

Hybridity of Historical Disasters. Nature, Society and Power

Veranstalter: Junior Research Group „Cultures of Disaster. Shifting Asymmetries between Societies, Cultures and Nature from a Comparative Historical and Transcultural Perspective“, Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies, Heidelberg University in cooperation with Orient Institute Beirut

Datum, Ort: 25.03.2010–27.03.2010, Beirut

Bericht von: Kristine Chalyan-Daffner / Eleonor Marcussen, Cluster of Excellence „Asia and Europe in a Global Context. Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows“; Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies, University of Heidelberg

The international conference „Hybridity of Historical Disasters. Nature, Society and Power“ organized by the Junior Research Group (JRG) „Cultures of Disaster. Shifting Asymmetries between Societies, Cultures and Nature from a Comparative Historical and Transcultural Perspective“ in cooperation with Orient Institute Beirut has invited a group of outstanding scholars researching among other themes „natural disasters“ in Islamic Middle East spanning the period of Medieval and Early Modern Times. The purpose of the conference was to bring together experts who would elucidate from different perspectives the relation of humans to natural hazards such as earthquakes, storms, floods, epidemics and even fires and the perception and interpretation patterns in dealing with disasters caused by these different kinds of hazards, the spectrum of concrete reactions on the part of individuals and authorities, the role of administration especially in controlling water and irrigation systems as well as legal issues often arising in the aftermath of a disaster. The conference set out to bridge these diverse but interrelated matters putting cultural as well as historical concerns at its heart.

After a warm welcome GERRIT JASPER SCHENK (Darmstadt/Heidelberg) presented in his introductory word a few considerations and main leitmotifs forming the basis of the JRG which examines the individual's behaviour as well as the society in general be-

fore, during and after a disaster in a comparative historical and transcultural perspective. Because of the complexity of the research field, which is both an object of natural and social sciences, and especially the complexity of the transcultural reflection of the subject under consideration, the main focus of interest was pointed out to be limited to aspects of interpretation, description, mastery and prevention of disasters. Besides, terminological problems referring to the development and transformation of translingual concepts of „disaster/catastrophe/risk“ and their semantic fields - shaped most probably by socio-cultural meanings from natural and cultural history - were further focused upon.

STEFFEN VOGT (Freiburg) opened the first session by giving interesting insights into the collaborative work of climatologists who use Arabic data for climate reconstructions. The project seeks to use methods developed and applied to the reconstruction of climate in Central and Northern Europe for other less investigated regions such as for example, Eastern Europe, India and the Middle East. The main tool of this innovative historical-climatological approach among other technical means is the collation, analysis and evaluation of data from different written Arab sources such as chronicles, annals and diaries covering medieval and pre-modern times. These texts provide information about climatic features typical for the given region enabling to produce weather tables even on daily basis. Descriptions of weather conditions in them, for example, „cold“, „extremely cold“, „warm“, „extreme warm“ weather are given arbitrary numbers grading from minus three to plus three which are presented on a chart. In such a way, the climate proxy data gained from a specific cultural context can finally lead to the reconstruction of approximate temperature series achieved mainly by means of statistical presentations. However, in order to generate a correct meteorological interpretation of these expressions, linguistic features of the Arabic language describing weather conditions should be carefully studied. If investigated further, this high resolution data may explain physical circumstances of some catastrophic events occurred in the regions of the Middle East.

Drawing on an anthropological case study of both historical and current disastrous events in Egypt MARISA ENSOR (Cairo) argued in her paper for a context specific relationship between cultural understanding of disasters and communities' efforts to mitigate their impact. She started her paper with a general introduction of the historical dimension of disasters, continued with the discussion of disaster symbolism as a cultural construct with reference to Egypt during the Mamlūk and Ottoman period and concluded with more recent events underpinning her theses that religion and symbolism continue to play an important role in people's conceptualization of disasters in Modern Egypt. The main focus of the research was placed on the depiction of symbolic interpretations of calamities like earthquakes, plagues, droughts and famines - the latter often caused by the irregularities in the rising of the Nile - drawn mainly from the Medieval Arab treatises such as of Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūfī, Ibn al-Jazzār and al-Manbijī. These authors give religious interpretations of disasters which are sent by God either as an omen of judgment day or as a punishment to the unbelievers for their immoral behaviour and a blessing to the believers.

SYRINX VON HEES (Beirut) transferred the audience to the year 721H/1321AD, when during the reign of Sultan an-Nāṣir Muḥammad several fires broke out in Cairo. These tragic events were vividly analyzed in the ambiguous accounts of the prominent Mamlūk chroniclers such as an-Nuwayrī, al-Faḍā'il, Ibn ad-Dawādārī, Ibn al-Kaṭīr, al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taḡrībīrdī in a comparative perspective. Von Hees presented differences regarding the way of narration in these texts, the description of human actions to these conflagrations and the interpretations of the probable causes of disaster. Hence, the main distinction concerns the dramatic narrative arrangements used by these authors, who most probably have different motifs how to transmit the state of emergency and who to blame for the cause of fires, the latter being either Christians or the poor. Most of the reports have also another thing in common: fires were being combated actively especially when they threatened the properties of the rich and powerful such as the Sultan, emirs or mer-

chants, which is also an aspect why the chroniclers give such an extensive coverage of the events. However, one of the main conclusions is that the picture of disasters - either generated by humans purposely or by negligence intensified by natural elements like wind and storm - is definitely a product of human narrative which plays a significant role in the question of interaction between nature and society.

JULIETTE RASSI's (Beirut) paper in the second session was devoted to natural catastrophes and their consequences in the Orient of the 11th century. She started the lecture with the quotation of the definition of „catastrophe“ suggested by Robert Delort¹ as a distressful, dramatic and disastrous event afflicting in general human beings who suffer as well as cause it. This point gave rise to a discussion of al-Maqrīzī's treatise on famines and as-Suyūfī's work on earthquakes, who not only report but also reflect on causes and consequences of specific disastrous events in the Medieval Orient. Juliette Rassi enumerated the major types of natural hazards which befell particularly Iraq in the 11th century drawn from the chronicle of an Egyptian physician Yaḥyā Ibn al-Antāqī and an Iraqi scholar Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī. According to them, particularly Iraq witnessed extraordinary snowfalls, „black winds“, hails, falling of meteors and comets, epidemics, earthquakes and water level irregularities in Tigris, all of which caused damages and losses leading to a massive food shortage. One of the dramatic consequences mentioned was consumption of human bodies and animals which raised a heated critical debate in the discussion afterwards.

YAHYA MICHOT (Hartford) highlighted in his contribution legal and economic aspects of natural disasters based on fatwas of Ibn Taymīya, a prominent scholar of the Mamlūk period. It showed the practical approach to disasters in contrast to the much discussed all encompassing spiritual way of coping. In his analysis he focused on the typology, terminology and the liability of disasters. Concerning the typology, natural disasters are classified as relating to or caused by water, atmosphe-

¹ Robert Delort, Avant-Propos, in: B. Bennassar (ed.), *Les catastrophes naturelles dans l'Europe médiévale et moderne*, Toulouse 1996, pp. 7-8.

re, animals and humans. Regarding the terminology, the most often used term in these fatwas is a heavenly disaster (*āfa samāwīya*) but never a natural disaster (*āfa ṭabīʿīya*) which strongly associates disasters with heavenly signs, with God's actions. Another frequently used technical term from the canonical tradition is *jā'iḥa* (calamity), which extended its meaning in legal contexts encompassing every heavenly disaster, afflicting especially agriculture, for which it is impossible to hold anyone liable. The concept of calamity in this context is not only a cultural construct but also a juridical one regulating duties of land owners and their tenant in the aftermath of a disaster. This juridical approach allows measuring the „disaster“ and sharing the losses proportionally between the parties involved.

Underlying the plurality of interpretations for natural disasters in the Medieval Arab sources, KRISTINE CHALYAN-DAFFNER (Heidelberg) focused in her paper on one kind of interpretation which depicted future disastrous events as dependant on astro-meteorological phenomena. She presented different types of such predictions on the basis of Arab sources of the so called *malḥama* genre (prognostication) and delineated its features on the example of one specific text taken from the astrological treatise of the 16th century Egyptian author Ibn Zunbul. This particular treatise highlighted the reflection of contemporary social needs for divinatory literature of the kind as a universal way of coping with disasters. Cultural flows in this astrological genre - being a fruitful example of manifold transmissions of intellectual heritage from one culture to another - were further presented as a derivation from the mixed Hellenistic and Assyrian-Babylonian *omina* tradition. However, equally important are the subtle changes and adaptations of the perception of disasters in this genre to Islamic culture and beliefs, the differences in questions of procedures advocated by various authors and the interrelationship of divinatory material with other genres and practices.

KONRAD HIRSCHLER (London) drew attention to the importance of future studies on disaster not in isolation but embedded within political contexts. From the view of historical anthropology, he focused in his paper on the

local cultural framework of reactions having frequently symbolic and practical strategies at its core. In this respect, cultural reactions to the occurrence of a series of major and minor earthquakes in Syria during the 12th century were examined. The main question addressed was how the urban population used the space available to them during the 1157 earthquake which destroyed Hama and was felt in Damascus. One of the immediate reactions of the population was unsurprisingly flight to open spaces and spontaneous erection of temporary dwellings. However, the flight was not random but was carried out through clearly preferred lines of communication: the Umayyad Mosque being one of the most favourable spaces of resort which was not only the focal point in the urban topography for religious practices but also for socio-political manifestations. The other favoured space was the Maidan quarter from where processions were organized especially during crises. All this signifies the active agency of the population in reaction to a disaster.

Using written sources of the eye-witnesses and images depicting the remnants of architectural heritage VERENA DAIBER (Bamberg) outlined in her case study of the 1759 earthquake in Damascus an aspect of change and continuation of architectural tradition. Previous to 1759 Damascus had already been marked by a number of earthquakes as well as social unrest, with the event of the earthquake serving as a turning point for the influence of material culture of the Ottoman Empire on the local tradition. After the earthquake the foreign influence increased in the city; in material culture this is especially evident in the reconstruction and repairs of the minarets of Sulaymaniya and Umayyad mosques which, according to the inscriptions on the wall, were rebuilt in a hybrid architectural style after the 1759 earthquake. In the subsequent years, public buildings showed distinguished features of change but also continuation of architectural tradition. The Ottoman architectural tradition existed side by side with older and local building styles, but the style of local architecture was predominant during the 18th century which was a time of relative independence for Damascus.

STEFAN KNOST (Beirut) presented the im-

pact of the 1822 earthquake on urban development in Aleppo (Syria). In the late Ottoman Empire, during the major earthquake of 1822, approximately 1/3 of the buildings in Aleppo were destroyed. In the subsequent reconstruction work a change in legal framework for property and loans came about as a necessity to cope with the effects of the earthquake and to restore the city. This change in economic conditions and space initiated by the earthquake articulated itself in new forms of contracts for leases and property. This was in particular pertinent for the foreigners' community, constituted mainly of merchants engaged in the lively spice and silk trade of Aleppo. Until the destructive earthquake struck, the community occupied rented spaces in upper stories of major khans (storage rooms) in the centre of the city. When the khans were restored, merchant families, mainly of Italian-Jewish descent with far-reaching networks, came to replace the Dutch, French and British national merchant communities. Before the Italian-Jewish communities established themselves firmly in the area the lease contracts were seldom transferred to new tenants.

SATO TSUGITAKA (Waseda) opened the third session dealing with disasters (*fasād*) from the economic perspective in Egypt during the Ayyubid and Mamlūk periods. His paper focused on sugar production which was an important commercial branch prospering in Egypt during the 12th and 13th centuries. As accounts of al-Maqrīzī and al-Asadī about this period show, regulations for cultivation, irrigation and land tenancy rights were outlined especially for sugarcane. However, in the later Mamlūk period the sugar production declined with the increase of social disorders caused mainly by riots and a series of calamities such as hot winds, droughts, epidemics and famines. According to these authors, the real causes of distress and calamity were administrative mismanagement in the form of corruption of the monetary system, exploitation of peasants by *'iqṭa* holders and an increase of land tax. Hence, the combined factors of political corruption, social disorder and natural disasters resulted in a down-turn for the Egyptian economy in general, and so also for the sugarcane industry.

STUART BORSCH (Worcester) presented in his paper *Plague and Economic Catastrophe: Egypt 1347-1440* the interconnection between different kinds of disasters. The effects from the reoccurring cycles of plague starting from the middle of 14th century had longstanding impacts on the Egyptian economic conditions. For the agriculturalists the tragedy of depopulation was intensified by a landholding system which facilitated the administrative middle-men and revenue collectors to continue to extract revenue despite lower production and lack of labour. The agricultural distress was further worsened by the disruption of the irrigation systems, the „sultanic“ and „baladī“ irrigation networks of canals and basins. The larger system, the sultanic network, tied together the important supply of water from the Nile to the villages through the small-scale village level baladī irrigation system. The larger sultanic system was neglected by the high ranking officials responsible for their maintenance, resulting in a water-shortage for the plague-stricken peasants.

SARAH SCHMITZ (Halle) elaborated on the history of concepts pertaining to disasters in the 14th century Egypt. The terminology for the perceptions of „negative events“ in the form of natural disasters are referred to with two concepts - „*fasād*“ and „*fanā*“ - and also linked to a language for political communication. This is apparent in the „*Book of the Right Way to the Knowledge of the Dynasties of the Kings*“ by the well-known 14th century historian al-Maqrīzī in which the author reports on the undertakings of the leaders of the time. In his writings „*fasād*“ was used by the Mamlūks for the socio-political event of Bedouin attacks, while the original meaning of the word, „decomposition“ or „destruction“ (biological) is also used metaphorically for decay of morality and belief as well as corruption in society. Clearly *fasād* is, in al-Maqrīzī's accounts, a man-made situation where acting is possible, similarly to how a „crisis“ of today is manageable by human beings. „*Fanā*“ („passing away“), on the other hand, was mostly used for describing value-free events and applied to the Black Death („the great passing away“) which was almost exclusively perceived as a value-free event governed by natural law and extra-social factors out-

ide the scope of human beings to act upon.

One of the conclusions to be drawn from the preceding discussions is that the way of dealing with disasters seems to represent an element that possibly constitutes and certainly shapes a particular culture, an element that carries forward the experiences of the past as expectations for the future. All of these patterns entered into the collective *imaginaire* of the „Arab world“ and enabled in respective new contexts specific forms of interpretation, recollection of and warning against catastrophes. In his concluding remarks GERRIT JASPER SCHENK pointed out that not only hybridity of disasters as a social construct of nature and culture made up the core of the body of the papers but also hybridity of concepts, their mixes and travelling through time and space. To a lesser extent the regional and spatial differences in terms of memorialisation became apparent in the conference. However, a number of interesting questions arose during the final discussion, for example, to what extent can we talk about a „state’s“ response and reaction to disasters in the „Arab world“ as it emerged in the European pre-modern era; were authorities or aristocracy involved in coping mechanisms in the same way? As terminology and structures differ widely the concepts and cultural reactions are what form the interesting part to study in order to understand better the relationship between human beings and extreme natural events.

Conference overview:

Session 1

Chair: Eleonor Marcussen (Heidelberg)

Gerrit Jasper Schenk (Darmstadt/ Heidelberg): Welcome and Introduction

Steffen Vogt, R. GLASER, GH. AL DYAB, D. RIEMANN (Freiburg): Arabic Documentary Data as a Proxy for High Resolution Climate Reconstruction

Marisa Ensor (Cairo): Learning from Disasters in Egypt: The Role of History, Education and Local Knowledge

Syrynx von Hees (Beirut): Fires in Cairo - Interactions between Nature and Society

Session 2

Chair: Susanne Enderwitz (Heidelberg)

Juliette Rassi (Beirut): Quelques Catastrophes Naturelles en Orient (au début du 11ème Siècle) et leurs Conséquences

Yahya Michot (Hartford): „Heavenly Disasters“ and Legal Responsibilities: some Fatwas by Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328)

Kristine Chalyan-Daffner (Heidelberg): Natural Disasters in Medieval Arab Divination

Konrad Hirschler (London): Responses to Earthquakes in Egypt and Syria during the High and Late Middle Ages

Verena Daiber (Bamberg): The 1759 Earthquake in Damascus and the Continuation of Architectural Tradition

Stefan Knost (Beirut): The Impact of the 1822 Earthquake in Aleppo/Syria on Urban Development. The City’s Foreigners’ Community between Integration and Seclusion

Session 3

Chair: Stefan Leder (Beirut)

Sato Tsugitaka (Waseda): Prosperity (‘imāra) and Disasters (fasād) in Egypt during the Ayyubid and Mamluk Periods - Focused on Sugar Production

Stuart Brosch (Worcester): Plague and Economic Catastrophe: Egypt 1347-1440

Sarah Schmitz (Halle): Fasād and Fanā’: Perceptions and Concepts of Crisis and Catastrophes in the 14th Century Egypt

Note:

Tagungsbericht *Hybridity of Historical Disasters. Nature, Society and Power*. 25.03.2010–27.03.2010, Beirut, in: H-Soz-Kult 06.05.2010.