

InVisible Histories

The Politics of Placing the Past

VAZIRA FAZILA-YACOOBALI

The ISIM and the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research (ASSR) jointly organized the workshop InVisible Histories: The Politics of Placing the Past, which was held on the second and third of September 2005. The workshop took place at the University of Amsterdam with additional financial support from Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO) and the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS). The workshop engaged two kinds of enquiry—research on the spatially fixed and research on the visually mobile aspects of material culture—and proposed a dialogue between them.

This multidisciplinary workshop brought together anthropologists, historians, art historians, and a cultural activist, who work on South Asia and the Middle East, to focus on material culture—to examine, on the one hand, how specific sites and buildings acquired significance in discourses of archaeology, heritage and civilization, and on the other hand, how images of sites and on sites transformed the meaning of places as they circulated through catalogues, calendars, posters, and postcards to make national, ethnic, or religious claims between people and places.

In a panel entitled Ruined Histories, Sitting Politics, the papers examined the construction and circulation of antiquity and world heritage. Ayfer Bartu Candan focused on the politics of a 9000 years old, world famous Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük in Turkey, to examine how a global archaeological community, heritage and art groups, tourists including “goddess” groups, as well as local government officials and villagers made multiple claims on the site, and argued that it is “through the encounters of these publics of Çatalhöyük that the public memory of the site is constructed” which “cross-cut, complement, and trouble one another.” Vazira Fazila-Yacoubali drew upon her ISIM based research on the World Heritage site of Takht-e-Bahi in northern Pakistan to track the historical transformation of “local ruins” into a Gandharan Buddhist religious site. She argued that the ideological inscriptions of emerging colonial archaeology, which “fixed” the meaning of the site, placed Buddhism at the apex of Indian civilization, and Islam as its nemesis, a religion of destruction and barbarism. Elizabeth Smith’s research examined how Robert Fernea’s “salvage ethnography” and photographs, taken at the time of the flooding of ancient Nubia because of the Aswan dam, continue to be produced and reproduced to authorize the placing of memory and identity amongst different Nubian communities.

In the panel Muslim Pasts, National Places, the emphasis shifted largely to the Indian sub-continent. Catherine Asher focused on the Taj Mahal as the premier icon of an imagined India. She traced its art historical significance from the time of its building by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan to the present, to argue that while the building was not considered of extraordinary importance at the time it was built, European aesthetics established it as the most sublime representative of Indian architecture. However, she particularly paid attention to the ways in which the Muslim mausoleum is imagined and claimed as a Hindu palace or temple, and its complex relationship to Muslim communities, in contentious contemporary Indian politics. Sandria Freitag and Yousuf Saeed examined a vibrant genre of print culture—popular posters from what Freitag called the “Indian Muslim niche market.” Freitag used her archives of posters to examine the two ways in which “Indian Muslims participate in a larger world of ocular practices” as well as “consume mass-produced visuals that belong to a specialized set of understandings.” Saeed, a cultural activist, on the other hand, focused on the production and circulation of these posters and saw them as a visual expression of an increasingly fragile “pluralism” in India.

In another panel Touring Histories, Alternative Geographies, the focus was on the Middle East. Martina Reiker critically engaged tensions between “mobility” and “locality,” as she examined the “museumification” and “re-scripting of heritage” in old urban spaces of Cairo located in global visions of EuroMed Heritage programmes, against the experiences of the working poor and middle classes that historically inhabited these spaces. She powerfully captured “a new local that, unlike capital, cannot or refuses to flow,” in the words of a displaced woman kiosk owner now selling fruit on a blanket in the street in historic Cairo—“They speak of change? Change to what? I do not speak the language of antiquities? How can I possibly learn that language?” Mona Harb, on the other hand, explored the makings of an “alternative Islamic sphere” through Hizbullah inscriptions of cultural spaces in a southern suburb of Beirut in post-war Lebanon. Examining diverse sites such as al-Saha, an entertainment “village,” al-Sayf, a summer youth camp, as well as martyr posters and the Al-Khiyam Detention Centre where Israeli forces held and tortured Hizbullah inmates, she raised questions about the relationship between consumer entertainment and resistance ideology in the making of Hizbullah’s new cultural economy.

Different anthropological readings of contestations over sacred spaces in Pakistan were presented by Pnina Werbner and Naveeda Khan in the panel entitled: Sacred Spaces, Contested Meanings. They were paying particular attention to the sensory and affective experiences of social relationships in these spaces. Khan’s paper on neighbourhood mosques and their “entanglements with ordinary life and sectarian politics,” explored what she called the “violence of the ordinary.” Werbner revisited the burial site of a living Sufi saint that she had been doing research on, and is the basis for her book *Pilgrims of Love*, to reflect on the ways in which the stage by stage building of the shrine of the saint transformed his presence and his relationship to his followers.

A rich and engaged discussion was provided by an array of notable discussants. Indra Sengupta, a Research Fellow at the German Historical Institute in London, and David Geary, a doctoral student at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, traveled at their own expense to participate in the workshop as discussants. Annelies Moors, the ISIM Chair at the University of Amsterdam, provided the opening discussion, and Peter van der Veer from University of Utrecht, Patricia Spyer from Leiden University and Kamran Asdar Ali, a visiting ISIM scholar, served as valuable discussants.

Vazira Fazila-Yacoubali was a post-doctoral fellow at ISIM from September 2003 till December 2005. Currently she is Assistant Professor in the Department of History at Brown University, Providence.
Email: vfyz@brown.edu

PAPERS PRESENTED

- **Ayfer Bartu Candan**, Bogaziçi University, Istanbul
Public Pasts: Multiple Claims on a Prehistoric Landscape
- **Vazira Fazila-Yacoubali**, ISIM
Where have the Buddhas Gone? Ruined and Recovered Histories in North-Western Pakistan
- **Elizabeth Smith**, New York University
The Photographic Production and Reproduction of Nubians in Egypt
- **Catherine Asher**, University of Minnesota
Supersizing the Taj
- **Sandria Freitag**, University of North Carolina
Situating the Self: South Asian Visual Culture and Muslim Identity
- **Yousuf Saeed**, Delhi, India
Contemporary Challenges to Pluralism in Popular Devotional Art of South Asian Muslims
- **Martina Rieker**, American University in Cairo
Envisioning Motion Before and After Barcelona: Inscribing Heritage in the Southern Mediterranean
- **Mona Harb**, American University in Beirut
Islamizing Entertainment and Tourism Activities in Lebanon (or the Cultural Materialization of Hizbullah’s Islamic Sphere)
- **Naveeda Khan**, John Hopkins University, Baltimore
What is it to build a Mosque? Or, the Violence of the Ordinary
- **Pnina Werbner**, University of Keele
Ziyarat: Words and Deeds, Death, and Rebirth of a Living Saint