Cosmopolitan Islam in Malaysia

Abstract
In recent years, Malaysia has emerged as an important destination for Muslim students from the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. The considerable numbers of foreign Muslim students currently enrolled at Malaysian universities challenge the prevailing representation of Southeast Asia as the periphery of the “Islamic world”. Grounded in the ethnography of a Malaysian university campus and an adjacent apartment building, this research explores everyday negotiations of religious, cultural and social diversity in the context of educational mobility from the Middle East to Malaysia.

Reconfigurations of Centre-Periphery Relations in the Islamic World and the Politics of Everyday Coexistence in a Malaysian Apartment Building

Research context
There is a long history of exchange between the Middle East and Southeast Asia, but the contemporary reconfiguration of mobility between Southeast Asia and the Middle East has to be understood in the context of changing global migration regimes. In particular, the introduction of islamophobic immigration policies by many Western states after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 has made it increasingly difficult for Muslims to travel to the West. Virtually banned from entering Western universities, and actively encouraged by campaigns launched by the Malaysian government, increasing numbers of Muslim students have opted to study in Malaysia over the last decade. Consequently, Malaysian campuses and their surroundings have undergone significant diversification, with newer immigration from the Middle East meeting older migration streams that have long made up the – often uncritically - celebrated multi-ethnic and multi-religious social fabric of Malaysian society.

Ethnographic foci
This research is grounded in on-going ethnographic fieldwork (2012-2013) carried out on a Malaysian university campus and an adjacent high-rise apartment building, where students from Iran live door-to-door with Yemeni post-docs and Malaysian entrepreneurs. It explores the changing topographies of migration in Asia by describing everyday interactions between neighbours, service staff and shopkeepers working on the apartment compound, and analyses quotidian mutual observation and questioning, distrust but also forms of sociality that develop in this dense, cosmopolitan urban contact zone. More globally, this research seeks to examine how contemporary immigration from the Middle East feeds into debates about religious and ethnic identity in Malaysia, and how centre-periphery relations in the so-called “Islamic world” are being reconfigured in the process.

Implications
The study of migration from the Middle East to Malaysia allows for a critical analysis of the contemporary politicization of religion in the context of migration beyond the West, and beyond orientalist readings that reduce Middle Eastern students to being “Muslims”. Furthermore, by exploring educational migration from the Middle East to Malaysia, this research focuses our attention on migration taking place within the global South, and raises important questions for a competence network in area studies: How do people who move within Asia define its boundaries, their region of origin, and the host country Malaysia? How do they conceive of religious centres and peripheries? The study of educational migration and the attention to everyday coexistence provide useful insights for the conceptualization of contemporary processes of globalization and reveal crucial links between spatial and social mobility in Asia.

Dr. Olivia Killias
Post-doctoral Researcher
Institute of Asian and African Studies
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
olivia.killias@staff.hu-berlin.de

DORSEA
Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia

A badge with the famous patriotic slogan „If there is no Iran, there should be no me“ put on the top of the quran at an Iranian Norouz celebration carried out in the apartment building.