

WORKSHOP

Reincarnation and Personal Identity in the Middle East

Vienna, November 30th–December 1st, 2017

Several religious communities in the Middle East such as the Alawis or the Druze believe in the transmigration of (human) souls. Apart from the dogmatic assertion that ‘souls migrate from body to body,’ in all of these communities transmigration also comes to light in the form of ‘empirical cases’ of reincarnation: people tell stories about children who speak about their past life in a different family.

If in many cases such children are eventually recognized as the reincarnation of a concrete individual which passed away some time ago (almost always because of some ‘untimely,’ unexpected, and/or violent event of death), the processes of social recognition and plot development therefore required are not only potentially rife with conflicts, but also touch upon the question of what constitutes a full human being.

Thus, both from an anthropological and an emic point of view, many substantial questions arise: To which family does the reborn child ‘really’ belong, to the ‘old’ one or the ‘new’ one? How is the child supposed to be treated, as a child or as an adult? To what extent does reincarnation entail legal and familial obligations, financial benefits (e.g. inheritance), or restrictions (e.g. marriage)? Where do (un)desired elements in an individual life come from? What is the relation between personal responsibility and predetermination?

In this workshop, we wish to explore the epistemological frame in which reincarnation works and functions the way it does (e.g. local time and space conceptions; models of reality and viability). Specifically, we want to address the different relationships reincarnation cases establish and affect: between ‘my’ family and ‘other’ families; between ‘my’ ethnic-religious community and the ‘others;’ between ‘my’ gender and the ‘others;’ between ‘my’ age-group and other age-groups; between humans and animals (etc.).

The workshop seeks to address the following questions, but does not feel limited by them:

- Which terminology/vocabulary do people use when they speak about reincarnation? Are there specific proverbs which take up reincarnation?
- Script/**Grammatik* of reincarnation-cases: Are there recurring *topoi* (e.g. finding hidden items or treasures; xenoglossy)?
- How do the discourses and concepts of the religious establishment differ from ‘lay’ discourses on reincarnation? In which respects do they influence each other?
- How could reincarnation be looked at from the perspective of the phenomenology of the lived body?
- How does reincarnation contribute to coping with critical life events and contingency?
- In what way does the concept of reincarnation foster internal group cohesion and interethnic relations?
- What if reincarnation cases ‘fail,’ i.e. do not lead to ‘closure’?

Organizational Matters

The workshop will take place in the *Dachpavillon* of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, Dr. Ignaz Seipel-Platz 2, 1010 Vienna (www.oeaw.ac.at)

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Dachpavillon, Main Building of the Austrian Academy of Sciences,
A-1010 Vienna, Dr. Ignaz Seipel-Platz 2

PROGRAMME

Thursday, 30th of November

09:00 – 09:15 Welcome address and organizational matters (Gebhard Fartacek & Lorenz Nigst)

09:15 – 09:30 Introduction of the participants

09:30 – 10:05 Tobias Lang: The Druze on the political landscape of Syria, Lebanon and Israel

10:05 – 10:30 Discussion (Moderation: Maria Kastrinou)

10:30 – 10:50 Coffee Break

10:50 – 11:25 Gebhard Fartacek: “*Amaliyat an-nuṭq*”: Episodic interviews dealing with the phenomenon of “speaking” children and discourses on Reincarnation among the Druze

11:25 – 12:05 Lorenz Nigst: The ambivalent presence of “speaking” in the Druze communities

12:05 – 12:45 Discussion (Moderation: Gerald Sack)

12:45 – 14:00 Break

14:00 – 14:35 Maria Kastrinou: Porous borders: Sovereignty, autochthony and the politics of death among the Druze in the Middle East

14:35 – 15:00 Discussion (Moderation: Tobias Lang)

15:00 – 15:35 Eléonore Armanet: “*Death does not exist here, and taqammos keeps us close*”: Druze assurance in reincarnation, a model of collective immortality?

15:35 – 16:00 Discussion (Moderation: Lorenz Nigst)

16:00 – 16:20 Coffee Break

16:20 – 16:55 Gerald Sack: Druze reincarnation as an ethnic marker

16:55 – 17:20 Discussion (Moderation: Eléonore Armanet)

Friday, 1st of December

09:00 – 09:35 Erlendur Haraldsson: My investigation of 32 cases of the “reincarnation type” in Lebanon

09:35 – 10:00 Discussion (Moderation: Eléonore Armanet)

10:00 – 10:35 Christopher C. French: The psychology of reincarnation claims amongst the Druze

10:35 – 11:00 Discussion (Moderation: Salma Samaha)

11:00 – 11:20 Coffee Break

11:20 – 11:55 Nour Farra-Haddad: Devotions to a Druze saint: From the philosopher to the founder saint of the community

11:55 – 12:20 Discussion (Moderation: Stephan Procházka & Gisela Procházka-Eisl)

12:20 – 13:00 Break

13:00 – 13:35 Salma Samaha: Landscape imprint of mortuary dwellings in different sociocultural contexts: A comparative study between Christian and Druze funerary practices (Lebanon and Syria)

13:35 – 14:00 Discussion (Nour Farra-Haddad)

14:00 – 14:40 Stephan Procházka & Gisela Procházka-Eisl: The conception of reincarnation among the Nuṣayrī-‘Alawī Community of Cilicia (working title)

14:40 – 15:00 Discussion (Moderation: Christopher C. French)

15:00 – 16:00 Final discussion (Moderation: Lorenz Nigst & Gebhard Fartacek)

16:30 – 19:00 Get-together, drinks & food