Local Production of Islamic Knowledge: An Ethnographer's View

The AKMI/ISIM Summer Academy brought together 20 nationalities at the Yıldız Technical University in Istanbul. For eleven days and nights, from early morning until late evening, we cared not to care about the invited participants (pre-doctoral candidates and recent Ph.D.s), and tutors, together with several of the locally invited lecturers. The Summer Academy took place in a brilliant walking tour of old Istanbul with Turkish in- tellectual Murat Belge, a visit to Bursa, and a visit to an Alevis Cem on the outskirts of Is- tانبol, together with the organizers and participants who were called Sultanahmet, walkers who vastly exceed- ed their expectations. In this case, however, the pace was mostly voluntary.

Forerunners

Today such summer academies are taken for granted, but they are a recent — and signif- icant — contribution to academic globalization. The first one took place in June 1987 in Tanger, Morocco, under the auspices of the now-defunct Joint Committee for the Comparative Study of Muslim Societies of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and the American Council of Learned Societies. Then called a ‘dissertation workshop’, this first ‘summer academy’ had the explicit goal of encouraging new scholars to build into their first publications the sort of inter- disciplinary perspectives and comparative experiences normally achieved only mid-career. They also acquired a better sense of how to write for wider audiences interested in studies of the Muslim-majority world and Muslim communities elsewhere — as well as firsthand experience in a Muslim-majority world other than the region of direct scholarly concern. In some privileged fields, such as mathematics and physics, seasonal academic gatherings, begun in the late 1940s, took place in such locales as Swiss resorts and attracted mainly scholars at the summit of their careers, to- gether with their chosen graduate protégés. The Tangier venue in 1987 was the Tangier- American Legation Museum, located in the old medina — a down-at-the-heels former diplomatic establishment. Participants stayed at the crumbling Grand Hotel Villa de France, best known for its gardens, already revert- ing to jungle, and for Room 35, in which Henri Mattisse produced many of his paint- ings. A local journalist was proud to show us the 18th century coffee routes near Ceuta, the Spanish enclave, to the homes and quarters of Tangier’s rich and famous.

Soon after 1987, other SSRC committees followed the example of the Comparative Muslim Societies committee, creating sum- mer workshops and institutes of their own, and other foundations also soon got into the act. The criss-crossing of workshops and summer academies available since the late 1980s has enabled a succession of doctor- al candidates and recent graduates to pro- mise their work in wider contexts and to offer comparisons that might otherwise have not been possible until much later in their careers. It also made communication among peers and faculty from throughout the world as easy (or in some cases perhaps easier) as communication with thesis advisers.

The Istanbul Summer Academy

The summer academy was light years away from its predecessor in Tangier. Preparations were considerably more elaborate, including, for example, a 400-page reader containing not only Islamic-related readings, but also representative selections from the main literary works of knowl- edge. Even if not always thoroughly read or assimilated, the document showed a work- ing consensus on the range of relevant readings. The tone and style of the various workshops were collegial, with tutors also making original presentations. There were the types of sessions: lecture workshops led by tutors, project presentations in three par- allel working groups, thematic discussions (or usually divided into three groups), and pre- sentations by outside speakers.

Tutors and participants developed infor- mational mechanisms to share perspectives and information. The working relations devel- oped early in the programme that comments and criticisms flowed from the outset and without personal frictions. The ‘tutorial’ lectures were generally short and informal, leaving lots of time for discussion. The same was the case for project presenta- tions, ranging from dream interpretation in contemporary Muslim contexts (Kenzi Graw) — interesting to rethink in context of the dreams film in the Bin Laden video released on December 13 to Ali’s ideas of tradition in Turkey and Europe (Elise Massicard) and the candidates’ works on Fethullah Gülen’s and the different national contexts of Turkey, Al- bania, and Germany (Bekim Agal). My open- ing presentation, ‘Twenty Years Later: The Study of Islam in Local Contexts,’ took off from where my 1982 article stopped and was intended to frame changes in intellec- tual approaches since then. Because of the parallel working groups, each participant heard only seven other presentations. Our schedule also included working sessions at both Turkish and for- eign research centres and meetings with both secular and religious-minded intellec- tuals in a variety of settings.

The ties that bind

The second week opened with two stun- ning reminders of how fragile are the bonds of civility and trust, on which we base our work and lives. The first intrusion of the world beyond scholarship occurred on Monday, September 10. Some of us, walking through the Taksim Square on our way to the Swedish Research Institute on Istanbul’s Kad- esui, heard a loud explosion on the other side of the square and immediately ran to the far side of the Taksim Square to help the wounded. On the far left recently released from prison — had blown himself up together with several policemen, and guards. This event was the first to protest the treatment of political prisoners.

The news of the bombing was rapidly re- ported on Turkish radio and television and in the next morning’s press, but attracted little attention in the mainstream media outside of Turkey. In retrospect, it was a bad prelude to ‘Summer Institute’s’ ‘September 11’ news, which reached us as we returned from Yıldız Technical University to our hotel.

By consensus — not by formal meeting — tutors and participants decided to carry on with our Summer Institute tasks. That evening Orhan Siler, director of the Tarih Vakfı Institute, spoke at the press, asserting that ‘the main vehicle of communic- ations should occur. Speaking to the press and debates, but rather how such communi- cations are to be shared.’

The second intrusion was on the last working day, Thursday, September 13. We learned that all commercial US air traffic was grounded, the White House evacuated, and the President removed to an un- closed location. Then the massive scope of what had happened began to sink in. None of us slept uninterrupted over the remaining days. The main vehicle of communi- cations was the internet, to which they would be put. Another view was that such writing and discussions, whatever in a time of crisis or in ‘normal’ times, should be open and never secret — at least for university-based scholars with a commitment to the open communication of scholarship. The issue was not about refrain- ing from contributing to policy discussions and debates, but rather how such communi- cations should be shared. Speaking to the press and public might take time, but is an obliga- tion as we engage our various publics in the classroom, in print, and elsewhere. With any activity, too much of such activities can circumscribe scholarly potential. So can too little. The Summer Academy achieved its pri- mary goals. The Summer Academy was a great success. The Summer Academy was a great success.

Directors:

- Martin van Bruinessen (SSRC) and Altan Gorküklü (Centre Marc Bloch, Berlin)

Tutors and Istanbul faculty:

- Felipa Atakan (Yıldız Technical): ‘Changing Patterns of Islamic Groupings in Modern Turkey’
- John Bowen (Washington University in St. Louis): ‘What is “Local” about Islam?’
- Ayse Caglar (Freie Universität Berlin): ‘The Concept of Hybridity and its Discontents’
- Margit Havasi-Szabó (Central European University): ‘The Nation and Citizenship’
- Gábor Seufert (Oriental Institute): ‘The Nation- al Attribute in the Turkish Republic’s Teach- ing of Islam’
- Anke von Kugelgen (Université de Fribourg): ‘The Production of Local History in Bukhara at the Turn of the 19th Century’
- Ayşe Örcü (Bogazici University): ‘Negotiat- ing Boundaries between Religion and Secular on Commercial Television in Turkey’

Other lectures and presentations were orga- nized by the Institut Français d’Études Anatoli- ennes, Orient-Instiut der Deutschen Orient- ländischen Gesellschaft, Swedish Research In- stitute, the Taib Vakfı, and the Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı.

The lectures included: Merso Amatassi- aou MFEA), Murat Çatıca, Sosyal Kenderova (National Library, Sofia), Awan- Frier, Kenderova (IFA, Tudor Ohlson (Lunds University), Lief Stenberg (Lunds University), and Johann Strauss (Strassbourg University).

Coordination:

- Georges Khalil (AKMI) and Dick Douwes (ISIM)

Notes

- 1. Published in Istanbul Almanach 5 (2001), and also found on the ISIM website (www.isim.org/ism/actes/).