

Preface and Acknowledgements

This book is the result of my long-term involvement with the interrelationship between religion, mobility, and space. Developing a cross-cutting research-field, the book synthesizes my research interest in the anthropology of Islam and Muslim piety in Central Asia with that in mobility and migration studies as well as in Gulf Studies. Moreover, the book's conceptual framework summarizes my preliminary work in New Area Studies theory and methodology. I have been particularly driven by the question of how transregional approaches can be put to work in, and through, both mobile ethnography and the ethnography of mobility. Connecting these different research areas opened up new intellectual horizons for me and helped me to break new epistemological ground. Religious economy for example became a suitable conceptual approach that led away from the one-sided academic focus on Islam and Muslim identity in Tajikistan as merely a political factor. It helped me to understand Islamic reform as a transregional configuration shaped by the interplay of mobility, global economy, neoliberal piety, middle-class sensibilities, and national migration regimes. After all, proposing the not-so conventional reading of the term 'Dubaization' as a multidirectional process of transcultural and transregional entanglement enabled me to write a thick description of mobile Muslim lifeworlds, and, in due course, to situate marginalized and supposedly peripheral actors at the center of economic and cultural globalization processes. It was also the religious economy concept that made me think of a possible positive future for Islam and Muslims from, and in, Tajikistan. My research coincided with the height of ISIS's media-staged atrocities on the one hand, and the movement's recruitment successes among Muslims from Central Asia on the other. While ISIS was a very present topic in many of the conversations I had, the people from Tajikistan whom I met during my multi-sited research did not relate to Islam as a political ideology. For them, Islam was a hopeful and self-empowering resource to fashion their economic activities in a morally and religiously meaningful way. Perhaps I have made the dreams and desires of my research partners too much my own. Be that as it may, by framing 'Dubai Islam' as a hopeful moral and social project, I see my book as a critical response to dominant academic narratives that tend to paint rather dystopian images of Islam in Central Asia against the backdrop of political discourses of securitization and Islamophobic tendencies.

Contrary to what the term suggests, monographs are never the product of a single person. This translocal ethnography was also a collaborative enterprise. In the long process from the idea for this book, through its realization to the completion of the manuscript, I have received strong support and inspiration from many peo-

ple and institutional settings, intellectually, mentally, as well financially in form of fellowships and grants.

Some of the best ideas in this book have grown out of many years of intensive and trusting collaboration with my colleague, companion, and friend Philipp Schröder. Thanks to the generous funding of our research project “Translocal Goods – Education, Work, and Commodities Between Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, China, and the Arab Emirates” by Volkswagen Foundation from 2013–2017 [Az. 86870], we were able to make our shared enthusiasm for translocality, our countless discussions on migration, work, ethnicity, and religion, as well as our shared travel experiences conceptually and empirically productive (Stephan-Emmrich and Schröder 2018; Schröder and Stephan-Emmrich 2016).

My fieldwork in the Arab Emirates would have been impossible without the excellent research assistance of Abdullah Mirzoev. A doctoral fellow in our “Translocal Goods” research project, Abdullah opened the doors and hearts of my research partners in Dubai and Tajikistan and helped me to gain deep insights into the lifeworlds of Tajiks working in Dubai’s fur business (Mirzoev and Stephan 2018; Stephan-Emmrich and Mirzoev 2016).

A fellowship at the I GK International Research Center “Work and Human Life Cycle in Global History (re:work)” at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin enabled me to immerse myself in the conceptual nexus of work, piety, and mobility from March to July 2016. I am grateful to all re:work fellows for many inspiring discussions and for their critical feedback on chapter drafts, especially to Christian Strümpell, Cláudio Pinheiro, Milena Kremakova, and Nitin Varma, as well as to Andreas Eckert and Felicitas Hentschke for making this fellowship possible. I would also like to thank Achim Rohde and Claudia Derichs for inviting me to be a fellow at the research network “Re-Configurations. History, Remembrance and Transformation Processes in the Middle East and North Africa” based at the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies (CNMS) at Philipps Universität Marburg. Between September 2016 until January 2017, the research network offered me a horizon-broadening academic setting, in which I had a stimulating exchange with other fellows, among them Ayşe Çavdar, on transregional approaches in Central Asian, MENA, and Gulf studies.

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Many theoretical insights of this book were shaped in the course of my long-standing collaboration and exchange on concepts such as translocality, Muslim worlds, and on transregional Gulf studies with colleagues at Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin (Leibniz-ZMO), in particular with Katrin Bromber, Ulrike Freitag, Stefan Kirmse, and Steffen Wippel (Stephan-Emmrich 2021). I am especially grateful to Samuli Schielke and Abdoulaye Sounaye for the many stimulating discussions on the anthropology of Islamic reform, Muslim piety, and everyday religion.

I also owe great thanks for the support I have received from my long-time colleagues and academic peers Jeanine Dağyeli and Jesko Schmoller, who shared insightful and intensive discussions with me and who critically commented on draft chapters. My special thanks go to Vincent Houben. He awakened my enthusiasm for New Area Studies and in our years of collaboration as colleagues at the Institute for Asian and African Studies (IAAW) at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin has become an intellectual mentor who has inspired and encouraged me in my engagement with transregionality as an epistemological project. I would also like to mention with gratitude Claudia Derichs, who accompanied the genesis of the book, first in Marburg, and later as a close colleague at the IAAW in Berlin. Claudia not only gave me important intellectual impulses in the course of our numerous teaching and research collaborations in the field of transregional theory and methodology, she also stood by me as a supportive friend.

My thoughts and arguments for the book also matured during my many years of teaching at the Institute for Asian and African Studies, first as a junior professor of Islam in Asia and Africa, and since 2020 as a professor of Transregional Central Asian Studies with a focus on Islam and migration. I would like to thank all the students who joined my BA and MA courses for their feedback on my book pre-publications. Their critical questions helped me to recognize blind spots, to see weak points in my argumentation, and to change perspectives. I am also grateful to my doctoral students for the inspirations and aha moments that I have had more as a side effect of reading chapter drafts and discussing their research projects, especially in joint colloquia, in particular: Anton Nikolotov, Rustam Samadov, Shahar Shoham, Muhammad Ashraf Thachara Padikkal, and Fiona Katherine Smith.

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