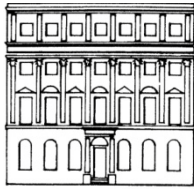


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Heike Liebau, Achim von Oppen, Sophie Roche, Silke Strickrodt:
Ruptures and Linkages: Biography and History in the South
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Ruptures and Linkages: Biography and History in the South. Conference organized by the German Historical Institute London (GHIL) and the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), Berlin, and held at the GHIL, 16–18 Feb. 2012. Conveners: Heike Liebau (ZMO), Achim von Oppen (Universität Bayreuth), and Silke Strickrodt (GHIL).

This conference brought together a group of scholars from Africa, America, Asia, and Europe, comprising mainly historians but also anthropologists, sociologists, and literary scholars, to discuss new approaches to biographical research in non-European history. It derived from established research interests in this topic at both the GHIL and the ZMO. At the GHIL, a preceding workshop had examined biographical approaches to the history of colonial and postcolonial Africa, and specifically how biographical research can help us to understand linkages between geographical spaces, political spheres, social units, and historical periods, which too often are examined in isolation from one another.¹ At the ZMO, the research group 'Actors in Translocal Spaces' uses biographical studies of individual social actors to analyse their agency with regard to mobility in a globalizing world. Further, biographical approaches are employed to understand how life trajectories intersect with education, knowledge, and expertise under specific social and political conditions.²

The conference 'Ruptures and Linkages' combined these existing research agendas and developed them further, taking them in new directions. To start with, it encouraged a comparative perspective on different areas of the 'global south' by considering biographies of individuals in or from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Of particular interest in this context was the connectedness of lives between

¹ 'Transcending Boundaries: Biographical Research in Colonial and Postcolonial African History', convened by Achim von Oppen and Silke Strickrodt and held on 5–6 May 2010. The full programmes of the workshop and the conference can be found on the GHIL's website <www.ghil.ac.uk> under Events and Conferences. A selection of papers from the workshop has been published as a part special issue, entitled 'Religious Biography: Transcending Boundaries', of the *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 38/3 (Sept. 2012). The publication of another batch of papers, dealing with 'Biographies between Spheres of Empire', is in preparation.

² Information about this research group can be found on the ZMO's website <www.zmo.de> under Research: Projects 2008–13.

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these three regions and with the north. At another level, the conference emphasized the special importance of biographical approaches for the study of imperial, colonial, and postcolonial history, of global crises, and local conflicts, which caused particularly dramatic historical ruptures in the 'south'. Nevertheless, historical actors in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East have often established connections that cut across seemingly disparate spaces, socio-cultural orders, or domains of power. Thus they clearly illustrate that the divisions mentioned above are better understood as fields of tension in which ruptures and linkages are mutually dependent. Finally, the objective of the conference was to reflect on the state of biographical research on Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

Three key themes structured the presentations and the discussion: first, the relationship between historical ruptures, biographical change, and translocal cross-overs in individual lives; secondly, the disjunctures and convergences between the lives of individuals and of collectivities; and thirdly, the construction of biographical knowledge in connection with, or distinction from, the wider historical context.

Ruptures and Translocality

How does the crossing of spatial boundaries relate to turning points in personal lives and in history at large? This was the key question addressed in a substantial number of contributions to the conference. Based mainly on autobiographical and sometimes also literary texts, these papers illustrated the close interaction of these different processes in the context of modern globalization. Spatial mobility, rather than representing a movement from one stable environment to another, grows rapidly in a context of increasingly fluid and changing social frameworks. Biographical research can therefore be highly enlightening with regard to the making of these frameworks at the various ends of migratory flows, and therefore of an important facet of globalization as such (Andreas Gestrich).

A. V. Venkatachalapathy (Chennai/Singapore) discussed the effect of a world tour, undertaken in 1931–32 and including visits to Soviet Russia, Germany, and the UK, on the outlook of the South Indian politician E. V. Ramasamy Naicker (1879–1973), known as 'Periyar'.

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He noted that Periyar's impressions of Europe reinforced his view that not colonialism but caste and religion were the real problems in India, prompting him after his return there to call for fundamental innovations in Indian society and to found his own party within the left movement. In 1935, however, the changing political climate caused him to give up advocating socialist ideas. This case illustrates that personal and political orientations may be more intimately linked to ruptures and transitions in the general historical context than to the experience of particular places during a translocal life.

In contrast, the life of Darwish al-Miqdadi, as portrayed by Dyala Hamzah (Berlin), points to the importance of different time/space contexts for personal identification. A Palestinian Panarabist who had been exiled from Palestine by the British and lived in Berlin from 1936 to 1939, al-Miqdadi used eight different signatures, spoke six different languages, and repeatedly changed his ideological orientation during his life-journey between the Ottoman Empire, British colonial rule, and Nazi Germany.

Several other translocal lives of non-European actors presented at the conference also included extended sojourns in Germany. Chanfi Ahmed (Berlin) discussed the life of the Moroccan *'ālim* Taqīyyu ad-Dīn Al-Hilālī (1311/1893–1987), who spent an extended period in Nazi Germany, pursuing his studies for a doctorate and working in the German radio's Arabic service. Again, the focus was on the influence of various religious and political contexts, and on the radical ideological convictions which this man embraced (Wahabism in Saudia Arabia, Hitler in Germany) while always seeing himself as serving the Islamic mission.

A study visit to Berlin in the early 1920s may also have been a turning point in the lives of the cohort of young men from India discussed by Joachim Oesterheld (Berlin). The focus here was on two individuals, Zakir Husain (d. 1969) and K. A. Hamid (d. 1972), whose postgraduate careers eventually, after Independence, led them to top political positions in India and Pakistan.

Another impressive example was discussed by Sauda Barwani (Hamburg), who presented a film by Tink Diaz (2007) about Emily Ruete, a former Zanzibari princess who eloped, in 1866, with a Hamburg merchant, and led an increasingly depressed life in Germany until 1924.

Ruptures and Linkages between Individuals and Collectivities

Another group of papers concentrated on the relationship between the lives of individuals and groups. In biographical research on non-European societies, especially in social anthropology, there is a strong tradition of considering the lives of individuals as 'typical examples' of larger groups, such as ethnic communities. In European historiography, by contrast, traditional biographies usually focus on prominent individuals who are portrayed as quasi independent of, or even as shaping, collectivities such as nations, classes, or religious congregations. New biographical studies from Africa and Asia, including some contributions to the conference, illustrate more recent approaches which suggest that there is a tense relationship between individual lives and larger collectivities. On the one hand, individuals are shaped by the collectivities to which they belong or with which they identify. On the other hand, individuals also contribute to the emergence of collective entities and identities, and to changes in them.

One field of productive tension between individual and group life addressed in several papers is the family, a category of collective belonging that for a long time has been taken as far too self-evident, especially with regard to 'other' ('southern') societies. Two presentations focused on Southern Africa and illuminated different kinds of missionary experience. In a joint paper, Peter Delius (Johannesburg) and Kirsten Rütger (Hanover/Zurich) dealt with the trans-generational and trans-continental history of a German-South African family over four generations. They examined the close relationship between J. A. Winter, a Berlin missionary, and the Pedi king Sekhukhune, which began in the early 1880s and resulted in, among other things, a plan for a marriage between Sekhukhune and Winter's daughter Anna. Enterprising individuals, in this case, were actively seeking to strengthen and extend their family ties. Khumisho Moguerane (Pretoria/Oxford), by contrast, discussed a family that between 1890 and 1952 provided a framework for social differentiation. Concentrating on two branches of the Molemas, one of the ruling clans of the Tshidi-Rolong (to the north of the Cape Colony), she showed the growing gap between the rise of a new academic elite

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and the slide into 'genteel poverty' of African white-collar workers within one family. She described this as a 'real crisis' in Southern African society during this period.

In her study of the well-known West African Bell-Berroa family, Stefanie Michels (Frankfurt am Main) also criticized closed concepts of 'family' in biographical research. She argued that the Bell-Berroa, who are often associated with a particular area or nation (colonial and postcolonial Cameroon) and gender (male), are better described as a network in which enterprising individuals, both men and women, maintained a long tradition of 'cosmopolitan mobility' across three continents while constantly seeking to reconnect themselves as a 'family' in changing political and ideological contexts (nation, race, and so on).

Along similar lines, but focusing on the role of knowledge and professional careers, Heike Liebau (Berlin) and Waltraud Ernst (Oxford), jointly examined the trajectory of a South Asian Parsi family over four generations and two continents (colonial India, Pakistan, Germany, and England) in the twentieth century. Their contribution summarized both the convergence and divergence of individual biographies within the same family context, but in different national and global contexts over time and generation.

Other contributions addressed different types of collectivities. Brigitte Reinwald (Hanover) presented a case in which the life of an individual—the Jamaican author and political activist Claude McKay, who travelled to Europe, Soviet Russia, and Marseille in the 1920s—is intertwined with the story of the African workers from the French colonies in North and West Africa whom he encountered in Marseille. In his autobiography *A Long Way from Home* (1937) and his novel *Banjo* (1929), McKay portrays this group of transatlantic seafarers and other migrants as a 'great gang of black and brown humanity'. He was, however, ultimately more concerned with his concept of 'Black sociality', which was rooted in his own life experience, than with the actual life strategies and social networks of his African and African-American companions.

The perspective of an age cohort was studied by Joachim Oesterheld (Berlin). In his case it consisted of a number of foreign students in early 1930s Berlin who had originated from very different colonial Indian backgrounds, including a number of individuals who were to become prominent in future. But Oesterheld also emphasized

that the common experience of diaspora in a non-imperial metropole turned this cohort into a social network, again with some implications for their individual careers.

Finally, Kai Kresse (Berlin) discussed the life-histories of Islamic scholars and Muslim intellectuals on the East African coast in the twentieth century, asking how their individual backgrounds and talents intersected with the social frameworks of groups, networks, and institutions they became part of, that is, with the specific social histories of Islam they sought to influence.

Biography as a Form of Knowledge

The third general question discussed at the conference relates to biography as a form of knowledge, constructed in tension with its historical contexts. Life histories can be narrated very differently at specific points in time. Some papers looked at this question with regard to historical actors who reflected on their own lives autobiographically, while others were interested in how researchers try to approach historical lives in the process of their own specific form of knowledge production.

With regard to the first perspective, Sophie Roche (Berlin) made a key contribution with her case study of autobiographies of Central Asian social scientists from former Soviet republics. She showed that the fall of the Soviet regime was often not experienced as a significant ideological rupture because it had been anticipated or was mitigated by the continued existence of these countries as nations. Of greater importance in their autobiographical memories were other topics, such as the rise of new knowledge about Islam with which these individuals became actively involved, or the increasing importance of the family.

Folasade Hunsu's (Ile-Ife, Nigeria) analysis of Hilda Ogbe's autobiography, *The Crumbs off the Wife's Table* (2001), was another case in point, showing that the knowledge that gives coherence to an individual's life can be developed only in retrospect. Hilda Ogbe wrote her autobiography when she was in her 80s, after the breakdown of her marriage and the death of her husband. She noted that she could not have written it when she was younger, or, at least, this would have resulted in a very different understanding.

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The second perspective on biographical knowledge production, focusing on (academic) biographers themselves, was exemplified by Nilanjan Sarkar (London). He examined the radically different ways in which the death of Rama Raya, regent and generalissimo of the mighty South Indian Vijayanagara Empire at the Battle of Talikota in AD 1565, was recorded over the following two centuries by different authors in different historical settings. In this paper, the contradictory biographies of a person and of an event were related mainly to the historical making of collective identity.

In a similar vein, Richard Wittmann (Istanbul) presented a survey of the different phases in the writing and publication of biographies in late Ottoman and Republican Turkey. He demonstrated how the selective adoption of particular biographical narratives by authors associated with specific social groups led to fragmented and mutually exclusive historiographies. This has changed only recently with an increase in the publication of hitherto neglected biographies due to the development of a nostalgic popular memory of a more diverse Ottoman past.

In a more self-reflexive mode, Kristin Mann (Atlanta) discussed the opportunities and constraints of reconstructing the biographies of subalterns, specifically, former slaves in nineteenth-century West Africa and Brazil. She was particularly interested in the multiple ruptures and dislocations in individual experience which the history of enslavement and liberation brought. Among other things, she pointed to the biographer's problem of having to cope with a lack of documentation or gaps in the historical evidence, and pondered the legitimacy of the use of historical imagination to fill these lacunae.

Ben Zachariah (Berlin) questioned the biographical approach in a related but more fundamental way. Referring to Bourdieu's reminder of a 'biographical illusion', he wondered whether the renewed interest in individual lives in the context of translocal or global studies risks taking them too easily as 'metonymies for larger things' and all too simply aggregating them into histories of communities, eras, or movements. It was a pertinent reminder, at any rate, of the problems of translation between micro- and macro-level history, and a warning against illusions of consistency and coherence which researchers may be tempted to nurture at the level of both collective and individual lives.

Ruptures and Linkages

In conclusion, the conference succeeded in shedding new light on ruptures and continuities in translocality, identity, and knowledge production from the perspective of biographical research. A wide range of approaches was discussed, including individual as well as group biographies, autobiographical texts by the historical subjects themselves as well as reconstructions by professional historians. As one contributor, Kristin Mann, noted, the question of rupture and continuity was also relevant to the conference itself. It brought together people who do not usually interact with each other very much—Central and South Asianists, Middle Easternists, Africanists—who carry with them intellectual baggage that derives not only from their particular disciplinary perspective but also from their specific area studies training. It turned out that in the debates about the writing of new kinds of biographies it was easier to cross disciplinary boundaries than the frontiers of our different area studies backgrounds. Assumptions taken for granted by Africanists, for instance, were not necessarily shared by South Asianists or Middle Easternists, and vice versa. But while this may sometimes have made communication more difficult, it was precisely this experience that made the discussions at the conference all the more interesting and valuable.

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