

The international workshop *Islamic Institutions and Imperial Reach: The Complex Articulation of Ideas, Education and Mobility*, held in Osaka on January 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010, brought together Japanese and foreign experts on various topics related to the role of collective and individual Muslim identity in moulding internal policies and mutual relations throughout a whole range of countries ([http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/rp/english/group\\_04/activities/index.html#20100123](http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/rp/english/group_04/activities/index.html#20100123)).

Young researchers and more experienced scholars, together with a numerous and attentive audience, had therefore a valuable opportunity to compare the different concepts, institutions and phenomena broadly shared by Muslims across Eurasia at different periods in history. The workshop was organised in three thematic panels, each including two presentations on the topics in the event's subtitle. Most, if not all, the presenters approached Islam and Muslim communities from an exquisitely 'transnational' point of view: the papers read at this workshop, in other words, focused on phenomena that could hardly be restrained within the boundaries of any imperial state, or of the states that resulted as a consequence of the dislocation of empires themselves. Even when this 'transnational' approach was not explicitly stated, the presenters made it clear that otherwise geographically delimited topics (such as the reformed *madrasas* in the Volga-Ural region, or the adaptive strategise of the Chinese *hui* minority) cannot be fully understood without taking into account reciprocal influences, intellectual exchanges, and international relations. To what extent transnational history *stricto sensu* differs from a 'transnational' approach to the history of empires, is also a significant question that deserves specific attention.

The first panel, chaired by Prof. Daisuke Furuya, focused on one of the thorniest questions of Islamic doctrine throughout history, namely the definition of *dār ul-Islām* as opposed to *dār ul-ḥarb*. Combining a presentation by a historian, Prof. Moinuddin Aqeel, with a fairly provocative 'normative' argumentation by Prof. Hassan Ko Nakata, this session clearly demonstrated the extent, to which, both in the past and in present debates, judgements on this doctrinal point could lead to binding obligations for Muslims, with possible significant spillover effects on the juridical status and everyday life of neighbouring non-Muslims and internal non-Muslim minorities. The first speaker extensively illustrated the long history of the debates among Islamic scholars on the very nature of India under British rule – should it be considered *dār ul-ḥarb* or *dār ul-Islām*, and, consequently, should armed struggle against the British be allowed or not? The second speaker argued in favour of the identification of *khilāfa* as the territorial domain of 'rule of law', and pleaded that the struggle to impose and expand the applicability of *sharī'a* constitutes an obligation

for nowadays Muslims. The two papers are hard to compare, because of their divergent form, aims, and discursive status. Nevertheless, moving beyond their many controversial statements, both Prof. Aqeel's study and Prof. Nakata's arguments highlighted what is, in our view, the most challenging aspect of any serious historical approach to religious ideas, or of any ideological framework that may mould individual and collective action: namely, in terms of plain juridical logic, the thin red line separating the respective domains of what should be (*Sollen*) from what actually is (*Sein*). If any discourse pertaining to the former is meant to be extra-temporal, it is precisely the historian's task to show its inevitable entanglements with the latter. This operation, however, cannot be carried out without taking into account the prescriptive pretences of any normative discourse: and this first panel undoubtedly served the purpose of highlighting the need, for any social scientist, to recognise the existence of multiple, interacting and mutually non-exclusive discourses around the same topic. In our view, it is precisely thanks to the prescriptive nature of normative statements about *dār ul-Islām*, and the values attached to it, that this concept could actually undergo a progressive 'tokenisation', being mobilised for different (and sometimes alternative) goals, with a degree of success that largely depends on the actual authoritativeness enjoyed by the actors involved. The same, of course, can be said about the historical vicissitudes of many other mobilising concepts, both Islamic and non-Islamic, religious and supposedly 'lay'. In this sense, one criticism that can be made of both the papers presented in this first panel concerns their lack of attention to the interplay of authoritativeness and power or, in other terms, to the circumstances of practical endorsement (and enforcement) of normative statements throughout time and space.

The second panel had more explicit comparative ambitions, hosting one paper on the adaptive strategies of the Chinese Muslim *hui* minority, and another about the struggle to reform Islamic educational institutions (*madrasas*) and their entanglement with the more general phenomenon of secularisation. Somewhat in continuity with the debates on *dār ul-Islām* and *dār ul-harb* of the previous panel, the first presenter, Prof. Matsumoto, illustrated how *hui* Muslim scholars managed to update the previously widely accepted doctrinal paradigm of *waḥda ul-wujūd* (unity of the existent, 'monism') in favour of theoretical insights coming from the most dynamic centres of Islamic scholarship located in the Near East. This theoretical renewal, due to the need to face the offensive of Christian missionaries and to the development of nationalist inclinations in China between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c., ultimately provoked a shift in the way *huis* represented themselves and their relation to the non-Muslim majority of fellow Chinese: the accent was no more on the compatibility of Islam, *via* the *waḥda ul-wujūd*, with Confucianism, but on the progressive nature of Islam and the prescription of patriotism as a religious duty. Somewhat similarly to Prof. Matsumoto, Dr. Tuna depicted the striving for educational reforms in

Islamic schooling institutions of the Volga-Ural region as the result of a need to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances in the Russian empire and to *stimuli* in provenance of the Ottoman one, combined with the heritage of a first generation of reformist scholars. Dr. Tuna argued that efforts to reform Islamic schooling from within gradually gave way to partly unexpected results, namely the secularisation of both pupils and recent teachers. The importance of Islam in moulding their individual and collective behaviour, in other terms, was radically downplayed, if not eradicated, by their experience in educational institutions that still claimed to be Islamic – at least in order to preserve their autonomy *vis-à-vis* the Russian imperial state. Still, the two papers differed in the relative importance attributed, in each of them, to the interplay between individual initiatives and structural societal constraints: if Prof. Matsumoto discussed the doctrine and practice of Islam in the *hui* context through the prism of successful accommodation strategies to a changing environment, Dr. Tuna showed how circumstances can provoke a sort of backlash against the original goals displayed by individual agents.

The very titles of the two papers presented in the third and last panel of the workshop demonstrate the clear will of their authors to study one of the most typical themes of ‘transnational’ history: human mobility, for quite obvious reasons, cannot be dealt with without transcending the narrow (and sometime surprisingly weak) boundaries of both modern empires and more recent nation-states. The first paper, presented by Dr. Meyer, opened with some critical remarks about the limits of existing historiography on the mobility of Russian Muslims between ‘their’ empire and the neighbouring Ottoman one. As historians and social scientists working about other migratory trends and diasporic identity have shown, a strong scientific grasp on cultural, social and economic phenomena related to human mobility cannot take place without a focus on the *continuum* of emigration, integration/assimilation, and re-immigration. Yet, the existence of continual fluxes in both directions and of a sort of juridical limbo on the status of Russian Muslims directed to, or in provenance of, the Ottoman empire has been largely ignored by historians so far. Dr. Meyer presented some factual evidence from his ongoing research on this topic, demonstrating in particular how Russian officials were sometimes surprisingly eager to prevent Tatars from leaving the country, and helpful when they asked to go back, or claimed diplomatic protection. Nevertheless, a less warm attitude was adopted towards other groups of Muslims seeking refuge in Ottoman lands, such as Chechens and other North-Caucasians: a suspicious attitude that was shared by both Russian and Ottoman bureaucratic echelons. The last paper, presented by Prof. Sakurai, equally focused on multi-directional human mobility and transnational networks produced by it, by showing the importance of policies concerning the seminaries of Qom (Iran) in re-shaping the geography of the Shiite world. The Islamic revolution of 1979 and the constraints imposed on Shiite religious

education in neighbouring Iraqi sacred sites (Najaf and Kerbela) have attracted more students to Qom; at the same time, specific measures have fostered not only the systematisation of the seminaries' curricula on the model of general higher education, but also the enrolment of an increasing number of foreign students. According to Prof. Sakurai, these circumstances have led to the 'Persianisation' of Shiite religious scholarship. On the one hand, the dominant position of Qom's seminaries provoked a response among Arabophone Shiite leaders, formerly based in Najaf, who sought to re-locate their educational institutions towards South Asia; on the other, it is not always true that Qom alumni, once returned to their countries, actually support the specific doctrine lying at the very foundation of Khomeini's Islamic republic, *velāyat-e faqīh* (leadership of the jurist). As pointed out in the subsequent discussion, though, it is quite difficult to see how the policies pursued towards Qom's seminaries combine themselves with the more general strategic goals of the Iranian government: the latter is manifestly seeking influence in neighbouring regions (in particular, Transcaucasia) along guidelines that have little to do with Shiite fellowship. Somewhat similarly, Dr. Meyer's paper left unanswered the question of how the overall policy of the Russian and Ottoman empires towards migrant Muslims was determined. Officials obeyed to directives, but why, and by whom, was the overall juridical and administrative framework determined? Both these papers, thus, raised the issue of policies (internal and foreign; cultural or military) and of their enforcement by those who retain both symbolic capital and a sufficient grasp on violence, namely the states – imperial or 'national'. As we noted with regard to the very first panel, a discussion on power, its sources and forms, and its actual grasp on both people and space (including the control of boundaries) is in many respects inescapable.

This leads, though, to a more general remark: to what extent does the historical experience of Muslims in modern empires differ from that of those living in contemporary nation-states (whatever their 'official' name is)? Do the histories of Muslim communities within each empire tell us anything about the specificities of Russian, Ottoman, British, or even Chinese administrative patterns, juridical policies and political cultures? This question, somewhat related to those of imperial citizenship and juridical pluralism, cannot be eluded. Quite correctly, Dr. Meyer used in his paper the more neutral operational category of 'subjecthood': but it is undeniable that the very notion of citizenship amongst Muslim subjects in Kazan' or Istanbul could be different, albeit comparable. A second point: in our introductory remarks we have mentioned a natural doubt about the applicability of a 'transnational' approach to movements occurring between empires, because the borders of the latter not only always include more than one 'nation', but could also lie across an area where people share many of the markers that conventionally identify an *ethnos*. Similarly, thus, it is legitimate to ask: do imperial borders and cross-boundary mobility between empires disclose

any specific features? And what characterises the policies on mobility of each of the empires involved in the study? It may be said that, if the ‘Islamic institutions’ mentioned in the workshop’s title were widely explored, less was said, on this occasion, on the extent and quality of ‘Imperial reach’. It is obvious, in our view, that this circumstance is far more a proof of the convenors’ desire to explore this topic in-depth on another occasion, than of any negligence by the presenters.

One of the most striking merits of this workshop – and of the research initiative lying behind it – consists, as we have already mentioned, in the fact that it brought together researchers whose current work focuses on different geographic areas. Because single individuals only rarely accumulate the necessary knowledge and skills (linguistic, palaeographic etc.) to deal with all the ‘regional powers’ involved in this research initiative, co-operation and exchange in the fields of both empirical evidence and methodological issues are, to a large extent, the most practicable way to foster a comparative approach to well-defined topics in history. The same can be said about the necessity to complement history with research techniques and ‘sensibilities’ from other neighbouring disciplines, namely anthropology and other social sciences. The discussants’ role, in this perspective, is particularly challenging, because they are supposed not only to exert their positive criticism on each individual paper, suggesting possible further investigations or shedding light on somewhat implicit aspects of its argument, but also to isolate an array of basic thematic ‘tokens’ that are shared by all the speakers. At this recent Osaka workshop the audience participated in this conceptual effort: for instance, referring to Dr. Tuna’s presentation, Prof. Sakurai intervened to ask for a more circumstantial operational definition of *madrasa*, in order to make elementary categories shared by more than one area comparable among them. Undoubtedly, the involvement of a third speaker for each of the three ‘thematic clusters’ chosen by the convenors would have probably facilitated this task, by moving beyond the juxtaposition of two parallel historical examples and paving the way, therefore, to more general conclusions. However the choice to set up the panels with clearly defined thematic boundaries greatly enhanced the disentanglement of these comparable ‘elementary units’ and led to profitable discussion.