: Christian Bromberger

- 09:40-09:50 Christian Bromberger: Introduction to the Topic
- 09:50-10:10 Carmen Rial and Cristhian Cajé: Football as Activism: Gender, Resistance and Solidarity
- 10:10-10:30 Magdalena Rodziewicz: From Pulpit to Playground: Iranian Shi'i Clerics on the Move
- 10:30-10:50 Ali Akherati: Eyes on the Sky, Roots on the Roof: The Meaning, Passion, and Politics among The Rooftop Pigeon Flyers of Tehran
- 10:50-11:10 Discussion & Coffee

Panel 2: Gender and Sexuality in Iran and the South Caucasus at the Turn of the 20th Century

Convenor: Janet Afary

- 11:10-11:30 Janet Afary: *Molla Nasreddin* and Women's Rights in South Caucasus at the Turn of the 20th Century
- 11:30-11:50 Elham Malekzadeh: Emotion, Power, and Female Agency in the Private Telegrams of Amina Aghdas (1899)
- 11:50-12:10 Fahimeh Mousavi: Women in the Qajar Family Power Structure: An Analysis of Women's Roles and Positions in the Shadow of Men's Sexual Desires
- 12:10-12:30 Nigar Gozalova: The First Azerbaijani Women's Newspaper in the South Caucasus
- 12:30-12:50 Zahra Kazemi: Gender and Women's Rights in the Works of the Azerbaijani Playwright Mirza Fathali Akhundzadeh

12:50-13:10 **Discussion**

13:10-14:10 **Lunch Break** ☪

14:10-14:30 **Keynote Speech:** Amina Tawasil: The Anthropological Work of Safeguarding the Vulnerable: Creating Spaces of Care During a Political Crisis

14:30-14:45 **Discussion & Coffee**

Panel 3: Emerging Spiritualities: The Trajectory of New Spiritual Practices in Turkish Society

Convenor: Kerem Gökem Arslan

14:45-15:05 Duygu Şendağ: Pious, Healthy, and Fun: New Religious Expressions in Turkey

15:05-15:25 Özgür Türesay: Indigenizing Spiritism? Reflections on the Spiritist and Anti-spiritist Literature in the late Ottoman Empire (1850s–1910s)

15:25-15:45 Kerem Gökem Arslan: “I Put a Spell on You’’: New Magical Ritual Forms in Heterodox Religiosities in Turkey

15.45-16.05 **Discussion**

Day 2

September 11, 2025, 09:00 (Istanbul Time)

Panel 4: Medicalisation

Convenor: Soraya Tremayne

09:00-09:20 Shamim Sherafat: De-professionalization in the Shifting Landscape of Medical Education in Iran

09:20-09:40 Selen Göbelez: Cesarean Epidemics: Techno-bio-medicalization and ‘Biopolitical Uterus’ in Turkey

09:40-10:00 Nafe Babasafari: The Body Under the Blade: A Phenomenology of Women’s Lived Experience with Cosmetic Surgery in Kurdistan, Iran

10:00-10:20 **Discussion & Coffee**

**Panel 5: Life Histories, Stories, Narratives, Oral History and Memoirs:
Individuals of Middle Eastern Societies**

Convenor: Mary Elaine Hegland

- 10:20-10:40 Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi: Diaries of Guity Afrouz: A Young Iranian Girl in the First Half of the 20th Century
- 10:40-11:00 Kim Shively: Make Sense of Death in a Foreign Land: The Muslim Diaspora in the U.S.
- 11:00-11:20 Mary Elaine Hegland: From On-the-Spot Fieldwork to On-the-Phone-and-WhatsApp Dialogue: A Story from Shiraz
- 11:20-11:40 Ziba Jalali Naini: The Resurgence of National Consciousness in Iran: Memory, Identity, and Personal Narratives
- 11:40-12:00 **Discussion**

**Panel 6: Decolonial and Feminist Movements in Central Asia:
Resistance, Agency, and Transformation**

Convenor: Rano Turaeva

- 12:00-12:20 Rano Turaeva: Introducing the Panel and Decolonising Gender Studies in Central Asia
- 12:20-12:40 Agathe Guy: Gender and Muslim Female Entrepreneurship in Kazakhstan
- 12:40-13:00 Aygerim Kapar: Care for Balkhash and Decolonial Eco-Activism: Women, Art, and Justice in Kazakhstan
- 13:00-14:00 **Lunch Break** (Panel 6 continues after the lunch break) ☯
- 14:00-14:20 Elmira Nogoibaeva: Esimde and the Decolonial Project in Kyrgyzstan
- 14:20-14:40 Almira Tabaeva One Hundred Years of “Hujum” (1927–2027): Past, Present and Future
- 14:40-15:00 **Discussion & Coffee**
- 15:00-17:00 **Commission Business Meeting.** All participants are invited to attend. We will discuss among other topics, next year’s venue of the Conference, possible titles, time, panel topics.

Day 3

September 12, 2025, 09:00 (Istanbul Time)

Panel 7: New Realities: The Role of Technology in Shaping Everyday Life in the Middle East

Convenor: Seyed Abdolreza Hosseini

- 09:00-09:20 Nicola Maria Camerlengo: AI and the Anthropology of the Middle East: Bridging Technology and Tradition
- 09:20-09:40 Niloufar Mohammadi: Finglish Subculture: Hybrid Realities in Iran's Tech Scene
- 09:40-10:00 Seyed Abdolreza Hosseini: Technology in Translation: The Case of Industrial Electricity in Iran
- 10:00-10:20 **Discussion & Coffee**

Panel 8: Rituals in Movement: Pilgrimage, Globalization and Diaspora

Convenors: Paulo Pinto and Gisele Fonseca Chagas

- 10:20-10:40 Rodrigo Ayupe Bueno da Cruz: Devotion in Movement: Personal Experience and Institutional Projects around Saint Charbel in Lebanon and Brazil
- 10:40-11:00 Gisele Fonseca Chagas: Rituals, Texts and Transnational Belonging: Shi'a Social Media in Brazil
- 11:00-11:20 Paulo Pinto: Mimesis and Baraka: Tombs, Replicas and Pilgrimage among Sufi Muslims in Argentina
- 11.20-11.40 **Discussion**

Panel 9: Research in Progress

Convenor: Soheila Shahshahani

- 11:40-12:00 Nicoline Julie Winther: What Does it Mean to be a Good Exile Palestinian in Times of Genocide?
- 12:00-12:20 Zuzanna Błajet: Well-being of Highly Skilled Tajik Isma'ili Migrant Women in Poland
- 12:20-12:30 **Discussion**
- 12.30-13.45 **Lunch Break** (Panel 9 continues after the lunch break) ☯

13:45-14:05 Viveka Anderton: Middle East: Ethnographic Methods in the Private Business Sector-Leadership, Transformation and Sustainability

14:05-14:25 Danila Mayer: The Ottoman Portraits in a Habsburg Archduke's Collection: Images between Engaging and Distancing

14:25-14:45 **Discussion**

Panel 10: Visual Anthropology

Convenor: Shilan Saadi

14:45-17:00

Three Films by different film makers will be shown. After each film there will be a discussion.

"River Neighbors"

Length: 25 minutes, released in 2023, Kurdish with English subtitles

Synopsis: Residents of two coastal villages of Gerzhal, located in Kurdistan of Iran, communicate through a wooden boat. The children give a lift to people with a boat, at a very low price. This is a job for them, besides going to school themselves and playing.

Director: Keyvan Fahimi, is the director and writer of this film. He was born and grew up in Mahabad, a Kurdish city in north-western Iran. Keyvan got his MA in dramatic arts, from Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran. He then completed his studies at Tehran film school. He is presently Chairman of the Board of Directors of Art & Cultural Institute of *Honar Afarinane Shahr*, where he made a few short and also some documentary films. His films have been shown in national and international film festivals and won a number of awards.

"Anita, Lost in the News"

Length: 17 minutes, released in 2024, Kurdish with English subtitles

Synopsis: A little girl and her family, hoping for a better future, cross the English Channel on a boat.

Director: Behzad Nalbandi

"Night and Fog in Kurdistan"

Length: 83 minutes, Kurdish with English subtitles, just won a prize.

Synopsis: "Night and Fog in Kurdistan" is about seven teenage girls who fled ISIS genocide of Yazidis in 2014. The director tries to document this genocide and also the plight of surviving in tents. The director got in touch with the characters and traumas of a childhood spent in war,

through her own Kurdish background, follows them for five years, through their years of residence in refugee camps in Turkey, as well as their relocations to European countries.

Director: Shilan Saadi

Open discussion after each film.

FAREWELL Note by All

Abstracts

Day 1
September 10, 2025

Panel 1: Sports and Games

Convenor: Christian Bromberger

Panel description: Games are free, uncertain, fictitious activities, with rules that suspend ordinary laws; the unreality of games is underlined by the name given to them... Games can value competition, other chance, still others simulacrum (playing with dolls) or vertigo (speed in a car). Some combine these different characteristics. These games can be physical, verbal, use illusion (dressing up for example) and are either intended for children or adults (betting, for example). Sports are competitive games, based on bodily prowess, against an opponent, a distance, a time, an obstacle, an animal, or even oneself. Considered in their dual dimension of practice and spectacle, sports are privileged observatories of the classification of genders (according to the sexual distribution of practices), of local, regional, national antagonisms (through the militant fervor of supporters aroused by the spectacle of competitions), of the threshold of authorized violence (variable according to societies), of the canons of bodily beauty, forms of sociability between athletes and between spectators, of the evolution of measuring instruments, consubstantial with sport, and finally of the ritual dimensions of major sporting events.

Panelists:

Carmen Rial and Cristhian Cajé

Football as Activism: Gender, Resistance and Solidarity

Abstract: This paper takes *The Football Aficionado* (2022) as a starting point for reflecting on the intersection of football and activism. Directed by Sharmin Mojtahedzadeh and Paliz Khoshdel, the film follows Zahra Khoshnawaz, an activist leading the Iranian movement for women's access to football stadiums. It highlights the dual strategies women have employed to challenge restrictions—disguising themselves as men to enter stadiums and directly confronting security forces at stadium gates. While these efforts faced significant obstacles under Iranian Islamic law, the movement gained traction when FIFA intervened, leading to solidarity among male spectators who refused to enter stadiums without female fans. This paper draws a comparison between the resistance of Iranian women football supporters and the historical struggle of women in Brazil, where football was officially prohibited for women from 1941 to 1979. Despite the ban, Brazilian women continued to play and support the sport in defiance of state-imposed restrictions. In recent years, female supporters in Brazil have mobilized against sexism in stadiums, organizing collectives to challenge harassment and advocate for equal participation in football culture. By examining these cases, this paper explores the parallels between different forms of resistance in Iran and Brazil, highlighting how football serves as both a site of exclusion

and a platform for gender-based activism. The study also reflects on the role of international institutions and male allyship in fostering change, positioning football as a global battleground for women's rights.

Magdalena Rodziewicz

From Pulpit to Playground: Iranian Shi'i Clerics on the Move

Abstract: Although Islam does not prohibit sports and even encourages physical activity among its adherents, the domain of sporting activities in post-revolutionary Iran has been subject to numerous restrictions. These limitations have often been ascribed to the interpretive authority of Shi'i clerics, who possess the prerogative to adjudicate the religious permissibility (*ḥalāl*) or prohibition (*ḥarām*) of specific forms of physical endeavor. Restrictions have disproportionately affected women, either barring their participation in public physical activities or limiting it due to the requirement of adhering to the 'Islamic dress code.' Paradoxically, clerics themselves have also faced constraints as upholders of clerical dignity (*sho'ūn-e rouḥānīyat*), a principle that demands a heightened seriousness in their public conduct, especially while wearing clerical attire. Nevertheless, recent years have witnessed a discernible shift in this paradigm. Confronted with an escalating crisis of their spiritual authority, a decline in societal esteem, and a widening rift between the clergy and the people, certain clerics have sought innovative methods of communication. Traditional sermons delivered from the mosque pulpit, which have increasingly migrated to virtual platforms in contemporary practice, are now being supplemented by direct participation in sporting activities—on occasion, undertaken while adorned in full clerical attire. This alternative approach to establishing contact with the believers characterized more as a grassroots initiative than an institutionally sanctioned directive, has sparked debate within clerical circles, exposing divergent viewpoints concerning the role of the clergy and the nature of their social presence. This paper investigates this emerging phenomenon, positing it as a novel communicative strategy designed to advance Islamic values while concurrently reconfiguring the clergy's societal status and function. Drawing on evidence from social media, press, television, debates among clerics, case studies, and individual testimonies, the study explores the motivations behind this development and the challenges it poses. The research seeks to outline a conceptual framework through which clerics navigate the tension between the traditional imperatives of clerical dignity—symbolized by the sanctified attire of the Prophet they wear—and the modern challenges to improve the clergy's public image amid a perceived crisis of legitimacy. Employing a diverse array of methodological approaches, this study provides a preliminary examination of the evolving interplay between the clergy, Iranian society, religiosity, and the culture of sports in the Iranian post-revolutionary context.

Ali Akherati

Eyes on the Sky, Roots on the Roof: The Meaning, Passion, and Politics among The Rooftop Pigeon Flyers of Tehran

Abstract: Pigeon keeping (kæbu:tær/kæftær bə:zi:) in Iran—including its broader historical and cultural geographies that extend beyond the country’s present-day borders—is a deeply rooted and enduring form of play and leisure. In this paper, after briefly tracing the historical presence of pigeons as instruments of entertainment in Iranian culture, I draw on over eighteen years of field engagement with pigeon flyers to examine the annual competitions known as *gero* (*pawn*). Focusing on the intricate details of these events, as well as on everyday practices of pigeon care and the social relationships that emerge among participants, I aim to shed light on the lived worlds of these individuals, the role of pigeon keeping in their lives, and the ways in which their gatherings express and transmit shared values, norms, and identity boundaries. At the same time, I address the transformations that have taken place in this field over the years. One of the most significant shifts - as articulated by the pigeon keepers themselves as “the growing importance of money” - is the shift from competition over symbolic capital to the economy of the economic capital. A clear manifestation of this is the dramatic rise in the number of pigeons each keeper owns or enters into competitions, transforming small-scale *geros* (*pawns*) of 5 or 6 birds in past decades into competitions involving thousands today. This transformation has had wide-reaching effects, influencing the structure of the competitions, the nature of gatherings and their guest culture, and even how pigeon keepers identify with and organize themselves around specific urban neighborhoods. Finally, drawing on my last three years of research among pigeon keepers in Rasht—where, notably, the first female pawn keeper in Iran emerged—I reflect on how this world might be reimagined. Using theoretical perspectives from the anthropology of play, I offer an alternative vision to what pigeon keeping has become in contemporary Tehran—a version increasingly criticized by the pigeon keepers themselves. I suggest that pigeon flying be understood less as a rigid, rule-bound sport and more as a flexible, playful, and socially meaningful form of engagement.

Panel 2: Gender and Sexuality in Iran and the South Caucasus at the Turn of the 20th Century

Convenor: Janet Afary

Panel description: This panel will look at gender and sexuality issues among Shi’i Muslim populations of Iran and South Caucasus (modern-day Republic of Azerbaijan), focusing on the years 1870-WWI. Presenters are encouraged to use a variety of historical archives such as travelogues, letters, memoirs, telegrams, plays, newspapers, poems, and graphic arts. Our focus is on how these societies were resisting or responding, to modern gender norms and the particular role which residents of South Caucasus (many Shi’i-Azerbaijani speakers) played in disseminating these ideas in Iran and the region.

Panelists:

Janet Afary

Molla Nasreddin and Women’s Rights in South Caucasus at the Turn of the 20th Century

Abstract: By the turn of the twentieth century, the subject of women’s education had become a hot journalistic topic. The Russian-language newspaper *Kaspiy* (The Caspian) and Azerbaijani-language newspapers such as *Sharq-e Rus* (East of Russia), and *Irshād* (Guidance) published

hundreds of articles promoting girls' education and called for the greater integration of women into the public sphere. In this context, the periodical *Mollâ Nasreddin's* treatment of Muslim women's rights was ground-breaking. Unlike others, it did not limit itself to the argument that women must be educated so they could become better wives and mothers, advancing the nation. Rather, the journal addressed many facets of women's difficult lives. It adopted a deeply sympathetic view of the girl child herself, explored the many abuses that girls and women endured during their lives, and called for legal reform of marriage and divorce laws. The journal published stories and printed cartoons on the various facets of a woman's life, from birth to old age, including subjects such as the stigma of giving birth to a girl, malnourishment, lack of education, segregation, child marriage and forced marriage, domestic violence, polygamy, temporary marriage, easy divorce, competition from non-Muslim women and, finally, veiling and dress code.

Elham Malekzadeh

Emotion, Power, and Female Agency in the Private Telegrams of Amina Aghdas (1899)

Abstract: This paper explores the private telegrams of Amina Aghdas, the favored wife of Naser al-Din Shah, written in 1899. Drawing on this unique set of archival documents, the study illustrates how a woman from a relatively modest background was able to exercise considerable agency and influence within the power structures of the Qajar court. The central research question investigates how Amina Aghdas, through her personal correspondence with the king, not only expressed emotional intimacy but also communicated criticisms, social concerns, and deficiencies directly and without mediation. These telegrams represent a rare form of affective and civic communication, where emotional proximity is intertwined with subtle political and social intervention. The methodology is based on textual analysis of the existing telegrams, interpreted within their broader historical and social context. While the paper does not follow a fixed theoretical framework, it is inspired by feminist historiography, particularly perspectives on voice, agency, and media in late Qajar Iran. Ultimately, the aim is to highlight the intersection of gender, power, and media during a period of meaningful social transition in modern Iranian history.

Fahimeh Mousavi

Women in the Qajar Family Power Structure: An Analysis of Women's Roles and Positions in the Shadow of Men's Sexual Desires

Abstract: During the Qajar period, wealthy and court families had complex structures in which women's roles were heavily influenced by men's desires and priorities. In some of these families, men's attraction to same-sex individuals, particularly teenagers and young boys, marginalized the position of their wives. The main issue of this research is to explore the position of women in such circumstances, and how they could maintain or alter their position within the family power structure. How were the wives of these men defined, and what tools did they have to influence or survive? Social expectations of these women, their legal and economic status, and the strategies they employed to examined. This study uses historical content analysis and relies on archival sources, including diaries of royal women, foreign travelogues, legal documents, and

literary texts from the Qajar period, to analyze the status of women in such asocial structure. The results indicate that these women were often confined within frameworks of silence, acceptance, and motherhood, yet in some cases, they strengthened their position through family networks or indirect influence on power. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of gender relations, power, and the status of women within the Qajar family structure.

Nigar R. Gozalova

The First Azerbaijani Women's Newspaper in the South Caucasus

Abstract: At the beginning of the 20th century, the issue of family and women's education became one of the most pressing problems among Azerbaijanis, widely discussed by intellectuals and educators. The periodical press of the region played an important role in the struggle for women's rights, against illiteracy and the isolation of women from public life. In the Turkish-speaking press of the region, this issue was first raised in 1903 in the newspaper *Shargi-Rus* (1903–1905), and later in newspapers like *Hayat* (1905–1906), *Irshad* (1905–1908), *Füyuzat* (1906–1907) and *Taraqqi* (1908–1909). The journal *Molla Nasreddin* (1906–1931) boldly confronted religious fanatics on the issue of women's freedom by publishing satirical articles and cartoons on this painful subject. The most significant event in terms of women's issues in the Azerbaijani press was the publication of the women's newspaper *Ishig*, the first issue of which appeared in 1911. The editor-in-chief was Khadija Alibekova (1884–1961). The publication of this weekly newspaper continued till the end of 1912, during which time sixty-eight issues were published. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the country's progressive figures have fought with all their might to strengthen women's national consciousness, against their illiteracy, ignorance and disenfranchisement.

Zahra Kazemi

Gender and Women's Rights in the Works of the Azerbaijani Playwright Mirza Fathali Akhundzadeh

Abstract: Mirza Fatali Akhundzadeh, also known as Akhundov, is considered the first modern playwright and the founder of Muslim enlightenment in South Caucasus and Iran. He was among the first to write about the critique of religious and cultural structures, the critique of despotism, the necessity of cultural reformism, and particularly women's rights and their problems in Islamic societies. In a taboo-breaking manner, he brought women out of seclusion in his Playwrights and introduced them into literature as living characters, striving to transform women's rights into a social issue. Akhundzadeh, by adopting a radical discourse, objected to strict gender segregation and the limitation of women. He viewed gender as a social and cultural phenomenon imposed by ancient traditions, patriarchal despotism, and oppressive Islamic legal codes. Therefore, in his plays, contrary to the traditional depiction of passive and powerless women, he portrays them as fighters, resilient, wise, emotional, having the right to choose, and free, challenging male dominance and finding liberation through the power of love. This article aims to critically discuss the portrayal of women in Akhundzadeh's Playwrights, examining the extent to which the presented model was realistic and aligned with the existing capacities of Islamic societies, and whether it could have liberated Muslim women from their suffering.

Keynote speaker: Amina Tawasil

The Anthropological Work of Safeguarding the Vulnerable: Creating Spaces of Care During a Political Crisis

Abstract: In an era marked by student arrests for Gaza genocide protests, ICE abductions targeting both activists and undocumented communities, diminished judicial resistance to authoritarian overreach, emboldened public racism, and escalating military interventions, anthropologists face urgent questions about our discipline's capacity to protect the vulnerable. This keynote explores how anthropological methods can create transformative spaces of care during political crisis. Drawing on anthropology's foundational commitment to "seek out unseen faces of the world at hand," I argue that ethnographic practice offers unique tools for safeguarding marginalized communities. Through what Angela Garcia calls "writing with care"—embracing vulnerability and uncertainty—anthropological work can "amplify voices otherwise inaudible" and challenge dominant narratives that justify state violence. The presentation examines how anthropology's method of experience creates what Zoe Todd envisions as "a space of being in the world together, allowing for different understandings of our being." In contexts where students face criminalization for moral witness, where immigrants live under constant surveillance, and where courts fail to protect basic rights, anthropological practice becomes a form of radical hospitality—creating collaborative spaces that resist dehumanization. I explore practical applications: documenting state violence through ethnographic testimony, creating alternative archives of resistance, and cultivating comfort with uncertainty as a methodological strength. Rather than demanding predetermined outcomes, anthropological approaches honor the emergent and speculative, creating space for unexpected possibilities. By pursuing anthropology's vision of "a humanity yet to come," our discipline offers frameworks for nurturing care, solidarity, and transformation within systems designed to eliminate safety and hope.

Panel 3: Emerging Spiritualities: The Trajectory of New Spiritual Practices in Turkish Society

Convenor: Kerem Görkem Arslan

Panel description: In the 19th century, magnetism and spiritualism gained prominence in the Ottoman Empire. Following the establishment of the Turkish Republic, neo-spiritualists congregated within specific social circles. Simultaneously, growing interest in Eastern mysticism paved the way for the development of new spiritual identities in contemporary Turkey. As for the 2000s, the democratization of the internet further facilitated the diffusion of European spiritual trends, intensifying interest in occultism, witchcraft, and paganism, particularly among younger generations. The widespread adoption of communication technologies and social media, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, accelerated the popularity of fast-consumption spiritual practices and prompted the integration of folkloric Islamic traditions into these new spiritual frameworks. This interdisciplinary panel, drawing on religious anthropology, marginalization studies, and history, will examine how these emerging movements challenge established religious norms and navigate tensions between secularism, individualism, and religious conservatism. These spiritual transformations raise essential questions about the

intersection of religion, identity, and social change in a rapidly evolving cultural landscape. Discussions will focus on the sociopolitical and cultural factors driving these movements, their interactions with state and religious authorities, and how individuals are reshaping their spiritual identities amid the pressures of globalization and modernization. This panel seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the shifting religious and spiritual dynamics in Turkey and their broader implications for contemporary society.

Duygu Şendağ

Pious, Healthy, and Fun: New Religious Expressions in Turkey

Abstract: My presentation will explore the practices of Muslim women influencers on Instagram who use the platform to offer guidance to other women on topics such as prayer, fasting, child-rearing, family relationships, and marital intimacy. Their overarching goal is to cultivate a 'healthy' individual, family, generation, nation—and, in certain cases, ümmet. With followings that sometimes exceed three million, these 'cultural entrepreneurs'—many of whom are professionally trained in psychology—offer new interpretations of what it means to live an 'Islamic' life, blending religious values with contemporary ideals of health and well-being. At the same time, they do so by adopting core traits of new media culture: interactivity, storytelling, visual appeal, playfulness, and fun. Drawing primarily on the profiles and social media content of these influencers, my presentation will examine the dynamics of religious change and evolving forms of authority, in the context of the established middle-class status of conservative groups after two decades of AKP rule in Turkey.

Özgür Türesay

Indigenizing Spiritism? Reflections on the Spiritist and Anti-spiritist Literature in the late Ottoman Empire (1850s–1910s)

Abstract: At the end of the 1850s, spiritism was quickly introduced to the Ottoman Empire through the European and Levantine communities in Istanbul. While the first article, a critical text on spiritism in Ottoman Turkish, appeared in 1876 in a literary journal published in Istanbul, the real turning point was in 1910. The publishing circles in Istanbul experienced a fervor about spiritism in that year. Two types of negative reactions to spiritism in the Ottoman press can be broadly categorized: materialist and anti-materialist. Here, I deal primarily with the Islamic and Muslim anti-materialist reactions to spiritism. The Islamic anti-materialist reactions to spiritism were based on Islamic theological sources. According to them, the entities who came were bad spirits, djinns, and demons. The only exception to this was the spirits of good Muslims who could visit their relatives in dreams. In contrast, Muslim spiritualist reactions were not grounded in a theological foundation; they were not actually against spiritism but were rather an expression of Islamic mysticism and spiritualism. Islamic and Muslim reactions shared common points. First, even though they seemed critical of spiritism, they also welcomed it as a refutation of materialism. Therefore, both reactions were, first and foremost, anti-materialist reactions. In that context, a few individuals attempted to introduce spiritism to the Ottoman readership by making it indigenous. These publications offer valuable insights into the concept of indigenizing foreign knowledge within the Ottoman context. In my paper, after a brief presentation of all

spiritist and anti-spiritist publications in Ottoman Turkish, I will analyze the anti-materialist reactions against spiritism with a special focus on the Muslim spiritualist reactions, where the indigenization attempts are the most visible.

Kerem Görkem Arslan

“I Put a Spell on You”’: New Magical Ritual Forms in Heterodox Religiosities in Turkey

Abstract: The global revival of Western-style witchcraft and folkloric traditions in the 20th century gained significant momentum with the advent of the internet, which facilitated the cross-cultural transmission of esoteric knowledge. Blending folk beliefs and neopagan customs, this resurgence not only reanimated ancient spiritual practices but also enabled the emergence of hybridized spiritualities that are contextually rooted yet globally inspired. In Turkey, this bricolage has taken on a uniquely localized character since the 1990s. The translation of some Western witchcraft texts during that period served as a catalyst for the dissemination of neopagan ideas and ritual forms. With the expansion of internet access in the early 2000s, Turkish witchcraft communities began to evolve under the increasing influence of Western esoteric discourse. This development signaled a significant shift from indigenous spiritual practices embedded in Anatolian folklore, shamanism, and Islamic mysticism toward more eclectic and syncretic expressions. Contemporary witchcraft in Turkey now reflects a conscious effort to localize Western neopagan elements within a culturally resonant framework. A notable example is the veneration of Hekate, traditionally regarded as a goddess of witchcraft in the Western tradition. In the Turkish context, however, Hekate is often reinterpreted as a regional deity rooted in Anatolian, Carian, or Thracian heritage, prompting ritual adaptations that diverge from her Western representations. This process of cultural reinterpretation often includes the revival of shamanic practices, while elements with Islamic undertones are selectively incorporated or consciously excluded, resulting in a complex spiritual synthesis. This study explores how Turkish practitioners of witchcraft negotiate identity and belief within this evolving spiritual landscape. It also examines how such heterodox religious expressions persist and transform under the shadow of an increasingly conservative Islamic political landscape, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of neopagan spiritualities in Turkish context.

Day 2

September 11, 2025, 09:00 (Istanbul Time)

Panel 4: Medicalisation

Convenor: Soraya Tremayne

Panel description: The notions of health and illness, which have been specific to the culture of the social group in which they occur, have been historically shared between different societies and through cross-cultural exchanges. However, the circulation of knowledge has taken a dramatic turn in the speed with which it is spreading across the world, through globalisation and the internet technologies, in the past few decades. One of the outcomes of these exchanges in the medical field has been the emergence of new perceptions of health, illness, and disease leading to the medicalisation of non-medical conditions and problems, which are being defined

and treated as health problems often requiring medical treatment. Social scientists view medicalisation as the act of excessively defining and medically treating conditions, behaviours, or attitudes that are not related to medical problems. Such approach often appears in the form of socially constructed issues turned into medical problems requiring increased medical intervention and control and the subsequent loss of autonomy by the patient. While medicalisation has many benefits, such as improved health outcomes and access to treatments, it also raises important questions about the limits of medical authority, the construction of disease and disorder, and the exercise of power over individuals' bodies and lives. Foucault's (1963) concept of "biopower" describes medicalisation as a mechanism of social control, and a process by which the biotechnology has enabled the exercise of power over individuals' bodies and lives, leading to a "medical gaze" that shapes our understanding of health and illness. Medicalisation's permeation into everyday life ranges, *inter alia*, from the transformations of the body through exercise, diet, or medical intervention (for example, cosmetic surgery, in a quest for re-shaping the body into a "healthy" or aesthetically "perfect one"); to the understanding of mental health and wellbeing where non-conforming behaviour is treated as a medical problem. This panel invites contributions on topics related to medicalisation and to what extent it is adapted and accommodated into various cultural settings in the Middle East.

Panelists:

Shamim Sherafat

De-professionalization in the Shifting Landscape of Medical Education in Iran

Abstract: This study investigates de-professionalization within the medical profession in Iran, focusing on the specific phenomenon where medical students opt for alternative paths like emigration or pursuing unrelated occupations rather than specializing. The research addresses the diminishing interest in specialized fields, surplus unfilled seats in universities, and the trend of students completing general medicine studies. I argue that the de-professionalization process can potentially undermine and negate professionalism at its extreme levels. To delve into this issue, I examined the state of medical education in Iran, the transition of students into doctors, ethical and scientific evolution, and the impact of factors such as educational hierarchy and economic challenges on medical de-professionalization. I used a qualitative approach to gain insights through semi-structured interviews with students and doctors. By applying Stern's factors of professionalization, I studied professionalism among Iranian doctors. Our findings highlight a prevalent capital-driven mindset among students, leading to disillusionment and detachment from the ideal doctor image, transforming them into conventional wage earners and fostering de-professionalization to its extreme trends.

Selen Göbelez

Cesarean Epidemics: Techno-bio-medicalization and 'Biopolitical Uterus' in Turkey

Abstract: Turkey currently holds one of the highest cesarean section rates among OECD countries, with over 60% of births delivered surgically. This ultra-medicalization of childbirth reflects a convergence of conservative pronatalist policies, neoliberal restructuring of healthcare,

and the normalization of bio-technological intervention. Drawing on fieldwork, including interviews with 40 women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds in Istanbul and additional interviews with healthcare professionals such as obstetricians, midwives and doulas, presentation interrogates how childbirth has become a site of intensified medical control, commodification, and moral regulation. Framing the uterus as a biopolitical site, this research examines how women navigate childbirth amid conflicting forces: the clinical rationality of risk management, the commercialization of birth as a marketable event, and the symbolic weight of motherhood in the Turkish political imagination. While many women internalize the C-section as a “safe,” modern, and even desirable choice, others experience it as a loss of agency, particularly within under-resourced public hospitals where obstetric violence and hierarchical medical authority are common. The paper explores how women's birth choices and experiences are shaped not only by institutional constraints but also by social class, digital influences, and generational expectations. Narratives of resistance—through avoidance, forgetting, irony, or engagement with alternative models such as doulas—reveal attempts to reclaim autonomy in the birthing process. However, such alternatives often remain inaccessible to disadvantaged women, reinforcing existing inequalities. By situating Turkey’s “C-section epidemic” within a global context of medical knowledge circulation and control over reproductive bodies, this paper contributes to broader debates on medicalization, gendered biopolitics, and reproductive justice. It argues that the rise of cesareans in Turkey is not merely a medical phenomenon, but a political and cultural one— where the female body becomes a terrain for negotiating power, modernity, and motherhood.

Nafe Babasafari

The Body Under the Blade: A Phenomenology of Women’s Lived Experience with Cosmetic Surgery in Kurdistan, Iran

Abstract: This qualitative study, employing a phenomenological approach, delves into the lived experience of women in Kurdistan, Iran, who have subjected their bodies to the blade of cosmetic surgery. The primary focus is on the deep understanding of the meanings, motivations, and socio-cultural consequences that these women attribute to medical intervention on their bodies. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using MAXQDA 2024 software. Findings indicate that for the participants, cosmetic surgery transcends individual choice, representing a complex response to structural pressures. Key drivers of this phenomenon include established norms regarding the “ideal female body,” the increasing medicalization of beauty, and the competition to acquire “bodily capital” in social arenas. The narratives reveal that the body is redefined as an identity project, wherein medical intervention becomes a tool for achieving social acceptance, recognition, and at times, resistance against social stigmas. Ultimately, the experience of “the body under the blade” in this cultural context signifies a complex intersection of female agency, the dominance of medical and beauty discourses, and the struggle to manage identity in a world where the body has increasingly become a mutable and reproducible object. Keywords: Lived Experience; Cosmetic Surgery; Phenomenology; Female Body; Medicalization of Beauty; Bodily Capital; Kurdistan, Iran.

**Panel 5: Memoirs, Life Histories, Stories, Narratives, Oral History and Memory:
Individuals of Middle Eastern Societies**

Convenor: Mary Elaine Hegland

Panel description: Social/cultural anthropology and ethnography have a long and illustrious history of considering individual lives, attitudes, and understandings, although sometimes the emphasis on commonly understood culture has overtaken individual variation, choices, and outlooks. We want to attend both to individual choices, decisions and innovations and persons' contributions to and understandings of their cultures and societies and also to trends and commonalities in cultures and societies. So much of cultural change, cultural variation, multitude of cultural choices, dynamics of decision-making, individuality, and even cultural and social trends and how all of this interacts with changes or resistance to change in economics, politics, migration, media, education, international connections, and religion can be understood through attention to the memoirs, life histories, stories, and narratives of individuals. For this panel, speakers who recount memoirs/stories of individuals gathered through interviews, conversations, recording narratives, gathering of letters or other written or published materials are invited to present some of the narrative or narratives and what can be learned from them. We are also open to analyses of life histories/stories gathered previously by others and what can be learned from them.

Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi

Diaries of Guity Afrouz: A Young Iranian Girl in the First Half of the 20th Century

Abstract: This study examines the diaries of a young Iranian girl from 1938 to 1951, covering her development from adolescence to adulthood. Born into a middle-class family in Tehran, Guity Afrouz had an open-minded father and a traditional mother. She maintained her diaries in four notebooks at various intervals. In them, she discusses her inner conflict between her passionate, lively father and her traditional, later disabled mother. Additionally, she makes frequent references to new recreational spaces, such as café and cinemas, and the new hobbies of the middle-class youth of that time, as well as the relationships between friends and young people. In her third notebook, she provides a detailed account of her first experience of traveling to Europe in the aftermath of World War II, offering a description of some of the places in Europe from the perspective of a young Iranian woman. The significance of this study lies in its unveiling of the daily life of a new middle-class family in Tehran during the first half of the 20th century, in the period of the Reza Shah and the early years of the reign of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, as seen through the eyes of a young girl. This perspective provides insights that may add to those accounts of men and few women who have previously recounted their memoirs from this era in books, interviews, and films.

Kim Shively

Make Sense Death of in a Foreign Land: The Muslim Diaspora in the U.S.

Abstract: Muslims who have migrated away from the homeland often face uncertainties as they age and contemplate death. Many Muslim migrants wish to be returned to their homelands for

burial, in part because they view burial in Muslim contexts as important to accruing the blessings that will help them on Judgment Day. But what happens when repatriation is difficult or impossible? Based on extensive ethnographic research and interviews, this paper examines how Muslim immigrants living in the eastern United States have reconsidered the final dispositions of their bodies, seeking new spaces and models to guide them in their decision-making about life and death in “*ghurba*” (a foreign place). Some see burial in gurbet as a source of blessings, since this they would be following in the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad, who was not buried in his homeland, Mecca, but in Medina, the land of *hijrah* (migration). Some of my Muslim interlocutors also draw on Sufi concepts for valorization of the suffering of exile, embracing the idea that human existence in the physical world is itself a form of exile, since separation from and longing for the divine is an endemic aspect of life. The pain of living and dying in a foreign country is a pale reflection of the gurbet experienced due to separation from God. Such a view allows immigrants to reorient their thinking about death and burial: rather than longing for return to the homeland, the pain of exile can be soothed through meditating on the eschatological promise of reunion with God after death.

Mary Elaine Hegland

From On-the-Spot Fieldwork to On-the-Phone-and-WhatsApp Dialogue: A Story from Shiraz

Abstract: My research methodology has changed from 1978/1979 to recently. From intensive field work, participant observation and talking with many community people, I have turned to in-depth interviews with a few individuals to prepare jointly authored presentations and publications. I’ve dedicated the last three years to working with one individual, Maryam Karimi, to write a coauthored book-length life history story with Maryam as first author. I have learned so much from Shiraz women and would like to honor them with a jointly-authored memoir with my best friend in Shiraz, Maryam Karimi. Three main reasons have influenced this change in approach to gathering social/cultural anthropological knowledge: First, due to my long-term association with the people in a Shiraz community, I have become increasingly close friends with many of them. My dissertation field work in this Shiraz community lasted fifteen months, with some 6-7 return trips from three months to two or three weeks. The last trip was in 2018. I maintain contact through phone, WhatsApp, skype, etc. This long-term association and friendship led to focus on specific individuals, rather than on social organization, culture and change as a whole. Second, over time, I have more and more realized how indebted I am to my friends in this Shiraz community; I could not have written a dissertation, gained a faculty position or published anthropological materials without them. I am well-positioned because of their help; yet, what have they gained? Many photographs, companionship and friendship, some material rewards—pay for food and lodging and sometimes fieldwork assistance, some trips to Istanbul for a very few, but this all seems meager compared with my rewards. I want to thank and honor them—and so I acknowledge their help by adding their names, of necessity pseudonyms—and in Maryam’s case, before my name for the planned book about her and her life and times. Third, as an American, I find it difficult to get a visa to spend time in Iran. Without access to field research and participant observation in this Shiraz community, it is easier to focus on individuals; we can speak on phone and WhatsApp. I have brought Maryam to Turkey three times; she joined me in Istanbul for memoir work a month summer 2023 and two weeks 2024. Working closely with

Maryam has demonstrated how capable, intelligent, resilient, and resolute an illiterate, early married, early widowed, culturally and religiously home-bound village woman could be. She shows how a woman can make decisions and successfully work toward her own goals, adding to the possibilities for women in the cultural repertoire.

Ziba Jalali Naini

The Resurgence of National Consciousness in Iran: Memory, Identity, and Personal Narratives

Abstract: In Iran, a powerful movement is reshaping national identity - one rooted in historical memory, cultural revival, and resistance to state-imposed narratives. This study explores how younger generations are reclaiming their sense of self, drawing from personal experiences, oral histories, and grassroots efforts to challenge official and mainstream historiography. Through ethnographic interviews, discourse analysis, and archival research, the study examines how individuals navigate the tensions between post-revolutionary discourse and nationalism. From literature, and poetry that has long preserved Iranian identity to the revival of pre-Islamic celebrations like Nowruz and Chaharshanbe Suri, Iranians are reasserting their cultural heritage in new ways. Even Islamic rituals such as Moharram occasion have become a medium for political and social expression, demonstrating how collective memory evolves to shape the nation's consciousness. By analyzing digital platforms, banned literature, independent cinema, and oral histories, this research uncovers the personal narratives that challenge dominant historical narratives. Scholars, activists, and cultural historians offer firsthand insights into how lived experiences are leveraged as acts of resistance - redefining identity beyond ideological constraints. This movement is far more than nostalgia. It is an assertion of historical truth, a call for sociopolitical transformation, and a step toward a more pluralistic understanding of Iranian identity.

Panel 6: Decolonial and Feminist Movements in Central Asia: Resistance, Agency, and Transformation

Convenor: Rano Turaeva

Panel description: This panel explores the intersections of decolonial and feminist movements in Central Asia, bringing together scholars and activists to examine the evolving landscape of gender, power, and resistance in the region. Amidst the legacies of Soviet modernity, contemporary state policies, and global feminist discourses, Central Asian activists and intellectuals are shaping new narratives of agency and justice in their efforts to decolonise power matrixes of discourse making and representation. Panelists will discuss how decolonial perspectives shape scholarly discourses and inform feminist struggles, addressing such themes as gendered nationalism, post-Soviet patriarchy, epistemic disobedience, and the role of digital activism, artwork in shaping decolonial and feminist discourses. Contributions will critically analyze the dominant knowledge creation in the region, the tensions between Western and other knowledge, global feminist frameworks and local traditions, the impact of authoritarian governance on feminist organizing, and the strategies employed by grassroots movements to challenge systemic inequalities. By bridging academic analysis with lived experience, this panel aims to foster a deeper understanding of the challenges and possibilities of feminist and

decolonial praxis in Central Asia, offering insights into how these movements navigate repression, co-optation, and transnational solidarities.

Rano Turaeva

Introducing the Panel and Decolonising Gender **Studies** in Central Asia

Abstract: Decolonizing gender studies in Central Asia requires a critical reassessment of how knowledge about gender, power, and identity has been produced and applied in the region. Dominant frameworks—often shaped by Soviet modernization projects and later by Western feminist paradigms—have overlooked or misrepresented local epistemologies, indigenous gender norms, and non-binary expressions of identity historically embedded in Central Asian societies. This paper interrogates the colonial legacies that continue to inform gender discourse, highlighting the tensions between externally imposed categories and the lived realities of Central Asian communities. By centering indigenous knowledge systems, oral histories, and local feminist movements, this work advocates for a reimagined gender studies that moves beyond Eurocentric binaries and Soviet-era patriarchal structures, fostering an approach that is contextually rooted, intersectional, and transformative.

Agathe Guy

Gender and Muslim Female Entrepreneurship in Kazakhstan

Abstract: In this paper, I will analyse how Muslim female entrepreneurs in urban Central Qazaqstan navigate gendered-based norms through their involvement in the halal market. Drawing on Foucault and the distinction made by Therond (2023) between “subjective experience” and “subjectivation of experience”, I will argue that while the market can reinforce traditional social constructions of gender (and heteronormativity), it also provides a structured space in which women can reinterpret and shape these norms. Through data collected in biographical interviews, I will analyse the trajectories of Muslim businesswomen, the way they *make* sense and reflect critically on their own life-paths. I will show how they use the moral authority and absoluteness of the halal norm to legitimize alternative forms of agency and negotiate social expectations, actively reframing gender and entrepreneurial activity and grounding it in religious and historical references.

Aygerim Kapar

Care for Balkhash and Decolonial Eco-Activism: Women, Art, and Justice in Kazakhstan

Abstract: The presentation explores the intersection of art, environmental justice, and women's leadership in Kazakhstan. Drawing from her experience curating the Care for Balkhash Lake initiative with the Artcom Platform community, Aigerim will discuss how grassroots, women-led initiatives drive sustainable change and environmental activism in the region. She will highlight how women resist environmental injustices through participatory art, cultural preservation, and practices of care. With the “Care for Balkhash” initiative as an example, Aigerim will emphasize its impact on policy change and community empowerment. She will share how art and collective advocacy contribute to protecting fragile ecosystems and empowering local communities. She

will adopt decolonial approaches to address colonial legacies and center traditional knowledge. She will also link these approaches to feminist and intersectional frameworks. Through this lens, she will explore how eco-activism can amplify marginalized voices and preserve collective memory. Finally, she will highlight how these strategies create transformative pathways to environmental and climate justice.

Elmira Nogoibaeva

Esimde and the Decolonial Project in Kyrgyzstan

Abstract: Esimde, an initiative of the Analytical Center Polis Asia, is a pioneering discussion platform dedicated to re-examining historical narratives and collective memory in Kyrgyzstan through a decolonial lens. By fostering civic engagement, historical awareness, and critical reflection, Esimde challenges Soviet-era historiographies and promotes an inclusive understanding of the country's past. Through its "Breaking the Silence" school, the platform empowers activists, researchers, and educators to engage with decolonial theories and apply them to civic initiatives, media, education, and political discourse. By creating spaces for interdisciplinary dialogue, collaborative learning, and public engagement—both online and offline—Esimde contributes to the broader decolonization processes in Central Asia. Its work highlights the intersection of memory, identity, and activism, advancing knowledge production that is rooted in local experiences and critical of hegemonic narratives.

Almira Tabaeva

One Hundred Years of “Hujum” (1927-2027): Past, Present and Future

Abstract: This research aims to explore inheritance behind western paradigms by unraveling the complex legacy of “Hujum” - unveiling campaign spanning from its inception in 1927 to its centennial anniversary in 2027. By countering the western-centric narratives that have dominated scholarly discourse on this subject, I intend to provide a more holistic understanding rooted in local perspectives based on the lost, but not yet forgotten voices. Through a methodological approach combining archival research with the intergenerational narratives of my own female lineage, I seek to unpack how socio-cultural dynamics, Soviet interventionism, and indigenous resistance that have shaped the experiences of Uzbek women over the past century and its impact on current gender issues. This research endeavors to present insights essential for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment initiatives in Uzbekistan and beyond.

Day 3

September 12, 2025, 09:00 (Istanbul Time)

Panel 7: New Realities: The Role of Technology in Shaping Everyday Life in the Middle East

Convenor: Seyed Abdolreza Hosseini

Panel description: The rapid proliferation of technological advancements—ranging from cars and applications to intelligent infrastructures—has profoundly transformed everyday life in the Middle East. These technologies have not only reshaped the way individuals work, communicate, and navigate urban spaces but have also embedded themselves so deeply into social consciousness that their influence is often taken for granted. This panel explores the agency of these technological actors in structuring daily routines, labor practices, urban mobility, and communal interactions. By examining how these tools, systems, and AI mediate human experiences, redefine public and private spaces, and influence cultural and economic landscapes, we aim to shed light on the evolving interplay between technology and society in the region. Through interdisciplinary perspectives, we seek to critically engage with the methodological and conceptual challenges of studying these shifts, questioning whether technology merely facilitates change or actively constructs new realities.

Nicola Maria Camerlengo

AI and the Anthropology of the Middle East: Bridging Technology and Tradition

Abstract: This study explores the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on everyday life in the Middle East, focusing on how technological change intersects with cultural tradition. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and case studies, it examines how AI technologies—such as smart irrigation systems in rural farming communities—are reshaping traditional practices. While older generations often resist these tools, younger farmers increasingly adopt them for their efficiency and environmental benefits, illustrating AI's dual role as both disruptive and adaptive. The research highlights how AI is localized to fit cultural norms while also generating ethical concerns around privacy, surveillance, and governance. By situating these developments within broader social and political contexts, the study emphasizes the need for an anthropological lens to understand how AI is transforming, and being transformed by, Middle Eastern societies.

Niloufar Mohammadi

Finglish Subculture: Hybrid Realities in Iran's Tech Scene

Abstract: This ethnographic study explores the everyday lives of Iranian programmers in Tehran, highlighting how technology shapes a distinct subculture within Iran's urban and workforce landscape. Drawing on subculture theory and based on participant observation and 30 interviews, the research reveals how these IT professionals navigate and construct hybrid realities through language, style, and social interaction. Their use of "Finglish" (a blend of Persian and English) and informal dress codes symbolize both global belonging and local resistance. The study further unpacks gendered power dynamics, showing how structural inequalities persist despite a meritocratic tech ethos. Ultimately, it offers insight into how digital labor, cultural

hybridity, and local constraints intersect to redefine social life and identity in the Middle East's rapidly evolving technological spaces.

Seyed Abdolreza Hosseini

Technology in Translation: The Case of Industrial Electricity in Iran

Abstract: The entry of technology into a host country is not a purely technical process—it is deeply shaped by human actors and social dynamics. In the case of Iran, the second-wave adoption of industrial electricity technologies in the early 21st century was a complex process of negotiation, adaptation, and transformation. This research focuses on how local engineers, technicians, and scientific communities responded to the arrival of new electrical technologies, actively engaging with and reshaping them within the Iranian context. Based on a close analysis of engineering documents and in-depth interviews with leading engineers in Iran, the study reveals that the localization of industrial electricity unfolded in two overlapping phases. The first involved grappling with unfamiliar systems—learning, experimenting, consulting foreign experts, and solving technical problems using sources. The second phase saw a growing mastery over these technologies, enabling Iranian professionals to modify, adapt, and even reverse-engineer imported systems. This transition, which unfolded over approximately two decades, demonstrates how technical ecosystems are not simply transformed by transferred technologies but are also active agents in reshaping them. The findings suggest that technological transfer in Iran was far from passive; it involved situated creativity, contextual adaptation, and the gradual emergence of local agency. This case highlights how technological change in the Middle East must be understood through the interplay of global systems and local actors.

Panel 8: Rituals in Movement: Pilgrimage, Globalization and Diaspora

Convenors: Paulo Pinto and Gisele Fonseca Chagas

Panel description: Rituals are a central part of the religious life of Middle Eastern communities around the globe, connecting them through shared patterns of devotion and worship, as is the case with shared rituals such as salat. Besides their recurrence in different places, rituals also connect communities through their participation in the circulation of people, symbols and experiences across the Middle East and its diaspora. Rituals can shape the movement of people, as in pilgrimage, as they can be shaped and changed through the dislocation of those who perform it, as in the case of immigrant, refugee, and diasporic communities. Rituals can also move through vast spaces, as in the case of globalized cults and devotions. This panel welcomes papers based on ethnographic research on rituals and movements in different Middle Eastern and diasporic contexts.

Rodrigo Ayupe Bueno da Cruz

Devotion in Movement: Personal Experience and Institutional Projects around Saint Charbel in Lebanon and Brazil

Abstract: This paper explores the transnational circulation of devotion to Saint Charbel, a central figure in contemporary Christian-Maronite spirituality, examining how it is shaped by both

personal religious experiences and institutional strategies. Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic research conducted between 2022 and 2024 in Lebanon and Brazil, the study traces how devotion to this popular saint articulates individual trajectories, affective religiosity, and institutional projects of identity and authority. In both countries, believers report miracles, healing experiences, and dreams involving Saint Charbel, highlighting his intimate presence in everyday religious life. These personal experiences coexist with coordinated efforts to promote his cult on both national and transnational levels. In Lebanon, Saint Charbel has been incorporated into Maronite nationalist discourse and elevated as a symbol of Lebanese unity. His widespread veneration is supported by ecclesiastical institutions, monastic communities, and political actors, particularly through the valorization of large-scale pilgrimages to the Saint Maron Monastery in Annaya and the broad dissemination of his image and relics throughout the country. In Brazil, where a significant Lebanese diaspora exists, devotion to Saint Charbel has expanded notably in recent decades. While rooted in diverse individual experiences among Lebanese descendants and non-Lebanese Catholics alike, the cult also plays a key role in revivalist initiatives promoted by the Maronite Patriarchate, the Eparchy of Brazil, monastic orders, and transnational institutions such as the Lebanese Maronite Foundation. These efforts seek to reassert the Church's formative role in diasporic religious identity through liturgical practices, public devotions, feast days, and organized pilgrimages to Lebanon. Thus, the paper argues that Saint Charbel's cult operates as a ritual and symbolic bridge linking local experiences to transnational religious networks, revealing how devotion becomes a vehicle for both spiritual connection and institutional projects across multiple scales.

Gisele Fonseca Chagas

Rituals, Texts and Transnational Belonging: Shi'a Social Media in Brazil

Abstract: This paper explores the Shi'a religious landscape in Brazil, focusing on how Shi'a religious institutions present their religious belonging through texts, ritual practices and transnational connections to the Middle East via social media. The aim is to reflect on how rituals are shaped in a discursive, pedagogical, and sensory ways in order to foster connections within the Middle Eastern Shi'a world, and to engage a broader Brazilian audience. This ethnographic research is a work in progress, initiated in 2024.

Paulo Pinto

Mimesis and Baraka: Tombs, Replicas and Pilgrimage among Sufi Muslims in Argentina

Abstract: This paper analyzes the construction of sacred territories by the members of the Sufi community of the Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniyya in Argentina through the construction of replicas of tombs of saintly figures of the tariqa which are located in Syria, Turkey and Cyprus. Currently there are currently 7 replicas in Naqshbandi Haqqani communities in Argentina. The first replica was built in San Lorenzo in 1997, then followed Glew in 2002, La Consulta in 2002, Maillin Ahogado in 2003, Potrerillos in 2007, Mar del Plata in 2019, and Lobos in 2024. An eighth replica was under construction in January 2025. These replicas are understood as "transmitters" of the baraka which flows from the original tombs. Nevertheless, the replicas are also object of specific rituals, such as pilgrimage and individual and devotional practices. These ritual practices mark

and inscribe the presence of sacred power in the Argentinian territory, creating a sacred geography that connects Argentina to the sacred territories of the Muslim World. The ethnographic data analyzed here were collected in periods of fieldwork research done in the *derghas* of Lobos in December 2017; Maillin Ahogado in June 2018; San Lorenzo in December 2018; Glew, Potrerillos, and La Consulta in February-March 2020; Mar del Plata in November 2023; and Lobos and Olavarria in January 2025.

Panel 9: Research in Progress

Convenor: Soheila Shahshahani

In this panel we will have speakers whose work is in progress: While the research is unique and cannot be placed in any panels, it is a valuable piece of work which could be opening up new dimensions of research, in method or theory. In order to give value to new research and appreciate their validity, we always have such a panel at the Commission meetings, and we appreciate the presence of young scholars in this panel.

Panelists:

Nicoline Julie Winther

What does it mean to be a Good Exile Palestinian in Times of Genocide?

Abstract: How does the war on Gaza affect the way in which you morally subjectivize yourself as a Palestinian, and how does this influence other everyday aims and aspirations? With an ethnographic, phenomenological approach and methodology, this PhD-project asks what it means to live a moral life as a Palestinian in exile with unfolding daily atrocities happening in the homeland. I here engage with 3rd generation Palestinians from Amman, Jordan. With the war now lasting more than 1.5 years, questions around the experience of crisis and how to navigate prolonged crisis become increasingly important. The Palestinian case is here a special one in its multilayered identity – at once historic and urgently contemporary. Since 1948, moments of heightened urgency have come and gone: 1967, the First and Second Intifadas, Sheikh Jarrah all serve as examples. These escalations have continuously reshaped the experience of crisis and possibly introduced new moral imperatives for Palestinians in exile. In the context of a heavily mediatized genocide, October 7th must be understood within this broader historical and emotional landscape. It is, therefore, highly relevant to ask how such atrocities are once again shaping the possibilities for moral and existential agency among Palestinians living outside the homeland. Themes of despair, narrative engagement, mediatized warfare, and the oscillation between action and fatigue are central to the issues I explore.

Zuzanna Błajet

Well-being of highly skilled Tajik Isma'ili Migrant Women in Poland

Abstract: Over the past decade, Poland has experienced one of the highest rates of immigration within Europe. Among the nationalities that have witnessed the largest increase in numbers are the Tajiks, who migrate to Poland for economic, political and educational purposes. This paper

presents a preliminary study exploring how well-being is experienced by highly skilled Tajik Isma'ili women residing in Poland. The study draws on the multidimensional well-being models (OECD regional well-being model and the model elaborated by Gallup scholars in the IOM report) encompassing financial, career, community and social domains. It also explores subjective factors such as a sense of achievement and belonging and life satisfaction as relevant aspects of well-being. The study focuses on women from Tajik Badakhshan, who initially came to Poland to pursue higher education, subsequently completed their academic degrees, and established their lives in the country. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The findings show that the women interviewed evaluate their financial and career situations positively. Well-compensated employment, along with prospects for professional development, emerged as the most frequently mentioned sources of satisfaction, and at the same time factors influencing decision to remain in Poland. Furthermore, the findings suggest that well-being in its community and social domains is experienced positively. Notably, the majority of interviewed women do not express a sense of connection to Polish society. Close relationships with people from outside Badakhshan are uncommon. Instead, all of the women articulate a strong sense of belonging to Tajik Isma'ili community, whose presence in Poland constitutes another significant reason for their intention to stay. This study contributes to the understanding of migration routes and patterns from Tajikistan to Europe by demonstrating how experienced well-being can serve as a determinant in migrants' decisions to settle in Poland.

Viveka Anderton

Middle East: Ethnographic Methods in the Private Business Sector-Leadership, Transformation and Sustainability

Abstract: The concept of business culture and cultural assessments within the private sector is nothing new. The importance of cultural differences surfaced around the end of the 1960s by researchers such as Hofstede, Pugh and Trompenaas, and Robert House's project GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness). Their contributions have pinpointed shared, implicit assumptions that individuals and groups hold, especially those associated with nationality in cross-cultural studies (*stereotypes*) and corporate cultures associated with brands (e.g., *Microsoft, Unilever, and Patagonia*). Focus has also been on organisational culture, a group's set of unique characteristics that distinguishes its members from another group, to be supported in evaluating the implementation of mergers, acquisitions, or joint ventures. Corporates have been inundated with a variety of team assessment tools and employee engagement surveys aiming to measure the values, motivation, emotional commitment and satisfaction of their employees. The majority of these tools were developed in the West; they had little relevance to the Middle East - often seen as one, homogenous unit - and the algorithms lacked sufficient comparative data from the region. They require adaptations to incorporate the local language and cultural context such as the family business model, expatriate workforce, and migration. The region is experiencing unprecedented growth, however, and through its Vision 2030 plans setting out needed transformation for growth and sustainability - non-carbon revenues, 4th Industrial Revolution, food security, and social inclusion. This cannot be accomplished without engaging and working closely with the private sector. The aim of this presentation is to define what business ethnography means; how this method can be used in the

private sector; creation of a deeper understanding of the values of leaders and employees and ways of working; organisational inclusion (gender, social class, ethnicity), safety at work, transparency, ethics, and compliance with established guidelines. Viveka will share her acquisition of knowledge from external research, internal assessments and her current research on future ethnographic application to business in the Middle East.

Danila Mayer

The Ottoman Portraits in a Habsburg Archduke's Collection: Images between Engaging and Distancing

Abstract: Archduke Ferdinand of Tyrol collected, in the sixteenth century, almost one thousand portraits of mostly European rulers, potentates, and aristocrats. Among them were oil-painted likenesses of Ottoman nobles - sultans, sultanas, and others - which were eventually compiled in a panel, together with various other celebrities. The presentation will look into the histories behind the portraits, their production, collection and coming together, and show intricate East-West exchange processes.

Panel 10: Visual Anthropology

Convenor: Shilan Saadi

Three documentary films of significance will be shown and discussed by all participants.

Short Biographies of Participants

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